

1. *Robert Fulford*

“Culture is a many-faceted jewel, each facet of which must be measured by a different instrument . . . It is important to all of us to know the relative status of Canada’s cultural development . . . to keep on knowing it . . . and to make every effort to ensure that it keeps on expanding, so that Canada can continue to grow as a strong, virile nation.”—Program, Canadian Conference of the Arts.

“This is a conference for the suppression of the arts.”—Member, Agenda and Conference Committee, Canadian Conference of the Arts.

TWO NIGHTS AFTER the Canadian Conference of the Arts concluded on May 6, a group of Toronto painters, sculptors, musicians and writers held, in the beerhall basement of a midtown restaurant, a “Canadian Conference on the Canadian Conference of the Arts”. Signs on the wall said “Peace through love” and “Peace through art”. A badly played saxophone made gestures toward modern jazz, and a loudspeaker blared. There was a reading of some Chinese poetry, and there were “statements”, mostly incoherent, from several of the painters present. When each one finished, a young lady said over the loudspeaker: “Thank you for your contribution. That was very con-tro-ver-si-al, and, after all, controversy is what we are here for. We all like controversy.”

But it was no good. Everyone drank a great deal of beer, everyone eventually danced and had a good time, but no one really believed that an effective parody of the Canadian Conference of the Arts had been achieved. The conference, it turned out, was so mindless, so lacking in purpose or point of view, that it was effectively parody-proof.

The Canadian Conference of the Arts (formerly the Canadian Council of the

A CULTURAL FLIRTATION

*Two Views of the
Conference of the Arts*

Arts) is the name of an organization made up of organizations. The thirty-seven members range in importance from the National Ballet Guild of Canada through the Association of Canadian Industrial Designers down to the Brantford, Ont., Arts Council. The conference which took place—perhaps *occurred* describes the occasion better—at the O’Keefe Centre in May was apparently the result of the national organization’s desire to do something with itself. It was decided to call a conference which would be of a generally artistic nature, which would be open to the public, and which would bring together both Canadian and foreign artists in most fields of creative activity.

The purpose of this was not decided in advance, and is not yet evident. The front page of the program carried a lamentable slogan, “To measure Canada’s cultural maturity”. But even the director, Alan Jarvis, disowned this idea as an adman’s slogan, a week before the conference began. As it finally fell together, the week-end was a mixture of art exhibit, concert, poetry reading, panel discussions, and speeches. The art exhibit brought together paintings and sculpture by artists who had received Canada Council grants, and it turned out to be no advertisement for the Council. There was a good deal of valuable art, but there was much that was bad and many of the individual pieces seemed no more than

eccentric. The concert, given by the C.B.C. symphony, was made up entirely of work by contemporary Canadian composers, like Barbara Pentland, Harry Somers, and John Weinzweig. It drew an encouragingly large audience.

But the speeches and the panel discussions presented more serious problems. As the conference drew near, those responsible for it began to exhibit signs of uneasiness. No one had any idea what it was all about. Sir Julian Huxley was coming from Britain, Isamu Noguchi was coming from the United States, and planeloads of painters and poets were on their way from Quebec. Yet by the middle of the last week before the conference, those responsible for panel discussions were coming agonizingly to the conclusion that they were in danger of acting out in public the classic dream in which a dreamer becomes a concert pianist, sits down at the piano before a huge audience, and then realizes that he cannot play. They were calling each other on the telephone, begging for instructions and receiving instead confessions of equal ignorance. On the day the conference opened, George Lamming of the West Indies could be found in the bar, asking what he was expected to do. He had, after all, come a long way.

This private concern became a public embarrassment when the panel discussions began. On the Friday afternoon, Lamming opened the literary panel by remarking: "One thing the panelists have in common is an utter uncertainty about why they are here and what they are going to say." This was followed by a statement from Mordecai Richler: "I don't know what to say to you. I don't see why you're having this conference—I don't understand what it's about." In other panels held simultaneously—on music, on art, on theatre, on town planning—there was more earnest discussion. Yet a distinguished foreign artist was heard saying, as he left the room at the end of the art panel: "Take me out of here. I can't stand any more of it." He was rushed off to his hotel.

Most of the arguments I heard had the intellectual content of casual, coffee-house chatter; yet they lacked the saving grace of informality, since most of the panelists seemed to feel that the occasion called for the most extensive possible use of formalized language and even outright cliché. Suburbia was condemned, and so was the poor market for serious books and the public's lack of interest in town planning. Sir Julian Huxley rose from the audience at one panel discussion to say that there was a great need for a publicity campaign which would make the public aware of the need for a better physical environment. Only a few hard-shelled artists let it slip that they didn't much care what the public thought.

In general, the artists involved in the conference found it pointless and even a little degrading. (Richler remarked afterwards that the most serious controversy

of the week-end concerned whether the participants should have to pay for their own drinks.) But for the artistic middlemen—patrons, collectors, critics, directors, producers, town planners—it had some small value. They were allowed to exchange ideas, and to obtain from each other a sympathetic hearing for their complaints about the public. Occasionally they even managed to inspire one another. At one point, in a panel discussion on the applied arts, the British architect Jane Drew sketched eloquently and memorably her own hopes for the future of cities. Her ideas were naïve almost beyond belief, but their very hopelessness gave them a special charm. This, like most of the conference, was entirely spontaneous. Only a few speakers arrived with prepared papers, and of these only one was genuinely thoughtful: Northrop Frye's talk on academicism in the arts, in which he suggested that a scholarly and historical approach was one of the distinguishing marks of the modern artist. Later, during a poetry reading, Irving Layton paused long enough to condemn Frye's speech and insist that academicism was death for the artist.

Masochistically, the audience of tastemakers reserved its most enthusiastic applause for a witty attack on themselves. Russell Lynes, the managing editor of *Harper's*, began by making his target obvious: "this distinguished group that I think I can safely call tastemakers." Then he said that what Jacques Brazun had called America's love affair with culture was more a flirtation than a serious affair. Audiences, he felt, were ogling the arts without really coming to grips with them, and tastemakers were setting artificial barriers between artist and audience. "I sometimes wonder if the artist of our time isn't being understood to death—over-interpreted, over-criticized, over-explained and overwhelmed with self-consciousness."

The readiness with which the audience accepted this criticism, and the eagerness with which Lynes' point of view was discussed later, suggested to me that the people who attended the conference were already deeply conscious of their own shortcomings. "You have revealed us to ourselves," the chairman told Lynes happily at the end of the talk, but it would have been more correct to say that he articulated certain fears which had already half-formed themselves in the minds of his listeners. They seemed pitifully anxious to stand condemned of flirting with culture, of taking art frivolously, and finally of helping to destroy that which they affected to love. But it would be unfortunate if the judgment were not appealed, for the role of the tastemaker is surely not without honor of some kind. We can examine several fields in which no tastemakers operate effectively—current television, say, or Detroit automobile design, or low-cost residential housing—

without finding any support for the idea that creators and public can get along better by themselves. Lynes may be bored—certainly most of the artists at the conference were bored—with the professional art appreciators, the designers' guilds, the culture-pushing women's committees; but in a culturally insecure society these forces have at least temporary value.

On a more serious level, many of the participants were obviously conscious of a failure which they could neither understand nor excuse. The theme of the conference emerged as their dissatisfaction with their own efforts to develop a humane community. A sense of guilt turned up, again and again, in talks by town planners, architects, designers, theatre people. Robert Whitehead reported on the melancholy condition of the Broadway theatre, and William Kilbourn gave an angry talk on community planning. In both cases, and in others, the public was given some of the blame; but in no case could the speaker avoid his own failure to make his own ideas applicable and effective. They all seemed to know that much of their talk was meaningless except to themselves; the public was still out there, unguided and essentially hostile, and no amount of panel discussing was likely to change it.

2. *Robert Weaver*

THE CANADIAN CONFERENCE of the Arts took place at the O'Keefe Centre in Toronto at the end of the first week in May. Two or three days later one of the organizers told a friend of mine: "The Conference was a great success. Every meal was over-subscribed!"

That may even have been as safe a way as any to judge what was (in large part deliberately) a circus of the arts. For on another level participants in the Conference have been arguing about its success or failure ever since it ended. Alan Jarvis, who was the Conference's National Director, informed readers of his syndicated newspaper column "The Things We See" that it was indeed a success. Mordecai Richler, who was on the literary panel, wrote in *The Star Weekly* that the Conference was a flop.

The Conference was designed to promote unity, but a good deal of the time it succeeded in emphasizing division. In the afternoon panel sessions the various arts were carefully segregated—though whether the miscegenation that Mordecai Richler advocated would have been a good idea is at least open to argument.

There was division between the writers and artists on the one hand and their audience on the other. There was even division between some of the organizers and the artists they had invited to attend; at the afternoon cocktail hour most of the writers, painters, and musicians were out front with the public buying their own drinks while segregated private parties were going on backstage. Most of the comments about the Conference that I heard came from novelists or poets, but I spoke afterwards to one or two musicians and theatre people as well. From their point of view, Mordecai Richler had it taped: the Conference of the Arts was a flop.

This was the second arts conference with which I've been actively concerned, and its atmosphere was strikingly different from that of the first, the Kingston Writers' Conference in the summer of 1955. F. R. Scott got the idea for that gathering. He came to Toronto for an informal planning session with a few literary people; there was an informal meeting later in Kingston. Queen's University provided an umbrella for the conference; the Rockefeller Foundation donated a few thousand dollars.

From such casual beginnings the Kingston conference grew into a three day meeting that surprised almost everyone with its cheerful, useful and unpretentious feeling. It had, of course, certain advantages that were lacking in Toronto this year. It was limited to writers and editors, and they speak more or less the same language. (But even at Kingston the poets tried to scorn the magazine and C.B.C. writers, and condescended to the novelists.) Kingston is a small city, and no one had much trouble meeting the people he wanted to meet. There were plenty of parties, and they were easy to find. There was enough privacy for writers to talk seriously, and without too much posing, to one another.

(I've always thought that the success of the Kingston conference was demonstrated in a rather ironical way; as soon as it was over, the delegates from the West Coast hurried back to set up their own regional conference. Despite the C.P.R., C.N.R., T.C.A. and C.B.C., British Columbia still resists Confederation.)

There was little that was casual or informal about the Canadian Conference of the Arts. It was preceded by eighteen months' planning complete with formal meetings, minutes, parliamentary procedure, committees and sub-committees, and a permanent secretariat. Its budget was in the neighborhood of \$75,000.00. The money came from the Canada Council, from the Province of Ontario and Metropolitan Toronto, from the Atkinson and Koerner Foundations, and from more than thirty companies and individuals.

The formality of the Conference was made inescapable by the decision to hold

it in the O'Keefe Centre. This Theatre, which looms like an expensive matron over downtown Toronto, has a peculiar place in the city. Many theatre people despise it as nothing more than a home-away-from-home for wandering Broadway musicals, yet in one year it has made Toronto the second theatre centre in North America. The theatre itself is large, handsome and not too fussy, but its surroundings are pretentious. The Centre provided the Conference of the Arts with the space it needed, but it made it hopelessly difficult to find people and almost impossible to communicate naturally and spontaneously.

The Conference of the Arts really had its beginnings in 1945 when the Canadian Arts Council was formed. This organization set out to gather information about the arts and to lobby for various cultural programs. It supported the Massey Commission and promoted the Canada Council. It sponsored a lavish survey *The Arts in Canada*, which was edited by Malcolm Ross and published by the Macmillan Company. But when one of the battles it fought had been won and the Canada Council had been established, the Canadian Arts Council was faced with a double irony: it had to change its name, and it had to find new reasons for its existence.

So the Canadian Conference of the Arts was born, and the cultural circus at the O'Keefe Centre was held partly to discover whether a national, semi-annual conference might provide in itself a useful function. At the same time the annual business meetings were held of the nearly forty organizations from French and English Canada that are member societies of the Conference of the Arts. These groups range from Actors' Equity to the Canadian Society of Creative Leathercraft, and from the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada to the Brantford Arts Council.

The public sessions in the afternoons and evenings ranged over a wide territory. At the poetry reading on the first night five poets read—Earle Birney, Leonard Cohen, Gilles Henault, Jay Macpherson, and Irving Layton—and they were all, I think (even Mr. Layton), as astonished and terrified as I was to find several hundred people waiting for the reading. I've heard most of the poets read better on other occasions, but I've rarely seen a more attentive audience. There was a lesson in the poetry reading: it was one of those rare occasions during the Conference when the artist spoke to his public solely as an artist.

But if the poetry reading seemed to be a success, the literary panel, which I had organized, was a disaster. I think everyone on the two panels would agree with that judgment; the writers were sour, gloomy and dispirited. On the first afternoon I wandered away for half an hour to see what the other panels were doing. There

was a deathly hush where the musicians had gathered, and a friend told me afterwards that the hush was almost unbroken for two long afternoons. The painters were fighting: a bearded, aggressive, humourless Toronto artist in the audience baiting Alan Jarvis (in the chair) and Harold Town (on the panel). Mr. Jarvis finally offered the beard the use of the microphone, the audience booed its negative vote, the painter left in a huff (wife in wake). I left for the theatre, where the dramatic arts were huddled in discussion on the enormous stage. This panel looked lonely and puny in the empty cavern of the theatre, but its talk sounded professional if not greatly exciting.

No conference can be quite as complete a failure as Arnold Edinborough said this one was: at the very least people meet and talk together. But when you consider the energy and the money that went into the Conference of the Arts, the meetings in Toronto seem an awful bust. There were plans that didn't work out. At one stage the keynote speaker was expected to be André Malraux, but that entangled the Conference in surprisingly high-level diplomacy, and they finally got for the keynote speech (possibly for their sins) Sir Julian Huxley.

Everything I have written here is hindsight, of course, and so have been the other public criticisms made since the Conference ended. No one spoke up loud and clear in the planning sessions, partly because long before May the Conference had somehow achieved an impetus of its own that, I suspect, left even its most fervent organizers somewhat dazed and helpless. And on the other hand scarcely any writers or painters or musicians or theatre directors refused to attend: the Conference was painful evidence that there are no real intellectual and ideological differences in the arts in this country, and that the arts would be healthier if there were. (Sad to watch Mordecai Richler and Hugh MacLennan unable to manage any real disagreement.) The Conference took on that fatal air of patronage and condescension that must hang over Park Avenue committees in aid of Negro sharecroppers. It had no real aim except to try to discover an aim for itself.

It is sad to think now how many other functions the Conference of the Arts might have found for itself. It might have raised \$75,000.00 to sponsor some of the writers and artists the Canada Council has to turn down each year; or to help establish experimental theatres; or to subsidize *The Canadian Forum* for a decade; or to help begin a monthly magazine of all the arts. In the future there is one function it might well undertake: it might campaign annually to raise the additional money the Canada Council needs to do its job adequately. In any case, no more Conferences of the Arts. For what the Conference at the O'Keefe Centre demonstrated is that good will is not enough.