

editorial

A RECORD WRIT IN AIR

ONE OF THE FAMILIAR COMMENTARIES on life and literature during the past generation has been the radio talk, and, despite the territory won by television, there is no reason to suppose that it will not remain an important vehicle of ideas and impressions and information. In Canada—and particularly through such programmes as *Critically Speaking* and *Anthology*—the radio talk has been one of the means of developing a mature standard of literary criticism. But perhaps its greatest achievement has been a more general one—the creation over the years of a kind of mosaic record of a country's life and thought, its manners and opinions, its arts and sciences.

Unfortunately in Canada that record has been almost entirely writ in air. The talk is spoken and heard and passes fugitively away, its only residue the typescripts that lie in the CBC archives, and the dwindling memories of the listeners. Publishers will rarely handle radio talks, and their disinclination may be justified to the extent that such a conversational kind of writing does not lend itself to the solemnity of stiff covers. This, however, does not mean that the radio talk is unpublishable. The long record of *The Listener* in Britain shows emphatically that the reverse is true, and that the periodical collection of talks can form a magazine that is rich and varied as few other periodicals can afford to be. If one had to prepare a history of British attitudes and tastes and interests over the past thirty years, one might well begin with the files of *The Listener*, for there, more than in any more profound or more single-minded periodical, the changing identity of the nation over those decades would lie concealed.

We have no similar magazine in Canada, and it is only exceptionally that our radio talks find their way into print. One of the exceptions is the programme known as *University of the Air*. I have beside me now half-a-dozen attractively presented pamphlets, each containing a series of talks delivered in that pro-

gramme. They range from Paul West's reflections on the growth of the novel to W. G. Hardy's reconstruction of the world of classical antiquity, from Lewis Walmsley's interpretation of China and the Chinese to William Robbins' discussion of humanistic values in English literature. These scripts vary a great deal in quality. Some of the speakers have fallen into the cardinal academic sin of condescension, and have chosen a talking-down superficiality which experienced radio hands know is not expected or liked by the seasoned listener; others have presented models of condensation and clarity; even the least satisfying of the pamphlets is informative and provocative enough to have been worth printing and preserving.

This experiment in publication has, I gather, been as successful commercially as in other ways; without the distributive organisation which commercial publishers have at their command, the CBC has sold an average of between 2,000 and 3,000 copies of each of these pamphlets at prices in the middle paperback range (75c to \$1.00). This success is encouraging, not merely to the CBC Publications Branch, but also to all who regret that so many excellent radio talks are heard and forgotten. It prompts one to ask for more of the same thing, more paperback collections perpetuating worthwhile series in other programmes, and, ultimately, a CBC magazine on the lines of *The Listener*.

I have been raising the question of such a magazine with CBC executives on and off for the past decade, and I have gathered that the principal obstacle has lain in the opposition of Canadian publishers of commercial periodicals, who have feared that a periodical sponsored by a government corporation would be a formidable competitor. Such an attitude is illogical and short-sighted, and has robbed the Canadian public of much more than it has given them. Since our commercial magazines, with their notoriously low estimate of the intelligence of reading Canadians, do not customarily publish the kind of material that is used in serious radio talks—particularly those concerned with literature and the arts—there would clearly have been no direct competition, in the sense of similar magazines struggling for the same public; obviously a Canadian *Listener* would have been quite different in character from any existing homebred popular periodical. But perhaps it was a more dangerous form of competition, the competition of better and more interesting material, that our commercial periodical publishers feared; perhaps they foresaw that the success of a CBC magazine containing intelligent talks would expose the shallowness of their own achievements.

One might in fact hazard the opinion that, had there been a good CBC-sponsored magazine operating in Canada over the past thirty years, the general

level of our periodicals would have been forced up by example, and that the American magazines whose competition has been given so much prominence during the recent proceedings of the Royal Commission on Publications would not have established the dominance they now hold on our magazine stands, a dominance which we must reluctantly attribute to the fact that they have done their work more skilfully and attractively than their Canadian counterparts.

Now, it seems, the attitude of Canadian magazine publishers has changed. In their demands before the Royal Commission on Publications for protection against American periodicals, there has been a hint of willingness to grant the desirability of free competition in Canada, of a more-native-periodicals-the-better attitude. Without desiring to take part in the politics of mass media, or to judge the veering commercial point of view, we would point out that such a change of attitude seems to leave the CBC free to enter the field of periodical publication with something of more permanent value than *CBC Times*. We hope the opportunity will not be missed, and that at last a systematic publication and perpetuation of our best radio talks can begin. Nothing would contribute more usefully to that "development of a Canadian identity through a genuinely Canadian periodical press", which was named as one of the aims lying behind and beyond the appointment of the Royal Commission on Publications.

Let us, then, have our Canadian counterpart of *The Listener*. But more good things than talks are lost upon our northern air. In *Canadian Literature* No. 5 Gerald Newman remarked that our "important dramatic writing" is done largely for "media other than the stage", that is to say, for radio and television. Every year several good original plays are among those produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation; very few of these find their way into print. Again, there seems to be the idea that such publications are not commercially profitable. This has not been the experience of other countries. For several years now a Frankfurt publisher has been bringing out the *Hörspielbuch*, an annual anthology of plays produced on West German radio networks; the continued appearance of these yearly volumes suggests that they find a sufficient and faithful public. It is certainly worth an experiment to see if there may not be a similar public in Canada for radio plays of lasting worth; this is another function which the CBC Publications Branch might assume, either independently or in collaboration with the commercial publishers.