

Introduction: Beyond the Margins

Jennifer Andrews et John Clement Ball

Volume 25, numéro 1, spring 2000

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl25_1art01

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)

1718-7850 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Andrews, J. & Ball, J. C. (2000). Introduction:: Beyond the Margins. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 25(1), 1–11.

Introduction: Beyond the Margins

JENNIFER ANDREWS AND JOHN CLEMENT BALL

IT WAS PROBABLY FITTING that the publication of this special issue on “Canadian Literature and the Business of Publishing” should have been hit by the journal’s biggest setback in recent memory. One weekend in July, after most articles had been edited, typeset, proofread, and corrected, the computer on which the issue-in-progress resided was stolen. Our managing editor, Sabine Campbell, works in a building surrounded by forest on the edge of the University of New Brunswick campus — a place whose peripheral location makes it rather more vulnerable, we now realize, than the Department of English office in the heart of campus where our editor hangs his hat. Much extra labour was required to compensate for the AWOL computer, especially as it had not been fully backed up since the turn of the millennium; a new machine had to be acquired and programmed, disks and manuscripts fished out of files, changes re-entered and triple-checked. After all the painstaking and repetitious effort, we can be heartened by the fact that the resulting issue has been revised, edited, read, and reread more thoroughly and repeatedly than any before it, and is therefore (let’s hope) as close to perfect as we’re likely to get.

More significantly, if a bit whimsically, we can reflect that the themes of our own little publishing story — compensating for adverse conditions; the risks of publishing in a peripheral spot rather than the more secure and populated centre — place it firmly within the grand narrative of Canadian publishing history. There is something incongruous about literary publishing anywhere: a “business” that is more typically a labour of love than a money-making scheme, an “industry” set among kitchen tables and brain cells as much as factory floors and shops. In Canada, the problems are exacerbated by enough obstacles to make the publishing of literature seem like mug’s game: the smallness of our English- and French-language book markets; the huge geographical distances and regional differences over which our readers are spread; the easy

availability of British and American books published with economies of scale unavailable here; cultural factors that can make foreign books seem more valuable and desirable than home-grown ones. That we have a vibrant industry in Canada at all is due in part to government policies and programmes set up to address those very obstacles. However, it is also due to the many stubborn idealists, renegades, adventurers, bookworms, scholars, and, yes, fortune-seekers who have cared enough about Canadian literature and culture to work towards its development, often at a high risk and opportunity cost.

It is fair to say that without our indigenous publishers, and the companies and authors they have nurtured, we would have nothing like the Canadian literature we know today. Yet as academics we tend to take much of their work for granted. We know, of course, that the literary “products” we respond to in our critical writing result from a process involving a complex of political, economic, cultural, and human factors. Those factors affect the text’s final form, and even whether it takes published form at all. When it comes to the literary text as a *written* object, we are usually more than willing to examine material, political, historical, and cultural contexts; when considering the text as a *published* object, however, we behave surprisingly like New Critics. In most studies of Canadian literature, the material stuff of publication is bracketed off in favour of what can be said about a text’s (immaterial) words. Like the editor’s remarks that helped shape the book, the flap copy that helps sell it, or the reader’s hands that hold it, such material factors are assumed to belong at or beyond the margins. Hence the impetus for this volume: to give publishing a central space.

When the study of the published book and the publication process has been discussed, it has been treated as a specialized area of research with its own methods and materials. Indeed, much of the previous work done on this topic has taken place in special issues not unlike this one. The prehistory of this issue begins, fittingly, in the year invoked by several writers herein as a point of origin for the contemporary era of Canadian publishing, 1967. To mark the Centennial, *Canadian Literature* published an issue entitled “Publishing in Canada.” George Woodcock begins with a succinct and provocative editorial on the growth of small presses and the need to produce separate Canadian editions of all books by writers working in Canada. Woodcock’s observations are followed by a summary of responses to a questionnaire on the state of Canadian publishing from a panel of writers, academics, and editors including Earle Birney, Hugh MacLennan, Kildare Dobbs, Carl F. Klinck, and Robert

Weaver. The five articles that constitute the body of the issue examine the topic from diverse perspectives, including those of a freelance publisher, a bookseller, and an editor, each of whom offers a strongly materialist analysis of the industry. Among the primarily English articles, Naim Kattan's "L'Édition Au Canada Français" notably offers a discussion of the economics and politics of publishing in Quebec. Perhaps the most timely of the pieces, a concluding article by Wynne Francis on "The Little Presses," anticipates the changing face of Canadian publishing with a systematic account of the development of the smaller presses over the previous three decades.

What the Centennial issue reveals in retrospect is a remarkable confidence in Canadian literature's ability to be successful on an international scale. At the same time, the contributors express concern that the Canadian publishing industry still lacks a definite mandate to serve Canadian cultural growth rather than simply pandering to foreign interests. Witness, for example, the contrast between Hugh MacLennan's insistence that "an international literature, based on Canada, already exists" (13) and Earle Birney's fear that "So long as this country remains a small political satellite of the United States, involved in the American economy of waste and war, our cultural future will be negligible" (12). Also, contributors to the issue repeatedly note the impossibility of surviving as an author through Canadian publication alone, especially in the case of fiction and poetry, which few houses are willing to publish because of the almost guaranteed loss of money on such books. Apparently fiction is especially hard-hit at this time; as the bookseller W.J. Duthie explains, "More of the large Canadian publishers issue books of poetry than issue novels" (40). This statement seems remarkable given the marketplace today, in which Canadian fiction has become a valued national and international commodity. First-time authors are coveted by small and large presses alike, who all hope their next release will generate the attention and revenues of Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* or Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*. From our perspective today, the 1967 issue of *Canadian Literature* serves an important purpose: it creates a historical picture of an industry growing into maturity, and reflects on how and why the business of publishing in Canada is unique and vital to our national identity.

In 1969, Woodcock included an editorial called "Centrifugal Publishing" in the winter issue of *Canadian Literature*, focussing on one concern: the geographic difficulties and attendant economics of publishing in Canada. Using Mel Hurtig's Edmonton-based venture as a model, Woodcock outlines the dangers of assuming that publishing can only be

done in Toronto (for English-language materials) and Montreal (for French texts). He argues that decentralization is good for the industry: “we may at last have the physical basis for regional literary centres where writers choose to remain without feeling the need to establish themselves in or near a megalopolis” (4). In keeping with this positive vision, *Canadian Literature* produced a follow-up to the Centennial issue in 1973, called “Publish Canadian,” which emphasizes the take-action feel that prevailed in the industry during the late 1960s and early 1970s. It includes articles on the growth of literary magazines, the development of university publishing, the rise of alternative magazines, a historical survey of publishing in Quebec, a discussion of the reprint phenomenon, and two materialist analyses of book publishing in Canada by then-publishers Dave Godfrey and Roy MacSkimming. Sarah McCutcheon’s study of the growth of small presses completes the issue.

Woodcock begins his editorial for the volume by noting “the changes that have taken place over such a brief period in the Canadian publishing situation” (3). In this later issue, “counter-cultural publication” is the central focus, with increased attention given to small presses, little magazines, and other alternative presses (3). Ironically, as Woodcock observes, “the established larger publishers [are] virtually unexamined,” a neglect he claims does not represent accurately the extent of their contribution to the expansion of Canadian publishing (4). However, he also contends that the growth of the small presses clearly shows the need for a wide range of publishers who are willing to take a gamble in all areas of Canadian literary production, not just guaranteed commercial successes. Indeed, as this *SCL/ÉLC* issue demonstrates, small presses remain a vital part of Canadian publishing, despite the economic threats to their survival, by continuing to encourage innovation and producing texts in often unprofitable but still vital genres such as poetry, drama, and literary criticism. Moreover, the pragmatics of publishing, examined by Godfrey and MacSkimming, are a critical part of understanding the industry. Robert Lecker’s article in this issue parallels — in many respects — Godfrey’s analysis in 1973 of the complex relationship between The Canada Council, banks, government agencies, and small presses. Like Godfrey, Lecker includes budget numbers, outlines production procedures, and describes grant processes in order to show the challenges of publishing books that do not attract a large popular audience. Reading these two articles side-by-side suggests that little has changed in the past twenty-seven years.

As with the earlier *Canadian Literature* volume, in the 1973 issue

Woodcock also includes responses to a questionnaire on the state of book publishing in Canada. But this time, the profile of respondents is dramatically different; the panel is dominated by small-press editors and publishers, including Shirley Gibson and Dennis Lee of Anansi, Michael Macklem of Oberon, David Robinson of Talonbooks, Coach House's Victor Coleman, and Mel Hurtig. Subjects of discussion include the links between nationalism and the rise of these presses, the financial struggles faced by most houses, the need for presses willing to publish new writers, and the fact that along with this explosion of publishing companies comes a proliferation of texts, not always of the best quality. Regionalism — and the attendant decentralization of publishing — is also recognized as an important factor in the rise of new presses. As David Robinson notes, “63% of the money the federal government is putting into publishing in English Canada is going to Ontario and 56.5% is going to Toronto,” creating an “Eastern Axis syndrome, where the budgets and decision making power is kept in the East” (60). Notably, debates over funding remain relevant to Canadian publishers today but the terms of discussion have changed. Assumptions about the stability of the “Eastern Axis” have been undermined in recent years, with the demise or absorption of several small presses located in Ontario, whose economic viability was threatened by a lack of funding. Witness, for example, the recent demise of Coach House, which has been reincarnated into a Web-based venture, and the transformation of other presses, such as Anansi, who have joined larger publishing houses in order to gain financial stability. Yet, as Kathleen Scherf's essay on Talonbooks in this issue attests, small presses outside of central Canada continue to survive and thrive as independent entities, despite regionalism, government cutbacks, and rising costs.

In recent years, discussion and debate about the business of Canadian publishing has been led by Robert Lecker and Frank Davey, both of whom have regularly — and polemically — examined Canadian presses and periodicals. Davey devotes a chapter of *Canadian Literary Power* to what he calls “The Collapse of the Canadian Poetry Canon,” and another to a study of English-Canadian literary periodicals. In the former, Davey examines the economic and cultural conditions surrounding the publication of poetry volumes in Canada, challenging the fear expressed by some journalists, poets, and critics that Canadian poetry is dying from lack of an audience. Using a combination of statistical analyses and studies of poetry anthologies from the 1970s and 1980s, Davey argues that poetry in Canada is not “in crisis,” but now serves a different purpose

(99). The power of humanism and nationalism, epitomized by the lyric poem, has been displaced. Instead, poetry “seems to have found a new use-value in elaborating or reifying the self-constructions of special-interest constituencies” and through this function, remains a part of nationalist discourse (99). For Davey, who is himself a published poet, journal editor, and literary critic, the main problem that arises with contemporary Canadian poetry publication is ensuring that these special-interest texts — which are “discursively affiliated with some regional, feminist, ethnic, [or] racial community” — circulate beyond their immediate readership (97). These books, Davey argues, need to facilitate an exchange between groups rather than simply reifying difference. The latter chapter offers a survey of recent periodicals whose primary focus is what Davey calls “the theorization of English-Canadian writing” (103). He creates profiles of each in terms of its funding and mandate, and then provides a critical evaluation of the journal’s content and quality, which helps him to explain the differing numbers of subscribers and the success or failure of the journal’s survival. By focussing on the material conditions of these journals and the communities they serve, Davey explores the reciprocal relationship between producer and consumer, and critiques the lack of support for “radical criticism” in Canada (122).

Davey’s assessment of periodicals does not include one of the most relevant contributors to current discussions of the materiality of Canadian publishing, *Textual Studies in Canada*, which was launched in the mid-1990s by members of the Department of English and Modern Languages at University College of the Cariboo. This journal provides, as its mandate states, “a collaborative and interdisciplinary forum in which researchers and teachers can address issues related to the study of texts within a Canadian context” (Garrett-Petts iii). Concerned with “where texts come from, who writes them, and who reads them; how texts function and how they are used,” *TSC*’s twelve issues include a wide range of articles that examine, either implicitly or explicitly, how publishing in Canada impacts on the creation and consumption of texts.

Much like Davey, Lecker is involved in publishing in a variety of capacities. The co-owner of ECW Press, the editor of *Essays in Canadian Writing*, and an established literary critic, Lecker has spent the last decade examining the Canadian canon, including the material conditions surrounding the birth of the New Canadian Library and the marketing of canonical texts (see *Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value and Making it Real: The Canonization of English-Canadian Literature*). Though sometimes criticized for not acknowledging his role as publisher

when writing as an academic, Lecker's work has engendered ongoing debates over the existence of a recognizable Canadian canon and the politics of such a metanarrative. His arguments have inspired responses from Davey and a variety of other Canadian critics (including Tracy Ware, Terry Goldie, and, in these pages, Laura Groening) who disagree with Lecker's account of how the Canadian canon was formed and what impact it has had. In this issue of *SCL/ÉLC*, Lecker dons his publisher's hat. He explores the pragmatics of publishing a scholarly book and candidly describes the challenges facing editors, business managers, and owners of publishing houses who remain committed to publishing criticism on Canadian literature and theatre.

The day-to-day realities of producing and marketing books are also the focus at The Canadian Centre for Studies in Publishing (CCSP), a program housed at Simon Fraser University. Running since 1987, the program, supported by an advisory board made up primarily of large and small publishers, writers, and librarians, offers a Masters degree in Publishing, as well as an undergraduate minor, summer workshops, and various writing and publishing courses open to the wider community. Designed to teach the practical skills, the program also has a scholarly dimension. The mandate of CCSP includes examining Canadian government policies and studying the history of publishing and the creation of the book. But education is merely one aspect of the CCSP, which also undertakes contract work, administers a job list, and has compiled a database of resources related to the Canadian publishing industry. In particular, the Canadian Publishers' Records Database, created by the CCSP, offers a wealth of information for those interested in the business of publishing in Canada. Intended to "identify, locate, and describe all records relating to the history of secular English-language book publishing in Canada" (www.harbour.sfu.ca/ccsp/databases/cprd/cprd_content.html), the database holds over 1400 entries and provides biographical sketches and histories of every publishing house with a record. This resource is a useful tool for scholars and yet another tangible way to ensure that information about Canadian publishers gets recorded and preserved for future study.

By creating an aura of excitement around the subject of Canadian publishing, these critical voices, journals, and programs have helped to ensure that a sustained dialogue about the conditions and complexities of the business exists. By bringing together a diverse range of articles that explore the whats, whys, and hows of literary publishing in Canada, this special issue aims to extend the conversation and show that publishing

continues to shape what we read and teach in the fields of Canadian literature and criticism. In his engaging opening article, Robert Lecker asks a provocative question of *SCL/ÉLC* readers: “Would You Publish This Book?” Using as a case study a scholarly book published last year by ECW Press, Lecker shows how the challenges of procuring funding for academic monographs in Canada, and the economic constraints involved with publishing such books, would seem to argue clearly against going ahead with publication. Yet he makes a compelling intellectual case for the necessity of continuing to publish critical and theoretical studies of Canadian literature and culture. Fearful that the recent decrease of Canadian literary criticism will diminish the value placed on Canadian literature, Lecker examines the intricacies of a publishing industry — built on national principles — that may be threatening its own survival. According to Lecker, by refusing to underwrite the publication of such scholarly studies, these presses are ensuring the decline of Canadian literary publishing. Still, as Lecker’s story unfolds, it becomes increasingly difficult to answer “yes” to his provocative opening question, especially when the cost of producing the book of criticism may mean sacrificing the financial health of the press.

One strength of Lecker’s article is its up-to-the-minute contemporaneity. By taking his narrative to August 2000 in an issue published in September, he may be setting a new record for a humanities journal. In contrast, the two articles that follow turn back the clock, providing fascinating historical contexts for the business of Canadian publishing. They look across the ocean (to London) and south of the border (to New York City) in order to understand the relationships between early Canadian writers, publishers, and readers. In ““Of the Irritable Genus”: The Role of Susanna Moodie in the Publishing of *Roughing It in the Bush*,” Alison Rukavina contests established readings of Moodie’s role in the creation of various published versions of her famous nineteenth-century narrative. Rukavina shows that Moodie was an active participant in the editing process despite the physical distance that separated her from her British publisher. Drawing extensively on archival sources, Rukavina documents Moodie’s collaborative efforts and explores the economic and artistic reasons for her commitment to producing a text that would sell in Britain.

Ruth Panofsky’s “At Odds: Reviewers and Readers of the *Jalna* Novels” traces the shifting literary value of Mazo de la Roche’s status as an author. Panofsky begins with the 1927 publication of *Jalna*, which received the first *Atlantic Monthly* prize, and examines the changing perceptions of de la Roche and her work between 1927 and 1960 as she

gradually became perceived as a “popular author,” with a large and loyal audience, rather than “a serious writer.” Drawing on archival materials and theoretical studies of literary value, Panofsky makes a strong argument for the cultural significance of *Jalna*, examining how the conservatism of de la Roche’s texts came to operate differently for readers and reviewers. While reviewers were increasingly dismissive of de la Roche, Panofsky claims that readers of her novels depended upon that familiar and stable set of conventions. By meeting readers’ expectations, de la Roche was able to cultivate a strong bond with her audiences.

The question of what constitutes a “canon” of Canadian literature, and who determines its contents, continues to be debated by those who study the business of Canadian publishing. Peggy Kelly’s “Anthologies and the Canonization Process: A Case Study of the English-Canadian Literary Field, 1920-1950” analyzes of the contents of poetry anthologies published over three decades. She gathers statistical data and uses this material to explore how gender and ethnicity shape the canon produced through these anthologies. Focussing on the distinction between association anthologies and academic-professional anthologies, Kelly examines the ways in which women and ethnic minorities either remained on the margins of the canon or were excluded from it altogether, depending on the method by which the anthology was created.

Issues of canonicity and inclusion are approached from a quite different perspective in Laura Groening’s article “Malcolm Ross and the New Canadian Library: Making It Real or Making a Difference?” Groening argues that Ross, the founding editor of the influential NCL series, has not been recognized for his contributions to a multicultural literary tradition in Canada. As constructed by Robert Lecker and (implicitly) Smaro Kamboureli, Ross has come to represent a stodgily conservative canon that, Groening argues, bears no resemblance to the vision of Canadian literature and society he actually promoted. Indeed, she asserts, contemporary articulations of Canada’s multicultural, multiethnic literary make-up would find a good point of origin in the efforts of Ross, over forty years ago, to make the diverse voices of Canadian writing more widely available.

Groening’s is the first of three articles evaluating the contributions of a particular publisher or series; the subsequent two follow the legacies of important small presses, House of Anansi and Talonbooks, from the late 1960s to the present day. Stephen Cain does an admirable job of historicizing Anansi’s unique first-novel series in “Tracing the Web: House of Anansi’s Spiderline Editions.” For Cain, the Spiderline experi-

ment reflects key elements of Canada's literary climate in the late 1960s, a remarkable period of nationalism that both nurtured and was nurtured by a sudden blossoming of book publishing across the nation. Drawing on archival resources and his own reading of the novels published under the Spiderline imprint, Cain brings his story up to date with a discussion of the series' rejuvenation in the 1990s before evaluating its overall contribution to Canadian literary history.

Kathleen Scherf also writes engaging archive-based history and astute analysis in "A Legacy of Canadian Cultural Tradition and the Small Press: The Case of Talonbooks." Showing how the changing fortunes of the Vancouver-based press reflect our literary culture since the Centennial, Scherf examines both continuity and change in the press and its publishing policies, from its anti-establishment beginnings in 1967 to its present profile as one of the strongest and most successful literary houses in Canada. She reveals the Talon story to be one not just of survival and adaptation to changing conditions, but of progressive leadership in turbulent times. Her article ends on a sombre note, however, as she wonders what the future holds for a generation of literary publishers who will, in the next decade, reach retirement with no obvious successors in sight to keep their presses alive.

In the email interview that concludes the issue, Douglas Fetherling also looks both back in time and ahead to the future — always keeping his gaze focussed on the present moment. As one of our foremost men of letters, whose many hats include those of writer, editor, book reviewer, and former publisher, Fetherling is well positioned to assess the current state of literature and publishing in Canada. He turns his encyclopedic knowledge and lively wit to the many material contexts in which Canadian literature is produced; publishing, design, editing, marketing, reviewing, bookselling, and much more all receive detailed scrutiny. For Fetherling, the increasing complexity and professionalism of the book trade since his early days with Anansi make for a lot more and often better publishing, but many of the old challenges remain, and publishing in Canada is as fragile and beleaguered as ever.

Like any publication, this issue of *SCL/ÉLC* represents a lot of work by a number of people, and we trust it justifies the effort by making a substantial and timely contribution to our understanding of the interrelated worlds of Canadian literature and publishing. What the issue has shown us is that this *is* still a specialized area of research; while we are very pleased with each article we have included, we had expected a larger number of submissions, especially from French-language authors (who

did not submit anything) and publishers (most of whom were too busy surviving as publishers to write an original article). A couple of promising submissions could not be revised in time for our deadline, and some others were not close enough to our topic to be included. We were interested that all those who submitted dealt with publishing in its traditional form — the book — and so the implications of electronic publishing, e-books and the Internet are regrettably not discussed here. It is our hope, however, as with all special issues, that the variety and rigour of these articles will stimulate further scholarship examining literature and publishing together, to be published in future issues of *SCL/ÉLC* and elsewhere.

WORKS CITED

- The Canadian Centre for Studies in Publishing, Simon Fraser U. 25 August 2000. <http://www.harbour.sfu.ca/ccsp>.
- Davey, Frank. *Canadian Literary Power*. Edmonton: NeWest, 1994.
- Garrett-Petts, W.F., et al., eds. *Textual Studies in Canada: Canada's Journal of Cultural Literacy* 1-12.
- Lecker, Robert, ed. *Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1991.
- . *Making It Real: The Canonization of English-Canadian Literature*. Concord: Anansi, 1995.
- . "The Canada Council's Block Grant Program and the Construction of Canadian Literature." *English Studies in Canada* 25.3/4 (1999): 439-69.
- Woodcock, George. "Editorial: Centrifugal Publishing." *Canadian Literature* 39 (1969): 3-4.
- , ed. *Canadian Literature* 33 (1967).
- , ed. *Canadian Literature* 57 (1973).