

## UNCOMMERCIAL VOICES

TWO ARTICLES in this issue deal in varying ways with the contribution of the small private presses to the encouragement of Canadian poets and even occasionally of writers in prose. The tribute which these articles imply is hardly sufficient acknowledgment of the debt which Canadian authors and readers owe to the men and women who have devoted their time, their skill and their financial resources, often extremely unobtrusively, to providing the means by which writers whose work do not at first sight look commercially profitable can be tested out by the *aficionados* in their art. The record of the private presses in this kind of endeavour is more than impressive; Contact Press, the most important and durable of them all, has been the first publisher for an extraordinary list of Canadian poets since accepted by the regular publishers as writers who will bring prestige to an imprint, if not profit to a publisher's coffers.

Without the private presses, with their care for presentation which gives an added pleasure to the reading of poetry, and without the mimeographed little mags which one reads with the hope of finding some interesting new talent fighting against one's distaste at the smudgy and ugly pages, Canadian poetry might still be very largely a community of verse-writers listening to each other's voices in clannish gatherings. At times poetry may take on life from the voice — sometimes a life that is not its own — but only on the page does it endure real examination and survive. Even the most fanatical supporters of poetry readings are rightly anxious to get into print at the first possible opportunity, since they know as well as everyone else that reading a poem from the printed page is a far truer test than listening to it, muttered, ranted or even carefully elocuted by its creator, who all too often sounds like its destroyer.

Not only do our private presses print poetry that otherwise might find no way to a reader, but they are there as a constant reminder to the commercial pub-

lishers of a duty to literature which they must expect to fulfil without profit. To be just, though some Canadian publishers have cut back severely on poetry since the 1950's, others are maintaining a respectable record. This Fall at least six new books of verse are either just off the press or due to appear almost immediately from the large Toronto houses. This is a far higher ratio to the total number of new books published than one would find in London or New York, while it appears that — in terms of actual sales of their works — Canadian poets are also proportionately better off than their British counterparts. Without wishing to suggest that Canada in 1964 is a poet's paradise, the fact is that, thanks mainly to the private presses and the little mags, the verse-writer has a better chance than ever in the past to see his work published, either at best in elegant print or at worst in the uncertain grey of the mimeographed leaflet.

In one other field — that of local history — private publishing, often by the author in collaboration with an interested printer, has done a great deal of good work in recent years. Every province produces books of this kind; most of them are mediocre, some are sensationally bad, and a few very good, but almost all of them make a contribution to the sum of historical knowledge, even if their literary merits are often low. An example of how ambitious and useful this kind of undertaking can become is given by a massive volume of more than five hundred pages, copiously illustrated and entitled *Peace River Chronicles* (\$6.50, published by Prescott Publishing Company, Vancouver). This volume, collected by G. E. Bowes from the narratives of 81 travellers extending over a century and a half, and flawlessly printed by Morriss of Victoria, is a remarkably rich source book for students of Western Canadian history, and also an example of fine book production from which some at least of our commercial publishers might learn a great deal. It even has its literary aspect, though a rather melancholy one. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, the records and narratives show a depressing decline in style and descriptive power; the evident reason is that at this point professional journalists begin to displace the miners and Hudson's Bay men, the travelling officers and the squatters' wives who felt so directly in their daily lives the rough embrace of an existence on the edge of the world. Perhaps there is a lesson in this for those who take too easily to the idea that the mass media may be the saviours of literature.

May the private presses flourish and may the dedicated amateurs who operate them receive from readers the support which they deserve and need if they are to carry on their indispensable functions in the literary world of modern Canada.