

CENTRIFUGAL PUBLISHING

FEW INDUSTRIES are more subject to centralization, with its attendant ills, than publishing. Little important publishing in England, France or Japan goes on outside the capitals of these countries, and, in the United States, Little Brown of Boston are merely the exception which seems to prove the rule that important publishing is concentrated in New York, though the big American university presses, like those of California and Chicago, do help to counter the centripetal tendency for commercial houses to cluster in the same city. Some countries with strong regionalist traditions, like Italy and Germany, do not centralize to anything like the same extent, and here the publishing industry appears to be more versatile, more flexible, and more alive to unfashionable possibilities.

Canada is a case of dual centralization rather than decentralization. Publishing in French is mainly concentrated in Montreal, and publishing in English in Toronto; even the one important university press is Toronto-based. Small, non-profit presses have appeared in other centres, particularly Vancouver, and there are regional printers who have dabbled in publishing to the extent of bringing out books of local interest which have assured markets. General commercial publishing, however, has rarely been tried outside Toronto, and this is why the appearance of a new and vigorous publishing house in the West is so especially welcome.

The man behind this venture is Mel Hurtig of Edmonton, one of the two best booksellers in western Canada. His firm, M. G. Hurtig Ltd., with one large bookstore already established, considered the alternatives of opening a chain of branch stores and going into publishing. Against a great deal of friendly advice, they chose the latter, entered into association with the Tokyo publishers, Charles Tuttle, and went into business.

From the start, they intended to avoid the temptation to pursue exclusively the sure money that is to be earned from local-appeal publishing. At the same time, they did not ignore this field as a support to their other books; they sold, for example, 33,000 copies of a *Natural History of Alberta*. Another supporting activity which has performed a particularly useful service to those interested in Canadian history is the reprinting of classic western travel narratives; Paul Kane's *Wanderings of an Artist*, and William Francis Butler's two pioneer books, *The Great Lone Land* and *The Wild North Land* are among the titles that have already appeared.

But the books by which Mel Hurtig wishes to be most widely known are literary works like Eli Mandel's *An Idiot Joy*, which won the Governor-General's poetry award, and, even more, "books of national interest and a social or political nature". The first of these is *The New Romans*, edited by A. W. Purdy, which has not only sold 40,000 copies, but has also stirred up a great deal of discussion on the burning questions arising out of Canada's relationship with the United States.

Many of our future publications [says Mel Hurtig] will advocate a more independent Canada. In this category will come books on NATO and NORAD, foreign investment and the future role for Canada in international affairs. . . . In fact, this is the kind of book we intend to concentrate on, even if it means reducing the number of titles we publish each year (seven our first year in 1967, fourteen in 1968).

No-one can fail to welcome a policy with such aims. At the same time it seems an equally important aspect of Mel Hurtig's venture that, while concerned with the independence of Canada, it also asserts in a very practical way the possibility of a healthy decentralization in Canada's literary life. This has happened during the last decade in the field of journals (*Malahat*, *Prism International*, *Mosaic* and *Canadian Literature* all having appeared in the West to compete with Toronto and Montreal publications); it happened for a brief period in the CBC early in the 1960's, when there was an extraordinary regional flowering in radio broadcasting from Vancouver, later snuffed out by the policy decisions and personnel shifts dictated by Ottawa. If it happens in publishing, 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 megalopolis.