

## ON THE CULTIVATION OF LAURELS

IN CERTAIN COUNTRIES literary prizes are major events in the world of letters and in the lives of individual writers. The Prix Goncourt, for instance, carries such prestige among the middlebrow reading public in France that it can multiply many times the sales of a winning book. The effect of this situation on literary manners had not always been edifying. Some writers stand proudly aside; the best are among them. Others are swept into the currents of competition and intrigue that swirl each year around the awarding of the major French prizes. Whatever else the Prix Goncourt and its rivals may have done for literature in France, they have not encouraged dignity among writers.

In Canada we have our own literary prizes — and they are surprisingly numerous when one comes to investigate them — but up to now we have been saved, perhaps by public indifference, the worse hazards of the French system. The winning of a Governor-General's Award makes comparatively little difference to the sales of a Canadian book, and, so far at least as our better prizes are concerned, their most negative result seems to have been a little mild envy among authors.

Of course, there is a good case to be made against any kind of annual literary award. For the best of juries are all too fallible, particularly in short-run judgments of this kind. Two years ago a Monaco bookseller showed me a complete set of books that had won the Prix Goncourt. To look at the titles was a salutary experience; the number of honoured and justly forgotten books was only less impressive than the number of unhonoured masterpieces written during the same period. And France, manifestly, is not the only country where such errors of judgment can occur.

Yet, with all their faults, literary prizes have existed since those distant days when Sophocles and Euripides competed for the Athenian dramatic laurels, and their incessant proliferation makes it seem likely that they will be with us as long as nuclear fission permits. In these circumstances the best we can do is to make sure that they become as effective a means as is humanly devisable of recognising good work.

The recent revision of the system of Governor-General's Awards represents at least a move in that direction, though there is much to criticize both in the changes that have been made and in the manner of their making. Let us first consider the latter question.

The Awards were started during John Buchan's term of office at the suggestion of the Canadian Authors' Association. At first the Association administered the awards; later it tactfully handed over the selection of the winning books to a virtually autonomous Awards Board, though it continued to pay for the medals — unaccompanied by cash prizes — which were given to the winners. Some time ago the Awards Board, apparently without formally notifying the Canadian Authors' Association, approached the Canada Council for assistance in reorganising the system of awards and in providing cash prizes to accompany them. There was no suggestion, it should be emphasised, that the Canada Council itself might actually "take over" or administer the Awards; at the same time, the Council clearly had a considerable say in the changes in procedure and in the reorganisation of the Awards Board. During the negotiations, it appears, the Canadian Authors' Association was not consulted; an editorial in the February issue of its magazine, *The Canadian Author and Bookman*, states categorically that "neither the Awards Board nor the Council people bothered to let the CAA know what was being discussed or contemplated." One does not have to be a partisan of the CAA to be perturbed by the lack of courtesy and tact shown in this instance towards the organisation which, whatever its merits in other respects, first suggested the Governor-General's awards and then had the good sense to set up a virtually independent Awards Board.

The Awards themselves have been changed radically under the new dispensation. The number of categories has been reduced, and separate prizes are now granted within each category for both English and French works. There is no longer an obligation on the Board to make awards unless books of sufficiently high quality are submitted to them. And, finally,

a cash prize of \$1,000 is now a part of each Award.

All these changes, while they do not create an ideal system, are improvements. At first I had doubts about the abandonment of the five past categories of fiction, poetry, creative non-fiction, academic non-fiction and juvenile literature in favour of three new categories described as "poetry and drama, fiction and drama, and non-fiction". A review of the awards over a sample decade (1948 to 1957) convinced me of the wisdom of this change. The poetry awards had indeed stood up very well; only one out of ten went to a book which now appears worthy of little attention. Of the fiction prizes, at least five were given to books which still seem of more than ephemeral importance. But, with few exceptions, the thirty books honoured in the other three categories now present an intimidating array of earnest second-rateness. In other words, perhaps twenty good books were granted awards in ten years, and thirty books received awards they did not deserve just because the prizes had to be given. Yet, at the same time, a number of good authors and good books went without recognition by the Awards Board during this decade.

The new arrangement at least ensures that second-rate books will not be honoured merely because there is nothing better, and the prestige of the Awards should rise accordingly. But there is still no guarantee that the judges will be any more adept at spotting real talent than their predecessors have been, and what seems lacking in the programme is a provision for recognizing the author who has produced work of acknowledged excellence over a number of years, yet has never been granted an Award.

The addition of cash awards is certainly to be welcomed. If one presents laurels, there is everything to be said for gilding them. What surprises one in this case is the thinness of the gilt. It is true that the \$1,000 presented by the Council should prevent a recurrence of those past occasions when impecunious authors could not afford the journey to receive their cashless awards. But, as Sally Creighton insisted in a CBC discussion a year or so ago, a cash prize should be substantial enough to help the writer *as a writer* — in other words to give him time to write or ruminate peacefully upon his craft. \$1,000 pays for little writing or rumination, and Mrs. Creighton argued very reasonably when, on the same occasion, she suggested \$5,000 as an amount that would give a writer not merely money, but that much more valuable commodity, leisure — a period of

freedom from the teaching or radio or TV or whatever other way of earning a living keeps the writer in question, like almost all Canadian writers, from concentrating on the books he really wants to write.

One result of the new arrangement for the Governor-General's Awards has been a temporary banishment to the wilderness of a number of other awards sponsored independently but presented at the same time as the major prizes; no place has been found for them within the new scheme. They include the Leacock Medal for Humour, the Beta Sigma Phi award for the best first novel of the year, the University of Western Ontario's medals for articles, short stories and poems published in periodicals, and the UBC Medal for Popular Biography. As I write in late March the future policies of the sponsors for these awards still appear undecided. There is, of course, no reason why they should not continue independently, and perhaps do more individual good by moving away from the shadow of the Governor-General's Awards. If this happens, their judges might with profit adopt the procedure of withholding prizes when no first-rate book or article appears; most of these prizes have on occasion been given to works which could not possibly have been honoured except on the basis of a better-than-nothing attitude.

Not all awards, of course, are given for published work. There are others, which may be the most useful, connected with contests that aim at encouraging the production of specific kinds of writing. One of the more interesting is the play-writing contest started by the Stratford Foundation last year. The results of the first competition have been encouraging, particularly since so far in Canada dramatic writers have tended, through lack of theatres, to work mostly for radio and television. Eighty plays were submitted. Ten were worthy of serious consideration, and the judges had no misgivings in awarding the three prizes.

These are our Canadian laurels. They are growing, considering the climate, into a respectable little shrubbery, but they still need trimming and training before they become as handsome as they might be. Let us hope, however, that they never become so handsome as to make us forget that no award of a year's end is more than a provisional token of excellence, and that no official accolade replaces the long testing in the minds of readers and writers by which a book is finally crowned with the laurels that do not wither.