

NEW TRENDS IN PUBLISHING (2)

HAVING FOUNDED House of Anansi, and having in the process created a facility of a kind Canada has never had before for publishing experimental fiction, Dave Godfrey moved on to establish, with two partners, the more politically-oriented publishing house called New Press — or, to use its own typographical style — new press. When it was first announced, and the founders made their smiling debut in a *Time* report, new press took the stand for Canadian nationalism. At that time I put a testing question to see just what intellectual rigidities this might conceal. Dave Godfrey assured me that the definition of nationalism was in no sense restricted; an anarchist regionalist, for example, would not be turned away.

And it is this malleable, undogmatic quality that I find the most attractive quality of new press. Its partners are businesslike, but unpushing. Indeed, the only letter they failed to answer was that in which I talked of writing a piece on their work, and asked for information. Other publishers would have tumbled over their own ankles to answer. new press merely ignored the request, and one sensed behind the ignoring less a radical independence than a gentlemanly disinclination to carry too far the imperatives of trade.

When I consider the pile of new press books which lie before me — by no means a complete batch since some have percolated to reviewers — I am rather amazed that a publishing house which sets out with such an apparently narrow intent could be so catholic in its actual productions.

To begin, there is no evident attempt to restrict the range of publication to the political and the polemical. The most impressive of all new press books to date has

been Dave Godfrey's first novel, *The New Ancestors*, a book of such quality that one feels a kind of awe at the thought of what his next may be. All the assurance, the accomplishment far beyond promise that went into Godfrey's volume of stories, *Death Goes Better with Coca Cola*, are here magnified into a fictional edifice in which hallucination and reality reflect each other in an extraordinary feat of experience transmuted.

The one disadvantage of having published *The New Ancestors*, so far as new press is concerned, is that in imaginative quality, in power of writing and in sheer intelligence, it overshadows everything else the house has yet produced. And this even though the press's few books of verse, picked by the editors individually because they like them, we are told, have certainly been above the recent Canadian average. The best of them, even better than Henry Beissel's *Face on the Dark*, is Charles Wright's *The Grave of the Right Hand*, and this, incidentally, is a book by an American poet who appears to have no Canadian links — a sign, if we needed any, that new press's nationalism is no kind of acrid xenophobia.

But fiction and verse remain the smallest group of titles in the list of new press's publications. It includes as well such curiosa as the *Canadian Whole Earth Almanac*, a fascinating compendium of rustic campishness which every quarter provides a mass of information on the "natural life", collected with an enterprise in research and an efficiency in collation lacking in most actual rural communities; indeed, I suspect its main public will be among urbanites who still dream of going to the land or — as I do — remember with mingled nostalgia and disgust their own failures in the simple life.

If only the straighter books that new press publishes had the originality and charm and occasional startling good sense of the *Whole Earth Almanac*! Perhaps I have been unlucky in the examples that have kept their places on my editorial shelf, but even if these are not the best, they obviously represent what new press's editors think is worth publishing. And some of them are mediocre by any standards. Comparing *The New Ancestors* with a clumsy chunk of partisan propaganda like Ed Broadbent's *The Liberal Rip-Off* or a stodgy piece of thesis-writing like John W. Warnock's *Partner to Behemoth: The Military Policy of a Satellite Canada*, I can only feel astonishment at the editorship that can produce all three from the same house.

It would of course be unfair to condemn all new press's publications other than fiction and verse on the strength of the most unattractive. I have just finished reading Margaret Daly's account of the CYC, *The Revolution Game*, and that strikes me as excellent radical reportage. But it is above the average, and to

balance it there are too many pieces of well-meaning bookmaking of a kind that has lately become over-popular in Canada — the volumes written by a group and always sagging towards the lowest level of competence, such as *Why Wilderness*, a turgid symposium on an impeccable cause, and *Pollution Probe*, which affronts the intelligent reader with its condescending and jargon-ridden presentation.

If such books are examples, we do not yet appear to be developing the tradition of polemical writing which Canada so notably lacked in the past and which is a symptom of emerging political maturity. Yet new press could be a veritable school of such writing, if only its editors would set out to revive in Canada the true craft of pamphleteering. The political pamphlet is a form which has its own laws and rewards. It is characterized by a conciseness of form, an economy of verbiage and a simplicity of statement which demand strength of opinion and do not evade literary grace — as the example of such noted recent pamphleteers as Bernard Shaw, George Orwell, Herbert Read and Aldous Huxley has demonstrated. The relentless lecturing of the thesis-maker, the chaotic rambling of the symposium partakers: these have no place in the art of pamphleteering. Indeed, one of its attractions lies in limitations which the real pamphleteer accepts with the same joy as a Welsh poet writing to an elaborate formula for an eisteddfod. In the classic ages of the pamphleteers — and the Thirties was probably the last of them — the custom was to fit pamphlet lengths to the size of sheets of printing paper; the preferred lengths were 16, 32 and 64 pages, and the art was to get all one wanted to say into one of these lengths. Anything over 64 pages was regarded as over-expansive, and the real pamphleteers despised the writer who needed more space to express what he meant with force and clarity and with enough well chosen supporting facts and quotations.

Cheap modern printing techniques have their advantages, but they also mean that many books which should never appear are published, and that subjects which demand the clear and economical statement of the pamphleteer are submerged in volumes of 200 or 300 pages, lost in tedious argument and pointless detail. I hope new press continues to give free rein to novelists and poets if they are as good as those it has so far published. But it really should get its polemicists into trim, and nothing would be better, I suggest, than a series of pamphlets on urgent Canadian issues, with a 64-page nozzle that would make the writers build up their eloquence under pressure.

G.W.