

LIMITS OF TASTE AND TOLERANCE

SINCE THE BEGINNINGS of *Canadian Literature* we have been concerned about the censorship of books. In our second issue, in Autumn 1959, I devoted an editorial —“*Areopagitica* re-written” — to the laws relating to obscenity which in that year were passed in both Britain and Canada. The conclusion of that editorial was that while the British legislation was an obvious advance on anything in the past, the Canadian legislation was at best ambiguous and at worst oppressive. While praising the British legislation for its provision for a consideration of the literary, scholarly or artistic merits of any work involved in a prosecution, I also remarked:

It is this writer's personal opinion that censorship of any kind is morally unjustified and practically self-defeating. It places a premium on obscurantism and intolerance, it lowers the climate of social relations by encouraging the sneak and the informer, and it places works of literature at the mercy of policemen, customs officers, magistrates and judges whose training does not often include the inculcation of artistic discrimination.

But, admitting a situation such as existed in 1959, when large numbers of people obviously still supported “some degree of governmental interference in the freedom of publication”, I took the position that to be realistic we must accept a compromise that would protect works of genuine literary merit; what I objected to in the legislation as it then stood was that it assured no such protection.

Events have led me to the conclusion that the argument on grounds of literary merit in fact provides a false position from which to criticize censorship laws; only the absolutist libertarian view, as Milton stated it, stands up to examination and is effective in practice.

Let me narrate the incident that led me to this conclusion. Recently I received a letter from a lawyer in eastern Canada who was preparing the appeal of a group of book store clerks who had been convicted on obscenity charges. The defence would involve three types of expert testimony — testimony on changing community standards of tolerance, medical-psychiatric testimony on the effects of pornography on behaviour, and testimony on the literary nature of “the paperback novels which are the subject matter of this appeal.”

I was invited, with just over two weeks’ notice, to provide the testimony “on literary merits” regarding some “dozens of novels”. I was not given the titles of these novels, though I was given a single sheet of summaries prepared by a professor of English in a Maritime university which left no doubt of the kind of books they were. I was expected to decide in a couple of days, before I had seen a page of the books concerned, whether I would deliver the appropriate opinions. It would of course have been impossible to give conscientious testimony in such circumstances, and I declined the invitation. But I remained interested in two sentences from the lawyer’s letter, which revealed to me as nothing before had done the weakness of the defence of any work merely on aesthetic merits. He told me that the professor who read the books “feels that this material appeals to a segment in the community, of lower intellect and education. The point is that this material says something to them — it is their choice of literature.”

Obviously the critic cannot defend on aesthetic grounds books which are someone else’s “choice of literature” but which he considers rubbish, as I suspect I would have found the books I was asked to defend. True, in this case a particularly gross form of relativism was applied by the lawyer and his consultant professor, but it had the effect of making me more aware than before of the element of relativism that enters any defence of the literary merits of a work in a non-literary environment like a court of law. Does not the very setting tend to distort our view on such matters? Does it not often become a we-and-they situation in which we tend to make a false judgment of a work just because it is threatened?

When one remembers some of the works that have in the past aroused impassioned defences on the part of men of letters, it is obvious that many of them were not works of high literature at all. *Madame Bovary*, *Les Fleurs du Mal*,

Ulysses: no doubt exists in those cases, to be sure. But does it not now seem absurd that in the excitement of the moment good critics found aesthetic merit in a bad banned book like *The Well of Loneliness* and regarded Frank Harris's shoddy and senile *My Life and Loves* as a persecuted literary masterpiece? Have not Henry Miller's books steadily and rightly faded in prestige ever since they ceased to be contraband? And could not one even say that *Lady Chatterley's Lover* gained prominence at the expense of Lawrence's better books because he was the centre of a *cause célèbre* which brought the critics flocking to defend it?

No defence of books against censorship that is based on aesthetic grounds can fail to produce such distortions, and lead critics by the emotions of the situation into untenably relativistic judgments. I am therefore now convinced that the only effective and logical argument against censorship is the absolute libertarian one. We have to return to Milton. We have to say — but this time without qualification — what I said in these pages in 1959, that “censorship of any kind is morally unjustified and practically self-defeating.” If we demand freedom of publication for *Beautiful Losers* and *Cocksure* we must allow freedom of publication for bookstall pornography (which, like cesspools, may have its own social value), but this does not mean that we must accept both as literature or that we can defend any “choice of literature” but our own.

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I N RECENT YEARS the range of scholarly tools for Canadian writers has been immensely extended, largely through the enterprise of the University of Toronto Press. The *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, to whose monumental merits we have repeatedly drawn attention, is only the most notable of these achievements; other compilations which have been of more specialized use to students and critics of writing in Canada also deserve attention. Apart from the *Literary History of Canada*, a work of massive scope and disturbing unevenness, the most ambitious has undoubtedly been the *Check List of Canadian Literature and Background Materials*, compiled by R. E. Watters. The great merit of this work, whose original version — published in 1959 — covered the period from 1628 to 1950, was that, while limiting himself to works in English, Watters took Canadian literature to mean writing by Canadians wherever it was printed, and thus, by diligently pursuing the *Check List's* various divisions of subject and genre, one is likely to find all a writer's works listed and not merely those which have found publication in Canada. A new edition of the

Check List of Canadian Literature, bringing its coverage up to 1960 and repairing the rare omissions in the earlier version, is due for publication this autumn. Unfortunately it has not arrived in time for detailed consideration; it will be fully noticed in our next issue.

The comprehensiveness of the Watters *Check List* makes one regret the limitations of two other important bibliographical works recently issued by the University of Toronto Press, limitations which are deliberate in the case of Harald Bohne's *Canadian Books in Print* (\$25.00) and evidently accidental in the case of Douglas Lochhead's *Bibliography of Canadian Bibliographies* (\$20.00). Both of these books — which have the advantage of dealing with publications in French as well as in English — are immensely useful so far as they go, but they are not the completely reliable tools their titles might lead one to expect.

The fault of Harald Bohne's handbook is illustrated in the ambiguity of its title. What are we to expect from *Canadian Books in Print*? Surely with most reason a list of books by Canadian authors which are now in print no matter where they were published. Books by Canadian authors are my idea of Canadian books, but not, quite evidently, Harald Bohne's idea; he is concerned strictly with books *published in Canada*, even if this merely means a Canadian distributor putting his imprint on a book actually brought out by a foreign publisher and which has no other link with Canada. So we have the extraordinary anomaly that, while works by non-Canadians as varied as William Godwin, George Orwell, Arthur Koestler and Iris Murdoch appear as "Canadian books in print", books by Canadian authors that were published abroad and are still in print are rigorously excluded. To give a very personal example, out of twenty of my books which were in print in 1971, only the nine actually brought out with Canadian publishers' imprints are included, although the rest were in fact available in Canada in that year. Does that make half my books Canadian and half non-Canadian? To be an effective scholarly tool rather than a mere showcase for local publishers, a handbook entitled *Canadian Books in Print* should be devoted to books by Canadians *wherever* they are in print and should leave out books by non-Canadians even though by some accident they bear a Canadian imprint. This book has a considerable usefulness, but it will only become as useful as it should be when one can open it and see at a glance what, among a Canadian writer's book-length works, can be bought in the year of compilation.

The criticism that this is something useful which might be improved applies also — though in a different way — to Lochhead's *Bibliography of Canadian Bibliographies*. Here there is no fault in defining the field, but there is — in this

second (1972) edition — a failure of thoroughness in bringing information up to date. In judging reference books I have always followed the rule of turning first to the items of which I have some close knowledge; the encyclopaedia one finds making mistakes in one's own field is to be used with circumspection, though not necessarily to be rejected.

In the case of the *Bibliography of Canadian Bibliographies* I looked up four references which concerned features that had appeared in *Canadian Literature*. Only one was complete and even then there was an uncorrected spelling change ("Theater" for "Theatre", as if the American hordes were already among us!). Our annual Checklist of Canadian Literature was entered as if Inglis F. Bell had edited it consistently from 1960 to its demise last year; no note was made of the fact that Rita Butterfield was editor from 1964 onwards or that the French section was edited during the same period by Susan Port and then by Pamela Piddington. There is an entry for our Index, but only the section up to No. 12 is noted, despite the fact that by the time this edition of the *Bibliography of Canadian Bibliographies* was prepared two further indexes had appeared, together reaching No. 36. And, while Earle Birney's *Bibliography of Malcolm Lowry* in No. 8 and the supplement in No. 9 are included, Birney's second supplement in No. 19 is ignored. Now, if I find failings in three-quarters of the entries of whose subjects I have close knowledge, how am I to proceed with confidence as I look up Mr. Lochhead's references in areas where my knowledge is notably less? Perhaps, as he stresses, one cannot include in such a book an entry for every bibliography of every kind, but at least those which are included should give full and correct information. Yet, for all its flaws, this is the only reference book of its kind, and it brings together a mass of useful information not collected anywhere else. One can only hope that, when the third edition appears, flaws of the kind I have mentioned will be eliminated.

A different kind of reference book, frank about its omissions and somewhat unashamedly didactic in its intent, is *Read Canadian* (James Lewis & Samuel, \$1.95), a compilation of essays and booklists edited by Robert Fulford, Dave Godfrey and Abraham Rotstein, three avowed nationalists of various viewpoints anxious to provide Canadians with some starting point for an appreciation of their country's literature. Scholars of uneven capabilities write essays of uneven quality on 29 categories of literature (some of them very restricted in a modish way, like *Drugs and Women*), and on the whole the coverage is fair. Hundreds of useful or important books are discussed, and a few of the authors, like Walter Young, Richard Simeon, W. H. New and Dennis Lee manage in these difficult

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circumstances to write essays of literary quality. Dave Godfrey and James Lorimer discuss the problems of publication in Canada and there is a list of Canadian publishers untainted by foreign initiation or control.

Every review I have seen of *Read Canadian* has noted the omissions in its coverage, and certainly they exist, in terms of books and authors missed and whole fields of study left out, but I do not propose at this stage to add to the list, since this does not pretend to be a comprehensive book and the editors have promised to fill out the pattern and be more comprehensive in later editions. Also, it is, after all, an introduction for the uninitiated. Those who are already modestly versed in the imaginative, historical and sociological literature of our country will find little that is unfamiliar, but the book is not aimed at them. It is aimed at people like Robert Fulford's young writer who went through high school and university in western Canada and never in the process even heard of Sinclair Ross's prairie classic *As for Me and my House*. As such a venture — the first of its kind — it is to be welcomed and its editors are to be congratulated.

G.W.