

MASSEY'S HARVEST

I RETURNED TO CANADA from England in 1949, just in time to learn of the launching of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, otherwise known as the Massey Commission. Coming from literary London, which in the late 1940's was flourishing with an abandon that contrasted with the physical austerity of Cripps's still-rationed Britain, I could not help feeling that there was indeed need for some kind of stimulation of the arts in Canada.

The scene in 1949 was as bleak as a Winnipeg winter. The only literary magazines in evidence were Alan Crawley's *Contemporary Verse*, John Sutherland's *Northern Review*, and the apparently imperishable *Canadian Forum*, and the first two did not have long to live. In publishing it was the pre-McClelland era, the age of the Ryerson Chapbooks and, outside that slim venture, of an overwhelming caution. Art galleries and theatres barely survived in the largest towns, and the touring companies that visited Canada were almost always of the lower grade.

Only the CBC seemed a shining exception, and it had a devoted following in those days when radio was still unchallenged. Robert Weaver was already performing the role of one-man council of the arts which he has carried on so splendidly ever since. One heard regular plays and concerts, one could sell talks on a great variety of subjects, for listeners were then treated as intelligent adults, and at a time when hardly any periodical would publish a short story, Bob Weaver commissioned them for CBC readings and then persuaded publishers to issue them as anthologies. The CBC was not only in those days a patron and an activator of literature in Canada. One took pride in it when Americans south of the border talked of it with envy, for it supported drama and music as energetically as it did literature. Perhaps, even then, the BBC was better, but the BBC did not seem like the Thelon River running through the Barren Land, and the CBC did.

But that was not enough to make me as a writer decide that I wanted to stay in Canada, and when I went off on a Guggenheim to France and the U.S.A. in 1950, I was not at all sure I would really settle here. Some atavistic longing for the great spaces did draw me back, in the fall of 1951, just in time to read the Massey Report, which appeared then, and I was so impressed by this exhaustive and concerned enquiry into a nation's creative needs, with its ambitious recommendations, that I decided to stay and see what would develop. It was only one of the reasons why I stayed, for the physical beauty of British Columbia had woven its spell, but it was a decisive reason; scenery alone would never have been enough.

I remembered all this when I was invited last winter to take part in a symposium in Ottawa called by the Governor-General to celebrate the quarter-century of the Massey Report and to consider the direction to take from now on. Half-a-dozen artists and critics, a couple of cabinet ministers, a Tory shadow minister, a cosmopolitan Senator, and a clutch of cultural bureaucrats spent a weekend to Government House in which the intervals between luncheons, dinners and receptions in Ottawa style were devoted to considering the changing situation of the Canadian arts over the past quarter of a century; on the last morning we pulled our scattered thoughts together to make some tentative recommendations which, for all their visible effect on the powers-that-be, appear to have dropped into a deep well. But we were all conscious that in the Peacock-like atmosphere of that great-house gathering by no means everything had been said that might have been, and one of our last decisions was that afterthoughts in writing would be acceptable, particularly from literary types who talk best to God and their typewriters.

I found myself, indeed, with a great many afterthoughts (a selection of which were sent to Ottawa and went into the same deep well of oblivion as the symposium's recommendations), and some of these afterthoughts were about the Massey Report itself. I was astonished, on re-reading it, to realize that time had given it a positively classic character; written with a literary flair one does not associate with Royal Commission reports, it showed an extraordinary wisdom in its assessment of the great cultural lacks of Canada in the late 1940's and the scanty resources to meet them. What impressed me perhaps more than anything else was the way the Commission had created its own bow wave of interest, not only looking into needs but making people think of them, so that when the time came to implement the most important of all the recommendations, that regarding the foundation of the Canada Council, the idea was accepted virtually without protest.

I have often heard it said that Massey was an "elitist" and that the Report was an elitist document. And so, if you think in such barren terms, it was. But in the cultural desert of Canada at that time a group of men and women was needed

who could act the elitist role and decide what looked like being good for the arts and hence for the country. I wonder — I wonder greatly — if Pierre Trudeau would have the grudging courage St. Laurent showed in setting up a commission to enquire into such a minority interest, and, having set it up, to implement a fair proportion of its recommendations.

What the Massey Commission did, if we give it credit for the consequences of its recommendations, was to create an entirely new situation for the arts in Canada, and to change, in ways not entirely anticipated and not in every way good, the general attitude of Canadians towards the artist as creator and performer.

Really, one has to see the situation from two points of view, that of the artist and that of the audience. Artists have been offered opportunities of fulfilment during the past twenty years in Canada that were unimagined at the beginning of the 1950's. And appreciators of the arts have been offered such opportunities of enjoyment that recent statistics suggest attendances at cultural events (plays, concerts, the ballet, art shows, etc.) now exceed attendances at spectator sports.

In Canadian writing (and I suspect also in painting though I am not so sure about music) the most striking development has been the vast quantitative increase in creations and creators, among whom — as always — there is a high incidence of fool's gold, but also a surprisingly frequent appearance of the real thing, so that a library of good Canadian books assembled today would be a vastly richer collection than one assembled in 1949. In poetry the upsurge has been enormous; as I pointed out in a chapter of the new *Literary History of Canada*, no less than 600 poets published more than 1,100 collections of verse between 1960 and 1972. The short story has emerged from under Weaver's protective wing to become a flourishing genre. If the number of fiction titles published each year has not increased so dramatically as the number of books of verse, the annual total of *good* novels is certainly far higher than in pre-Massey years. Criticism has matured and proliferated, both in books and in periodicals, and literary journals of all kinds are not only numerous beyond all our dreams in 1949, but often durable into the bargain. And the appearance of new theatres of all kinds (professional, semi-professional and amateur) has presented dramatists with unprecedented opportunities to write for the stage which have partly compensated for the unfortunate recent shrinkage in the role of the CBC as a patron of drama.

How much all this is the result of the Massey Commission, with its direct offspring, the Canada Council, and its indirect creations, the provincial arts councils which support artists in varying degrees (stingily in British Columbia, generously in Ontario), is impossible to say. In my view, just as the Massey Commission sensed and activated an already existing hunger among Canadians for arts they could enjoy, so the first activities of the Canada Council and the provincial councils coincided with an upsurge in creativity linked with the general social restiveness of the 1960's. Artistically, Canada seemed to come of age in that

decade, and the Council was there to provide what the individual artist needed most in a country where payment for his work had always been scanty and intermittent: the gift of time. The complement to this was giving money for material expenses to performing arts groups, galleries, magazines and publishers so that, when writers or painters or musicians had made use of the gift of time, their efforts could be presented to the public. In these fields, the Canada Council's work has been excellent, and uninhibited by false fears of elitism. By removing financial anxieties from artists, it helped to assure that much good work which otherwise would have been aborted was completed and presented to the public.

But then the Council moved into more questionable areas than merely giving time to artists and expenses to performers and publishers. Some of its programmes seemed to negate its grants for creation by encouraging artists to occupy themselves with things outside their proper work; writers, for example, were funded to wander over the country reading their works in the cause of publicity, when they should have been at home doing what a writer does best — writing.

A major Canada Council project that has always disturbed me is the Art Bank, whose effect has been to make the state the principal patron of the visual arts, with the result that dealers tend to become state purchasing agents and painters to become increasingly dependent on governmental buying and hence on official taste. It is only a short step from that point to the idea that artists of all kinds should become state employees or at least state pensioners, and that the Canada Council's ultimate function is to be either a personnel office or a welfare agency.

The most recent Council move with regard to writers has very disquieting implications in this direction. It institutes the virtual beginnings of a "guaranteed income" programme. First, only two people will be chosen; they will have to present projects lasting for three years, and over these years their incomes will be sustained by Canada Council grants at the level of \$16,000. No doubt the first two of these three-year grants, and perhaps many others, will enable writers to fulfil long, difficult and not very remunerative projects that are of real value. But it is the idea that writers should have a "guaranteed income" rather than specific grants for particular projects, that concerns me. The dialectic of struggle plays a real, though undetermined part in the process of artistic creation, and to make artists secure through continuing subsidies is more likely to produce plump capons than soaring eagles.

It is time to look carefully at the complexity of state aid to the arts and its possible effect if it becomes too intrusive or, for that matter, too solicitous towards the artist. Patronage of any kind is an ambivalent process, and we have already noted in these pages the occasional need to bite the hand that feeds. The ambivalence of aid to the arts has perhaps, however, most deplorably shown its darker side in contributing to the transformation of the CBC from something near to a dragon of the airwaves into a moribund dinosaur, for if the Canada Council has

on the whole kept up high standards, the CBC over the last decade at least has gone nowhere but down.

And here we come to question of the audience for the arts, how it has changed since the issuing of the Massey Report in 1951, and the effects of the changes in its manner of participation.

We have to bear in mind here that there are two ways of enjoying the arts, direct and indirect. Direct enjoyment occurs when we go to a play or a concert or an art gallery, when we listen to poetry being read, when we perform plays or music as amateurs. The indirect way is through the media; we read books instead of watching plays or hearing poets; we study paintings in fine colour reproductions; we listen to recorded music in our own houses. Also, we watch television or listen to radio, and here there is the difference that, while we control our reading or our listening to records, we are dependent for broadcast entertainment on the programmes offered by the various networks. For those interested in the arts in Canada this has in the past meant principally the CBC.

The significant change that has taken place in the habits of the arts audience is a shift towards participation as spectators or performers directly in arts events and towards choosing those mediations, such as reading books and listening to records, which allow the maximum personal choice. The amount of time such an audience now allots to radio and television has sharply decreased; they have opted out of MacLuhan's mass media utopia. This is partly because of the greater incidence of arts events in their communities, partly because of the vastly increased availability of paperback books, of records and tapes. Thanks to these changes, largely fostered in Canada through programmes deriving ultimately from the Massey Commission, the arts audience has become progressively less interested in what is offered by the broadcasting systems and particularly by the CBC.

This shift in attention is what has allowed the bureaucrats who control the CBC to debase their programming virtually at will, and with the illusion of public consent, since they have not been subjected to the kind of massive protest that would have occurred even as recently as the mid-1960's. In the high days of radio, when the CBC was the main source of dramatic production in Canada and the principal employer of actors, musicians and writers, listening was a habit among the vast numbers of people who now frequent arts events, and such people formed — and continued to form until very recently — the CBC's most faithful body of support, its Praetorian Guard. In those days anything produced by the CBC was a matter of interest and discussion among people concerned with the arts; the CBC was their lifeline in a society where the arts were badly served, and this feeling continued into the 1960's in radio and into the early years of television, when producers and programmers alike were still conscious that the new medium might be even better than the old as a means of reporting on the arts and extending their publics.

That time is ended. Almost a decade ago CBC television virtually ceased to serve the arts. CBC radio still pays lip service, and FM is not wholly lost, but AM is being ruined by inane experiments in presenting the arts through mindless chatter and absurdly fragmented programmes in which the pop and the classical are inextricably mixed. The people who concoct such programmes are not producers; they are communications technicians bedevilled by false ideas of democracy. They have failed to understand that democracy, in so far as such a concept can be taken out of politics and transferred to the arts, is not a matter of melding all tastes into a flavourless uniformity; it depends on pluralism, on people developing their own tastes independently, and in a situation where one network cannot possibly serve all tastes, it should serve tastes not otherwise provided for. There are plenty of stations to serve the pop audience; it does not need *and does not want* the CBC. Therefore let the Corporation go back to what it once did so well, conserving the nation's cultural heritage, and content itself with serving the great middlebrow audience, which likes its drama to be good, its experimental programming to be intelligent, and prefers its classics unadulterated.

But where is the audience? Lost already? It may well be, having — as I believe — abandoned the CBC in favour of more direct and dependable forms of satisfaction, such as live music and drama, quality pocket books and recordings. Yet that lost audience is the only true audience the CBC ever had, for the insane pursuit of ratings which the CBC now carries on is bound to fail, if only because the Corporation is inept in its commercial programming in comparison with the Americans. If the CBC is to recover any following it must recover its uniqueness, the quality that once made its arts programmes and its almost vanished talks programmes the envy of intelligent Americans.

The situation is urgent, for the road the CBC is now taking is the primrose path to 1984. To present programmes in which there is nothing for the listener's or viewer's mind to grasp as he is lulled into thoughtless complacency seems the aim of present-day CBC programmers. Certainly, if a dictator wished to use the media to lull the consciousness of the people (and one sometimes suspects the present government of such ambitions), CBC AM radio as it is being mis-shaped today would be his ready tool and CBC television has the same totalitarian potential. This is the dark side of the results of the Massey Report, which its framers never contemplated; we have gained vastly in direct participation in the arts, but we have done so at the cost of failing to notice the dangerous debasement of public broadcasting, ultimately the most potent of the mass media.