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Editorial – Publish or Perish?

The admonition to publish or perish, with its oral equivalent: present a paper or stay at home, may be of value to the occasional administrator who has no better device for allocating travel monies, increments, or other rewards of virtue, but has certainly had some unhappy consequences. All of us, I am sure can recall more than one occasion when, sitting through some usually duller than normal submitted paper, the feeling has come over us that we have heard it all before. Anybody who has ever really tried to keep up with the literature will know of many frustrating examples of related one or two page papers, published in several usually obscure journals, by the same author (or authors in varied sequence) under different titles. When assembled through due process of inter-library loan or microfilm and subjected to critical comparative study, such papers often prove to say exactly the same thing. Often it wasn't worth saying anyhow. Then there are the papers, often longer, which appear in the proceedings of a meeting, and again in a regular journal, with no great change. There are also coherent theses which are decimated for publication in a diversity of periodicals; for this the blame is also diverse: the facile acceptance of long lists of publications as an index of merit in both the papers and their author, editorial boards with a terror of long papers, and authors with an inordinate love for every word they have ever drafted.

But all of this is at the personal level; the current Canadian wave of nationalistic or perhaps we should call it tribalistic fervour, since our aboriginal peoples appear to be specifically excluded, has expanded the publish or perish dictum to the level of national publishing houses. These must be helped, maintained, kept Canadian, cherished, and above all kept uncontaminated by any other funds than Canadian dollars.

The first requirement for a Canadian publishing house to flourish, however, is that Canadians buy, even if they do not read them, Canadian books, because there are obstacles of various kinds, all unjustifiable, to the passage of books across many international boundaries. Canadians do neither of these things; at least not on the scale of most progressive peoples. Some 10 years ago I lived for a while in an African town of some 15,000 souls, more than half of them black or brown, which supported as many shelf-feet of bookshops as a Canadian city of 350,000.

Per million of population, Canada publishes one third of the average number of books published by western European countries and only about half the number published in the U.S.S.R. Some 10 years ago we could at least take comfort in the thought that we published nearly twice as many books per million people as our neighbours to the South, but their production is now well ahead of that of Canada. It is a strange fact that the more books per head a country publishes, the more copies of each it prints. This leaves Canada still further behind in numbers of copies of books printed, so that while bookish Britain prints a book per head in about 16 months, it takes Canada over six years to achieve this.

Business men tell me that Canadian publishers lack business ability; this may well be true. At the receiving end I know them to be slow, inaccurate, and expensive. It is almost always both quicker and cheaper to buy a British book from a British retailer than from a Canadian distributor, who is usually also a Canadian publisher. Prices may be as much as 65 per cent above British retail prices, and I am told that the average price increase is 30 per cent. But this money buys little service; from the consumer's viewpoint it would be hard to imagine a commercial group less interested in his needs than Canadian publishers. Telegraphic enquiries get surface mail replies if any, letters may languish for weeks. Foreign publishers have similar and more serious complaints about Canadian businesses which claim to act as distributors for them. Neither principal nor client is served. If and when books from a foreign publisher eventually arrive through a Canadian distributor they may be the wrong edition or the wrong book or both, they may be so damaged that they must be returned, they will probably be too few and too late for the purpose for which they were ordered, and the price will certainly be an anti-educational shock. Such businesses should be investigated, not subsidized. In respect of many one wonders, not that they go out of business, but that they have managed to stay in it for so long.

In most countries most of those who deal in books have an interest in education and take pleasure in the contributions they can make to it. In Canada this attitude is rare, though it pays no less than elsewhere; more often, distributors here prove to be inhibitors. The book trade should be cooperating with librarians to, in three words, *make Canadians read*; surely our climate is favourable. Clearly, until this is done it will remain possible, both at the personal and at the public level, for a nationalistic Canadian to both publish *and* perish.

Brian Hocking