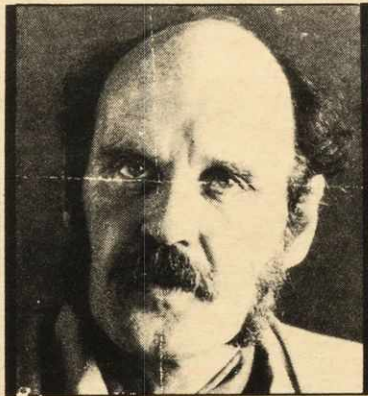


## Interview

## Graeme Gibson

speaks on freedom of expression

By P.J. WILSON



Graeme Gibson

As part of freedom of expression week, Canadian author Graeme Gibson spoke to the *Gazette's* P.J. Wilson last week on the problems of censorship and book publishing.

**PJW:** What is the Freedom of Expression Committee? Who are they and what do they do?

**GG:** The Book and Periodical Development Council is an umbrella organization with its head office in Toronto. It's an organization made up of representatives from the Canadian Library Association, the Book Sellers' Association, the periodical distributors, the Writers' Union, the two publishers' organizations—the Canadian one and the Book Publishers' Council—plus the League of Poets, and a number of other organizations. Now it's been in existence since the early seventies—probably seventy-four, seventy-three. And it's done a lot of things. And one of the things is that they felt, being an umbrella group, it would be appropriate for them to strike a committee that would be responsible for some kind of response to the growing opposition to certain books, certain kinds of periodicals. And so the Freedom of Expression Committee is just a part of that larger organization. And the fruits of their work is this Freedom to Read Week which is going on across the country.

**PJW:** In your first lecture on Friday, you spoke out in favour of some form of control on violence in literature—in the form of hate literature, for example—as well as violence in TV, film and video. Without asking you to predict the future, do you have any ideas about what kinds of controls might be socially equitable?

**GG:** (Hesitates) That's very diffi-

cult. Most attempts at control, as I think emerged in the discussions, are very imperfect. The Ontario Film Censors, for example, were mentioned as a bad example. And I think that there's always a tendency to overreact. I think we always ban more than we need to, or we ban when we should only control—or whatever it may be. Given the apparent emphasis on the swing to the right—and I hate the terms left and right—but the conservative nature of so many concerns at the moment, I fear that the controls may be unwise and they may be extreme. I have as much fear of that as the people who challenged me at my lecture—I have as much fear of that as they do.

I think that it also has to do with technology, the availability of videos—and the violence that is in a lot of those videos. And if those studies are right, if violence can incite certain kinds of violence, then emotionally—and I think ethically—there ought to be some kind of controls. I don't know what they are; I haven't spent that much time on it, and I'm not a specialist.

There's an interesting piece of legislation proposed in England, which sounds outrageous at first, about the videos—the, quote-unquote, pornographic violence. Some members of the English parliament suggested that these should be available, that you could see them in film houses, that they should not be sold for consumption at home. Because if they are shown in theatres, then you have some control of the age of people seeing them. If they are sold at home—if they go into homes—then who know who will see it? And they have really alarming studies, which were subsequently discredited because they were too—they weren't thoroughly done—on the number of kids under the age of

twelve who had seen sexual dismemberments and violent rapes and sexual murders because the videos were available in the home. And that fourteen-year-olds had shown them to eleven-year-olds.

**PJW:** That always seems to be one of the main fears, that it's the children—

**GG:** Sure. And I think it's very genuine. I think one can argue that we are all censors with our children. That we think that he or she is not yet ready for that. Now some are much more repressive than others. But even the most liberal—I don't know of—I can't imagine a parent, for example, who would permit a nine-year-old boy or girl to see pornographic rape movies—I just don't know of one. And if they did, I would think that they were, at the very best, unwise. (Laughs) So we all do it. And I think again on this basis is my recognition that it is theoretically possible in a humane and just society—which I think is probably beyond us, that's my dilemma—to exercise controls that do not brutalize the principle of free expression. I think one can make a distinction between art and the marketplace. I think one can make a distinction between what is genuinely free expression and what is pandering to a market or a potential market. It's not an easy distinction—it's a very, very messy one—but that's the nature of human life. That's again my objection to a blanket. I think we have to make those decisions—I think we do it all the time.

**PJW:** Your latest novel *Perpetual Motion* might be described as being rather bawdy at times. I'm wondering if that book—or indeed any of your writing—has come under pressure or experienced any danger of suppression.

**GG:** Certainly not *Perpetual Motion* to my knowledge. *Five Legs*, my first novel, was withdrawn from sale in a number of bookstores that I know of—and perhaps from others—because of complaint from a purchaser. Someone who bought a copy of the book at a W.H. Smith book shop in Toronto brought it back, complained about the language, insisted on their money back, they got their money back, and the books were then withdrawn from sale for the rest of their life from that particular store. And I know of another store where that happened. Now if I know of two, there are undoubtedly others which I haven't heard about.

**PJW:** I've heard of instances of talented and serious writers who have been unable to get their work published due to the biases—or even fears—of certain publishers. Do you know of such instances? And what are the reasons for this, apart from the usual commercial considerations which can be used as an excuse for the rejection of certain material?

**GG:** When you take a book into the publishing world, what you've got to recognize is that you're taking it in to a bunch of individuals with personal tastes and preoccupations, and then on top of that you have the preoccupations of editorial boards. First you have the individual, then you have the character of a publishing house or magazine, which again limits.

And what you've also got to recognize is that certain kinds of writing will only be published by certain kinds of publishers—that every publisher in the country has far too much stuff coming in. Maybe not far too much terrific stuff, but far too much publishable stuff. If the book is terrific you're talking about, then I don't believe it will be published. Other than a statistical number—you know, a very small minority—first rate books are not going to be published, for whatever reason. Malcolm Lowery's *Under the Volcano* went to twenty-seven or twenty-eight publishers before it finally came out. Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*—it took her ten years to find a publisher for that book.

**PJW:** Why do you suppose that is—is it that the ideas are too far ahead of their time, or—

**GG:** I think that ideas or the style are too far ahead of their time, or the voice appears to be eccentric at the given time and place. But also the world is imperfect—and things fall through. I think on the whole in Canada now—and I know that some people would probably agree quite energetically—I think in Canada now, if the manuscript is publishable, if it's a good solid book, I think that we've got as good a chance of getting it published here as in any country in the world. There is a whole range of publishers, from real establishment stuff to experimental to regional to left-wing and so forth. To feminist, although I think the women probably—well, no, I think gener-

ally speaking that it's broadly representative. So I'm not saying that there aren't good manuscripts that are thwarted—aborted—there are not too many of them. I think statistically it's very, very small. (Laughs) And that's no help to the author—no help to the author. You know, I went to five publishers with *Five Legs* before it was published—and at that point there were not a whole lot more than five in Canada. It took three years to get it published, of constant—And, in fact, *Perpetual Motion* has been turned down by twenty-eight publishers in England. It hasn't been published there yet. It's been published in the States and in Germany and in Poland and in France—but twenty-eight publishers in England just don't want to publish it.

**PJW:** As an "established writer," to use that term that writers hate so much, do you feel any pressure to conform to the tastes of your publisher? Or, on the contrary, because you've already had some success, are you freer to say what you want?

**GG:** I don't feel any constraints, nor do I feel any more liberated to say what I want. For me writing is a fairly obsessive and a very private thing, and my allegiance throughout it is to the book. As I begin to sense what book is there, my only concern is to write that book the best I can—whether it's publishable or not. I assume it's publishable; I assume I will not show it to anyone unless I believe it is. I mean, I've had false starts, I've had manuscripts I haven't finished or haven't got anywhere with. But if I come to a book and I know I'm in it, my only allegiance is to that book. So that I don't think of publishers and I don't think of anything—I don't think of readers—while I'm writing the book. When I'm editing it, that's different—then I think of an ideal reader. So it doesn't influence me.

**PJW:** Criticism is a vital factor in determining what books, once published, are read and what books are not. What do you think of criticism—especially criticism by persons who are themselves book authors reviewing the work of other authors who may be friends or foes?

**GG:** In Canada, we're a relatively small community. English Canada is, what, fifteen million or something if you take away the fourteen or fifteen million. And then you take off that the number of people whose language is not English, and we're down probably to twelve million people who read fluently in English. And that's very small—that's less than the population of Mexico City. So we're not a big community. And then the writing community is that much smaller. So we have to sometimes review people we know or be reviewed by people we know who we either like or dislike. Now it's up to the individual to be responsible for that. I think on the whole Canadian writers who write reviews—on the whole—tend to be quite responsible. I don't think the state of critical writing in Canada is anywhere near as good as it should be. I think the main reason for that is there aren't enough universities teaching Canadian literature. Many, many people graduate in the humanities—in literature, in history and sociology or whatever—without ever having taken much Canadian literature.