

More than Maclean's

Canadian magazines: topical and struggling

By KEITH NICKSON

If you have ever managed to drag yourself past the lurid magnetic attraction of *Penthouse*, *Viva* and *Playboy* in the York bookstore and remorsefully turned the corner, you would be surprised and enchanted by the splendid array of Canadian magazines confronting the eye. In most cases of course, the mundane covers cannot compete with the glossy pseudo-sensuality of *Penthouse*, but the contents within often present a fresh, invigorating alternative to the America media we have unfortunately grown so accustomed to.

Scanning the racks initially, the more well known and sophisticated Canadian magazines first cause the eyes to jolt to a stop: *Toronto Life*, *Saturday Night* magazine and *Macleans*. Each resemble externally the flamboyant, highly stylized approach of many American journals and this is certainly one major reason for their success.

Glancing sideways you'll notice that you are quite alone - a definite distance separates you from the mob trying to get their fingers in the latest *Mayfair*. Self-consciousness seeps up through the soles of your Kodiacs along with a distinct feeling that you are abnormal, an aberration of the species. If you courageously shuffle further along the rack, Canadian arts and news journals begin to boldly assert themselves - relatively obscure titles such as *Canadian Review*, *The Last Post* and *Canadian Forum* pop out, perplex and intrigue. Where did they come from you may ask. How long have they been in circulation? Why did I not know of these Canadian magazines before?

"Conditioning over the last 50 years has made American magazines popular. This happened because up until recently channels of distribution were entirely US controlled. This has always been our biggest problem, so the opening of newsstands and outlets is crucial so people can see and be exposed to Canadian magazines."

Drummond Burgess, the managing editor of *The Last Post*, thus summarized the popular argument presented by most Canadian publishers and editors.

The Post is a national news magazine based in Toronto which is now entering its eighth year of publication. As opposed to such conservative news magazines as

Time and *Newsweek* Burgess admitted that "We are a left wing magazine but we are not ideologically strict. Our leftist slant comes out in the type of stories we select rather than in terms of heavy editorializing".

Those wary of Marxist journals which try to force every social or political development into a straitjacket of ideology need not be concerned over the *Post's* political slant. On the contrary, the *Post* considers issues in a vital and refreshing manner that is noticeably absent among its powerful American competitors.

Burgess stresses, "Our approach is factual. We are an independent magazine not associated with any political party or group. We believe this is necessary to maintain our credibility".

In terms of circulation, *The Last Post* is obviously not in the same league as *Time* or *Newsweek*. Burgess insisted nevertheless that "On a per capita basis we do quite well in comparison to American magazines."

THE LAST POST

The problem of distribution inevitably resurfaces. In recent years, the appearance of new Canadian distributors has given the Canadian publishing industry reason to be a little more optimistic. *The Last Post* is circulated by Coast to Coast Distributors, a Maclean-Hunter firm who handle several Canadian publications. Drummond Burgess is not satisfied with Coast to Coast however and is hoping to find a more efficient method of circulation.

One possible alternative may be the distribution chain established last year by the Canadian Periodical Publishers Association CPPA. Sheryl Taylor Monroe of the CPPA described the distribution system as an attempt "to expand the number of places that carry Canadian magazines. We have been locating stores, showing them the Canadian magazines available and arranging to deliver them to the stores. In the last five months we have set up a chain of 100 stores".

The CPPA has almost 200 Canadian magazines as members and spends its time promoting these publications and badgering various levels of government to improve the business climate for Canadian publications through beneficial legislation.

The Canadian Forum is a national

news and arts journal in its 56th year of publication with a higher circulation than *The Last Post* but it still faces many similar problems. In the past, the *Forum* was also distributed by Coast to Coast but recently they switched to Gordon and Gotch Ltd., a British company and promptly had their circulation boosted by over 100 per cent. Despite these positive signs, the *Forum* people say it can only survive if Arts Canada and the Canada Council continue to issue them grants.

The Forum's editor, Denis Smith, said "two thirds of our funding comes from sales and grants while we try to raise the remaining one third ourselves in various ways." Even *Saturday Night*, a relatively prosperous magazine in Canadian terms, failed to make any money in 1976.

In an attempt to improve the situation, the federal government passed the controversial Bill C-58 which forced *Time* to drop its Canadian edition and Readers Digest to carry a majority of Canadian material.

Denis Smith was dubious regarding the benefits of this legislation saying the original bill had been altered and diluted by the time it was passed. Smith said, "The bill became very ambiguous. It was going to end completely all the privileges *Time* and *Digest* enjoyed. Then it allowed *Digest* to continue while *Time* cut out its Canadian news section and is now in the process of again building up its advertising revenue. The interpretation of the bill is so arbitrary that even *TV Guide* is now considered Canadian!"

The Forum has not gained any revenues from the bill but Smith believes that *Toronto Life* and *Saturday Night* may have benefited since they resemble most the *Time-Digest* style of magazine.

DISTRIBUTION

Yet again, it seems doubtful that the legislative approach can ever create a climate in which Canadian publishing can flourish. Sheryl Taylor Monroe of the CPPA argued, "You can't really legislate a willingness on the part of the distributors when they are American owned to carry our magazines. They might take 10,000 copies and shred most of them and then turn around and say - we only sold 500, here's your \$100, we can't distribute your magazines. So that kind of pressure would probably work against you."

The publishers, editors and writers of Canadian magazines are unanimous in their belief that the lack of widespread distribution is the crucial obstacle barring their development. It was with surprise and interest then that I stumbled into a Queen St. bookstore recently and found a separate rack of Canadian magazines prominently displayed by the front door of the store.

I suspected that perhaps the CPPA had contacted the proprietor and he had obliged them by displaying the magazines, but no, he merely wanted to give Canadian publications a fair chance against their American competitors. Good Lord, I thought, a gentleman with a conscience! Nothing was further from the truth, however, what he had to say about Canadian magazines was brutal. "Canadian magazines are too expensive," he asserted. "They don't have enough content for the price relative to American magazines. They are not appealing in their approach, their covers are conservative and boring and don't have the flash and eye-grabbing quality of American magazines." I responded by suggesting that limited funds and advertising revenues may be the reason that our magazines failed to be more impressive. "They get lots

PREPARING FOR INDEPENDENCE
DAVID LEWIS STEIN W.L. MORTON DENIS SMITH MICHAEL STEIN
JOHN HARNEY MELVILLE WATKINS ABRAHAM ROTSTEIN DOUGLAS MYERS WILLIAM NEVILLE

The Canadian Forum

\$1.00



of grants from the government" he shot back "and until they get more professional lay-out men, editors and writers, the situation will not improve".

The gentlemen who operate the International News and Bookroom on Yonge St. were more cautiously optimistic. One cashier said "It's hard to say how well Canadian magazines are selling but *The Canadian Forum*, *The Last Post*, and the *Canadian Review* sell as well if not better than some American news publications".

It may be significant that in the International News and Bookroom, Canadian magazines are mixed in with publications from the remainder of the world and seem to be able to compete internationally. "We don't keep Canadian magazines on a separate stand," the cashier said, "after all, if you go to Denmark you won't find Danish magazines on a separate rack - I see no reason for it here."

Although these two retailers had radically different thoughts concerning the success of Canadian magazines, it appears there is a real lack of communication between the retailers of Canadian magazines and the producers of them. When I confronted Denis Smith of *The Canadian Forum* with the allegations made by the owner of the Queen St. bookstore, he admitted that there was some truth to them, but suggested that the scale of production in Canada was so much smaller than in the US that it is difficult to compete effectively. He added "I wouldn't want the *Forum* to become a mass circulation magazine like many of the American ones because that would negate our ethics and principles."

In spite of the controversial problems stunting the growth of Canada's publishing industry, obscure journals covering a wide range of subjects still manage to appear and perpetuate their existence on the slimmest of operating budgets. The proprietor of the Queen St. store pointed to *Harrowsmith* a magazine barely six months old as a definite winner.

Concerned with rural living and folk arts, *Harrowsmith* is published in Camden, Ontario and 'sells out regularly' in this Queen St. store. The issue I picked up has an extensive feature on "The Joys of Junk", or the treasures to be had from digging through provincial dumping grounds. Other stories consider *Orgasmic Gardening*, a

profile of the Greenpeace Foundation's International crusades, an investigation into the Origins of Bluegrass, a guide to finding wild herbs that can be converted into healthy teas and an exquisite centre piece on The Maples of Autumn.

The most amazing aspect of *Harrowsmith* is that for one dollar you receive a glossy covered, 84 page magazine with a mere nine pages of advertising. (One glance at it and I guarantee you'll flee the suburbs for rural Ontario with a box of granola firmly tucked under your arm!)

If summoning the fickle muse is your consuming interest, then the scope and variety of Canadian literary reviews will be a welcome surprise. From 'Fiddlehead' published by the University of New Brunswick for the past twenty nine years to *Room of One's Own*, a fascinating feminist journal of literature and criticism published by the Growing Room Collective in Vancouver, the range and depth are vast.

Room of One's Own features fiction, poetry and criticism of female writers exclusively and attempts to delineate the feminist Canadian consciousness and examine its development through history to the present. Combining crisply executed and relevant illustrations with female writing that is extremely competent and unique for the most part, *Room of One's Own* is a pioneering journal that deserves more publicity and support.

Warp magazine is Canada's self-appointed 'National Patriotic Quarterly of Cultural Struggle' and claims to be 'organizing a patriotic front in the cultural arena which send the Yankees packing!' The subscription rates clearly support their rhetorical struggle: in Canada four issues for one year cost \$3 while residents of the USA are charged \$25 for a one year subscription! Financial warfare has simultaneously been declared.

Curiosity aroused? Then plunge your bony hands into the racks of Canadian magazines, dash to the cash register (even sneak a *Penthouse* amid the pile if you must) and boldly smack your charge card down! Your consciousness will be the better for it and who knows, your infectious enthusiasm just may signal the future prosperity of the unstable Canadian magazine industry.

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SPECIAL REVIEWS SECTION

From New York to L.A., I'm a star all the way