

Comment

by Jim Lotz

In February, 1973, I crossed Canada from Halifax to Victoria on behalf of the Canadian Booksellers Association, looking at the problems of getting books to Canadians. A lady in Halifax put the problem in a nutshell. She said: "They claim you can't tell a book by its cover. But how else can you find out what it's about?" Many Canadians were having difficulty in finding out what was being published in this country.

Over the past three years, Federal and Provincial governments have poured millions of dollars into publishing and the industry is being "researched" and studied while many Canadian writers struggle to earn a reasonable income. Writers and publishers often believe that labelling a book "Canadiana" is enough to ensure its success. Some of the governments' money was well spent on helping Canada's two national book reviews.

Quill and Quire is the trade paper, and is run in a supremely efficient manner by a female editorial staff. It contains short book reviews, items of news about the trade, and longer pieces on authors and events.

Books in Canada is published monthly, and is available free at bookstores; you can also subscribe to it. Over the years, **Books in Canada** has developed into a tough minded review that should be read by every university student who wants to sort out the good stuff from the garbage in Canadian publishing. Of course, it takes as much effort and energy to write a bad book as it does to write a good one; a critical review is a great help to any writer if it's too free of personal malice.

In the October issue of **Books in Canada**, there's a splendid review of two books on Canadian workers by George Melnyk, editor of Edmonton's **NeWest Review**. One book, **Working in Canada**, is edited by Walter Johnson, who worked in an automobile plant for three years. It's published by Black Rose Books.

The other book, a collection of papers by junior academics completing their doctorates, is entitled **Essays in Canadian Working Class History**. It's edited by Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, and published by McClelland and Stewart.

Melnyk asks the question — who should write and speak for the workers of Canada? At a Conference I attended in Ottawa last November, the session on "Industrial Relations" was full of government officials, academics, and union officials; there wasn't a worker in sight. There's a handy myth around that the working class can't speak for themselves, and that they need the middle class and the academics to do this for them. Melnyk writes:

(*Working in Canada*) is written by workers about their daily work experience while *Essays in Canadian Working Class History* is written by labour historians a-

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What about the workers ?

about "the working class". The first is written for the most part in the language of everyday speech, while the second is drowned in radical, intellectual, and social-science jargon.

One of the safest ways to handle social problems in the past has been to identify a problem group (Blacks, Indians, The Poor), and then to "research" them. If you look at the results of research in the States and Canada on these "disadvantaged peoples", you'll find much of the work was trivial and resulted in a great deal of academic advancement for the researchers but little change in the conditions of the people who were studied. Only recently have social scientists begun to study power and privilege in Canada.

Melnyk identifies the difference between the situation of the workers and of those who study them.

While reading **Working in Canada** I got the distinct impression that its authors would certainly lose their jobs if their employers read what they said, while the academics would get a promotion.

The accuracy of this observation was revealed a few weeks ago when the **Dalhousie Gazette** interviewed some of the workers employed by the university. They preferred to remain anonymous. If an academic had "done a study" on the labour force at the university, and written it up as a paper, he would have gained another brownie point for promotion or tenure.

Reviews like one by Melnyk will make the task of the student much easier, because they discuss why books get published, and reveal the assumptions beneath the writing. Melnyk's critique also raises another point — who should write and speak for the workers of Canada? How many books have you read written by Indians, for example? Harold Cardinal's new book, **The Rebirth of Canada's Indians**, is to be published soon. Another excellent book is **No Foreign Land: The Biography of a North American Indian**, written by an Indian and a White, Wilfred Pelletier and Ted Poole. But books by Indians are a small trickle compared to those written by anthropologists and other social scientists on "the Indian problem".

I can see the same fate in store for the workers of Canada. They have been "discovered" and identified as a problem. The government coffers are opening for academics who wish to do research on them. At the November Conference I attended, an apostate labour relations expert claimed that he would never again work for government. Another expert suggested that the Government spend \$50-100 million on experimental projects to improve labour relations in Canada. He spoiled his case by noting that such experiments had collapsed in Scandinavia; as soon as the social scientists "studying" the situation left, things went back to normal, because, as he explained, managers are there to manage — not to play games for social scientists to observe.

All this suggests that students should start learning about the labour scene first hand before Canada's workers become objects of research and have to be "read

about" instead of being "listened to".
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