

# The wonderful Wizard of Marchbanks marks a return to genuine wit in Canada

**MARCHBANKS' ALMANACK**, by Robertson Davies. McClelland & Stewart, 205 pp., \$6.50.

Modern humor seems too often to derive from our attempts to forget the desperation of the age. We belittle our awareness of race by telling WASP jokes; we seek escape from our own dehumanization by listening to Bill Cosby tell charming stories of his boyhood.

Robertson Davies does not belong to what one might call the bawdy school of humour; his is a refined wit meant to draw chuckles rather than guffaws. He has a delicacy of language not found in much Canadian humour these days. He finds comedy not in situations, but in people's reactions to them; not in a gross jest, but in a curt phrase; not in a falsification of reality, but in reality itself.

*Marchbanks' Almanacks*, says the lengthy title page, is "an Astrological and Inspirational *Vade Mecum*". The book takes its format from the traditional almanacs still to be seen on occasion. It is divided into twelve parts, one for each sign of the zodiac, but each containing only a small (and very tongue-in-cheek) discussion of astrological principles.

The rest is a sort of chronological peep into the life of Samuel Marchbanks, gentleman, traveller,

and critic of the world-at-large. Marchbanks is not a new character in Canadian humour—Davies has written two other books utilizing him as a mouthpiece.

Marchbanks carries on an extensive correspondence with several friends (and enemies), all with ridiculous names and all exhibiting a predominant human trait. There is Dick Dandiprat, his neighbour, who is always borrowing something and never returning it in one piece. Marchbanks tries in vain through the entire course of the year to have Dandiprat jailed for having encouraged a skunk to commit an unnatural act in the back seat of his (Marchbanks') car.

There is Amyas Pilgaric, Marchbanks' only true confidant; Osceola Thunderbelly, an Indian who is trying desperately to secure a warm home in jail for the winter; and the Rev. Simon Goaste, a preacher who worries about what to do with his empty "vinegar" bottles.

Aside from the correspondence, Marchbanks gives us a series of short ruminations, one-paragraph comments on the bewildering society of Toronto and Canada as a whole. These paragraphs are remarkable for their witty incisiveness and for their fresh insight on every-day things—like electric blankets or yoyos.

But any sort of summary or condensation of the book fails to do

it justice. It can be read front to back, but it is primarily a browsing book; one can pick it up and begin reading at any point with equal enjoyment.

Davies has a peculiarity of language and perspective which defies description. It borrows heavily from the Addisonian type of wit found in *The Spectator*; it also reminds one of *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* and even more of Franklin P. Adams' satire on that work.

Nonetheless, his style is his own. There can be little question that he is consciously striving for a kind of affected antiquity; this, in contrast to the modernity of his subject matter, is the source of much of the book's humour. One envisions him as a colossal anachronism, an eighteenth-century man plunged into the twentieth century.

Hence Marchbanks has amusing reactions to the things which we find ordinarily cold and humourless. It is amusing, for example, to find an Addison speaking of peanut butter sandwiches: "But to sit on the grass on a fine May day and champ mouthfuls of peanut butter sandwich, occasionally washing them down with coffee—well, I fancy there will be a good deal of that in Heaven."

I have heard it said that humour results from an unlikely juxtaposition of ideas—if that is so, then Davies is a master of the art of humour. The idea of an anachronistic old gentleman (likely in a waistcoat and wing collar) sitting in the grass eating peanut butter sandwiches is striking enough—bring in the ethereal concept of Heaven, and you have a humorous contrast indeed.

Much of the humour is, of course, satiric—Davies has a good deal of fun with Canadian idiosyncracies. Speaking of the Canadian accent, he says: "There is something about a Canadian which compels him . . . to preserve intact the accent in which his barefoot old granny used to curse the timber wolves that ranged around her cabin. It is one of the last areas in which illiteracy is equated with integrity."

Rare humour, this, and very welcome indeed in the usual wasteland of McClelland & Stewart publications. It is a literate book, an intelligent book, a very funny book—and Samuel Marchbanks should prove a valuable companion to any who appreciate humour in the old style.

—Terry Donnelly

## leftovers

There is a species of women including, we are sad to say, almost all of those who make a habit of walking in pairs, who take no greater delight than in walking down busy sidewalks and obstructing traffic.

One may observe these strange creatures whenever classes change, and all the main pedestrian arteries of the campus are crowded to capacity. They dawdle along, in pairs and even in threes, swinging their ample derrières from side to side, and effectively blocking passage to any hurried student who might wish to scurry past them.

One gentleman is reported to have sustained serious injuries while attempting to effect a passage past two of these wondrous belles. At first he attempted to force a passage between them as they drifted a few feet apart, but narrowly escaped being crushed when they drifted back together again; then he tried to pass on the right, but was forced into a mud puddle when the girls shifted their position once more.

At last, in desperation, and already five minutes late for a lecture, he took his life in his hands and started forward on the left, only to run full tilt into a 180-pound lady who was headed in the opposite direction.

\* \* \*

It is with regret that we note the cancellation of the Theatre Committee's production of *The Frogs*, which had been scheduled for late November. The failure of the scripts to arrive made the cancellation necessary.

\* \* \*

There is a new gathering place for the joss-stick set: it is called "Inn the Beginning" (a name taken from an earlier and somewhat dissimilar venture) and is located in the basement of the S.C.M. House at 11120-83 Ave. Each Friday night things are going to happen there, including folk-singing, neo-Yorkville theatre, and puppetry. It is open to all.

\* \* \*

Should a campus of 15,000 students, or very nearly that number, have a literary magazine? Undoubtedly yes, but Students Council seems determined to have it otherwise.

Three years ago an enterprising group of students founded such a magazine—*Inside*. The quality of subsequent issues has been sporadic, but that is beside the point; the point is that the actions of our Council threaten to force the magazine out of existence altogether.

Each year Council has steadily reduced the budget of *Inside* (alias *Pulpinside*, because of the low-grade paper necessitated by lack of finances), until the present editor, one Marcia Reed, has been presented with the glorious opportunity of putting out only one very small issue this year.

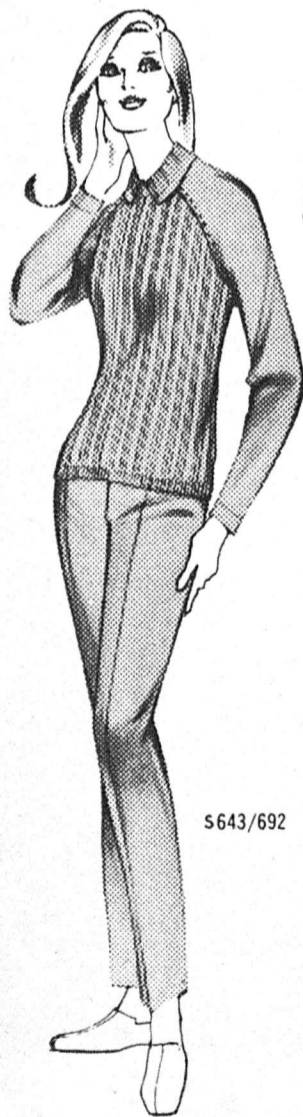
It is most peculiar that some eight dollars is contributed by every student to athletics, some six dollars or whatever towards a yearbook, and only some three cents towards a literary magazine.

Is Council attempting to stifle whatever creative initiative remains on this campus? There are many who want to write and draw; they have as much right to an outlet as those who find fulfillment on the football field, in the theatre, or on the dance floor. The Gateway proper, being primarily a newspaper, cannot provide the outlet our artists need.

*Inside*, whatever its quality has been or will be, has become and must remain an integral part of campus life. It is the sole publication representing one of the most important facets of the university, namely creative writing. Poetry and fiction are the hobbies and loves of many a student; and it is the writer's essential privilege to put his work before others for appraisal and consideration.

Now is the time for all these writers, and those who sympathize with them and want the privilege of reading what they have written, to raise a voice in protest. We must not allow the University of Alberta to become an illiterate place.

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