# Coach House Press, 1965-96

OPEN LETTER

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# Contents

# Editorial

Readers may have noticed some slight changes in the format, paper quality, and editorial content of recent issues of *Open Letter.* All of these ensue in some way from the reductions in government funding to the arts in Canada that began with the 1995 federal budget and from the federal shift throughout the 1980s and 90s away from regarding an operation like *Open Letter* as culture and toward regarding it as cultural industry.

The current subsidy difficulties for *Open Letter* concern mostly its support by The Canada Council, the arms-length federal arts agency that has provided through its Aid to Periodicals program extremely helpful financial assistance since 1971. The federal government's virtual freezing of the Canada Council's overall funding in recent years, combined with the steady increase in periodicals seeking assistance, has caused the Council both to reduce the level of funding the program provides and to attempt to reduce the number of periodicals that qualify for assistance. *Open Letter* has been affected by both of these changes.

The editors have been informed that the Council considers *Open Letter* a "scholarly journal" that falls outside its mandate to assist arts activities, and that assistance is unlikely to be granted for much longer. As well, *Open Letter*'s operating grant has been gradually reduced from a high of $8700 in 1993 to $3450 in 1996. This reduction has been largely a consequence of a new granting formula which takes into account only production expenses and payments to contributors, and ignores distribution and overhead costs. For *Open Letter* this formula rewards the journal for keeping high the most flexible parts of its expenditures—payments to contributors and production costs— and punishes it for not being able to reduce fixed or rising costs like postage or envelopes. The result is a situation in which any attempt to reduce costs is likely to lead to a further grant reduction.

To add irony to injury, the Canada Council awarded *Open Letter* a special "marketing grant" in 1996 that was nearly double the operating grant—$5,000. This grant, and its size relative to the operating grant,



appears to reflect what Karl Siegler elsewhere in this issue describes as a shift from "culture based" to "business based" funding. As if to corroborate this, the Canada Council letter informing us of the two grants noted that the jury "considered your audience too small and limited for the mandate of the Council's program" (although the program is advertised as open to all periodicals of more than 500 circulation). Clearly there is a preference being signalled here, again using Siegler's terms, for "sales-driven" periodicals over "editorially-driven" ones. Grateful as we are to receive the marketing grant, which we plan to use to help establish an *Open Letter* web site that will offer summaries of the articles in current issues, we remain sceptical about the appropriateness of sales-based funding to an arts council. Moreover, any marketing campaign which *Open Letter* has attempted in the past twenty years—through advertisements and direct mail—has resulted in subscriptions that have cost the journal or the arts council that funded the campaign in excess of $100 each. There is a point of shrinking returns in the circulation growth of any arts periodical, a point at which efficiency requires one not to try to grow, and to spend discretionary money not on marketing but on making the periodical more attractive to current readers.

In an attempt to remain within whatever the Canada Council conceives its granting mandate to be, *Open Letter* has been reducing the number of scholarly articles that it accepts and giving preference to those written by artists and by scholars who are also practising artists. This change undoubtedly constrains a journal that has attempted over years to be, as it has often described itself in its funding applications, "a space in which writers, visual artists, and literary scholars could articulate and discuss with one another theories of art production, criticism, and the cultural role of literature." However, it also reflects the ways in which institutional policy inevitably shapes what is possible to write or publish, or even what one can conceive of writing or publishing. This is not to complain that Canada Council policy changes constitute an interference in *Open Letter*'s editorial policies (although they effectively do)—no Canadian journal has an automatic entitlement to a Council grant, and any journal could choose not to publish rather than become the kind of periodical the Council preferred to support. However, individual scholars who might have written a particular article which they knew *Open Letter* might wish to publish—whether on Hiromi Goto, the politics of canonicity, Karen Mac Cormack, or Victor Coleman—may well not write that article now that they know that *Open Letter* could be jeopardizing its own future by

publishing it.

And Canada Council funding of *Open Letter* may cease in any case, leaving it reliant entirely on the Ontario Arts Council for assistance. Here is evidence of another institutional change in Canada—the steady devolution of funding power from the national to the provincial level. From 1971 to 73 the Canada Council was the only source of assistance to *Open Letter.* Beginning with a small grant in 1974, Ontario Arts Council assistance grew from less than 40% of the Canada Council grant to 193% of it in 1996.

*Open Letter* is currently examining all possible ways of continuing to publish in this new situation. Even the reduced Canada Council grant does not allow the journal to be produced, printed, and sold in the ways in which it has been until now—if it were, it would have an annual deficit nearly equal to the production cost of a single issue. Among the possibilities we are investigating are the adopting of a different printing process, the introduction of institutional subscription rates, the doubling of the prices of back issues to effectively increase the value of a subscription, and the launching of an *Open Letter* limited edition chapbook series to subsidize the journal. In the event of an ending of Canada Council assistance, we may have to return to photocopying or mimeograph. But we do plan to continue.

These developments at *Open Letter* connect somewhat ironically with the concerns of the present issue: the going-out-of-business in late 1996 of Coach House Press, ostensibly in the face of financial shortfalls caused both by government assistance policies in the previous decade (for an analysis of these see Karl Siegler's article "Amusements") and by 1995 cuts to federal grants and the Province of Ontario's loan guarantee program. In both cases relatively stable and manageable publishing operations are jeopardized by pressure to expand beyond the scale of the available Canadian readership. The publishers are subtly advised to change what they publish in order to increase its market appeal, or to internationalize what they publish in order to increase sales abroad. While granting agencies like the Canada Council may dream that one-time "marketing" grants can gradually make publishers less reliant on annual operating grants, publishers are encouraged to expand beyond their expertise and beyond their imagined audiences.

When Coach House Press began facing these pressures in 1987, bpNichol declared that for him it would be preferable that the press go out of business rather than begin publishing writing that was interesting to the



press's editors and managers mostly because of the sales and grant revenue it might generate. The situation is not quite this bleak at the moment for *Open Letter.* The option is still open to remain small, to cut back to cheaper formats in order to keep publishing the commentary the editors wish to publish, and to forego the larger grants that the Canada Council and its juries are explicitly linking to a larger readership and a more narrowly 'arts' content. If there are lessons to be gained from this issue of *Open Letter,* one is certainly that even in as arts-supportive a context as Canada in the 1970-90 period, there are prices attached to state patronage. The price for Coach House turned out to be something other than the obvious. It was not the direct interference of legislators who from time to time may attack individual projects, or even the indirectly damaging actions of legislators who, from time to time, irrationally reduce cultural funding in parallel with more considered reductions to funding in other areas of government. It was the over-extension of debt that governments encouraged by offering abruptly cancellable loan guarantee programs and extra marketing grants as rewards for temporarily inflated sales. It was the diversion of attention from editorial concerns to marketing concerns, and the tempting of publishers to abandon their core readerships and seek titles more marketable both nationally and internationally. Grantee beware.

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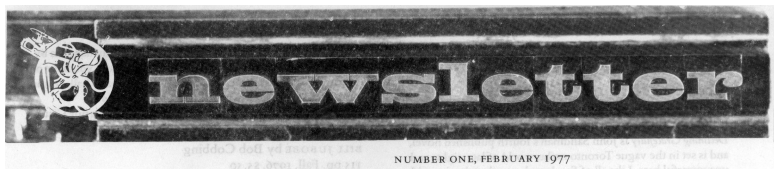

# Crossing the Border: A Coach House Memoir

David Rosenberg

In 1970, I left Toronto to write a dissertation on Gertrude Stein at the University of Essex, England. Within a few months I was living and researching in Paris. It was still heady to be a North American in Paris at that time. With the help of George and Christine Tysh (editors of *Blue Pig*) I was invited to give a reading at the Paris salon of Keith and Rosemarie Waldrop (editors of *Burning Deck*) who were cultivating a new generation of French poets. After the reading, I was approached by many of these French poets (each one introduced to me by Rosemarie) who I think were trying to congratulate me but with such rudimentary English that I couldn't believe they had enjoyed, much less understood my work. Back in England, Fulcrum Press, which had contracted to publish my book, *Leavin' America* (buoying me in leaving Canada) suddenly changed policy and decided to publish primarily English poets. Something to do with money and grants, I was told. And marketing.

Footprints of Gertrude Stein were reduced to the fading memory of Man Ray, for instance, whom I interviewed. A trace of his American Jewish cadence made me homesick. But for where? In Toronto, after the Vietnam draft crashed in, I had joined the faculty at York University, but during four years of being pressed to teach "more Canadians," it all suddenly changed into "more Canadian *teachers*" and I was being shipped out. My anchor remained the Coach House, which took over York's secretarial role for *The Ant's Forefoot.* But could I work there? Soon enough, I was mixing hot lead for the linotype machine, writing amusing grant proposals and droll catalogues, editing and collating and typesetting and pasting up, and collaborating with artists. I was involved in the creation of as many new publications as the number of books I had previously checked out from university libraries. I was also living in a commune and taking no paid vacations.

But I am jumping ahead. To get a read on the cultural significance of Coach House before it became, for a brief time, my whole life, I need to return to Toronto in 1966. Within a few weeks of my arrival from



Syracuse University, I was rummaging in the funky Village Bookshop on Gerrard Street, where I found the first two issues of *IS.* prominently displayed. It suggested more than a literary magazine, its graphics sort of buttonholing the reader with a risky sensibility. I measured risk at the time (still do) as a willingness to sidestep a conventional audience (including the newly trendy) and risk creating a new one. *IS.* was not simply arty but a self-conscious artifact that suggested collaboration between writers and artists. Rather grandiosely, I thought of myself as a junior exile from the New York School of O'Hara and Ashbery, which taught that vision comes first, before virtuosity, and that the vision that was then so fragile in poetry (still is) could absorb the stronger energy that had rocked the art world with Abstract Impressionism in the 1950s. The art behind my first impression of *IS.* was a graphic one, but it offered sufficient contrast to the literary gravity I was aware of just across the border in inaccessible (for me) Buffalo. With Olson and Creeley still anchored there, a grandiosity of place had become finely ironic: Buffalo had none of the mythic locality typical of Black Mountain aesthetics. The magazines looked plain—no sense of any artists in residence.

By contrast, *IS.* seemed less histrionic but more grounded in a community of art, however small. All I had to do was hold the issue in hand long enough before the store owner—the bordering on portly, balding Marty (was his name Marty?)—was asking if I knew Victor Coleman and passing on his phone number, as well as Stan Bevington's. Thanks to Stan, it seemed the fledgling Coach House was more firmly in place than Olson's memory of whaling trade sites in Gloucester. Stan had the unique notion of supporting books with commerce, in order to avoid having to fit into the meagre and self-congratulatory marketplace for poetry, as is the case with writers founding a publishing house. Neither would he do it with arts grants, nor with academic dispensation—but rather through his commercial operation of job printing. How often in a century is such a person born?

Stan seemed to have arrived in Toronto from years of wandering in the desert, which in fact turned out to be Alberta. Most miraculously, the Coach House was not a consciously Canadian place. It was beyond the mainstream, just as it was beyond and in back of Huron Street. There were other alternative presses springing up then in North America, ranging from psychedelic to newsprint, but none as serious about creating an artistic community. I found something in common in the minds of Stan and Victor Coleman, a vision that required a sharp critique of the

mainstream. Not strictly criticism—which was badly written then—but the inherent critique of collaboration.

*Collaboration and Critique*

Even in the second half of the century, the inviolability of a work of art, graphic or literary, and the grandiosity of the artistic mind was so taken for granted in the mainstream that collaboration among artists seemed beyond the pale, like incest. It was in the nature of collaboration, then, to provide an outlaw critique of genres. When I founded *The Ant's Forefoot* magazine, the format critiqued the genre of literary magazine as much as it upset librarians and booksellers. It came out of a group collaboration, several of us batting the notion around, including Stan's input on what was possible and affordable (experimental typesetting on paper plates also gave physical character to the ink impression of each copy, for instance). Each issue tried an alternative method of production, influenced by *IS.* magazine, which completely reconceived itself in every number. The sole editorial statement, from the first issue, was a critique, naturally, of editorial statements.[1]

The primary critique, however, consisted in the practice of editing. Eschewing written criticism, I expected to interrogate the conventions. Almost all the work was solicited, allowing me to ask for poetry that was also first a critique. Of course, much of it was ironic, sending up the pretense of conventional poetry. Several issues contained long translations of modernist classics—by Mayakovsky, Cendrars, Apollinaire, Desnos—that mimicked the anal retentiveness of academic translations. Anti-national, in practice the magazine broke into thirds: one part American, one Canadian, one British. There was no way *The Ant's Forefoot* was ever going to qualify for a national grant from any one of them.

And so the recent catalogue to the National Library of Canada exhibit of Coach House Press came as an incongruous nose-blowing. Purged of foreigners and foreign influences, Coach House no less than *The Ant's Forefoot* was presented as a Canadian cottage industry. To the contrary, I had been supported by Victor and Stan in the editing of books by American poets like Lewis Warsh and Tom Clark, in collaboration with American artists like Joe Brainard and Jim Dine. Lee Harwood from England, Jerome Rothenberg from California, and Gerard Malanga from New York came to Toronto on visits, to see where their poems had been published. They didn't even appeal for readings to be set up for them. These poets were under or barely thirty at the time.



While the intention was to expose the culturally determined individual, the social aspect of our critique was actually banished to the improbable land of the solitary present—especially to the extent that few of us could see ourselves as culturebound. Perhaps the saddest commentary was how we did not register—and therefore did not miss—the presence of women or people of colour or gay persons among the artists and writers. They were there but were not polled as themselves. We thought it egalitarian enough to imagine everyone living in a yellow submarine. What a loss. Without the critique of personal history, we never thought hard enough of mounting a coherent defence of the Coach House as a critical institution.

*Marketing*

I had worked as an editor at McClelland & Stewart for a time, but as in the universities, I rarely saw creative artists. Editing a book of Earle Birney's poems, the closest I came to him was a letter about typos. When Leonard Cohen visited, I was introduced to him by Jack McClelland himself, and before I could open my mouth they had turned away and entered a marketing conference. What was missing at Coach House, of course, were the middle men and women, the marketers. Although I was not going to make more than a subsistence living when I returned there, there were thousands of presses and universities, and few Coach Houses. Other presses published hand-crafted books, yet they rarely aspired to artifacts. Black Sparrow Press in Los Angeles, for instance, had made the dulling investment of nurturing library and special sales. In other words, they had discovered that marketing was necessary to establish a niche. But they would never leave that niche, and neither would they attract any significant collaboration—remaining a post office box.

Coach House did not exist for an audience. Stocking up with names or genres was beside the point for a vision in which collaboration and transformation revealed every publication to be 'ephemera'—the duration depending on what response could be sustained, and not on local canon-making. The audience came *first*—insofar as it was part of the collaboration, somehow entering into dialogue. Everything else was critique, so that the notion of ephemera grew into an interrogation of the larger pretensions of mainstream culture. A Coach House book would fall into the hands of a reviewer for the Edmonton paper and produce a review we could laugh at for a moment, tacked to the bulletin board. The Edmonton professor who reviewed my book, *Leavin' America,* wrote that there was too much empty space on the page, and that this space was

filled with bored crosshatchings (which were, in fact, a feature of the abstract-impressionist design by David Bolduc).

The most impressive lesson was that collaboration extended to the dead as well. *Leavin' America* was largely a collaboration with Rimbaud—transformations rather than translations of his poems. I had to start with reverence for the original and then imagine the author's critical response to the transformation. The audience was created a bit faster for my ensuing book of transformations from the Psalms, but it was harder to get a sense of the original authors' critical approval. Many years of scholarship ensued until the ancient Hebraic poets separated into discrete voices for me. Since the obligation in collaboration is not to take the audience for granted—or to take the genres for granted—the attention to keeping the audience alive, in front of you (at least in creative mind) is diametrically opposed to the concerns of marketing, which are always backward looking, identifying what has already crystallized (or fossilized, in Coach House terms).

Ultimately, collaboration critiques the stance of the artist in society by making us conscious of the larger context for the work of art, its vision outside of pompous canons. Vision is easily misunderstood—as it often is by the alternative cultures—as resistance to the conventional. Turned into philosophy or ethics, vision tends to flatten up, like the lyrics of rock songs or the manifestoes of cultural revolutions. But it remains sharp when it keeps to the less grandiose practice of critique, as in the early works of Victor Coleman and bpNichol I knew around the Coach House. When bp and Victor and Michael Ondaatje were first published at Coach House, they were something far more interesting than careerists or unknowns in their twenties—they were quiet, unassuming visionaries. Like other nonacademics I met at this time, Gerry Gilbert, Dave McFadden, and David Phillips among them, a conversation with Barrie (bp) consisted of a cultural critique in a brief, laconic collage of quotations from what we were reading or writing. Of course, it seemed nothin' highfalutin at the time; mostly, it just seemed funny, serious but deadpan. When Barrie quoted Freud as if he was a contemporaneous poet, I was smiling. It was another decade before I could actually find the right focus in which to read Freud myself, but Barrie's smile remained with me.

What I have called transformation can also be understood as restoration. The current restoration of Coach House seems to parallel the oeuvres of some of its collaborators, including my own. My book-length poem, *The Lost Book of Paradise* (Hyperion, 1993), was a professed restoration



related to the tropical studies and Everglades restoration that brought me to Miami, a new intellectual frontier for tropicalists. The poem is a reading of natural history, probably no more nor less grandiose than Olson's stab at locality, which fired us up for awhile back when he lived down the road in Buffalo. While Olson might then have cut the growth away to read the Mayan, now the wild forest itself is the text most urgent to read.

*Resisting the Academic*

As annex for a time, we had the anti-university of Rochdale College. Victor lived on the floor above me, both of us renting as "resource persons." I was in my last year of teaching at York, and even though Victor was better read, more talented, and more authentically Canadian than any of my English Dept. colleagues, he was not academically welcome: like bp, he had found a self-critical route by embracing life first. Resisting the academic took the embryonic postmodern form of conscious quotation—of turning genres and institutions into artifacts. Exhibit A was Rochdale, a satiric critique (profoundly unCanadian in curricula) of academia that helped support for a time the literary and artistic artifacts produced at Coach House.

Just as the Inuit people began to craft a postmodern art for an unknown audience that might sustain them, Coach House may have dreamed an art that might actually change the mainstream—or 'their' culture. In its purity of heart and candidness, Coach House mined the border between written and graphic art, a border that dissolved into a postmodern collage. Text metamorphosed into mask—not always meaningfully, but the gesture remains valuable. It suggested a primal community—an artifact itself—more in touch with natural diversity than the pseudo-diversity of the university. Yet the best borderline academics were attracted, from Bowering and Ondaatje to Frank Davey, Fred Wah and Robert Hogg. Probably because the latter had found a tenuous resistence to the academic in their own practices, and were looking for a wild tethering point.

In the rearview mirror of Coach House, the university coexisted on the level of marketing: both looked backward, mounting the netted butterfly on an edifice of bills. The art co-opted by the university blurred into the art of marketing. Both resembled glorified crafts from a Coach House vantage point, and both—marketing techniques and academic techniques of poetry and fiction—barely disguised a cataloguing of trends. They were studies of the nostalgias, emulating what had already prevailed. Are

they still? I'll leave that question out there. What is clear is that while modernism prevailed and postmodernism is prevailing, Coach House in its heyday (and perhaps Coach House now, as well) still appears an outrageously risky, if not outlaw operation. An outrage—under wraps, of course—is what drives vision outward.

A dream I had while toiling one year at McClelland & Stewart was to establish some Coach House books as an imprint. Thank heaven that didn't happen. No sooner was I sitting at a desk in a windowless cubicle than I was thinking about 'marketing'. But once freed (off to study the Stein-wizard) I could come back again for a final immersal in Coach House. Beyond Bolduc and Coleman, I collaborated with Michael Sowden and Nelson Ball on an offshoot series of books, *Foreprint Editions,* and later in New York (by 1972) produced *Coach House South,* entirely devoted to collaborative publication of "classics from the Sixties," including Ted Berrigan's collage novel, *Clear The Range.*

The Coach House lost behind me (I once wrote a desperate letter from New York, asking if I would be welcome to return. Answer: no answer) I went on to collaborate with lost authors and lost cultures, way back at the origin of the alphabet.

## Notes

[1] *The Ant's Forefoot* began one evening as a necessity was felt for a new magazine that would collect statements of personal concerns from serious writers, in the form of reviews, notes, testimony, etc. As the evening wore on, such a magazine came to seem less urgent than an accurate description of the laying of the first underwater transatlantic cable, & the 'seriousness' of the creative process bogged down in the general perplexity over who was or is Mendeleyev? It was finally decided that a new magazine would have to be printed or else the whole evening would ebb back into the flow of insignificant events. Thus *The Ant's Forefoot* was born, with no other apparent purpose than the salvage of an evening seemingly beyond repair.

# Some Notes about a Long Relationship with the Coach House

Douglas Barbour

The first book from Coach House I ever saw was also the first book from Coach House I ever reviewed, beginning a long and mostly happy reading relationship with the press. Yet it was not what I would call 'a Coach House book' in the usual sense, and my review was much more negative than would usually be the case when dealing with Coach House poetry. That book was Henry Beissel's *New Wings for Icarus,* beautifully produced like all the early Coach House publications, with stunning three colour lithographs of drawings by Edmonton artist, Norman Yates (whom I was to meet when I eventually went to teach at the University of Alberta). But, as a typically tough young writer-critic, with fairly strong ideas about what made for good poetry and the usual surly sense that I knew more than my elders, I found this one lacking. To be fair, what little I had heard about Coach House by that time led me to believe that it was interested in 'experimental' writing, and Beissel's wasn't that at all. It was not the kind of writing for which Coach House would become (in)famous, and, quite frankly, I still don't know how it got on the list. But there it was, and like the other early books it announced that this small press was not just going to publish new writing but that it would do so with production values few other presses could hope to match.

How we loved those books from the late 60s and the 70s (I'm not sure exactly whom that 'we' includes, but I know that it is a larger community than just the writers I will be naming shortly; I suspect it included a number of visual artists at one time or another). Even when I didn't like, or 'get,' the writing, I always admired the actual books. Only later did I get a copy of what I believe was the first Coach House book, Wayne Clifford's *Man in a Window* (March 1965). That date is interesting: although everyone agrees that the Centennial fever of 1967 was a root cause of a Canadian small press explosion, here's evidence that Stan

Bevington and his early editors had already decided to make a go at poetry publishing at least two years before. As with the Beissel, this book too contains some gorgeous illustrations, by Dennis Reid, done in various colours. Then there was Joe Rosenblatt's first book, the aptly titled *The LSD Leacock* (1966), with 20 drawings by R. Daigneault, done in green ink on heavy paper. Even David Phillips's chapbook, *The Dream Outside* (1967), runs a series of stills from a film by bpNichol across the tops of the pages. From the beginning, Stan Bevington and his cohorts wanted to, and did, design their books as aesthetic adventures in their own right. Coach House quickly became known among those who cared as the small press that produced art press books at regular prices (looking at the prices of $1.25 for the chapbook and $2.50 for the regular books sure says much about other changes since that time).

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I knew two Coach House writers to begin with, bpNichol and Michael Ondaatje. So Sharon (who met bp in the stacks of the University of Toronto library and later introduced me to him) & I were among those who first saw that wonderful box, *bp* (1967), containing *Journeying and the returns* (another quirky piece of bookmaking, with its various coloured inks barely visible against the heavy gray paper), 'Letters Home' (the envelope of concrete poems), 'Borders' (the little 45 rpm [remember those?] record of sound poetry), and 'Wild Thing' (the wee flip poem dedicated to The Troggs): an introduction to the whole of bp's art. At the time, we were living in Kingston, where both Michael Ondaatje and I were pursuing graduate studies. When Michael got the proofs of his first book, *The Dainty Monsters* (1967), he asked us to help proofread it. Sharon and I went through it three times, the final time backwards letter by letter, after which Michael and Kim did another three proofreadings. There are no typos in the book (although there is one on the back cover, which we did not see). It was, of course, another beautiful book (Michael chose the batik for the cover), and over the years reached a larger audience than most Coach House poetry books found as it achieved such widespread critical popularity.

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I don't know when Coach House branched out into other genres. As a poetry reviewer, I mostly tended to see its poetry books, which at least until the early 70s continued to be works of art on their own. I know I saw Bowering's pennant shaped *Baseball,* but I seem not to own a copy (did someone steal it, or did I just not get it?). I reviewed Roy Kiyooka's *Nevertheless These Eyes* (1967) and didn't like it as much as I would come to (didn't understand it as well as I should: young turk reviewers can be such a pain), but it was another example of beautiful book making, with its reflective cover, and the blue type for four specific poems in the middle, and, of course, some striking illustrations (typography and design are by Bev Leach, it says, but I assume the drawings are Kiyooka's and that he had some say in the overall look of the book). Victor Coleman's tall & spectacular *One Eye Love* that same year loudly announced the aesthetic then in operation—"printed in canada by mindless acid freaks"; the cover and interior artwork nostalgically recall the rock posters of the time. 1969 saw the publication of bpNichol's *Two Novels,* printed back to back with pages of cut-out illustrations by bp in the centre (and I still haven't done that; in some ways I remain too conservative for the early Coach House aesthetic; either that, or just too much the dedicated bibliophile). These were more or less 'proper' size volumes, but Coach House had already taken up arms against that standard too, and not just in a pamphlet like *Baseball* (which had to have driven librarians up the wall, and was surely meant to).



At any rate, as I check out my library I find David McFadden's big blue book, *Letters from the Earth to the Earth* (1969), with its over 100 snapshots (David always stuck up for the art of the ordinary, so photographs seem fitting). On the other hand, Victor Coleman's *Light Verse* (1969) also uses photographs, but they are specially tinted inserts. And after the tall, thin *One Eye Love,* this book is a neat 14cm x 14cm, and much thicker than usual to make up for that fact. The same year, Michael Ondaatje's *The Man with Seven Toes* was longer than it was tall. By creating such different books, Coach House seemed to be staking out its claim for the book as an aesthetic object in its own right, yet I would have to say, looking back, that the different formats always seemed suited to the material. The concern to include art appears again in David Cull's *Cancer Rising* (1970), again using heavy dark paper and brightly coloured paintings. Frank Davey's *Weeds* (1970), a large format chapbook, appeared in heavy olive-green, while George Bowering's *Geneve* (1971) is printed on hot orange and rust paper. In 1972, Coach House produced three tall thin volumes, David Dawson's *Ceremonial,* with its clouded blue pages by David Hlynsky, Daphne Marlatt's *Vancouver Poems,* and Fred Wah's *Among,* its green pages full of forest. One can just feel the glee of the printers as they fashioned these joyful backgrounds for the

poems, and certainly one of the major impressions one carried away from all these beautiful books was a sense of riotous colour, and an insistence upon the page itself as an imaginative context for language in action.

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When did Coach House establish an editorial board? I can't recall, but I remember beginning to see the names of specific editors on the books. It was great fun to read a book and then check to see if you had guessed correctly. I have to say I think the original concept, as I understand it, was a great one for a deliberately small literary press: each editor could bring two books a year through the press on his (or her?) own; further books were decided by a discussion of the whole. This structure made for a highly eclectic list, yet all the books seemed to belong there: they all had the Coach House aura.

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Some of what contributed to that aura is best caught in Michael Ondaatje's homage to the editor who made the early Coach House house style what it was, Victor Coleman. Over the years, whenever I was in Toronto, I would drop by the Coach House itself, walking down what is now bpNichol Lane, around to the worn lawn and into the always bustling printing shop, and upstairs to see if anyone I knew was there. The big room with tea or coffee cups on the old wooden table, possibly a few writers and editors sitting around, conversation filtering through from the offices across the way, and all those copies of every Coach House book stacked in the bookcases around the walls. I always picked up a recent book or two, often met bp or Michael there, before heading off with them to some further conversation. It was one of the dependable places. As I have lived in Edmonton since 1969 and so almost always visited during the summer, my standard memory (and memory tends to do this, for I actually know I went there during Christmas holidays too) is of approaching in summer sunlight. Thus the sense of recognition in reading:

> Stan's fishbowl
> with a book inside
> like some sea animal
> camouflaging itself
> the typeface clarity
> going slow blonde in the sun full water
> ("'The gate in his head'")

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I seem to recall George Bowering suggesting that Coach House, especially through bpNichol's and Frank Davey's editorial work, operated as the Eastern (or Toronto) outlet for the major West Coast writers: certainly some of George Bowering's, Lionel Kearns's, Roy Kiyooka's, Daphne Marlatt's, Barry McKinnon's, Fred Wah's, and Phyllis Webb's important books appeared under the Coach House sign, to mention just a few. In Bowering's case, some very significant books appeared, only to become rare items almost immediately (although some were gathered together in another now-out-of-print volume: *West Window*): *Geneve, Curious,* and *Allophanes* (and *Geneve* didn't even make it into *West Window,* which is curious). Along with the later *Kerrisdale Elegies,* they remain among my favourite Bowering books, not least because they demonstrate Bowering's sly mastery of the serial poem. Three of Phyllis Webb's finest volumes appeared with Coach House, none of which I could bear to do without. Other West Coast writers who either started with Coach House or published significant books with the press include Robin Blaser, Maxine Gadd, Dwight Gardiner, Gerry Gilbert, Diana Hartog, John Pass, David Phillips, and Sharon Thesen. And this is only the representation from the West Coast.

Over the years, Coach House came to publish highly significant work by both older and younger poets from the rest of Canada. I'm not going to name everyone, but the following list (by no means complete), added to the names already mentioned, is pretty damned impressive, and represents a majority of the writers I would want to count as especially relevant to my own poetics (with the obvious exception of a number of writers from the prairies, few of whom ever made it onto the Coach House list): Margaret Atwood, Rafael Barreto-Rivera, bill bissett, E.D. Blodgett, Nicole Brossard, Wayne Clifford, Frank Davey, Christopher Dewdney, Don Domanski, Louis Dudek, Paul Dutton, Brian Fawcett, Judith Fitzgerald, Robert Fones, Robert Hogg, D.G. Jones, Robert Kroetsch, Dorothy Livesay, Stuart MacKinnon, Steve McCaffery, David McFadden, Anne Michaels, Stephen Morrisey, bpNichol, John Nold, Ken Norris, Sean O'Huigin, Michael Ondaatje, Robert Priest, Libby Scheier, Gerry Shikatani, Lola Lemire Tostevin. These are just poets, mind you, as my major interest in Coach House books has been in the poetry offerings. I am surprised how many of these names feature in my criticism and teaching; but then they are among the writers I most admire.

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I always wanted to be published by Coach House. So it was a pleasure,

indeed, when bpNichol decided to take Stephen Scobie's and my *The Pirates of Pen's Chance* (1981) to the press. This was a collaborative collection of homolinguistic translations, a mode of writing we had picked up from bp and Steve McCaffery (for example, the long central serial-like poem, "A Long Tall Sally," took as its beginning McCaffery's homolinguistic translation of Gertrude Stein's "A Carafe that is a Blind Glass" in *Every Way Oakly*). I confess to having come up with the awful punning titles in this book, including that of the book itself, and this might be a cause of shame for the rest of my life were it not that our editor, himself one of the chief punsters of our age, took advantage of it to write one of the funniest and finest back cover comments I have ever had the pleasure to be named in: "Witty & direct, moving & eloquent, abstract & challenging, always intriguing, in *The Pirates of Pen's Chance* Barbour & Scobie are the very models of a modern major generational approach to literature." I still grin whenever I read it; but, alas, far too many readers today know nothing of Gilbert and Sullivan ....

*The Pirates of Pen's Chance* was a good example of Coach House books of its period. The temptation to psychedelic colour schemes had been left behind, but the general design was still among the neatest around, the paper was heavy, and the cover of each book suggestive of what was to be found between them. Such care for the presentation was another reason Coach House maintained such a high reputation for its books, simply as fine books.

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Of course, had it done nothing else, Coach House would deserve our thanks for publishing *The Martyrology.* I still remember the awe and delight I felt when lifting off the paper loop holding the first two volumes together. Again, design was centrally important, and bp collaborated intensely in the process. Jerry Ofo's drawings work a bit the way those old Big Little Books did with their flip figures; and that effect we know came partly at bp's urging. The carefully contructed lines in the paper added a sense of age and mystery to the writing (but it was only with their fading in Book 3 and disappearance by Book 4 that we could see they were a part of the overall meaning of the slowly growing text). The sense of serious play that is at the heart of Nichol's work is manifested everywhere in the whole text, as it should be but as only a press like Coach House, as it was then, could manage to accomplish. But then, it was precisely Coach House's dedication to the imaginative possibilities of each book that kept writers like bpNichol and Michael Ondaatje (in his



poetry) committed to the press in return (admittedly, Ondaatje went to larger presses for his fiction while Nichol never wavered in his commitment to small press publication, but both writers recognized the importance and necessity of a press like Coach House, and worked to preserve it).

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Over the past few years, I have to admit, I simply haven't kept up with Coach House. To be honest, although some fine books still appeared under the Coach House imprint in the 90s, I felt as if something of the original spirit had been lost when bpNichol died in 1988. The new editorial board, and the way it appeared to work, was just too business-like. Oh, the good books were still there: sterling examples include Diana Hartog's *Polite to Bees* (1992), Paul Dutton's *Aurealities* (1991), Sharon Thesen's *Aurora* (1995), and that masterwork, Robin Blaser's *The Holy Forest* (1993) (and, of course, there were the reprints of various books of *The Martyrology,* for which I am deeply grateful); but it did seem that many of the authors I associated with Coach House were finding other small, innovative presses for their new work. And while I have nothing against Evelyn Lau, for example, I just don't find her poetry interesting, nor does it offer anything of the kind of poetic innovation and excitement I used to associate with picking up any Coach House Press book.

But this past fall's list actually made me sit up and take notice: a new Daphne Marlatt novel, a new work by Nicole Brossard, and at least one book of poetry that seemed to represent the old Coach House spirit, Darren Wershler-Henry's homage to bpNichol's concrete poetry, *Nicholodeon.* All of which seemed to go down the tubes with the announcement of Coach House's demise, an announcement that still doesn't make complete sense. Well, Anansi quickly picked up Marlatt's *Taken,* and other publishers have sought out some of the more high-profile writers, but a first book like *Nicholodeon* seemed doomed. Thus I am really happy to see some of the old Coach House gang, Stan Bevington in particular, picking up the pieces. Coach House is dead; long live Coach House!

# The Old Coach House Days

## Dennis Reid

Stan Bevington left Edmonton for the University of Toronto in early September 1962 with plans to study two years in the Department of Fine Art, just enough to complete the entry prerequisite for the School of Architecture. Two years later, he was to be found not studying architecture but in a late-nineteenth-century coach house off a lane southeast of the corner of Bathurst and Dundas in downtown Toronto, the proud owner of an old Challenge Gordon platen press, housed downstairs, and at the centre of a widening circle of friends and associates, a number of whom often slept upstairs. I'd arrived in Toronto the same time as Stan, from Oshawa, and also enrolled in Fine Art; we soon become friends. After a disastrous year at U of T, however, he entered the Ontario College of Art to take graphic design (I had fixed on art history). A bit more than a year later, he'd decided, November 1964, to quit OCA and turn all his efforts to a design/job-printing business he had been building for the past few months.

The impetus for this decision was his great success the previous spring and summer producing and selling small versions of various designs for a new Canadian flag. Prime Minister Pearson had declared his government's intention to replace the traditional Red Ensign with a distinctively Canadian flag, setting off a flurry of proposals. Stan hit on the idea of producing magazine-sized versions of as many of these as possible for sale on the streets, and by mid-summer was moving thousands, particularly along Yorkville Avenue. By that summer of 1964, Yorkville was beginning to flourish as the new counterculture centre of Toronto, and of much of the rest of Canada, superseding the more local bohemian enclave of the Gerrard Street Village.

The flags were printed by the silkscreen process on a big table in the basement studio-living quarters Stan had set up a year earlier in the house of old Oshawa friends of mine on Albemarle Street, south of the Danforth, just before he had decided to enroll at OCA. He had learned silkscreen printing while in high school in Edmonton, and had traded on these skills to learn to operate a linotype machine while working in weekly newspaper/job-printer's shops in Edson and Fairview, Alberta. The filmwork for the flag screens was accomplished with an old bellows camera, a honey-coloured wood-and-brass beauty he'd acquired earlier in the year.



During the summer he bought a used bright red Austin Healey Sprite to run the stacks of flags around to the various seamstresses who finished them, then out to the small gang of street hawkers who sold them. Friends from U of T and OCA, who for the past year had made the Albemarle basement the centre of their social lives, helped with production and sales, joined increasingly by denizens of the Yorkville scene.

Stan became one of the prominent features of that scene through the course of the summer, darting about on flag business in the hurly-burly of the weekend streets, and systematically soliciting printing jobs from Yorkville merchants and in the Bay-Gerrard area of the old Village during quieter times. And he met hundreds of people, one of whom told him about an old Challenge Gordon platen press for sale, cheap. Another told him about a near-derelict coach house for rent at Bathurst and Dundas. With the help of David Bolduc and Tim Cowan, fellow students at OCA, to share the rent, it all came together late in August.

Despite the acquisition of the Gordon, Stan's printing business, Bevington Graphics, was based almost entirely on silkscreening, and the magic that could be achieved in the camera. That fall Will Rueter, another OCA friend, joined with Stan to buy handset lead type for the Gordon, and Stan and I became involved for a short while with a passion of Will's, the Guild of Hand Printers, a serious hobby group (including a number of prominent designers) that produced an annual packet of hand-printing ephemera called *Wrongfont.* The first bound printing to come out of the Bathurst Street coach house was a chapbook handset by Stan, Will and his brother, Vincent. *Why Typography*, for *Wrongfont* 3, produced in late January 1965 and released at the end of April, was the text of an address by the legendary Canadian type designer, Carl Dair.

*Man in a Window,* the first publication to bear The Coach House Press imprint, is a product of that moment. Impressed by Stan's exploratory settings of some of David Bolduc's poems, I suggested producing a book of poetry by Wayne Clifford, an English literature student at U of T I'd known since high school in Oshawa. Two other U of T friends, Kog Anderson and Brian Ridley, lent money to buy the paper and offered to help with handwork. Stan did the design, handsetting and letterpress printing, and I agreed to create illustrations, even though I'd been the laughingstock of the compulsory studio courses during my first two years of Fine Art. The resulting illustrations—which strike me today as conveying a constrained, almost formal sensuality, entirely appropriate to Wayne's wonderful poems—were very much a collaborative project. Another U of T friend, Janet Amos, agreed to pose for the photographs that were to be the basis of the illustrations, and was directly involved in creating the images. I used photostat paper in the old wooden bellows

camera, exposing one image at a time upstairs, where Janet posed near the heat (it was mid-winter), then running downstairs where Stan developed the high-contrast image, then running upstairs to try again, and so on. We made screen stencils from the photostats later—Stan was crucial to the positioning of the images on the page—and printed them on a big work table. They were sent out for gathering and binding. Although the printing was completed in March, it was early spring when the books hit the stores.

More than a year passed before the appearance of the next book, Joe Rosenblatt's *LSD Leacock,* with illustrations by Bob Daigneault, which came out in July 1966. It was a busy year. The coach house had become the focus not only of the old U of T gang, but of an growing number of artists and designers from OCA. And there were more writers showing up. Stan met Victor Coleman late in 1964 at a party at Earle Birney's house and we decided to ask Victor, with his knowledge of the small press and literary network, to help with the 'marketing' and distribution of *Man in a Window.* We met bpNichol about the same time, through Jo Hindley-Smith, a folksinger who was a friend of Kog Anderson and Doris Cowan, another coach house habitué. Scott Symons, with whom I'd taken a Canadian decorative arts course a year earlier, was often around. Instead of a literary salon, the model was the sort of weekly newspaper/job-printer where Stan had worked in Alberta, a place that centred a community.

The design-printing business was also expanding, which allowed for the purchase of an old linotype machine in March 1966. By occasionally working for Albert Offset, a commercial printing firm up the street, operating their process camera, Stan was able to have time on their offset press. The text for Henry Beissel's *New Wings for Icarus,* which was originally intended to be the second publication, was set on the linotype and printed on the Gordon. Although the filmwork for the illustrations (drawings by the Edmonton artist Norman Yates) was done at Albert's, his press was not able to handle the colour required by the design. It was finally finished on a new A. B. Dick Offset press acquired by Bevington Graphics in September, two months after the appearance of Rosenblatt's *LSD Leacock.* With the fourth publication in November, bpNichol's *Journeying & the returns,* the unique Coach House Press mix of a bold concept with innovative, collaborative in-house design and production, with imaginative, often challenging packaging, had been achieved.

# The Coach House Press: the First Decade. An Emotional Memoir

Victor Coleman

Memory, like folded paper with its grain running the wrong way, is likely to wrinkle and crack. Cracked, folded, and put away, like anything you cherish. Fragile.

My introduction to The Coach House Press came when I was programming literary and public affairs evenings for The Bohemian Embassy, an archetypal 'coffee house,' in 1964. I had started to publish the mimeomag, *Island,* in September of that year, had produced eight "Poetry & Jazz" half-hour programs for CHFI-FM, had made contact with Raymond Souster and Contact Press, and was reviewing books for the CBC. Wayne Clifford had approached me about wanting to read his poetry at The Embassy and read just a few weeks later. I ran into Stan Bevington around that same time at a 'salon' at Earle Birney's house in Rosedale and Stan invited me over to see his print shop on Bathurst Street.

Having been dumped by the *Toronto Star* from my job as copy clerk when I turned 20 (a *Star* policy I find mysterious to this day), I was scrambling for work. With the help of Ray Souster, Robert Fulford, & Richard J. ('Bob') Needham (the man who had hired me at the *Star*) I scored a job as assistant production manager at Oxford University Press, Toronto. William Toye was my immediate boss and eventually became a bit of a mentor. I needed the job to support a growing family and did the best I could with the bones I was thrown, but it was hard to keep my nose to the grindstone during a period when I was commuting to Buffalo and Detroit on weekends to partake of what I considered to be the hottest literary movement extant on the planet. Hey, I was only 20! What did I know?

*ISLAND (1964-66)*

Ray Souster had put me in contact with a number of Canadian, British and American writers early in 1964. I wrote to most of them to solicit contributions to the first issue of *Island,* which appeared on September 17,

six days after my 20th birthday. *Island*/1 featured poetry by Gael Turnbull, Matthew Mead, Gilbert Sorrentino, Thomas (Tom) Clark, Ron Loewinsohn, John Newlove, Gwendolyn MacEwen, R.S. (Red) Lane, Frank Davey, Souster and a 1952 letter to Souster from William Carlos Williams. The magazine was produced on an old Gestetner mimeograph machine in the large attic 'den' of my rented (from painter Anton Van Dalen) flat on Humberside Avenue in the High Park neighbourhood of Toronto. Souster had recently moved to a house around the corner on High Park Avenue and I was seeing him weekly to discuss poetry and publishing, and to consult with him on the latest submissions to his, Louis Dudek's and Irving Layton's (then Peter Miller's) Contact Press.

Around this time I began my frequent visits to Buffalo, New York and Detroit, Michigan to hang out with writers I had contacted through *Island* and through my reading series at The Bohemian Embassy. In Buffalo I met and/or hung out with Western Canadians Robert Hogg and Fred Wah; Americans such as Stephen Rodefer, John Clarke, Danny Zimmerman, John Wieners, Albert Glover, Morris Donaldson and Bill Hutton; and Brits Andrew Crozier, John Temple and Jeremy Prynne, all of whom (except Hutton) were students of Charles Olson, along with such visiting instructors/lecturers as Robert Creeley, Edward Dorn, LeRoi Jones, Robert Kelly and Diane Wakoski.

The Detroit connection was focussed on the Artists' Workshop, a hotbed of writers, artists and musicians that included John Sinclair, Robin Eichele, George Tysh, Jim Semark, Ellen Phelan, Allen Van Newkirk, and a visitor from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Ron Caplan. It was in pre-riot Detroit that I made my first contact with African-Americans, chief among them musicians Joseph Jarman and Charles Moore. Sinclair was also involved in the underground revolutionary group known as the White Panthers, whose 'Minister of Defense,' Pun Plamondon, later became notorious for blowing up Ann Arbor's CIA building.

The Buffalo scene was somewhat more academically oriented, with more focus on the literary revolution than on the political, and it was a lot closer to home (exactly 99 miles by bus). I often extended my weekend visits there so that I could audit Charles Olson's classes. I was rapt, bedazzled and befuddled in equal measure by the breadth of Olson's knowledge and by the way he was able to utilize the expertise of his various students to elucidate and investigate the ancients and moderns alike.

In the midst of all this I was visiting Coach House and planning



printing projects (with Ron Caplan a reprint of the Divers Press edition of Paul Blackburn's *The Dissolving Fabric* and another Caplan collaboration in a reprint of George Oppen's *Discreet Series*), working with Souster on *New Wave Canada,* and continuing with quarterly *Island*s, printing the last issue after normal work hours on the A.B. Dick press at Oxford University Press, and starting its progeny, the tiny first issue of *IS. (pronounced eyes).*

I knew that the inevitable split with Oxford University Press was going to be difficult; I enjoyed working with/learning from Bill Toye, a generous man, and my co-workers were all very supportive. Toye gladly assisted me in designing the title pages and cover-type of the Souster-edited Contact Press anthology, *New Wave Canada: The New Explosion in Canadian Poetry.* When Toye first saw the manuscript of this anthology he asked me if he could show it to A.J.M. Smith, who was up from the University of Michigan at the time putting the finishing touches on his revised *Modern Canadian Verse in English and French.* Although I wasn't actually there to hear it, Smith clearly had run into the room yelling "Stop the presses!" when he'd looked at *NWC*; he subsequently included work by a number of its contributors in that august volume, although I was sadly not one of them.

Two weeks after resigning as assistant production manager at OUP I was receiving instruction from Stan Bevington on the operation of a linotype machine, my first real skill. I had given up a low-paying job for a no-paying job: the quintessential 1960s idealist.

*Coach House (1966-75)*

In the mid-sixties the linotype machine was my alchemy, a way of turning lead into gold, and I have the scars to prove it: hot lead squirting from the infernal machine had landed on the backs of my delicate hands as liquid and then peeled off as solid. Ouch! It was a total engagement with language, poetry; this was the way to redirect the canon-blind scripture. This was how to get those slacker poets into the mix. Allow them to get their hands dirty by helping to make their own books; a way to complete their collective vision of the new direction in Canadian writing and publishing.

Eventually I was able to earn a modest living through commercial typesetting jobs. In the meantime I promoted the notion of publishing at Coach House to the extent of inviting a number of writers to submit manuscripts for consideration. This followed closely upon Wayne Clifford's initial group of invitees: George Bowering, Michael Ondaatje,

David McFadden, Joe Rosenblatt, bpNichol and myself. Dennis Reid, the third member of the founding triumvirate, illustrated Clifford's first book, *Man in a Window,* and edited Ross Woodman's fine little monograph on London, Ontario painter Jack Chambers. Wayne, in the meantime, had left to attend the Iowa Writers' Workshop where he continued to work in a local print shop and produce chapbooks independently. It became my responsibility to see the books that Wayne had solicited through the press.

Although I was the only writer in the community at that time who was 'employed' at Coach House, a number of others were constant visitors; chief among them bpNichol. Barrie Nichol came to Coach House with an open mind, a fund of knowledge about international Concrete poetry and fringe-publishing, and an aggressive desire to produce. He was already turning out his micropress four- to eight-page Ganglia ephemera. His *Journeying & the returns* was the first Coach House book to receive any appreciable attention in the mainstream literary press, although it also garnered remarks such as "You call this a book?". *bp* (as it's generally known) was put together in what became the Coach House signature collective-production mode, i.e., involve as many eager hands as possible, provide them with plenty of peanut butter (or bologna) sandwiches and maybe some beer, and work long into the evening. We were unstoppable.

The boxes that held the three different elements of *bp* were painstakingly constructed by hand around the upstairs lunch table (Stan made the red benches, and controversy still rages about whether Stan or Wayne made the actual table). Many of the individually printed 'concrete' or visual poems had to be folded by hand and then tightly inserted into their envelopes. One evening we were delighted to learn that all four workers just happened to be Virgos.

Bibliographer (and all 'round dogged ephemera sleuth) Nicky Drumbolis, in his 'corrective' to the Coach House's *Tweny/20* cata-logue, produced to note the 20th anniversary of Canada's premiere literary press, cites a 12-page booklet of 'remarks' by Carl Dair (*Why Typography?*) as the first Coach House Press publication, marking the actual birthdate as sometime in the fall of 1964. But it wasn't until all three Coach House founders (Bevington, Clifford and Reid) collaborated on *Man in a Window* in March 1965, that the initial inklings of its forever changing the face of contemporary writing and design in Canada quietly emerged. The few publications that appeared between that date and the November 1966 release of *Journeying & the returns* were mostly collaborative generations of a fledgling community of young writers, artists, designers and printers,



all of whom were anxious to displace the prevailing provincialism left over from the fifties.

The collaboration between Stan Bevington, (bedrock of technology and the precision of design), and me (guiding editorial light, production gremlin, and chief fund raiser), ultimately spawned a larger, seldom out-of-control, collective entity that progressed through an era of protest and discovery unmatched, in this writer's opinion, before or since. To say that there were highs and lows during this first decade is to risk mischievous misinterpretation. The signature tiny colophon addendum printed in select early titles: "Printed in Canada by mindless acid freaKs" was ironically quoted by Margaret Atwood at a Coach House Press reception for the McClelland and Stewart sales staff shortly after "The Canadian Publishers" took over the egregious task of distribution in 1991, effectively turning Coach House into a branch plant of that mainstream publisher.

But we're dealing here with the first decade, before Canada Council block grants to publishers provided the largesse which suddenly and precipitously allowed for what Raymond Souster had characterised "the new explosion" in Canadian poetry. Joe Rosenblatt's *The LSD Leacock* did not appear until 1966. It was *Leacock,* along with Clifford's *Man in a Window* and a lovely production of Henry Beisell's *New Wings for Icarus,* illustrated by Norman Yates, that were the first three 'trade' books produced by the fledgling Coach House Press.

The Coach House imprimature appeared on eight titles in 1967, including George Bowering's pennant-shaped *Baseball: A Poem in the Magic Number 9,* designed by Gar Smith; Michael Ondaatje's first book, Dainty Monsters; Nichol's *bp*; my own *one/eye/love*; David Phillips's *The Dream Outside*; and Roy Kiyooka's important second book, *Nevertheless These Eyes,* which eulogized the English painter Stanley Spencer in a kind of visual/visceral language that became the benchmark of the Coach House aesthetic for the next 20 years. Wayne Clifford's commitment to the first six authors was brought to fruition and a publishing program, and an ethic, had been born. A slight slow-down in production was experienced in 1968 due to a couple of things: my earlier temporary emigration to the West Coast, and the expropriation of Bevington's Bathurst Street shop to make way for a new library and community centre. Stan threw his lot in with a group of disaffected academics who were on the verge of founding a bold new experiment in independent education, real estate development, and humanist social engineering called Rochdale College.

In 1969 the first manifestations emerged of the input of David Rosenberg, a Detroit native, winner of the prestigious Hopwood Award for Poetry at the University of Michigan, who was teaching at the new Glendon Campus of York University. David became the editor of the librarian-infuriating *The Ant's Forefoot* (which merely folded the standard 11- by 17-inch printed sheet the other way to produce the unusual 5 ½ by 17-inch format), one of a handful of periodicals produced by Coach House from its inception. *Tweny/20* lists seven titles for 1969 (not including periodicals), but things were about to take off.

Other periodicals that emanated from that first decade included the iconoclastic photography magazine, *Image Nation* (a title lifted from an open serial poem by eventual Coach House author Robin Blaser), which started life as a Rochdale College newsletter edited by me; the quirky comics irregular *Snore Comix,* edited variously by Jerry Ofo (illustrator of Nichol's *Martyrology*) and Michael Tims (a.k.a. AA Bronson of General Idea), *IS.*, the Coach House Press 'house organ' edited by me with a few guest editors; and the second series of Frank Davey's *Open Letter.*

The eleven titles published in 1970 include the seminal *Search for Talent,* a collection of replicated found photos; the first volume of David McFadden's and Greg Curnoe's *Great Canadian Sonnet*; Robert Fones's first Coach House Press publication, *Kollages*; and a badly bungled (by a hurried publisher) *StoneDGloves* by Roy Kiyooka, released simultaneously with his National Gallery exhibition of the same material. It's probably worth reiterating here what has been said elsewhere about the importance of constant input from important visual artists to the early Coach House Press oeuvre.

Sixteen titles saw the light in 1971, including Christopher Dewdney's first book, *Golders Green*; fellow Londoner Robert Fones's second production for Coach House, *Anthropomorphiks* (arguably the most beautiful production in the early history of the Press); Tom Clark's *Neil Young* (not a biography); an astounding visual novel, *The Projector,* by Martin Vaughn-James; poetry from David McFadden, Robert Hogg, George Bowering and Mike Doyle; the first Coach House Press anthology of short fiction, *The Story So Far,* edited by Bowering; and Matt Cohen's *Too Bad Galahad.* The year 1971 was also the beginning of the end of the Rochdale period, although Coach House maintained some form of connection until Rochdale's forced closure.

The 'me' decade's biggest talisman for Coach House was probably the



federal Local Initiatives Programme (LIP) grant we received which allowed us to hire a few more workers and took the pressure off the growing burden of deficit financing. A memorable documentation exists of that event in the form of a Jim Lang pinhole camera group shot taken in front of the Rochdale bank with the first installment of the grant, in small bills, strewn about the feet of the current staff. Thirteen titles were published in 1972, not including periodicals, among them Fred Wah's *Among*; bpNichol's *The Martyrology* Books 1 & 2; and Daphne Marlatt's *Vancouver Poems.*

By 1973, the critical response to the Coach House publishing list was all over the place. Accolades came in from sympathetic reviewers internationally, while the nationalists were accusing us of being victims of cultural imperialism. Two senior American poets had visited us, been impressed with what we were doing, both aesthetically and politically, and offered us manuscripts, gratis, to help raise funds for the Canadian books we were publishing, books, I'll hasten to point out, that few Canadians were actually buying. Robert Creeley's *His Idea* was one of our quickest productions, having achieved publication for a reading Creeley was to give at A Space, Canada's premiere artist-run centre, within a three-week period. Allen Ginsberg's *Iron Horse* was a somewhat more substantial text, took considerably longer in production, went on to a couple of reprints, and was eventually published in a facsimile edition by Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Books in San Francisco. The other books by Americans that year were Bill Hutton's *The Strange Odyssey of Howard Pow*; *Antlers in the Treetops,* a collaborative novel by Ron Padgett and TomVeitch; and photographer Robert Cumming's *A Training in the Arts.* Also amongst the 20 titles published that year were new books by Dewdney, Ondaatje and Gerry Gilbert.

My last full year on the job at Coach House was 1974. By early 1975 I had become executive director at A Space, where a lot of the contacts I'd made through Coach House continued to associate. The eighteen titles printed in 1974 included Robert Fones's lovingly designed pirated edition of Jack Spicer's *After Lorca*; poetry by Fones, David Bromige, Jonathan Greene, John Perrault, Stuart MacKinnon, myself and E.D. Blodgett. Fiction and other prose rolled off the presses in the form of George Bowering's *Curious*; *Fox Lore* by Sharon Smith; *A History of the Toronto Islands* by the senior students at that venerable institute of learning the Island Public School; Ann Mandel's small study of Robert Creeley's poetry; A.S.A. Harrison's *Orgasms,* a lavish AA Bronson-designed

production that featured interviews with 21 women about their sexual responses; Matt Cohen's *Peach Melba,* which featured a David Hlynsky cover photo of the eponymous dessert as executed by Ms. Generality a.k.a. Margaret Coleman (who had cooked legendary lunches for the Coach House crew between 1969 and 1971, and who died later in 1974); David Young's first public manifestation in editing *The Story So Far* 3, and novelist Valerie Kent's short novel, *Wheelchair Sonata.*

*'Outside Hands'*

Although I wouldn't place the beginning of the decline of Coach House firmly around the time I left to become director of A Space, it's as good a time as any to begin a discussion of the changes that occurred there between 1975 and 1988.

My reasons for leaving were many, not the least of which was general disatisfaction with the role of senior editor/production manager. A good portion of the energy derived from innovation is bound to dissipate with time; Coach House was no exception. As I was increasingly engaged with media other than print as purveyors of the kind of writing I wanted to champion, such as readings, performance, broadcasting, multimedia, and collaboratives (between writers and other artists), these alternatives expanded their importance in my mind at that time, largely through A Space and other artist-run centres as agencies of change. The other major reason was my rather naively myopic view of the new technologies of print; namely the dreaded computer/word processor. I was, somewhat stupidly, reticent to take on this new technology and can see now that this arose out of fear and trepidation in relation to my inability to master all the new gadgets. I had already had a difficult time working and maintaining the old linotype, which was soon to become obsolete.

Whatever gap I left as the 'guiding light' of Coach House publishing policy was quickly filled by a committee consisting of writers and designers who had previously acted in consultancy roles: bpNichol, Michael Ondaatje, Frank Davey, David Young, Rick/Simon, David McFadden and Sarah Sheard; with Dennis Reid, Stan Bevington and Robert Wallace eventually left to cover books other than poetry and fiction. I did not play an active role in editorial decisions again until 1984, when I was approached separately by Nichol, Ondaatje and Young to rejoin the team, because, as David Young pointed out, there was a distinct lack of energy to keep things going in the face of ever-diminishing returns.

By far the most active editors in my ten-year hiatus were Barrie Nichol



and Frank Davey; the former as spirit maintenance, the latter as canon feeder. Nichol maintained his belief that books of vanguard literature should walk the walk, stay small (if increasingly more marginal), and continue the tradition of outrageous spectacle whenever possible. Davey was very busy advancing in the academy and eventually became the head of York University's English Department. The split in their aesthetic, always very friendly, was nonetheless distinct and it can be discerned through a closer examination of the titles both saw through the press between 1975 and 1988.

The death of bpNichol in September 1988 also signalled the death of The Coach House Press as we had known it (see my *The Day They Stole the Coach House Press,* The Eternal Network, 1993). There were actual grabs for power on the part of individuals who had been on board earlier. These folks had been convinced by the bean counters at the various funding agencies that Coach House needed a stronger marketing strategy blah-blah-blah, so the new editorial/management board became top heavy with bureaucrats, suits, dilettantes, arts consultants, and high-profile writers, such as Margaret Atwood, to smokescreen the bankers. This maneuvering effectively removed all semblance of community, collaboration, and hands-on production from the realm of the realizable, reducing Coach House to the role of just another extruder of standard books.

Whether or not it will be possible in the future for something quite like The Coach House Press of the 1966-75 period to exist and flourish again is impossible to project; the confluence of energies, the consensus of aesthetic spirit, and the zeal to experiment and innovate must all happen simultaneously within a community of artists/writers, or it won't happen at all. Things will merely dissemble into the politically correct fiasco that passes as an arts community in Canada today.

January 1996, Toronto

[This article was originally written for a catalogue to accompany the National Library exhibition, *New Wave Canada: The Coach House Press and the Small Press Movement in English Canada in the 1960s.* When issues of censorship arose, the article, and indeed the entire Coach House Printing-designed catalogue, was withdrawn. It first appeared in the 'pink' issue of Stuart Ross's *Mondo Hunkamooga* (#17/18, October 1996).]

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*Postscript/April 1997*

The baggage I carried with me to A Space in 1975 manifested itself as

The Eternal Network imprimatur, publishers of Shelagh Young, Opal L. Nations, J. 'Kit' Miller, Harry Matthews, Toby MacLennan, and Tom Sherman as well as the last five issues of *IS.* and the arts tabloid *Only Paper Today.*

My hand was still visible in the Coach House catalogue until 1978 and, although I never lost touch I didn't find the publishing programme that essentially engaging, writing it off as 'too many cooks.' Far from being what Sarah Sheard characterizes as a 'coming of age' for Coach House (in a recent *Toronto Life* memoir), the period between 1975 and 1988 was a slow decline into a kind of compromised eclecticism, with entirely too much "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine" going on. Which is not to say that good, even exciting books weren't being produced; just that there was a singular lack of vision, which eventually showed up as tired and frustrated volunteers searching for an answer, any answer. And what they came up with in 1991 was the solution of transforming the community-based, cooperatively edited sandbox into a business.

The slippery slope was long and arduous—about five years. I was not terribly surprised when I learned, in July of 1996, of the demise of Coach House Press. I read and listened to the bleeding-heart response from the literary and publishing 'industry' and was astounded that so few understood what had happened/was happening. There was never any mention of the horrendous rate of returns from book retailers North America-wide; there was never any mention of the production of literary titles in such quantities in such expensive lavish designs for a market that simply didn't exist; there was never any mention of the size of the salary being paid to the nominal publisher; everything was blamed on government cuts.

Like junkies on methadone in a welfare state, small presses in Canada were playing by rules laid down by the various government agencies that provided them with fat subsidies. They were extruding standard product for a market that never existed, they were warehousing this product at great expense, they were cutting their share of any realizable remuneration through bad deals with large distributors (whose salesmen, notoriously, seldom carried much poetry and first fiction with them on their junkets); but they continued to print the required minimum of 500 copies, whether they could sell them or not, to maintain their subsidy habit. The glut of literary publishing that continues today is completely unmanageable in an unfriendly, celebrity-dominated publishing marketplace.

# Reader's Regrets

## Julie Beddoes

*Standards*

We all know that they are double, triple, multiple and historically variable. Moral consistency is not achievable in a contradictory universe but to abandon the attempt is called hypocrisy. The financial problems of Coach House Press are blamed on "management capability" by Ontario Premier Michael Harris (*Toronto Star*); those of Canadian Airlines are blamed on its employees' paycheques.

*Publishing*

The standards for what makes a book a wonderful object change too, but at any time they exist and can be known. I spent most of my years as a editor with publishers of proven "management capability." They put out Canadian lists with the help of public money (it has yet to be demonstrated that publishing Canadian books is not a good thing for Canadian society to spend its money on) but every title had to be sold hard to management and sales forces. They often didn't see why they should have to work so hard for my projects when the output of foreign potboiler factories moved apparently by themselves but in fact with the help of the multinational hype industry. I believed passionately that Canadian writers should be finding their audience with the help that big publishers with a large sales forces and publicity departments could give them. It was always hard to persuade people who seldom went through the processes you and I go through when we wander into a bookstore and decide what to buy that the kind of packaging that makes it possible to move a mass-market paperback (splashy cover, cheap paper, hideous printing) wasn't the way to help *Burning Water* find its best audience.

As production managers and I agonized over shaving two cents off the cost of printing a cover, five cents a page off typesetting; as we fantasized about one day sending our books to a typesetter not a printer, in my shopping bag was, perhaps, Books Three and Four of *The Martyrology.* It was important to know that somewhere there were people who didn't have to sell the fall list to a sceptical sales manager, who could buy paper,

experiment with typesetting, design covers, with no other criteria than what makes the book as an object beautiful and true to its text.

Commercial publishers take what amounts to ownership of a text, under conditions laid down in a contract, and once the contract is signed, the manuscript edited, sometimes before, the writer is more or less equivalent to a hired hand, laid off at the end of harvest, when a new set of workers take over all the other tasks necessary to get the book into the hands of the reader. Editing the text is part of this process: getting it into the form considered most attractive to the imagined reader, with, in our post-romantic age, some lip service paid to the wishes and intentions of the writer. An editor in such a house has to be resigned to being as much a packager as a servant of literature.

This is a method that is hard to condemn. It has got some good books read widely and we all recognise the fallacies in the old view of the author being solely responsible for the readers' experience. But it also tends to obscure some of the other things we now recognise about books, and which the work that came out of Coach House Press taught us before we read the theory. The text of a book is not an autonomous lump of meaning which retains its essence independently of the form in which it is transmitted to its reader. This is why a book in which the producer of the text is fully part of the team that constructs that form is a different sort of object from one in which the functions are rigidly separated. As well, the criteria according to which that form is constructed will play some part in the sort of experience the reader enjoys. This is of course acknowledged every time a cover is designed; as for the rest of a book's material form, it is too often treated as simply a place to cut costs. Pages for full-sized hardcovers are designed to be reduced for mass market reproduction. The realization that "the medium is the message" is still resisted by a great many of those who write, make, read and teach Canadian books. Coach House took it as a given and operated accordingly.

*Teaching*

When I became a teacher, not an editor, of Canadian books, I was shocked to find that many university teachers of literature still see the preservation of ancient artifacts as our only task. Coach House Press certainly produced artifacts worth preserving by these criteria. Some of us would like to throw out such dilettantism (not to mention the colonial cringe) in favour of steering our students to recognise—and where valuable contest—the power of established cultural criteria. We'd also like our students to be aware that language is not transparent, that messages are



mixed and manipulative, that intellectually challenging writing is the most fun, that books are lovely things to have around.

Coach House produced a lot of the best Canadian materials from which such lessons can be learned. Many of my colleagues would say that all this can be taught in Shakespeare 201; I'd reply that the such lessons would be obscured by the weight of generations of genuflectors and a class list that tells students that nothing is worth reading unless it was written by a dead foreigner. (Foreign women are more OK than they used to be.) Even in a curriculum that steers English majors away from Canadian courses (thus making inevitable the sort of unprofitable operations that so upset Michael Harris) a few students every year get the message; some of them are affected and strengthened all their lives; some go on to teach in their turn. Now that most books have shelf lives somewhere between those of eggs and Macintosh apples (apples at least are kept many months in cold storage) there has to be a publisher who is willing to keep indispensable course materials in print year after year on the sort of sales that graduate class adoptions generate. I don't know yet what the effect the loss of Coach House Press will have on my teaching in the long run but I dread what I won't be able to find when I compile my book lists for fall 97.

Another dread is that this won't matter in the long run. More students and fewer faculty will eventually mean that most of our teaching will be in survey courses, CanLit from Brooke to bp, taught from half-a-dozen NCLs and an anthology. Such complicity of the arts budget cutters and the education budget cutters is both coincidental and, as the saying goes, over-determined. Coach House, like the disappearing frogs, is a sign of things to come: a world so culturally and intellectually impoverished that the hypocritical smugness of people like Michael Harris will not be challenged.

*Freedom*

The newspapers not already owned by Conrad Black are owned by people with interests more or less identical with his. Freedom of speech is invoked in defence of Black's near monopoly, of violent videos for kids and of cigarette advertising. When will it be used in the defence of the small publishers now losing their Ontario Development Corporation loan guarantees? (How much did that programme cost the taxpayer for god's sake?)

Many who have written about Coach House have pointed out how much the glorious achievements of Canadian writers over the past 30

years have depended on the institutions that have supported them, most particularly public funding and the small presses. This is equally true of the ideas that make a society healthily dynamic. A lot of what is now a legislated part of our national life—a recognition of diversity, of minority rights—was first proclaimed in the publications of the small presses. What sort of society would we be living in if they had been silenced? What will our society be like when all the voices and arguments which will never be represented in Black's publications are unavailable even to those who seek them out? The glorious hubbub that exists on the streets not far from the intersection of Huron and Bloor Street is the image of what could have been our national discourse if we were willing to honour and support the media that make it possible. The demise of Coach House is several steps toward the univocal society. We don't have official censors (except for movies); Conrad and Ken and all those corporate CEOs whose role model is Augusto Pinochet are not going to need them.

*History Teaches*

The history of Coach House Press is the history of the past 30 years. May we never live in a society without history, without change and experiment; ironically, Coach House's changes through the decades have mirrored our increasing willingness to abandon experiment, to call regression reform, to close down the institutions that remind us of this. The closure of Coach House is both an abandonment and a betrayal of a history from which we still have a lot to learn and a refusal to ensure the conditions that will enable a resistance to the current historical regression.

Many years ago, the idealists of Coach House's early days believed that technological change would bring about a democratization of discourse, would make it possible for resisting voices to be heard. Instead, the Saskatoon and Regina papers sell out to Hollinger because they can't afford new presses. As much as we believe that the exercise of power also constructs the forms of resistance to it, if those forms require vast amounts of capital to be able to reach an audience, then they are not going to materialise without the support of the powerful. That means that to resist is also to conserve: without the medium there is no message. All the messages that Coach House would have—or might have in its future metamorphoses—mediated are now lost, as well as those of the other small publishers which will disappear one by one over the next few years. How will these media be replaced? Not by Bill Gates.

# The Beginnings of an End of Coach House Press

Frank Davey

1. The Coach House editors are sitting on red wooden benches and rickety chairs around the long table hammered together from two-by-tens fifteen years before by Stan Bevington or Wayne Clifford. It is 1982. Mike Ondaatje, bpNichol, myself, Stan Bevington, David Young, my wife Linda, are there among the voting editors. Most likely Dennis Reid also. Quite possibly at the table is David McFadden, who attends meetings, offers advice, edits some books, but always laughs or shrugs off suggestions he should be "a member of the board." Nelson Adams, master typesetter and designer, is probably somewhere in the room. Possibly also Clifford James, who has been hired some years earlier to look after the press's orders and shipping and some of its advertising, and Sarah Sheard, who has come to the press's full-time staff first as a student trainee sometime in 1978 and has stayed as a full-time employee to work at a variety of ongoing editorial and promotional tasks. If I had the time to consult my all of my filed of CHP minutes which I've deposited over the years in the Simon Fraser University library I could list those who are at least officially around the table. David Young, with Stan's tacit endorsement, has asked the eds to invite Clifford and Sarah to join the editorial board because, he says, it is awkward for them to work at editorial tasks, and meet and work with writers who come to the press, without having full standing as editors. It's also awkward for anyone to oppose his request, even though Clifford and Sarah have left the room to enable supposedly free discussion—we all work with them on the promotion and distribution of the books we edit, and consider them at least work-site friends. But I oppose it anyway, arguing that David's explanation for his request is inadequate and perhaps disingenuous, that it is not unusual for a press to have editorial assistants who are not full editors, and that if they feel awkward this is their problem. I add that—despite the fact that Sarah has ambitions as a writer and has been working on a novel—to include

them on the board would be to break with the artist/writer-press conception of Coach House. I suggest that the fact that they are friends and work in the building does not mean that they would necessarily be good additions to the board. They do not have the small press background that most of the present editors have and, apart from this, we have no indication of what kind of books they might wish to acquire in the name of the press and publish. bp and Linda speak against David's proposal also. Stan, who does not enjoy disagreements, says little. Mike supports David, but mainly on the grounds that the issue is no big deal and that Clifford and Sarah are our friends. We have a formal vote, and David's suggestion is endorsed, 4 votes to 3. Clifford will leave Coach House within two years. Sarah will continue on the board until the early 1990s.

2. The Coach House editors are sitting on red benches etc. It is sometime in 1983 or 84. Since 1975 and the establishment of an editorial board to edit the press, each editor has had complete freedom to select and publish through the press two titles a year, and to publish additional titles by acquiring what we have come to call "publishing slots" from editors who do not plan to use them. None of these selections have had to be approved by the full board, although most have routinely been presented for discussion. Further titles can be selected collectively from unsolicited manuscripts by the full board and be assigned to individual editors for editing, contract negotiation, and overseeing of production. With a board of 7-8 members from 1975 to 82, this arrangement allowed the press to aim for around 16 titles a year. There is a proposal on the agenda to limit editors to the editing of two titles per year, whether these are ones the editor found independently or ones from among the unsoliciteds, and thus to end the practice of editors acquiring the unused editing entitlements of other editors. It is supported by Sheard, David Young, and others on the grounds that the current arrangement has allowed "some editors" to dominate the press. Since bp and I have, since 1975, edited more than half of the Coach House titles, we all know who the "some editors" are. bp protests that the current system is equally open to everyone—if other people brought manuscripts forward and used their 'slots' there would be less pressure on editors like himself to keep finding good manuscripts. I protest that bp and I have been left editing numerous unsolicited manuscripts, accepted by the board, especially poetry ones, because other board members haven't been willing to work on them. Often the board has requested or cajoled us to look after them. The present motion will make it more unlikely than ever that an unsolicited manuscript will be



accepted and published. There is a formal vote. bp and I are outvoted.

3. The Coach House editors are sitting around their long and rough board table. It is early in 1985. I have just reported to the meeting that Barbara Godard and I—she has co-edited the press's Coach House Quebec Translations series with me since 1975, although she doesn't sit on the eds board—have the opportunity to acquire for the press English-language rights to Nicole Brossard's novel *Amantes* and are hoping to get the rights to *Picture Theory.* Sarah Sheard comments that the press already has too many Brossard titles, and that they don't seem to sell very well, and that surely there must be other Quebec writers. bp replies that Coach House doesn't try to represent all English-language writing in Canada, and that the Quebec series doesn't have to be representative of Quebec writing, and that Nicole is very likely the major woman writer of her generation in Quebec—what's wrong with our being her English-Canadian publisher? Both bp and I remind everyone of how our publication of Brossard's work has evoked strong interest in it among our British Columbia authors, some of whom have been writing about it, teaching it, and responding to it in their own work. I point as well to the very positive reception of *Amantes* and *Picture Theory* in Quebec, and to the history of warm and productive relations between Coach House and Brossard, and—fatal error—to the fact that the board has never attempted to block the editorial selections Barbara and I have made. Sarah immediately moves the discussion to the new issue, proposing that the series should be controlled by the entire board, that the new Brossard titles not be acquired, and that the series be broadened by the acquisition of more non-Brossard titles. There is a formal vote with, as I recall, only Linda and bp supporting my position. I immediately announce my resignation as co-editor of the translation series—in effect resigning on Barbara's behalf as well. Later that year, David McFadden would be commissioned to find more saleable Quebec titles. He would soon acquire—with the board's approval—Dany Laferrière's *How to Make Love to a Negro* (1987), the first of several Laferrière titles. A couple of years later, when sales records show that our Brossard titles are among the best-selling of our backlist titles, especially to university women's studies courses, Sheard tells us she was wrong about them. The board asks my help in getting other Brossard titles. We publish, through my editing, Brossard's *Surfaces of Sense* (1989) and *Mauve Desert* (1990). By this time, however, I no longer communicate directly with Brossard, but through a "professional" management structure which handles all contractual matters.

4. The Coach House editors are sitting around their long and rough etc. It is late in 1986. A new "management board" of Stan, David Young, and Valerie Frith has taken over the management of the press from Stan. It is about to engage Valerie as a consultant on the legal reorganization of Coach House Press and its disentanglement from Stan's printing business. Already she is the de facto chair of editorial meetings, and likely—after her consultancy, most of us believe—to become the press's first full-time manager: someone who will coordinate the editorial board and oversee publishing operations. To this point the editors have handled much of the day-to-day business of the publishing house, arranging contracts for manuscripts, doing copy editing and proof-reading, consulting with Stan and the printshop employees about page and cover design, corresponding with authors, writing catalogue and flap copy, and advising on arrangements for promotion. Quite possibly the editors as a group have not done this well enough—at least not well enough to spare Stan, the only editor who spends most of his days at the press, unwanted questions and difficulties. Then in the Christmas Eve *Toronto Star,* Entertainment Section, a note that Valerie has been named "President and General Manager of Coach House Press." I phone bp and he comments (I quote him the next night in a letter to George Bowering) that Valerie "has a fantasy of being the second coming of Anna Porter and building chp into the kind of publisher Bill French and Ken Adachi drool over." In January I discover that the news item has also disturbed others. Mike Ondaatje is muttering that her position "sounds pretty permanent." Young and Sheard are complaining that the announcement was un-chp-like. Nevertheless, during her consultancy Valerie tries to be friendly and helpful, and to listen to all the conflicting voices among the editors. But she is clearly more interested in the economic expansion of the press than in publishing more of the unusually written or unusually packaged books the press has become known for. More disturbing, however, is the unavoidably alienating effect of the fact that she has been commissioned—that she is not at our meetings as an unpaid volunteer to a cause, like the rest of us. She remains a stranger at our table. The beginning of the professionalizing of Coach House. When she leaves the press abruptly some six months later—amicably, on her way to other things—she will be succeeded by even more professionalizing managers.

5. The Coach House editors are sitting around .... 1986-87 passim. Issues of editorial renewal. Most of us have all been on the board a long time.



Do we really need younger editors. More in touch with a new generation. Only one woman member. Old boys club says Sarah. Yet none of us are ready to 'retire'. Among various arguments: (a) we are who we are and we should go on editing and publishing the books we believe in; (b) younger writers aren't sending us manuscripts because they view us as an elderly clique; (c) younger writers should set up their own publishing houses the way we did—they don't need our paternalism; (d) we need more women editors in order to remain credible; (e) the women writers we'd most want as editors are presently much more interested in being part of feminist publishing houses than of a press like Coach House; (f) we shouldn't want feminist editors, we should want women editors; (g) even with an "old boys club" of an editorial board, Coach House already publishes more women writers, and more important feminist texts, than most Canadian publishers—women's writing is one of our strengths; (h) women writers don't need our paternalism.

6. The Coach House editors are sitting. It is sometime in 1987 or early 88. There is a proposal on the agenda that would effectively end the system of guaranteed editorial 'slots' and require all manuscripts to be approved by the full board. I argue that our system of guaranteeing each editor carte blanche authority to acquire one or two manuscripts a year has been one of the strengths of the press—one that has distinguished it from presses edited by a single editor or by committee, and allowed it a variety of idiosyncratic titles. The proponents reply, however, that they want the press to have a clearer overall direction and editorial plan, and more attention to be paid to the marketability of titles. "Some editors," they suggest, have been unilaterally publishing titles that they know have a potential sales of less than 200 copies. ("Shame, shame!" some honourable editors whisper.) These should be left, they argue, to small presses like Underwhich or Curvd Handz. Coach House needs at least a few titles with wide potential sales, like Margaret Atwood's *Murder in the Dark*, which Sarah has acquired for the press, or some mainstream non-fiction. Eventually the meeting arrives where there is a formal vote. bp and I are once again outvoted. At my home afterward, while he paces the living room because of the pain from his 'bad back,' we discuss whether or not one or both of us should resign from the board in protest. But we both know that one or two of the editors would be happy to see us resign. We feel obligations to various authors who would have little chance to get published at Coach House without us. We also feel the pull of our friendships to some of the other editors. We think that perhaps the new

policy will have little effect.

I'm sure that these incidents happened, but I'm now not always sure of the chronology. Sometimes I recall the second, third, and sixth as concurrent, or as following quickly upon one another—although the editorial board minutes I have at hand say otherwise. I know I saw them mostly from my own place at the editorial table, through my own imagination of what Coach House could be, and within a frame of reference different from that which Mike Ondaatje, say, was experiencing through his work with *Brick* or the success of the stage version of his *Billy,* or that Nichol was experiencing through his work with Therafields, or through his sound poetry performances with The Four Horsemen, or that Sheard was experiencing as a young woman who perceived herself to be "an honorary guy" (50) in a "guy-dominant place" (47)[1] and who was writing and later publishing (to considerable mainstream acclaim) her first novel. But I also know that these incidents poisoned the atmosphere at Coach House for me during the 1982-1988 period, and for Linda (who had edited seven titles between 1976 and 1985, including McFadden's Great Lakes *Trip Around* books and Paul Quarrington's *The Service*), who gradually withdrew from the board during 1986 and 87. Overall, the second and sixth incidents diminished the sense of trust among the editors. The effective ending of the independence of individual editors not only destroyed one of the most important of the understandings under which the 1975 editors had agreed to join the press, but demonstrated that many editors mistrusted and wanted some way to control the choices of others. bp tried to be charitable and understanding about why these things happened, although as late as 1987 the minutes show him complaining about the two-book limit on editors and how it doesn't match his editorial style. I know I was less generous—as well as feeling attacked by the editors who had proposed the changes I felt let down by those eds who had acquiesced to them. There were also unmistakable indications that some of the editors wanted to take the press in directions much different from the emphases on the small, dissenting, and outrageous with which the press had begun under Wayne Clifford and Victor Coleman and which Nichol and myself and, in the 1980s, drama editor Robert Wallace had attempted for our own reasons to continue.

Sometimes, as well, I wonder to what extent these events were symptoms of other Beginnings[2] of an End of Coach House Press. In the late 1970s and early 1980s it had truly seemed to the editors that they could go on indefinitely publishing their various esoteric, whimsical, anti-



authoritarian, eccentrically designed, small-audience titles— Bowering's *Allophanes* (1976), Brossard's *A Book* (1976), McCaffery's *Carnival* (1977), Marlatt's *Zocalo* (1977), Dragland's *Peckertracks* (1978), or Rita McKeough's amusingly 'pataphysical *How to Disguise a Musk Ox as a Ram* (1979). Yet as the years went by pressure to raise the press's sales figures increased, particularly in the annual block grant consultations with the Canada Council. And rumours came to us from various parts of the country that Coach House was poor at marketing its titles—that jests were being made that to Coach House publishing meant printing books and storing them in a warehouse. At the time there were a number of poets who were publishing collections both with Coach House and with more reputably commercial publishers such as McClelland & Stewart. I recall getting McFadden and Bowering, who were among these, to help me compare their sales at the two presses. On average, despite their vastly different marketing resources, McClelland & Stewart and Coach House were both selling around 800 copies in the first year of a Bowering or McFadden poetry title. But the rumours, and advice from the Canada Council that we could do a better job of promotion continued, and by the 1980s had become ammunition for editors who favoured more mainstream, standard-looking, and widely saleable titles to use against those who preferred that the press publish more titles like Ann Rosenberg's first novel *The Bee Book* (1981) or Gail Scott's first work of fiction *Spare Parts* (1986).

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Often during our early discussions of promotion and advertising, bp and I favoured, with some support of other editors, a strategy of promoting the press, its various cultural connotations, and its authors collectively rather than promoting individual titles. Through this strategy we hoped to create a nation-wide community of people who would regard themselves as Coach House Press booksellers, readers, afficionados, and collectors, who would look forward to receiving our catalogues and other mailings, and who would seek our books out even though they were not widely advertised or distributed. Stan and Victor had already begun such a strategy through the lavish posters that they had printed and distributed to booksellers for titles like Ondaatje's *Rat Jelly* (1973) and Matt Cohen's *Peach Melba* (1974)—posters which featured the name and logo of the press and its artwork capabilities as much as they featured the book. Booksellers would frequently feature these posters merely for the ambience they gave the store, and then stock the book because they had

wanted to display the poster. Some inquired about offering the posters for sale. Under the new board posters were produced for Christopher Dewdney's *Fovea Centralis* (1975), Martin Vaughn-James' *The Cage* (1975), David McFadden and Greg Curnoe's *The Great Canadian Sonnet* (1976), Richard Huyda's *H.L. Hime: Camera in the Interior* (1976), McFadden's *The Poet's Progress* (1977), Andrew Birrell's edition of Benjamin Baltzly's photographs (1978), and in 1979 a general poster featuring a colourful collage of book covers, design awards, and miscellaneous objects under the title "ORDER NOW!" In February 1977 bpNichol initiated the *Coach House Newsletter,* which he designed to supplement the annual catalogue with general news about the press, the editors, and their activities, and to be sent to bookstores, libraries, and other "regular customers." Bookstores and libraries received a "3-hole ring-binder, embossed with the Coach House logo, in which to collect the newsletter." The first issue contained the articles "Some Facts about The Coach House Press," "Editorial Perspectives & Procedures," a "Technotes" column about computer typesetting, editor's comments about three current titles, and the first part of a descriptive bibliography, from 1965 onwards, of Coach House titles. The second offered the "Technotes" column "Computer Assisted Proofreading," a background note about the Coach House Quebec Translations, and a second installment of the bibliography. One clear implication of the bibliography was that Coach House books were becoming historically important.

Another means the new board tried to advertise the press was an annual public "literary entertainment" modelled on the variety show, first staged in late 1977 under the title "The Big Sonnet." Announced on another colourful poster (which unfortunately tended to be stolen by collectors as soon as it was posted), staged at Innis College to an overflow crowd of around 800, and wittily emceed by David Young, this collage of readings and performances was a huge success in delighting its audience and in raising Coach House's visibility in Toronto. Whether it caused books to be sold was more difficult to determine, since it was not intended as a sales event and since we had no way of measuring its impact on sales elsewhere. The press held a similar and equally spectacular event, "Revenge of the Big Sonnet" in December 1978.

Ondaatje's very successful *Long Poem Anthology* (1979) publicized the press in a different way—by placing many of its authors and editors—George Bowering, Roy Kiyooka, myself, Daphne Marlatt, Robert Kroetsch, Don McKay, bpNichol—into the culturally legitimating format



of a textbook, and by placing Ondaatje himself in a canon-making role. Small literary presses in Canada had to this time only rarely attempted to influence the legitimation of their own authors by publishing anthologies or criticism: John Sutherland of First Statement Press with *Other Canadians* in 1943, Louis Dudek and Irving Layton of Contact Press with *Canadian Poems 1850-1952* in 1952, and Margaret Atwood for House of Anansi with *Survival* in 1972. Another legitimating effect of these Sutherland, Dudek/Layton, and Atwood books came from their placing of their own press's authors side by side with previously legitimated ones. Coleman had begun a similar process at Coach House in 1973 when he had published Creeley's *His Idea* and Ginsberg's *Iron Horse* alongside titles by Dewdney, Gerry Gilbert, McCaffery, and Ondaatje. Nichol saw this kind of publishing as a way of educating readers by foregrounding historical and international connections, and so was especially supportive of the press's publishing older Canadians like Sheila Watson, Phyllis Webb, and Louis Dudek, to whom he felt indebted, and British writers like Ian Hamilton Finlay and Bob Cobbing, to whom he felt kinship. Coach House published, through Nichol's editing, Cobbing's *Bill Jubobe* in 1976 and Finlay's *A Boy's Alphabet Book* in 1977; through my editing it published Watson's *Four Stories* in 1979 and Dudek's *Cross-Section* in 1980; through Ondaatje's it published Webb's *Wilson's Bowl* in 1980 and *Water and Light* in 1984; and through Christopher Dewdney's it published Webb's *Hanging Fire* in 1990.

To expand this way of aggrandizing the press through publication rather than promotion, and emphasizing its educational and cultural importance, I commissioned George Bowering to edit *Fiction of Contemporary Canada* (1980) and *The Contemporary Canadian Poem Anthology* (1983). While I gave Bowering no instructions about which authors to include, the result in the fiction anthology was a collection that included Thomas, Newlove, Atwood, Ray Smith, J. Michael Yates, Wiebe, Godfrey, MacEwen, and Coach House authors Marlatt, Hindmarch, Bowering, Matt Cohen, David Young, and Nichol, and in the poetry anthology one that included Atwood, bissett, Blaser, McKinnon, Newlove, Stanley, and Coach House writers Bowering, Coleman, Davey, Dewdney, Fawcett, D.G. Jones, Kearns, Kroetsch, Marlatt, McFadden, Nichol, Ondaatje, Wah, and Webb. An added promotional advantage of such anthologies was that their potential for high school and first-year university adoption could lead to the sale of our single-author collections to universities for graduate and senior undergraduate courses. In the 1980s

the sale of titles by Marlatt, Wah, Bowering, Webb, Nichol, Ondaatje and Brossard through graduate and senior undergraduate course adoptions became a substantial source of revenue. The anthologies' effectiveness was somewhat limited, however, by the fact that many of the 'Coach House writers' in them were not, strictly speaking, Coach House writers. Kroetsch, Matt Cohen, Bowering, Wah, and Marlatt all published more work with other presses. Among the writers Coach House had helped develop—Ondaatje, Nichol, McFadden, Dewdney, and Young—Ondaatje was publishing his best received writing elsewhere and McFadden, not unreasonably, was offering most of his writing to McClelland and Stewart, which could provide substantial royalty advances, before bringing it to Coach House.[3] One could even argue that the major overall risk with the strategy of promoting authors rather than books was that of developing for one's authors such large readerships that as a group they became attractive to large, well-financed commercial publishers—with whose royalty advances a press like Coach House could not compete.

Karl Siegler of Talonbooks has commented from time to time on the sad and seemingly endless story of Canadian literary presses spending substantial amounts of money and time on developing and publicizing authors, only to see these authors use their new fame and expanded readerships to negotiate lucrative contacts with large commercial publishers. At Coach House this situation often seemed like a Catch-22: if the press did a good job of promoting a book or author, the author might very well take his or her next book to a better capitalized publisher. If it did a poor job, the author might seek for the next book the unknown promotional possibilities of another small press. At many Coach House editorial meetings there were jokes about how the press was becoming a 'farm team' for 'big-league' publishers, or about how certain authors would offer us only those manuscripts their usual commercial publishers considered unlikely to be profitable. How big was this problem? I think now that for Coach House it was not as large as it was for other small publishers, and might not have been significant at all if the press had confined itself to being a publisher of poetry, short fiction, and art books. Only two of the authors for whom Coach House published first books—Michael Ondaatje and Paul Quarrington—went on to publish regularly and successfully with commercial presses, and those successful books were almost all novels. A number of 'Coach House writers'—notably Bowering and McFadden—tended to split their writing into difficult texts that they preferred Coach House to publish and more widely



readable ones that they could more profitably publish elsewhere. A much longer list of writers—Nichol, Hogg, Dewdney, Coleman, Dragland, Kiyooka—made the press their primary publisher over a number of years, and Bowering and Ondaatje made it their primary publisher for poetry.

Authors that leave a small press like Coach House or Talonbooks for larger commercial-market publishers are making choices of ideology as well as of a publisher. One of the things a Coach House of the 1975 to 87 period offered its writers was not financial return or marketable celebrity but cultural capital—and political capital. There are suggestions of integrity implicit in *not* writing or publishing for a market—implications that the beliefs and values embedded in the text have *not* been pragmatically adopted to appeal to large numbers of readers and sell them large numbers of books, that a restricted distribution has been accepted by writer and publisher as the 'price' of these values. At Coach House, where numerous books had been published that had openly spurned or parodied the marketplace—released in plastic bags (*The Story So Far 2)* so browsers couldn't open them, or with loose inserts (*The Martyrology* 1 & 2) that bookstores could lose, or in formats (*The Ant's Forefoot*) too large for bookstore shelves—the sense that its books were too good, clever, important, or rarefied to be commercial had been emphatically established.

Nevertheless, as the 1980s unfolded, there became increased tension on the board between those like myself who wished to use means like the above to promote the press and thus promote the kind of books the editors themselves valued, and those who wished to find at least a few manuscripts that could make money for the press if promoted and commodified by mainstream advertising methods.[4] The latter were sensitive about how low the gross annual sales seemed (usually under $100,000) and how the lack of a reliable line-of-credit made it almost impossible to offer advances or purchase publicity, and presented arguments that implicitly suggested that 'more'—more sales, more investment in marketing, longer press runs, more reprints—would mean 'better' publishing. Sheard has recently written that the marketing strategy of the 1978-86 Coach House "was Zen marketing, the illusion of marketing through the energetically imaginative spreading of rumour ... marketing you needed special X-ray glasses to see" (50). Yet even those who argued for one or two more 'mainstream' titles annually could rarely come up with a possible manuscript, and in most years persisted—along with the rest of us— in publishing small, risky, difficult-to-market books: in 1984-85, for example, Nichol edited poetry collections by Ken Norris, John Pass,

Gerry Shikatani, Bill Griffiths, Judith Copithorne, and Rafael Barreto-Rivera; Sarah Sheard edited two 'first books,' Diane Schoemperlen's short fiction collection *Double Exposure* and Marlene Cookshaw's poetry collection *Personal Luggage*; I edited Bruce Whiteman's *The Invisible World Is in Decline,* Karl Jirgens' first book *Strappado,* and David Donnell's poetry collection *The Blue Ontario Hemingway Boat Race*; Linda Davey edited Robert Priest's poetry collection *The Man Who Broke out of the Letter 'X'*; McFadden edited Jones' *The Brave Never Write Poetry*; Ondaatje edited Stan Dragland's *Journeys Through Bookland*; Christopher Dewdney edited Anne Michaels' first book, the poetry collection *The Weight of Oranges.*

However, the editors were collectively never able to articulate a 'Coach House' editorial position, nor were groups of editors ever able to argue for one. They had inherited a vaguely left-of-centre romantic liberal vision from Victor Coleman—notions that standardization is bad, bureaucrats are untrustworthy, that the status quo must be challenged, that the collaborative is preferable to the individual, that disruptive or 'outrageous' or 'iconoclastic' literature is good. This vision was rather more clear about what it mistrusted—accountants, bankers, arts bureaucrats, mainstream publishers, censorship, bourgeois lifestyles, established conventions—than it was about what it valued—artistic freedom, experimentation, disruption, iconoclasm, collaboration, voluntarism, innovation. It was also limited in being trapped in reactive definitions: in iconoclasm that depended on the existence of icons, disruptions that depended on there being stable systems to disrupt, innovations that could look new only if the old or customary were clearly visible beside it. Ethically, it was limited by the implications of its relativism: that the new was necessarily good regardless of its ethico-political implications or of the ethico-political value of what it attempted to displace. Logically, it was limited by the illusion that it opposed a status quo that made its disruptions and iconoclasms disruptive and iconoclastic. It was strongest in its arguing for conceptions of collaborative authorship and against conceptions of writers as individual geniuses—in arguing for books as collaborations among writers, visual artists, typographers, and designers. During Coleman's editorship, collaborations of this kind produced some of the most spectacular of Coach House of the Coach House titles—Nichol's *The Martyrology,* designed by Gerry Ofo, Bowering's *Baseball,* designed by Gar Smith, and my own *Weeds*, handset by Nelson Adams and designed and printed by Michael Sowden.[5]



But the various limitations of the vision the editors had inherited, together with its tendency to 'bankers are bad' oversimplifications, made it rather easy for centre-right voices like Sheard to ridicule or parody. The press would have been much stronger at this point if the editors had been able to articulate the differences among mainstream/capitalist literary publishing, eclectic small press publishing, activist special constituency publishing (regional, Canadian nationalist, feminist, gay/lesbian, ethnic, or racial) and the publishing they wished to do, and why they valued these differences. Coach House at this time *was* greatly different from commercial literary presses that select manuscripts that promise to bring the best return to shareholders, or that treat books and authors like perishable objects of fashion. It was very different in where it located cultural value and capital. It was also different from eclectic liberal-arts presses—Cormorant and Quarry come to mind— that see themselves as publishing quality non-commercial writing that attests to the power of individual creativity, and from those like Women's Press, Turnstone, and Sister Vision Press that seek to publish books that aggrandize particular communities. In the 1970s and early 80s Coach House perhaps differed most of all from publicly established Toronto literature—from the writers and texts attended to by *Maclean's,* Harbourfront, or the CBC, or published by Oxford, Macmillan, McClelland and Stewart, or Anansi. I recall attending the farewell party for *Tamarack Review* in 1982, and being surprised (1) that no one that I had ever encountered at Coach House was present, and (2) that in my twelve years in Toronto I had met virtually none of the writers and editors who *were* present.

But as a group the eds were only vaguely aware of their dissatisfaction with and separation from official literary culture in Ontario: a culture of prizes, the media celebration of prizes, commercial editorships, cocktail parties, regular CBC appearances, hard-cover novels, one-season fads, and author profiles on the front inside pages of daily newspapers—a culture that tends to equate sales success with quality, celebrity and international recognition with social importance to Canadians, and which attempts to blur differences like class, race, ethnicity, gender and region into an essentialized, apolitical and global 'quality literature.' Because of the small size of the Toronto arts scene, by 1983 one or two of the editors were already interacting with aspects of official literary culture—and quite possibly attracted to it. In time these editors would open the way for writers more deeply connected to official literature—Susan Swan, Leon Rooke, Alberto Manguel—to join the board.

Nevertheless, the very general ideological view shared with Coleman helped unify the board during the 1975-80 period. During 1980-87, however, the aesthetic/political positions of the editors began to shift, taking on a range from a pragmatic 'you-can't-fight-city-hall-so-why-bother' to bpNichol's increasingly considered resistance to consumerist texts and consumerist publishing. Some editors—particularly some who openly aspired to publish fiction with presses like McClelland and Stewart—regarded Nichol's views as quaint. Sheard was impatient with any ideological position that required one not to cooperate with the power structures that could help a writer or press become 'successful.' Some shared Nichol's commitment to supporting writers whose texts could never be widely marketable within a capitalist economy and its affiliated education systems but did not share his critical understanding of capitalism. Some agreed that such writers should be published but thought some smaller publisher should do the publishing. Some saw the oppressive power of economic and literary convention not as a social or systemic problem but as the individual problems of idiosyncratic artists. Sometimes Coach House's catalogues and advertising parodied the language and strategies of consumerist publishing; sometimes they seemed to adopt them. Some of the books Coach House published attempted to offer alternatives to the reader's easy consumption of texts—Nichol's *Martyrology Book V,* Scott's *Heroine*, Kearns's *Convergences,* Gilbert's *Moby Jane*; some others—MacPhee's *What Place is This,* Gilmour's *Back on Tuesday*—seemed junior attempts at creating popular literary consumables.

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All through this second editorial period at Coach House none of the editors, except for owner Stan Bevington, had—as far as I know—access to the full financial records of the press. Editorial meetings would get to look at sales figures for individual titles, and at the gross quarterly and annual income of the publishing operation in terms of grants and sales. But we never saw the corresponding cost side of the operation—production costs for individual titles, or ongoing overhead costs for distribution and promotion. Occasionally the editors would ask Stan whether we could afford one or two more titles, and he would usually say we could, or he would pronounce a particular manuscript—usually a photography or art book—too expensive to produce without a special grant or institutional co-publisher. The reason the editors never got to view the full financial implications of their decisions was that Stan's



publishing business, Coach House Press, and commercial printing business were operating as a single enterprise. There was apparently no easy way to separate the overhead of the publishing operation from the overhead of the printshop—they shared the same buildings and employees. On paper, at least, Stan could reduce production costs on Coach House books by doing work on them himself in the evenings or on weekends, or reduce the publisher's expenses overall by pricing its printshop labour and materials at his own cost. My impression was that Stan valued the flexibility this arrangement gave him in operating both sides of his business.

So it was with some shock that we heard David Young announce to an editorial meeting in the fall of 1986 that the pressures of business had been damaging Stan's health, that he needed to divest himself of the publishing operation, and that he had been meeting over the past year with David and Valerie Frith, the Ontario Arts Council Literature Officer, to find a way to separate publishing from printing. The beginning of an end for CHP. Would this beginning have happened if the editors had been able to see the press's evolving financial profile? Even at this moment financial details were scarce. It was unclear whether or not the press could be considered to be 'in debt' (Bevington has recently told a *Toronto Star* reporter [August 11, 1996, B8] that it wasn't), although there were hints and rumours that perhaps the two combined businesses were, or that separating the publishing activity from the printing business would require the former to take on debt. David's news, however, did make it brutally clear what a publishing (fool's) paradise the editors—apart from Stan—had occupied for the past 11 years. They had been able to have their own 15-20 title-per-year publishing business without having to concern themselves about the salaries or supervision of employees, cost of business and warehouse space, accounts receivable, ongoing cash flow, or possibility of debt. Now all of these concerns loomed as potentially theirs. To start a business like Coach House from scratch had been relatively painless: a person starts printing and selling books as a sideline to a printing business. Sales of the books plus the availability of government grants makes the hiring of an employee possible; underpaid or volunteer labour by those who admire the books that have been published and want to see more of their kind makes further incremental expansion manageable. But to take over an established publishing business with a backlist and current titles sufficient to keep at least two and possibly three full-time employees busy, even one without debt, is a much different kind

of project. And here it was to be undertaken by a group of people who had little or no experience in business, and who were in most cases, I would guess, fully-extended or even over-extended in their personal finances.

Some of the first organizational changes to appear were presented to the editors (in a November 20 memo[6] to the editors from Valerie Frith) as *faits accomplis*. Stan, David, and Valerie had decided that the legal separation of publishing from printing would occur on January 1, 1987. Stan's managerial role would be assumed on that date by a "Management Committee" of three members—Stan, David, and Valerie. The new publishing company would be "the sort of non-profit operation we are all accustomed to seeing in the arts." The editors would become known as the "Advisory Board." Valerie was being commissioned by the publishing house to produce a consultant's report on the press's "restructuring" (a word now ominously anticipatory of Mike Harris's neo-conservative re-organization of the Ontario government)—a report which she would submit to a March 30 1987 editors meeting. These events were presented to the November 25 1986 editors meeting as essentially benign. The minutes record Dennis Reid observing that the separation in itself "has little meaning" and Valerie leading the discussion of a letter that was to be sent to all Coach House authors reassuring them "about the fact that in the terms of the board and the production staff, everything remains much the same."

There was another meeting on December 22 at which some uneasiness about what was occurring began to emerge, although again the official minutes suggest calm. The next day I wrote my own summary of it in an e-mail letter to George Bowering, who as Coach House author of long standing and with a book, *Delayed Mercy,* currently in press, was understandably concerned about the press's future. I cite this not necessarily as a version of what was actually happening but as what I was coming to believe was happening.

> We just had our annual Xmas meeting. It seems that what is really happening is that Stan has been persuaded to give the publishing co. away. He didn't want to give it to the editorial board, suspecting that it would likely be unequal to the task of operating the press as a day-to-day business, & so has given 2/3 of it to two people who, out of concern for Stan's very bad health, had urged him [to] do something to resolve a chronically difficult financial situation (& I'm sure they were sincere in their concern)—David Young, and Valerie Frith, who have become with him sole members and sole directors of a new non-profit corporation that is talking over the assets (warehouse of books, one computer) and liabilities (1986 royalties, a provincial loan) of the publishing operation. I believe the by-laws of the new corporation (no one except the 3 have seen them, wch is one sore point, although I don't impute any malice or power-hunger to them, just carelessness) say that the directors shall be Stan, the business manager of press (as of January 1, Valerie) and one representative of the editorial board (David). However, these also seem to be the only members of the corporation, & thus the only ones eligible to be directors. On the plus side, these 3 are also financially responsible for the new corporation, liable for the salaries of any employees, for the royalties, for the prov. loan.
>
> David Young (& Sarah Sheard) are already talking like young Tories—"bottom line," "real world" and abt the need to produce books to meet the needs of a new "market reality." They may have merely picked up a discourse from the current right-wing small-business fashionability, & not have radically changed their thinking about what books they'd like to see printed, but I don't trust anyone who talks that way. Dennis Reid seems sympathetic to their point of view, and Valerie; Dennis is a very cautious, scholarly person, also very humane, and sees a new fiscally-responsible direction as important because it would be best for Stan's health. Valerie is a dreamy liberal idealist, who thinks that if chp can only have a good plan, and good spread sheets, the world will unfold as it should. Michael O. can't figure out what all the fuss is about—he keeps saying that he just plans on editing the same kind of books he's always edited, as if he doesn't hear Valerie saying everything about the press must be open to reconsideration and David Y. saying that we can't go on publishing the books we have, that our past years have been disasters. Chris Dewdney sees all that's going down, & plays the anarchist, making wonderful quips at everyone's expense. bp & I can see that our preference to keep publishing the kind of books we have been publishing will very likely conflict with DY's determination to change the direction of the press toward more saleable titles, or at the very least cause our colleagues—Stan, Val, DY—to lose their own money in paying the press's bills. Linda feels there's been a bit of a power-play, probably an unconscious one, in as much as the details what have been arranged legally have been kept from most of the eds, & they've been asked to give tacit approval to a plan they know very little about.



Bowering wrote back the same day, inquiring about Stan's health and about what kind of books David Young thought Coach House might publish. I replied on Christmas Day. Again, I can't be sure that all of the scenario I sketched, particularly in the first paragraph, was factually true—only that it was what I and other editors had been led to believe at the time.

Stan's health problems have consisted of severe attacks of asthma, which

have nearly suffocated him and have hospitalized him 3 times in the last 2 years. The most recent illness was this fall, at which time Valerie (who Stan had recently got to help him negotiate with prov. of Ont. Loan people—I guess because of her Ont. Arts Council position), and David Young had gone to work to get him to set up a different management structure for chp which wouldn't cause his neck to be on the line for every financial problem and which could enable its business to go on even if he wasn't there for a month or so. [....]

I don't know what market David Young's been thinking of, although I know it isn't cookbooks, although it cd be cooked up books. It's been damned hard to pin him down about what he wants to do, & I think that he's both been intentionally vague and been not all that clear himself about what kind of books the new chp cd do. What he's said is that the chp lists in recent years have been "disastrous"—whether he means artistically or financially I don't know, we haven't been able to pin him down here; when bp & I have asked him for examples he's accused us of wanting to bog down the discussion in particulars and recriminations. But his disastrous list does appear to include *Kerrisdale Elegies* [Bowering, 1984], *Convergences* [Lionel Kearns 1984], *Candy from Strangers* [Diana Hartog, 1986], *Monsieur Melville* [Victor-Levy Beaulieu, 1984], *Blue Ontario Hemingway Boat Book* [sic, David Donnell, 1985], *Weight of Oranges* [Anne Michaels, 1985], *Almost Japanese* [Sarah Sheard, 1985], *Noman's Land* [Gwendolyn MacEwen, 1985], *C-O-R-R-E-C-T-I-O-N-S* [Victor Coleman, 1985], *Zygal* [Nichol, 1985], *Water and Light* [Phyllis Webb, 1984], *Secular Love* [Ondaatje, 1984], so its hard not to figure that he doesn't [sic] have some radical change in mind. He's also said that one reason chp must change is that the literary market has changed, because of Bennett's purchase of M&S & Doug Gibson's hiring there, because of Carson's desertion of General for Doubleday, because of Macmillan's decision to stop publishing poetry, because of Anna Porter & Linda McKnight's travels, etc. I have always thought that these moves were irrelevant to a press like chp, since we were publishing writing that was worth publishing regardless of the policies of other presses, the 'worth' of our books was not contingent on the policies of others but was constructed by the books themselves.

I concluded the letter by mentioning the *Toronto Star* note about Valerie's presidency that had been published that day, and about how difficult it was for Linda & I to go on "fighting this thing" when "David and Val make every criticism we offer seem like an attack on Stan." I repeated that observation in another letter on December 29, writing that "I feel a little badly about Stan, because every time any of us have criticized the new developments, intending thereby to criticize Val & David, poor Stan has looked very uncomfortable."



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In March, Valerie Frith finally delivered her report, confirming the suspicions bp, Linda and I had had that much more was on the table than the separation of two businesses. Things were not to remain otherwise "the same." Coach House editorial policy was open for change: the report recommended that the Management Committee (now called a Board of Directors) acquire and publish annually three or more "drafthorse" titles with the commercial potential to sell at least 2000 copies and help subsidize literary titles. There were to be three such titles in 1988 (out of 16 titles overall), rising to six out of 16 in 1990. The editorial board was to be opened for radical change. Although Valerie personally preferred keeping the present board (writing "if it ain't broke, don't fix it") she announced she was yielding to pressure from some editors by recommending that the present ten-member board be split in two, with each group of five editors serving in alternate years, and with the temporarily retired members replaced by younger editors who would serve limited three- or four-year terms. Each editor would acquire and edit one title every two years. Editors would also be limited to particular genres—editors would have to agree to be a fiction editor, poetry editor, drama editor, or non-fiction editor, but could not wander from their category.[7] Responses to the "drafthorse" proposal at the March 30 meeting, as recorded in the minutes, were curiously muted and acquiescent, with the eds merely insisting that they also have the opportunity to propose such titles and be informed about and allowed to comment on those being undertaken by the directors. Again, however, the rather cheerfully written minutes did not represent the level of distress and conflict in the room. I wrote to Bowering later that evening my own summary:

Some good clarifications and compromises struck, although it's clear that a little bourgeois press that publishes up to 6 middle-of-the-road non-fiction titles per year is being embedded within the previous ed programme. Dennis Reid shrewdly and sardonically labelled these the new "engines" of the chp economy [he was alluding to the political rhetoric of the current Reagan and Mulroney governments]. It's not clear what these new titles will be, although DY assured Mike that they wd not embarrass the press, at wch Sarah proclaimed that many short-run literary titles of the past had been embarrassing to her, and Dennis Reid observed that some found it more embarrassing to be whores than bad poets. I somehow doubt this great moment will be preserved in the chp minutes [it wasn't]. However the new 2000-selling "engines" seem to be the price we pay for chp staying in

> business, or so Val then said. Sarah added that these "engines" were therefore beyond debate.... bp suggested that the alternative of declaring bankruptcy & going home would be more attractive to him than publishing bad books, and DY said there was no chance these could be bad books ...

The editor's responses to being themselves restructured, however, were heated, and were listed in the April 14 1987 minutes under "nays" and "yeas". The four nays objected to the lack of continuity a "split" board would create, and to the impracticality of an editor attempting to acquire, help develop, and edit a manuscript and oversee its production into a book within the limits of a calendar year. "bp said if he were to take a year off, other things would likely move in to replace his involvement at Coach House, so he'd be off the board for good." I suggested that Dennis Reid, as art editor, and Bob Wallace, as drama editor, held unique spots on the board and were unlikely to be easily "alternated" with younger editors. Christopher Dewdney feared friction between older and younger editors. bp argued that the present editorial board had a collective "identity," and that if changes were allowed to damage that identity, it might no longer be a board that interested the some of the present editors.

But the editors supporting the recommended changes wanted precisely to alter the identity that bp valued. David Young described the present board as "a stagnant pool." Mike Ondaatje called it "a closed entity" that suffers from "smugness." Sarah Sheard called it "an academy," "an old boys club" that lacked women and younger writers. She suggested that editing one book every two years was her usual pace and therefore an appropriate pace for other editors. In general, the editors who favoured making the press more commercial and eclectic presented their views in a rhetoric of liberation. David Young favoured "opening the board ... for the sake of injecting some new life," Sheard pronounced herself "in favour of radical change," Ondaatje also was "for radical change." However, the editors who wished to continue a policy of anti-consumerist publishing spoke in figures of continuity and identity. Discussion was so heated that the editors decided to each submit in written form to the next meeting alternative ways of organizing the board.

In the written proposals, presented to an editorial board meeting two week later, April 22, the opponents of reorganization marshalled different arguments against the proponents' rhetoric of liberation. Dennis Reid remarked ironically that he too found "some instinctive appeal in the idea of new blood" but that he found "to instruct an editor not to serve every other year or two would be to define him/her out." Defending the practice



of a few editors editing a large number of titles, he argued that while allowing "the most forceful and focussed [editorial] energy [to] dominate might seem an irresponsible way to run a 'business', ... it has assured the growth of vitality of the CHP for more than twenty years." Nichol pointed out the inconsistencies in the re-organization arguments—that according to these Coach House was a valuable institution and worthy of saving (and in 1987 ranked by the Canada Council in the top 3 of 90 publishers), but also "an 'in-group'; an academy; an old boy's club; insensitive to new trends"; it lacked focus but also needed to disperse its editorial tasks among more editors, and to limit the number of books they could edit and the number of years during which they could edit them. He condemned the suggestion that editors edit only one book every two years as "useless." "It waters down any impact any individual editor might have. And if you water down that impact then that editor's activity as an editor ceases to have any consequence." He concluded by offering his resignation from the board in order to make room for a younger editor.

I submitted two written comments on the proposed reorganization. In one I opposed the defining of editors by genre, noting that I saw myself as "editing writing rather than editing a particular genre" and saying that if I represented anything on the present board it was "a constituency that sees language as constructing meaning rather than expressing it, that sees the page and the book as a field of semantic & semiotic play, that sees writing as a kind of exemplary political activity, an activity that by open[ing] structures in which meanings are repeatedly invented & constructed argues for and contributes to a society in which the familiar and inherited are continually challenged by the imagined." In the other I suggested that there were some on the present board who "misunderstand the nature & history of small presses."

> A small press is never 'open', liberal, or eclectic. Its eds know what kinds of writing they wish to support, & by supporting these they indeed make their press appear like a 'clique' to those naive enough to think that democratic open-to-all values make for good writing or good publishing. In fact this 'clique' image some have been lamenting is also the 'trade mark' image we've being praising ourselves for having.

I then suggested that the present eds decide the kinds of writing they wanted the press to publish, and create a new eds board by choosing six from among themselves and two new people who could be trusted to find and edit such writing.

The proponents of change continued to characterize the present Coach

House as stagnant, aging, closed, unbalanced, and—despite the arguments we were having—homogeneous. Ondaatje wrote that it was definitely time to open ourselves to "something fresher." We were in his view "mostly male," and mostly from one "specific aesthetic" (which he defined, perhaps humorously, as anti-Beissel, Jonas, Skelton). He declared himself against "a 90% male board" that published books authored by " 70% women"—indeed a good point. He predicted that if the eds didn't do anything now, the press would "stagger slowly to a close"—which is what it did eventually despite all changes. Sheard offered a mathematical formula for rotating editorships, proposed that the "first choices of new editors to approach be women writers, to redress the current imbalance," and that we should consider writers like Roo Borson, Carole Corbeil, Margaret Atwood, and Rosemary Sullivan. I vaguely recall that at various meetings she had also mentioned names like Libby Scheier and Eleanor Wachtel. (Christopher Dewdney, commenting on Sarah's suggestions for editors, volunteered to have a sex change operation and rename himself Rue Dewdney.) Diane Martin, who had been a part of Coach House production staff for a number of years, wrote that in her view "the board has consisted, in the last few years at least, of 10 or so closed individuals, pursuing individual goals for individual reasons."

> Since the individual's mark on any one book is only a single line in the colophon ["seen through the press by..."] it is the collective identity that APPEARS to lie behind each title. Yet in terms of effort, co-operation, communication with fellow editors, and with publishing and production staff, the imprint is a lie. The isolation that has been practised in the one-person-one-book method of publishing has made for a situation that is just this side of ridiculous.

She was paraphrasing—in slightly different rhetoric—a section of Valerie's report which described the editors "as a group of solists rather than an orchestra" and which found among the editors "very little common understanding of either literary or publishing goals." She did not mention that the report had also argued that the editors, despite their differences, had paradoxically created a press that "is seen to represent a very specific literary aesthetic."

David McFadden tried to appeal to both sides of the conflict, commenting that he thought board members were "suffering from a sort of spiritual malaise, a touch of hardening of the arteries," but diplomatically not specifying which members. He suggested all discussion of changing the editorial board be postponed for a year to avoid having it self-destruct. He



added that he didn't think the editors should be worried about how the press is regarded by members of the larger literary community—that the important thing is to publish the books we believe in, and that he questioned the argument that the press needed younger editors. "Let them have their own press. We're not old. Look at Earle Birney." But he then appended the quite possibly ironic comment, "in general the young aren't as smart as we are and we should try to keep them off the board."

One thing which is evident in re-reading these documents is that there was little communication between the sides—or respect for others' arguments. Sheard tried to keep the general assumptions behind her proposals hidden behind platitudes about openness and connections to the general literary community. But the lists of possible women editors she suggested represented a fairly narrow range of white liberal heterosexual feminism—and I don't recall that any of us, except tongue-in-cheek Dewdney, challenged her about this. Nichol and I would try to articulate general principles about small press publishing and about Coach House's place in it, but most of our co-editors would treat these as irrelevant. Young, Ondaatje, Sheard, and Martin would in their various ways characterize as "tired," "stagnant," "closed," and "old" a list of books and a current editorial dynamic that Nichol and myself and some others viewed as lively, fresh, open, and youthful. It was hard to believe we are all talking about the same publisher. So great was this gap in the perception, that I know that I did not always take Young, Sheard, Ondaatje, and Martin seriously. I suspected them of pretence and posturing—of cynically constructing a fiction about a closed and tired Coach House in order to bring about the replacement of editors who wished to publish Brossard, Gail Scott, Bowering, Tostevin, Gerry Shikatani, Shaunt Basmajian, Steve McCaffery, Betsy Warland, Rafael Barreto-Rivera with ones who would wish to publish Libby Scheier, B.W. Powe, Elizabeth Smart, Gil Adamson, Jan Zwicky, David Gilmour, Evelyn Lau, Izaak Mansk, Andre Breton and Marguerite Duras.

The April 22 meeting, however, was surprisingly productive—perhaps partly because Valerie was out of town and the meeting was chaired—at his own insistence—by Victor Coleman. Victor, who had in his written memo endorsed Valerie's suggestions for reorganizing the board, surprised everyone by doing an about-face and proposing a board of six permanent editors, two each in poetry and fiction, one each in art and drama, with the board of directors editing non-fiction. The result of the subsequent discussions, as I indicated two days later to George, was that

we approved a combination of my proposal and Victor's: "everyone resign, & we put together, by secret ballot if necessary but not necessarily by secret ballot, a new board that represents either genres or constituencies or both. Victor and I & Diane are supposed to get together and flesh out the details for the next meeting."

The ultimate result of this series of arguments and compromises was a kind of stalemate that was resolved by events, as much as by anything, and tilted toward the 'reform' position. A board of directors was established. An editorial board with many new editors, each assigned to a genre (mine was fiction—too many of the eds had wanted to do poetry) was created. Out of a semi-imaginary Coach House Press made up of authors, editors, former editors, typographers, press workers, writers and artists who had undertaken special publishing projects—that group of people who had gathered around Stan from time to time over the past two decades to participate in the creation of books—a roster of voting members of the new not-for-profit corporation was constituted. The process began of formalizing this semi-imaginary and ideologically heterogeneous community into legal terms—devising the ways in which the members would elect the directors and editors, approve new corporation members, and draw up and approve the constitution and by-laws of the corporation. Another beginning of an end of Coach House.

In the early part of the fourteen years that I had served as a volunteer editor, there had been very simple ground rules for our operation: who the editors were (the editors collectively chose replacements for departing colleagues or additions to the board) and how many manuscripts per year each editor could independently select to publish. Apart from these basic legalisms, the editors had interacted on the basis of what was socially or communally achievable, rather than legally required, among them. Such an interaction had been possible because of friendship, and because of those few vague ideological assumptions about small presses that we could agree upon: that they should be subversive, mischievous, interrogative, or defiant toward various artistic, prosodic, theatrical, political, sexual, bureaucratic, or narrative conventions. It was these assumptions that had seen Coach House publish a poster that depicted the circumference of potential 'fall zone' should the CN Tower topple, publish a record of the Theatre Pass-Muraille's *The Farm Show,* publish various gay and lesbian texts, publish a book (Gerry Gilbert's *Lease*) with three spines, conceal a major piece of art work on the underside of the dust jacket of Bowering's *Genève*, publish parodic feminist deconstructionist fiction,



publish from its computer files on-demand editions of works-in-progress, updating these as the author revised (several librarians were furious that we could not supply them with the earlier versions), or publish problematic books because we believed that our doing so would free the author to write something much better. Toward the end of the 1980s, as is obvious above, this kind of editorial interaction became impossible.

Now, new editors were invited to join the board, new editors who did not always share the suspicions of commercial publishing that had motivated Nichol, Bevington, or Robert Wallace, and who were suspicious instead of literary theory. At least one of the new women editors was, like Sheard, suspicious of much feminist theory. In effect, the establishment of Coach House as a corporation began the final phase of the replacement of a group of friends who had got together in 1975 to publish books they would like others to be able to read with a group of strangers who got together as employees, corporate directors, and editorial advisors to run a business. The process of alienation of the editors from each other and of editors from management had begun. Exactly who 'was' the press became, despite the 'semi-imaginary Coach House' of our pre-incorporation discussions, and the roster of "members of the corporation" that resulted, increasingly problematic. The manager reported to the directors, who met separately and conveyed few of their discussions to the editors. The make-up of the board of directors had itself been problematic because of the personal financial responsibilities (including responsibilities for employee salaries) the directors of Canadian corporations are legally defined as assuming. Many people I would have trusted as directors were unwilling, some for family reasons, to undertake such potential liabilities. Arguments were made that people like the corporation's lawyer should be on the board of directors because of their special expertise. When the editors met, they had to rely on their recommendations being relayed to the directors by the manager, or by the editorial board representative on the board of directors that the corporation by-laws required. While in previous years the individual editors could make 'decisions' on manuscripts, promotion plans, and distribution changes and know instantly—by a nod or comment from Bevington—whether these would happen, now they could make only recommendations and find out what the manager had decided to do as the year unfolded. Newer editors—between 1988 and 1995 Susan Swan, Carole Corbeil, Leon Rooke, Lynn Crosbie, Alberto Manguel, Jason Sherman, Thomas King, and Michael Redhill all served at least briefly on the board—may have

thought this way of operating unremarkable, but older ones such as myself found it much less engaging and satisfying than the earlier procedures. The director who was most influential in enabling the new corporation to function during 1987-88 was bpNichol, who kept in personal contact with most of the editors and who, at director's meetings, argued passionately for a press that would operate in the interests of its editors and writers—if the press could not continue to publish books most of the editors 'believed in' as significant literature, he repeatedly declared, then it should not continue in business. Nichol had no interest in being part of a press that published merely whatever kind of books it needed to publish in order to stay in business.

Nichol died unexpectedly in October 1988 during surgery on his 'bad back,' a back which had turned out to have been invaded by a virtually inoperable tumour—dying on what Coleman has called in an angry poem "the day they stole the Coach House Press."[8] I had been in France since early July of that year, and got back to Toronto only in July of 1989. On leave of absence from the editorial board, I received no minutes of editors' meetings or, as a member of the corporation, no reports of corporation business. On arriving back in Toronto I slowly discovered that there had been other vacancies on the five-person board of directors while I was away, and that the remaining two directors, one of them David Young, had appointed a lawyer, a businesswoman, and a bookseller—none of them members of the corporation—to fill them. While the directors had the power to make such appointments, and to legitimate them retroactively by calling a general meeting of the corporation to confirm the appointees as both members and directors, they had that right only so long as a quorum of directors existed. Two directors did not make a quorum.

Why were the actual members of the corporation unable to change this possibly well-intended palace coup in any meaningful way? We did variously petition to have an Annual General Meeting called to invalidate the appointments. An AGM was held, in Frank and Linda's living room, at which at least one of the contested appointees was embarrassed, to his credit, into withdrawing his name from consideration. A motion was passed to restrict the power of the board of directors over the editorial board, and to enjoin directors from selecting or editing new titles. But overall the members' efforts failed. They failed in part because the members were split three ways—a very small 'radical' group organized by Coleman that sought to throw the rascals out and go back to small-



scale 'iconoclastic' publishing, a 'sensible, business-like' group centred around Sheard, Young, and others who hoped that the new corporate structure could be used by the 'semi-imaginary Coach House' to produce a few mainstream titles and a little more of the fashionably hip publishing they believed the press had become known for, and a third that tried to find ways to keep the new structure within the control of the 1965-80 Coach House 'community.' But they failed even more because so few of us were willing to undertake the financial risk of being a director. Only strangers were willing to stand for some of the board of directors positions.

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The beginnings of an end of Coach House Press:

7. 1989-90. Misunderstandings between Stan Bevington, in his printshop at the old Coach House Press address at 401 Huron Street (rear), and Victoria Ridout, the new Coach House manager hired by corporation president David Young and the new business-like board of directors in her offices in the converted coach house next door, grow. One morning Stan arrives in the laneway (now bpNichol Lane) behind the coach houses to discover approximately 50 boxes of 1970s Coach House books piled there awaiting that day's garbage pickup. I coincidentally arrive around the same time, and retrieve about a hundred copies of two of my own books and several souvenir copies of McFadden and Curnoe's *Animal Spirits.* Vicky is frustrated by the lack of warehouse space, and on the basis of recent sales records has calculated that she needs only limited quantities of these titles to satisfy demand for the next ten years. Nevertheless the symbolic meaning of her having, as manager of the new Coach House Press, thrown about 50 cases of earlier CHP books into the garbage, is undeniable. Stan arranges for bookdealer Nicky Drumbolis to come at once and transport the books to safekeeping his basement. Later Drumbolis will offer the books free-of-charge to their authors.

8. Sometime in 1992. Since 1990 Margaret McClintock has been managing Coach House. The directors have given her the title of "publisher." The press is about to be changed from a not-for-profit corporation to a for-profit corporation. The change is recommended by the directors as making it easier for the corporation to borrow money. The members of the corporation become shareholders in proportions based on what the directors estimate to have been their contributions to the press.

9. Spring 1993. Coach House moves up. The press moves from the Huron Street laneway into vacant main floor offices leased by the law firm of the lawyer whom the two surviving original directors had attempted to appoint as a director in 1988. It is a high-rise residential building with entry controlled by a uniformed doorman, on relatively affluent Prince Arthur Avenue. Stan Bevington is rumoured to have refused his shares in the new corporation. Even Sheard seems to have recognized the move as a questionable one, writing that Coach House was "now in snazzy new upscale digs with terminals on every desk and broadloom and a watercooler and voice mail and a sales force, but it wasn't as much fun. [....] In a way, it was over before it was over" (56).

I remember three main things about the last years of Coach House Press. One was how few meetings of any kind there were. The editorial board met only four or five times, that I was told of, in the 1990-1994 period, and not at all in 1995 or 96. No minutes of these meetings were sent to editors. No annual general meetings of the corporation were held, as far as I know, after its conversion to for-profit standing—a violation, as I understand it, of the Corporations Act and of the rights of the shareholders. No reports of any kind were sent by the directors to the shareholders. Most of us did not know who the directors were, and might not have recognized their names had we been told. None of the members, as far as I know, attempted to petition for an annual general meeting. Editors did not lobby for editorial meetings, and were often unhelpful in cooperating with the few efforts McClintock made to hold meetings. Many of them did not know each other. And why go to meetings when the decisions made there might never be implemented, and when the only task one might emerge with was to read a manuscript and make a recommendation? Irony of ironies, this was the publishing house we had brought in to being, in part, because Valerie Frith and Diane Martin had thought the editors and staff too self-absorbed and isolated—"soloists rather than an orchestra." Here the soloists could seldom find another to sing to.

The second thing I remember was how, at the few meeting that were held, Margaret would talk proudly about how much our gross sales had expanded. From grossing under $100,000 annually throughout the 1980s, we were told, the press was now grossing around $450,000, with almost half of this accounted for by U.S. sales. None of the editors ventured to ask whether this increase in sales was a good thing—whether it might be a better strategy for long-term survival to stay small. None asked whether we should be putting so much effort into publishing to the U.S. market,



or reminded Margaret that we'd begun as a press that wished primarily to speak and publish to a Canadian cultural community. The third was a constant search for large amounts of money. At times Margaret expressed relief that a loan guarantee had been obtained, or that short-term loans had been negotiated for money that would 'capitalize' the press and enable it to invest in new manuscripts. At others she would drop strong hints that if any of the editors could offer a loan of $50,000 or more the position of the press would be greatly strengthened. Evidently substantial debt had been accumulated between Stan's passing over of the press to the new corporation and the present. However, as in the earlier years we editors were never shown any records that detailed the press's overall financial position.

There were other notable things. The editors, whether there were board meetings or not, were usually shut out of design, promotion, and contractual decisions except in cases of difficulty or crisis. The books looked more and more like the books of other publishers. Gone were the idiosyncratic shapes and designs that wouldn't fit a bookstore's standard shelves, and the designs that seemed direct responses to the texts they helped present. The press no longer had at-cost access to Bevington's talented designers and typographers, and shopped around for competitively priced designing and printing. And the editorial direction had changed. Gone was the parodic, left-of-centre anti-establishment edge of much of the list of the previous Coach House. Here was fashionable internationalism, with the *Brick Reader* (1991) and various Alberto Manguel-edited titles (by Marguerite Duras, Anna Seghers, Julio Cortázar, and Andre Breton, Marco Denevi, Liliana Heker, and Emine Özdamar) vying for the cachet of the *New York Review of Books*. Here was French author Daniel Pennac's *Better than Life* (1994), with a catalogue note that it had sold 300,000 copies in France, and Canadian playwright Atom Egoyan's screenplay *Exotica* (1995), with a note that his films "have screened at every major festival and have won many prestigious international awards."

An editor during this period could have little sense of power. I would solicit a manuscript, read and appraise it, and recommend it to Margaret, and not hear back from Coach House for a year or more. In the 1976-1984 period, I would select a manuscript, announce it to the board, negotiate its contract, consult with the author about design, copy-edit it, proofread it, oversee production, and within a year the book would be in print. I recommended Cordelia Strube's *Alex and Zee* (published Fall 1994) in

1990 and was told that it would have to have a second reading. More than a year later, not having heard anything definitive from Coach House, I wrote Strube privately, telling her that I had liked her novel a great deal and wanted her to know that I had recommended it to the press. She replied that she had heard nothing from Coach House, and that she had been so disappointed in general with the lack of publisher response to *Alex and Zee* that she had decided to write a second novel in an entirely different style. Six months later I received a call from Margaret that she had recently stumbled across the *Alex and Zee* manuscript and sent it out for a second reading. The second reader had also recommended it, and she wondered if I had a current address for Strube—the one on the manuscript was out of date. (Later the press would not only publish *Alex and Zee* but also accept Strube's second novel, *Milton's Elements*—but without showing it to me or suggesting I might wish to edit it. The first indication I had of the design of *Alex and Zee* was when a copy of arrived in my mail.) I had a similar experience with Lola Tostevin's *Frog Moon,* which I successfully solicited for the press, worked on editorially over several months, recommended to the press, and am still awaiting the promised second reading. Tostevin astutely withdrew the novel, published it with another publisher, although in an earlier version than the one she and I had arrived at. With a novel by Smaro Kamboureli in 1993—a work I had also solicited—I simultaneously recommended some re-working to the author and publication of it to Coach House. To this day I have had no reply from the press, and can only guess what has happened to the manuscript. Something much the same could have happened to Gail Scott's *Main Brides,* which I worked very hard to obtain for the press, only to find that the second reader—this time a woman member of the editorial board—couldn't figure out its narrative structure and thought it overall rather muddled.[9] I got the firm impression from my experiences with *Main Brides* and *Alex and Zee* that management did not want me to work too closely with authors and particularly did not want editors to work with the same author on successive books. Once manuscripts were selected, they seemed to prefer editing and copy editing to be done by free-lance editors who could be more easily controlled, directed, and terminated. Only if an author, as Gail Scott did, insisted on having input to design, might an editor be consulted. Several times I considered resigning from the board, and then looked at the current CHP catalogue and realized that authors like Scott, Tostevin, or Kamboureli might have no chance at all to publish at Coach House were I not there.



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Today, the whole conception of the 1988-96 Coach House Press seems bizarre. How could many of us imagine that incorporating Coach House and entrusting it to professional management, and to directors who held their offices only because no one else wanted the risks attached to them, would result in a publishing house we could be enthusiastic about operating? We had converted the small, writer/artist-directed press into a press much like the consumerist publishers bp had mistrusted: one whose employees need it to grow if their jobs are to be secure and their salaries to increase; one whose directors need it to publish marketable titles if they are going to be able to report 'good' financial news to their shareholders and bankers. We had also entrusted its management to directors and staff many of whom were at the very least resigned to the continued reign of power structures some of us found oppressive, and sceptical toward politically disruptive aesthetics. Even the catalogue copy for politically interrogative books like Valerie Frith's anthology *Women and History: England 1500-1800* (1995) seemed designed to aestheticize disruption: "Here is a rich variety of women .... [f]ascinating, moving, and above all, surprising ...."

According to one of the letters Coach House authors, editors, and translators received in August 1996, the board of directors who voted to close down the Coach House Press business and wind up the corporation were president Martha Butterfield, Ann Mandel, publisher Margaret McClintock, and Mitchell Tempkin. Good people, or they wouldn't have taken on such an unpromising job. I had known Ann Mandel for more than twenty years. Before receiving that letter I had never heard the name Michael Tempkin. I met Martha Butterfield once, at the 1988 Annual General Meeting that was held in my living room. Although I was still a shareholder and member of the editorial board, I had not known she was president, nor that Mandel and Tempkin were directors. Possibly they were also Coach House shareholders—no list of shareholders had been circulated since the 1992 conversion of the press from a not-for-profit to a for-profit corporation. The by-laws of the not-for-profit corporation, I'm fairly sure, had stipulated that new members had to be approved by an annual general meeting, and that directors also be members—the 1987-88 members had been concerned about 'who' came to be Coach House Press. I'm not sure that the by-laws of the second corporation had a corresponding provision, or that I or other shareholders ever possessed a copy of them. I say this not because I suspect there was a conspiracy to 'steal' the

press but to point out, whether or not there were such by-laws, how alienated the 'official' Coach House Press had been allowed to become from those writers, artists, and designers whom it had once been imagined that it represented and served.

During the media uproar about the press's closing, I found it difficult to be upset or disappointed except about the breaking up of the 1965-90 backlist.[10] The press that was closing was not the version of Coach House Press I had worked to create. Although its catalogues had faithfully announced it was a "writers' press," writers seemed to have little to do with it. In its last five years the press was paying more in managerial and staff salaries than its sales had grossed during most of years of the 1976-1987 editorial board—salaries that were undoubtedly needed to operate a dramatically larger operation. For tasks like copy-editing, manuscript acquisition, communication with authors, it had replaced volunteer, unpaid, highly skilled writer-editors with salaried, less skilled, office workers. Despite the decision that had been made in 1988 to require full board approval of all titles, editors like me in the 1990s found out what Coach House was publishing when the postman delivered our catalogues. Many of the titles—as I've hinted above—I could have cared less who published. Many were foreign titles translated into into English for sale primarily in the U.S. I presume that most were being chosen not at any editorial board meeting but in private consultations between Margaret McClintock and selected, favoured, or easy-to-reach editors. In large part, I think, this situation had come about because the paid staff were overworked, had little in common with the community—the "members of the corporation"—who had made the early Coach House succeed through their volunteer support, and were mostly left alone by them. Operating the press communally—through the editors' board—required too many phone calls, too many delays, too many discussions. Other means were more efficient. The editors and other corporation members/shareholders/ in turn may not have been exactly bored by the new Coach House—in either of its corporate incarnations—but were definitely not so excited by it that they demanded participation.

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It is tempting to end these recollections and reflections with accusations and perhaps a moral. But the events don't yield such things easily. Even when in severe conflict, the parties to them were doing what they thought was 'best' under the circumstances for 'Coach House.' Of course they understood very different things by 'Coach House'—some an early



modernist press that would blast and bombardier a bourgeoisie, some an apolitical fine arts press that would publish beautiful books and beautiful texts by artistic people, some a communal Canadian press that would demonstrate the creativity of cooperative social models, some a press that would create and recreate within an increasingly commercialized and competitive society space for more generous visions, some a semi-commercial international literary press that would manufacture and sell bourgeois titles to finance of the publication of compatible and non-embarrassing literature. Some—perhaps most—understood Coach House in various combinations of these views. Some also thought at least one of these views absurd. As did I.

So despite the problematics of blame, one still has opinions. I think that people who saw Coach House as an apolitical international fine arts press that would publish beautiful books by wonderful people to a tasteful and semi-adventurous middle-class readership ended up controlling it in its last years. They meant well, and the rest, as they say, is history. I also think that at various moments before and after the events of 1988-89 those in charge of Coach House—myself included—allowed it to get too big. Too big when Stan's management of it began to become complicated in the 1980s. Too big when Canada Council juries asked for more money to be spent on promotion and for sales to be increased. Too big when the hiring of a manager seemed the best way to control expenses and when the hiring of a manager meant an increase in revenue would be needed to pay the new salary. Too big when the new directors decided to borrow money to fund and promote a more costly and potentially lucrative publishing program. Too big when tempting new federal and provincial government subsidy and loan programs were offered; too big to survive if and when the new programs were severely cut or terminated.[11] But can we blame those who recommended that Coach House grow? Growth, after all, is the primary ideological assumption of capitalist economies. Without growth there are no new jobs, no dividends for stockholders, no income from the stock market holdings of one's RRSP. If a company is not growing, business ideology holds, it is stagnating, and business ideology—being realistic, having common sense—was often invoked by Sheard, Young, and others who led the changes from 1986 to 1990.[12] Becoming big also meant becoming, as those editors repeatedly and enthusiastically recommended during our late 1980s disagreements, more 'professional.' And in the press's last incarnation we saw the results of professionalization: a new paid staff, enlarged international sales, and new

gross income that approached $500,000 unable to sustain for nine years a publisher which a group of amateurs, often with less than a fifth of this money, had kept operating for more than twenty.

When news of the press's closing was made public, some of the old myths and arguments about Coach House re-surfaced, along with new commentary that somewhat amazingly offered to evaluate the press in terms of its management skill. Michael Redhill, an editor in the early 1990s, lamented in *The Globe and Mail* the end of Canada's "most diverse, purely literary press"—not a description of a press I can imagine Coleman or Nichol ever wanting to help edit. Michael Coren in *The Financial Post* repeated the falsehood that Coach House's "distribution was poor, promotion weak"—that it did "not sell enough books" (July 24, 1996, 11). Ontario Premier Mike Harris commented that the press had gone under not because of the termination of its Province of Ontario loan guarantee and cutbacks of up to 74% in its federal and Ontario grants, but because "they can't compete in the marketplace." Its closing, he suggested, "probably speaks to their management capabilities" (*Globe and Mail,* July 17, 1996, C3). Yet these had been the most business-wise and management-capable leaders Coach House Press had ever had—leaders who had largely accepted neo-conservative ideologies that hold that small publishers should have entrepreneurial expertise and the capability of competing "in the marketplace." Mike Harris was kicking his own people. At the other extreme, Betsy Struthers of the League of Canadian Poets, Timothy Findley, Susan Swan and others wrote to *The Globe and Mail* (Letters, July 20, 1996, D7) to defend what Swan called the press's "business acumen" and McClintock as someone who "exemplified creative entrepreneurial publishing." Between these views, no one argued that the press might have been better off with less management capability, less entrepreneurship, and more paranoia about bankers and indebtedness. Most of the letters-to-the-editor writers in this period, in fact, telescoped the small, left-of-centre early Coach House that had "nurtured" Ondaatje, bpNichol, Brossard, and Ann-Marie Macdonald (July 20 letter to the *Globe* by Marcus Youssef) and the entrepreneurial Coach House that was closing its doors. Writers complained about the cutting of government subsidies but left unmentioned the press's own self-inflicted cutting during the McClintock years of the voluntary labour of its editors and supporters—labour which had previously had constituted a much larger subsidy than government money. To avoid much of its debt, the newly incorporated press could, very early in the 1990s, have reduced salaries,



reduced or eliminated some salaried positions, given up the cash-advance pursuit of famous international writers, and gone back to being a largely volunteer operation. Some letter-writers, or boards of directors, might have been able to imagine this. The resulting press might also have failed. Or it might have looked something like the now nostalgically recalled pre-1987 'nurturing' Coach House Press.

## Notes

[1]In her memoir of her fifteen years with Coach House Sheard presents the press as even more 'guy dominant' than it was. She mentions by name nearly all the male editors and many of the male production workers and writers, but curiously none of the female production workers or editors (including my wife Linda who was on the editorial board for more than twenty years) and among the numerous female writers only Daphne Marlatt. 'Guy dominance' here seems to affect memory as much as it did the press.

[2]There is necessarily something fictional, after all, about any positing of beginnings of ends. The beginning of the end of Coach House could be argued to be when the 1975 editorial board was established, or when Wayne Clifford was succeeded by Victor Coleman, or when Stan Bevington began his printing business, or when Stan moved to Toronto from Alberta, or ...

[3]A related issue was whether or not Coach House editors *should* publish their own books through Coach House. Some editors felt strongly that editors should support the press aesthetically and financially by publishing much of their best work through it. Sheard sometimes expressed concern about the appearance of vanity publishing, and in 1987 during discussions of recruitment of new editors proposed that they not be allowed to give the press their own manuscripts until they had edited several titles by others. Both Nichol and I had observed a tendency in the promotion and distribution staff to take some of the editors' books much less seriously than those by non-editors—as if they considered them vanity publications; we had concluded that by and large our books were given better treatment by the staff of presses where the editorial status of our work was unambiguous. He still preferred the design advantages of continuing to publish *The Martyrology* through Coach Houses, but published many other books with other small presses. After 1984 I was determined—except for a brief lapse in 1993 (see note 9 below)—to publish no further books through Coach House, and took my poetry collections *The Louis Riel Organ and Piano Company* to Turnstone, *The Abbotsford Guide to India* to Press Porcepic, and *Popular Narratives* to Talonbooks, and published various literary criticism and non-fiction volumes with Turnstone, University of Toronto Press, Talonbooks, NeWest, and Penguin.

[4]In Valerie Frith's 1987 consultants report these divisions were presented as "only half of the editors expressed satisfaction with the current publishing program of short-run literary titles." The other half "want to see the press undertake more ambitious projects." "We have two kinds of editors," Frith continued: "happy and unhappy. We need two kinds of books: short-run literary titles and a new line of longer-run books with backlist potential that will subsidize literary risks and provide opportunities for those editors who find the current publishing program limiting. Frith's choice of "short" and "limiting" to describe the press's literary titles and "ambitious" and "longer" to describe the new more widely-saleable titles gives some suggestion of her own preferences.

[5]With Coleman's departure, and with the advent of computerized typesetting, the Coach House emphasis on writer-artist collaboration diminished. Many of the new editors tended to regard text as the primary part of the books they were publishing, and to be wary of art that might distract from it. Computerization of Coach House typesetting encouraged editors to seek shorter production schedules, and to accept somewhat standardized page formats.

[6]This document, together with other documents I cite in this paper—copies of Coach House minutes, Frith's 1987 consultant's report, reorganization proposals submitted by editors, and my letters to George Bowering—are all publicly available in the collections of my papers held by the Special Collections division of the W.A.C. Bennett Library, Simon Fraser University. I thank Gene Bridwell, Special Collections Librarian, for having helped me consult some of them.

[7]It's worth noting that Frith tended to view the editors only as "talent scouts" and to underestimate their role in the negotiation of contracts, copy editing, production planning, and promotion. Her report began its discussion of the roles of editors by stating "The Coach House operates on the assumption that the functions normally assigned to a publisher have been divided among twelve people, the editors. In reality, however, only one publisher function—talent scout—was assigned to the members of the editorial board. (As it happens, the editors have all taken a keen interest in production as well, which has become a significant aspect of the editor's role. This should not be confused with the editor's function, however. Nor should it be considered one of the publisher-functions that the editors have assumed.)" This legalistic and dismissive account was not only inaccurate but led rather quickly in the 1990s to a new management structure that limited and contained the editors within talent-scout roles, preventing them from asking troublesome questions, and reducing their personal and creative investments in the press.

[8]*The Day They Stole the Coach House Press.* Toronto: The Eternal Network, 1994. But, alas, in an edition of 25 copies. No risking bankruptcy here.

[9]In April of 1993, aware of the press's constant search for money and interest in "drafthorse" commercial titles, I offered the press my 'instant' book on Kim Campbell, *Reading 'KIM' Right,* which would have had to be published by June



to take advantage of the Conservative leadership convention and summer federal election. Again, I received no definitive reply, and published the book with Talonbooks where it received excellent editing, speedy publication, and sold more than 4,000 copies. With Coach House's McClelland & Stewart distribution and Toronto-based promotion, it could conceivably have sold many times that number.

[10]The breaking-up of the Coach House Press backlist remains for me the major calamity of the press's closing. Tens of thousands of hours of volunteer labour and more than two decades of Canada Council and Ontario Arts Council money had gone into building that list. Offers were made by two or more publishers to take on the backlist and keep much of it in print. Margaret McClintock argued that "keeping the Coach House backlist alive intact is in fact not possible due the terms of many of the author contracts" (letter, August 15, 1996) but it seems unlikely that she or the directors attempted to consult with the authors about the offers that were made or determine whether they would want to waive any terms in their contracts to allow a transfer to occur. While some titles that enjoy strong demand in the college market—Marlatt's *Ana Historic,* Nichol's *The Martyrology,* Webb's *Water and Light,* Scott's *Heroine,* Walker's *Nothing Sacred*—have been picked up quickly by other publishers, the fate of other important titles like Watson's *Five Stories* or Griffith and Campbell's *The Book of Jessica* remains obscure. Various contractual problems make the easy transfer of many of the Quebec Translations to another publisher difficult. Coach House's solution of allowing all rights to revert to author, editor, or translator, and to sell the remaining inventory of books to authors or their new publishers "for a nominal cost" did little for an author unable to find a publisher willing to administer the distribution of a book.

[11]Karl Siegler describes in his article "Amusements" (elsewhere in this issue) how small Canadian publishers like Coach House were promised in 1992 large amounts of sales-based 5-year marketing money—in effect a tripling of the previous program—by the federal Department of Heritage and then encouraged by federal loan programs to borrow against the expected grants. Part of this new money was unofficially conceived as compensating for the application of the new General Sales Tax (GST) to books, and part as compensating for the terminating of the postal Book Rate. Overall, the grants were also conceived as balancing the new looser policy on the foreign purchase of Canadian publishers under which unprofitable publishers, for which no Canadian buyer could be found, could legally be acquired by foreign buyers. By making most small Canadian publishers 'profitable,' the grants would make them ineligible for foreign purchase. The massive surprise cuts to these grant programs in the 1995 federal budget left the publishers trapped in an indebtedness which government itself had lured them into undertaking.

[12]Sheard now summarizes the press's 1990-92 transformations in the phrase "The press did eventually outgrow its crib" (56), as if the entire 1965-90 period were one of immaturity and infancy, and as if growth to adulthood were defined by the

adopting of corporate structure and for-profit strategies.

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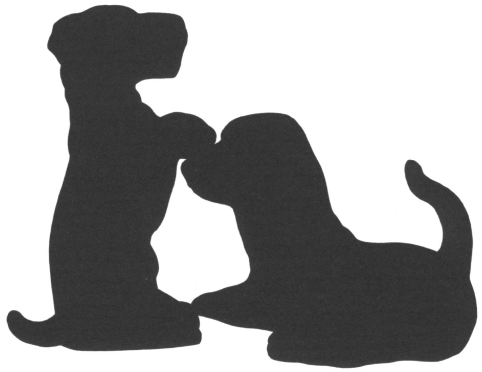

# Coach House Poetry

## Stan Dragland

(*This article was first written in 1990, and published in French in* Ellipse *44 (1990) to introduce a selection of Coach House Poetry—ed.*)

> A man must try to whip order into
> a yelping pack of
> probabilities
> (from Jack Vance, *The Languages of Pao* quoted by bpNichol in "A Book of Hours," *The Martyrology* Book 6)

What are the constants? Belief in the marriage of word and design (publishing and printing were knit, and virtually in the hands of the editor/writers, until their separation in 1987); a vision of publishing as a confluence of art forms; commitment to the avant-garde or exploratory in writing and printing. But Coach House's taste has been formed by a shifting editorial collective composed of writers, rather than professional editors, so a single signature is not going to appear. Coach House poetry is not easy to generalize, but I'll try to make a few holes for the pigeons.

*

Coach House was born in 1965. Stan Bevington, printer and designer, was (and is) the core; Dennis Reid, artist-historian, and Wayne Clifford, poet, were the other publishing originators. Coach House's first book, Clifford's *Man in a Window,* was a collaboration between the three of them. In 1966, Victor Coleman became the "official / unofficial editor," according to bpNichol in "Primary Days: Housed with the Coach at the Press, 1965 to 1987." The ambiguity reflects the unhierarchic relaxation of authority that prevailed in the early days. In 1975 Victor Coleman could leave to find other scope for his interdisciplinary interests without severing ties, Coach House having been less a business than an elastic arts community. "The formative Coach House notion," runs an entry in the Literary Press Group Catalogue for 1977,

> was to put the means of production in the hands of the writers and artists so they could midwife their own visions into the physical world. While time

> and the economic necessities of equipment overhead have qualified this policy somewhat it is still possible for an author to sleep in the loft here and oversee the shape of a book, a visual artist to mix his own inks in the press room, or for bookworms to nibble some greenhouse lettuce (22).

This spirit of collaboration generated a sense of community that drew in, at various stages, other writers like bpNichol, David McFadden, Michael Ondaatje, David Young, Sarah Sheard, Christopher Dewdney and Frank Davey. The twenty-five years of Coach House's history roughly coincides with the growth to national prominence of such writers. Ondaatje's books are now internationally read, in fact, but like the others he still labours gratis in the 1990s as a Coach House editor.

My impression is that before he died in the fall of 1988 bpNichol was the most active Coach House editor. His death was the loss not only of a major if not popularly known writer, but of a hugely generous friend to other writers. The unrealized project nearest his heart, one that he talked about often and lobbied informally for over many years, was a sort of Canadian version of Rothenberg and Quasha's *America, a Prophecy* ("poetry as an act of vision, charged with the immediate energies of authentic speech and shaped by its moment in history" xxix), an anthology of Canada's ignored or unofficial writing: the creeks and meanders that he and most of the others at Coach House have found so much more challenging to navigate than the mainstream.

Coach House appeared as part of what now looks like a tremendous burst of energy in the English-Canadian writing community, a huge step towards establishing the maturity of a literature that was still in many ways provincial so late in the twentieth century. Coach House Press has to share the credit for that push with other houses like Oberon (1966), Talonbooks (1967) and Anansi (1967). For a short time, such new presses, colleagues and/or rivals, *were* the ardent alternative scene, but it wasn't long before presses and books began to proliferate. If Coach House was the first flowering of a new literary activism, soon there was a tangled garden. Part of the tangle is caused by small press willingness to share writers. Coach House and Vancouver's Talonbooks (which stresses drama) publish different books by many of the same poets. According to the selected bibliography in George Bowering's *The Contemporary Canadian Poem Anthology,* Lionel Kearns published seven volumes of poetry between 1963 and 1982, none of them with the same house. Coach House published the volumes of bpNichol's "integrative" diary-based long poem, *The Martyrology* (it folded in the results of his experiments



in concrete and sound poetry), as they appeared, but his publishing record is astonishingly various. For some time Ondaatje published poetry with Coach House, fiction with Anansi. And so on. Who is a Coach House poet? a) Any poet published by Coach House b) More narrowly, the poet-editors (especially Coleman, Davey, Nichol, Ondaatje) and the poets whose work they brought to the press, as distinct from those who merely submitted manuscripts.

Frank Davey's entry on Coach House in *The Oxford Companion of Canadian Literature* says (and this is another take on the origin of the press) that it was, or in many ways became, "a continuation of Contact Press [whose editors were Louis Dudek, Raymond Souster and Irving Layton], extending Contact's welcome to new poets by supporting most of the writers of Souster's [1966] Contact Press anthology *New Wave Canada: the new explosion in Canadian poetry*" (132). This amounts to saying that Coach House has been a publishing home for those poets interested in and/or influenced by radical American writers, especially those of the Pound/Williams tradition and of the so-called Black Mountain School: Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan. With George Bowering, Fred Wah, Lionel Kearns, Robert Hogg and others, Frank Davey had in 1961 begun the west coast poetry newsletter *Tish,* a magazine devoted to publishing poetry and poetics nourished by such American sources, the single most influential document being Olson's dynamic essay "Projective Verse" with its stress on "COMPOSITION BY FIELD, as opposed to inherited line, stanza, over-all form" (387) and its insistence on "the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects" (395). The American poets have been attacked as a new colonizing influence by Canadian nationalists who fail to understand how an 'open' poetic is responsive to the local anywhere, the local being the *only* universal in the view of William Carlos Williams. In an unpublished memoir called "A Writer in the Arts Community," Victor Coleman sees Coach House and *Tish* as parallel and related phenomena, so it's not surprising that when Frank Davey came to teach at York University in 1970 he joined Coach House. More recently, Coach House writers like Christopher Dewdney and (especially) Steve McCaffery have contributed to the debate of the diverse "language" writers over the place of speech and reference in the

creation of meaning, with its implications for what Ron Silliman calls "the larger question of what, in the last part of the twentieth century, it means to be human" (xix).

The flow between Coach House and American poetry is strong, but should not be overstated. Coach House poets have been responsive to all sorts of sources. George Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies* (1984) is a primer of intertextuality. Principally it's a respectful parody of Rilke's *Duino Elegies,* trans(p)la(n)ted into contemporary Vancouver, but quotations, allusions, echoes of "that great anthology" of world literature—Canadian, Quebecois, American, English and French poetic sources—thicken the texture. Christopher Dewdney holds that a contemporary poet needs a broad information base, and the references in his 'epic' of interconnected books warp writers like Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Jack Spicer and Lewis Carroll into a woof of contemporary science and linguistics. McCaffery's *Evoba* (1987) has a backwards title and a subtitle, "The Investigations Meditations," which introduces the book's response to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations;* a section of Rafael Barreto-Rivera's *Nimrod's Tongue* (1985), called "Derridative Poems," is a commentary on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus.* Strains of Gertrude Stein's music show up in Nichol, Bowering and Marlatt. Merleau-Ponty, Ponge and Robbe-Grillet are among the phenomenological forebears cited in Marlatt's *What Matters* (1980). Wallace Stevens is celebrated in Michael Ondaatje's *Rat Jelly* (1973), though more as opposite than exemplar... And Coach House poets have been shaped by each other and by the general contemporary Canadian scene in ways so labyrinthine as to make any mere listing of influences ridiculous.

*

The small presses I've mentioned, with others like New Press, blewointment and weed/flower, tapped an energy of love for the real thing, the arts for their own sake. Economically speaking, Coach House has often been gloriously perverse in publishing the sort of books it wanted to make, whether or not there was a market for them. This independence has meant that Coach House editors could assume a readership that not only needs no selling on poetry but thrives on experiment, on the testing and violation and reconstitution of textual categories.

Coach House has never been nationalistic like Anansi, a house whose programme has included setting English Canada on the road to self-understanding. Some might say that Coach House's only politics has been an undeclared anarchism, but that is to ignore the underlying motives for



staying underground, or at least maintaining roots there. When bpNichol articulates these motives in his article on Coach House, he touches a politics that lies beneath content:

> We live in the midst of language, surrounded by books, and, as a result, the nature of both has become transparent to us. We look thru the books to the content inside them. We learn to speed read so that the words too can be strip-mined for their information. Thus are we made more ignorant. And painting, sculpture, dance, photography, etc., *all* the so-called Fine Arts, suffer, because we look but we don't see. Once the surface of the world, of its objects, inhabitants, etc., becomes transparent to us, it quickly becomes unimportant to us as well, and things that should register—political, social, ecological—don't (24).

These plain words harmonize with poststructuralist literary theory, that confluence of disciplines aimed at materializing transparencies of discourse, and with the postmodernist practice of provoking the reader into co-creation. McCaffery, Nichol, Bowering and Davey have written widely, sometimes collaboratively, on postmodernist poetics; Davey's *Open Letter* (begun in 1965 and published by Coach House between 1971 and 1977) is an important international magazine of theory and "commentary on texts and concerns marginal to the 'cultural industries'..." ("Editorial Changes" 7).

*

Nichol's article associates the collaborative work at Coach House with a concept, dear to him, borrowed from the Argentine concrete poet Dom Sylvester Houedard. This is "'borderblur', the area where the distinctions [between arts and genres] break down and become useless" (19). Besides poetry, Coach House has published fiction, drama, criticism, photographic and other visual work, not to mention scads of ephemera (broadsides, newsletters, postcards, posters); the press has been a centre where all these categories could interpenetrate and cross-fertilize. I expect that the results have frequently enough been a nightmare for the people who classify books at the National Library. The extreme variety and the importance of the original context of design work against any fair selection of Coach House texts (as does the press's hospitality to the long poem), so we need here a taste of what is not represented in this issue of *Ellipse*.

David McFadden's 1970 *The Great Canadian Sonnet* (the title plays on the obsolete quest for the Great Canadian Novel) is neither Shakespearean nor Petrarchan. It's an autobiographical prose narrative about life in Hamilton. A drawing by Greg Curnoe arbitrarily illustrates a line

from each page of prose, as in the big little books that *The Sonnet* parodies. bpNichol's *Journeying and the Returns* (1967) is a boxed miscellany of poems, concrete 'poems,' sound poetry, a flip book, a burnable sculpture, the whole works assembled as a puzzle meant to fit properly in its box in one way only. George Bowering's 1967 *Baseball: a poem in the magic number nine,* according to Victor Coleman, "was a sequence of nine poems; they were almost positions, and it became clear that the reader was at bat. So the book came out pennant shaped, opening out into a diamond, with a green felt cover and the section numbers in the bases; 1.5.9: home" ("Technical Difficulties" 20). Steve McCaffery's two-volume 8½ by 11 *Carnival* (1973 and 1977) is meant to be taken apart and its units reassembled into something like a concrete poetry wall. According to the Introduction, it's "a multi-panel language environment, constructed largely on the typewriter and designed ultimately to put the reader, as perceptual participant, within the centre of his language."

Even when a Coach House book fits the standard 5½ by 8½ non mass-market paperback format, it often reflects a care to harmonize design and content. "When we were putting Daphne Marlatt's *What Matters* (1980) thru the press," bpNichol says, "Nelson Adams and i spent hours working out a way to translate Daphne's particular use of internal spacing in the typewritten drafts of her poems into typographic terms. The result was a text that was faithful to the author's original" (23). A more overt experiment that also fits comfortably on the standard bookshelf is Gerry Gilbert's 1987 *Moby Jane,* a long poem which begins on the front cover, proceeds through the inside front cover and over the territory normally occupied by half title, title page, acknowledgements, contents, dedication ... and 'finishes' on the back cover. The poetry spills like a barely-containable force out of the confines of the pages normally allotted to it. *Moby Jane* is typical Gilbert, a West Coast maelstrom of (anti)artistic activity, and it's one of many Coach House reminders that bookmaking's conventions are transparent to most readers. The design emerged from a collaboration between Gilbert and Victor Coleman, some of whose early books bore the subversive statement "copyright is obsolete." This is not the principle on which Payment for Public Use was negotiated by The Writer's Union of Canada.

My favourite Coach House bookmaking extravaganza is Robert Fones's *Anthropomorphiks,* which Victor Coleman calls a "book of poems" on the inside slip cover flap. The poems range from free verse to concrete, and they are part of a scape of found material and visuals



populated by Fones's collection of anthropomorphic advertising figures. The first thing you notice on the cover is Candy Man in red and blue. He is an icon hovering over a wilderness river, but he comes away with the acetate slip cover he is printed on. Underneath is a paper slip cover bearing the river scene, a natural environment in which play a host of small figures like Reddy Kilowatt and The Licorice Allsorts Man. Under that, on the book cover, Michelin Man is embossed in metallic blue on red. There are marching phalanxes of pipe men and screw men on the end papers. The book is a total design environment in which plenty is going on before you get inside.

The publishing activities I've been describing have often enough been dismissed as the solipsistic play of a childish or marginally responsible coterie content with being trivial or obscure except to each other. Much modern art has been dismissed in similar terms by audiences unreceptive to the carnivalization of generic categories. When art opens its assumptions to self-scrutiny and to the active participation of readers or viewers a lot of rear-view mirrorists, unwilling to be taken in, opt right out. A less lazy or less paranoid response to weird-looking poetry—actually reading it—reminds the reader that experiment always tends to freeze (as convention-based poetry may be genuinely exciting). Coach House harbours some imitators along with its bone-deep originals.

The public impact of Coach House has varied inversely with its independence. That is a necessary hazard of staying out front or off to the side, and it has not troubled the Coach House writer/editors who were weaned on unofficial culture, on fringe or unrespectable or underground sometimes bourgeois-baiting modernism. But the press seems about to enter a new phase at the moment—more professional, less quirky. Coach House books may begin to reach a wider audience; at what expense remains to be seen.

It's not always remembered that, besides being a temporary home for Charles Olson and other poets important to so many of the writers revolving around Coach House, Black Mountain College was an alternative educational "institution," a sort of Rochdale College (that 1960s parody of The University of Toronto) that worked, and it was a nexus of the arts not unlike the early Coach House. This is clear in John Cage's description of one of the first happenings:

> At Black Mountain College in 1952, I organized an event that involved the paintings of Bob Rauschenberg, the dancing of Merce Cunningham, films, slides, phonograph records, radios, the poetries of Charles Olson and M.C.

> Richards recited from the tops of ladders, and the pianism of David Tudor, together with my Juillard lecture, which ends: "A piece of string, a sunset, each acts." The audience was seated in the center of all this activity. (*Silence* x)

*

Coach House's two most important anthologies—Michael Ondaatje's *The Long Poem Anthology* and George Bowering's *The Contemporary Canadian Poem Anthology*—are based on aesthetic criteria, and this helps the observer to get a grip on the sort of poetry Coach House has typically, if not exclusively, stood behind. As their cover designs indicate, the two anthologies are meant to be complementary. Together they might be thought to represent the kinds of contemporary English Canadian poetry if these were divided, simplistically but not irrelevantly, into the long and the short.

*The Long Poem Anthology* gathers nine volume-length poems (by Robert Kroetsch, Stuart MacKinnon, Daphne Marlatt, Don McKay, Robin Blaser, Frank Davey, George Bowering, Roy Kiyooka and bpNichol) in a genre or extended form which orchestrates fragments of narrative and/or lyric and/or documentary and/or visuals. The variety of participating genres may suggest why Coach House was a natural to publish this anthology assembled from various small presses. *The Contemporary Canadian Poem Anthology* collects twenty poets working short or lyric forms within a 'process' or 'open form' aesthetic: Margaret Atwood, bill bissett, Robin Blaser, George Bowering, Victor Coleman, Frank Davey, Christopher Dewdney, Brian Fawcett, D.G. Jones, Lionel Kearns, Robert Kroetsch, Daphne Marlatt, David McFadden, Barry McKinnon, John Newlove, bpNichol, Michael Ondaatje, George Stanley, Fred Wah, Phyllis Webb. Being one of a kind, Ondaatje's anthology has been very influential, especially in universities, while Bowering's has a shelf of competitors.

Bowering and Ondaatje are not only anthologists but also unacademic academics, photographers, writers of poetry, fiction and criticism (not so much of the latter in the case of Ondaatje, who is also a filmmaker), but no reader would ever mistake a scrap of the writing of one for that of the other. Both incorporate poetics into their creative work, whether poetry or fiction (see Ondaatje's "The Gate in His Head," arguably *the* Coach House poem in its address to Victor Coleman, its reference to a personal icon of the press, Stan Bevington's book-in-a-fishbowl, and its aesthetic: "not clarity but the sense of shift"), but Ondaatje stakes out no theoretical



territory to defend while Bowering is an aggressive postmodernist. As they are to each other (very different), so is each to the diverse writers represented in their anthologies: convenor of a meeting of distinct and different voices. That said, though, they both acknowledge the Contact Press/ *New Wave Canada* lineage, and when they try to boil down what they have collected, the statements overlap in important ways:

> Ondaatje: "The stories within the poems don't matter, the grand themes don't matter. The movement of the mind and language is what is important.... Somehow the poems move when you are not watching so that new objects and tones come into relief. We are not dealing with poetry whose themes are hardened into stone, into a public cultural voice. Between readings the tents are folded and the company moves on. In the daylight sometimes one can hardly see them at all" (12).

> Bowering: "The public & political hoopla [of 1967] meant almost nothing to the invention of the poetry you will find represented in this book. Diverse as they are, there is one thing these twenty poets hold in common, that being the assumption or belief that the animator of poetry is language. Not politics, not nationalism, not theme, not personality, not humanism, not real life, not the message, not self-expression, not confession, not the nobility of work, not the spirit of a region, not the Canadian Tradition—but language. The centre & the impetus, the world & the creator of poetry is language" (2).

> Ondaatje: "These poems show a process of knowledge, of discovery during the actual writing of the poem. 'You have to go into a serial poem not knowing what the hell you're doing,' wrote Jack Spicer. The poets do not fully know what they are trying to hold until they near the end of the poem, and this uncertainty, this lack of professional intent, is what allows them to go deep" (13).

> Bowering: "Some poets equate care with finish, the aim to turn a perfect urn & keep the dust off. They believe that a discourse once opened should be closed, perhaps with an adage for a final stanza. The poets in this anthology tend to believe that discourse once open should remain open, like Pandora's heart to the world" (3).

In these excerpts Bowering is much more polemical than Ondaatje, whose shifting metaphors hold the critical field open—though Bowering matches him in other texts, like *Errata,* a critical/theoretical tease—parts of it first published in *Brick,* one of whose editors is Ondaatje. If we add mythopoeic and/or academic poetry to Bowering's list of exclusions, and remember that not all of his poets have been published in volume form by Coach House, we have a reasonably complete catalogue of the sorts of

(content-driven) poetry least likely to appear under the Coach House imprint.

Women writers are better represented by Coach House in general than they are in the two anthologies, even though most of the press's editors have been men. Much of this poetry written by women is naturally feminist in consciousness, though sometimes the issue is implicit (as in the various lyricisms of Colleen Thibaudeau, Sharon Thesen and Diana Hartog), while for Lola Tostevin and Betsy Warland, there is a grounding in feminist theory, feminine grievance. With Daphne Marlatt, Gail Scott and others, Warland and Tostevin (a bilingual poet) have sisterly ties in Quebec, with feminist writer/theorists like Nicole Brossard, Louise Cotnoir, and Louky Bersianik. *Tessera,* the principal voice of their collaborations, is a magazine committed to unacademic explorations in theory and practice beyond thematics.

In *Ow's Waif* (1973) Steve McCaffery published poems generated by an attempt to apply the process of translation to other poems in English. "This type of composition," he says in a note at the end of the book, "permits the writer a near to total separation of form from content, the entire 'borrowing' of content as a prepared word-supply (a 'supply-text') and a creative concentration on the invention of the poems' forms as verbal fields free of presupposed or prerequisite rule structures of grammar and syntax." Texts produced by this and other arbitrary or conceptual disciplines (not only by McCaffery, but by Nichol, Paul Dutton and Rafael Barreto Rivera—together the Four Horsemen sound poetry group—and by Doug Barbour and Stephen Scobie) are something like an avant-garde to which Coach House's anthologies are middle-of-the-road. This sort of work is often a score for oral performance, and may double as concrete poem. When McCaffery performs such a composition, however foreign to the linear print mind, however complex the supporting theory (see his book of essays *North of Intention*), the ear accepts it naturally. As Coach House poetry slides in the direction of the visual, so it gravitates towards music and theatre. All of this happens in the work of McCaffery alone, one of the few artists I know who in a single 'reading' can corner reality without once making 'sense.'

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As Sarah Sheard writes in the blurb of Margaret Atwood's *Murder in the Dark,* this is Atwood's "seventh work of fiction or her tenth work of poetry, depending on how you slice it." McClelland and Stewart or Oxford can sell anything with the name of Margaret Atwood on it, but



Atwood herself thought of Coach House as the natural home for her most experimental work, a long poem made of often self-reflexive prose poems.[1] The book fits Coach House's list, where fit is not a big issue. Coach House poetry is partly defined, then, by the welcome occasionally extended to poets like Atwood whose sphere of influence touches the Coach House circle just once—like Don McKay (*Lightning Ball Bait,* 1976), an editor with Brick Books and a shape-shifter of voice and metaphor; David Bromige (*Birds of the West,* 1973), a Canadian citizen of English origin, now an important American writer with ties to the San Francisco "language" group; and Robert Kroetsch (*The Sad Phoenician,* 1979), in fiction and poetry probably the patriarch of English Canadian postmodernism.

The normative Coach House generation would be that of the baby boomers, but the press has picked up a certain publishing slack for important writers of an earlier generation, people like Phyllis Webb, Louis Dudek, Dorothy Livesay, Colleen Thibaudeau, and D.G. Jones. Webb, Jones and Thibaudeau each command at times a formalist precision that one would not automatically associate with Coach House, though Bowering (not so doctrinaire in his choices as in his rationale for them) finds Webb and Jones open-ended enough for his anthology, and Ondaatje would have included Webb's *Naked Poems* in his had it been available.[2] For encouragement with the formal challenge of acrostic thirteen-line sonnets 'spoken' by nineteenth century poet Archibald Lampman to his love, Kate Waddell, Jones acknowledges Steve McCaffery, and Webb credits Ondaatje with introducing her to the Persian ghazal, as practised by John Thompson in *Stilt Jack,* with its couplets proceeding in non sequitur. As an editor of Contact and other iconoclastic small presses and little magazines, Montreal poet Louis Dudek's lines were open to anti-establishment writing, especially Ezra Pound's, from outside the country. He has been virtually ignored by the Canadian mainstream, but Frank Davey has done much to place him, and Raymond Souster, nearer the centre of Canadian modernism; part of that effort involved bringing a belated Dudek selected, *Cross-Section, Poems 1940-1960,* to Coach House. When they could, then, Coach House editors have sponsored the new work of forerunners who remain important to them, and sometimes they have influenced that work.

Another small 'group' of anomalies is made up of foreign writers, which might be stretched to include important contemporary Quebecois writers in translation, most of them fiction or fiction/theory writers like

Victor-Levy Beaulieu and Nicole Brossard. From Britain there are the concrete/minimalists Bob Cobbing, Ian Hamilton Finlay, and Thomas A. Clark; from the U.S., the unminimalist Allen Ginsberg. One Dadaist, Tristan Tzara, shows up twice in translation.

*

Stan Bevington, David Young, Michael Ondaatje and bpNichol wore tuxedoes to host *Echoes Without Saying,* Ron Mann's 1983 filmic tour of Coach House. Their dress is a statement in the same class, though nowhere near so overt, as the one made in the film *Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Leonard Cohen* by the poet himself, as he turns from working on his poems in a hotel bathtub to write *caveat emptor* on the wall. Formal wear in Coach House contributes an edge of self-parody to the celebratory but otherwise serious enough appearance of the printer and the writer/editors in this film about one of the least institutional institutions of their mutual experience. For me, bpNichol's appearance in black tie (though with brown pants) resonates with the evening in 1970 when he accepted the Governor General's Award for poetry formally dressed in a white robe. I don't know that Barrie Nichol ever saw himself in motley, but he was adopting one *fun*ction of the fool whenever he stepped outside the frames of life and writing to look them over and to help others see them. His experimentation was never competitive and always joyous. He *was* Coach House. This is a huge unfair exaggeration, but I don't hear any complaints from the friends and collaborators now[3] carrying on without him.

## Notes

[1] *Murder in the Dark* was followed by *Good Bones* (Coach House, 1992).

[2] It became available for Sharon Thesen's *The New Long Poem Anthology* (1991).

[3] "Now" (1990) was then. Now (1997) Coach House is not carrying on. Now a personal valediction seems appropriate.

I met Don Smith in the summer of 1964 when I was working as an orderly at the University Hospital in Edmonton. I remarked on the copy of D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* on his bedside table. That was the first contact in what became a friendship. I was visiting Don and Marg one day when Don showed me a couple of strange books he'd been sent from Toronto by a guy he'd encouraged as a kid. One of the books was diamond-shaped: *Baseball, a poem in the magic number nine.* It's something to think how important Bowering's writing is to me now, since back then his baseball book, sent to Don Smith by his friend Stan Bevington, was a just a curiosity.



Don's medical problems were permanent. His joints didn't work properly. But despite his being what some people would have called crippled, I never saw him down in the mouth. He was an inventor, an artist. He made a photo-enlarger out of a large juice can. He designed the manually operated elevator between the bedroom and his basement workshop. Eventually Don's body let him down for good. It gave me immense pleasure to be able to dedicate *Wilson MacDonald's Western Tour,* my first Coach House book, "to the memory of Don Smith." Little did I know, as they say, looking at those strange books in Don's house, that Stan Bevington would become my publisher.

*Wilson MacDonald's Western Tour* tells a story that the title gives a sense of, and how it came to be a book is a story eloquent about the 1970s and Coach House Press. It's a story with a certain poignancy, seeing that Frank Davey invited me to write something about Coach House the day after I received a statement of my final inventory, books that I could buy at $1.00 apiece: *Peckertracks, Journeys Through Bookland, The Bees of the Invisible*. Now I'm my own distributor and the footnote turns into a commercial.

I was researching Duncan Campbell Scott for my Ph.D. thesis in 1969. I was flipping through letters to Lorne Pierce in the Lorne Pierce Collection at Queen's University. On my way to S I got snagged briefly at M by the distinctive angular handwriting of Wilson MacDonald. I couldn't help but read a few of his 1923/1924 letters to Pierce. A character jumped out of them: a man who thought he was god's gift to Canadian poetry, though I'd never heard of him. A few year's later when I was teaching at Western and summering north of Kingston, I remembered Wilson MacDonald and looked him up again.

This time I photocopied the letters for fun and began to collect other MacDonald material from the early twenties: poems, especially illuminated ones, letters pro and con about MacDonald, the hyperbolically laudatory promotional brochure for his tour, together with the draft showing that MacDonald himself had written it. I put all the stuff together in a binder just for the hell of it. This was the early 70s, near the end of the last period of Canadian university expansion, and there was little pressure to publish. I showed my orange binder of MacDonaldiana to Michael Ondaatje who at the time was also summering just down the creek or up the road, near Bellrock, Ontario. Unbeknownst to me, he took the binder to Victor Coleman at Coach House and brought back an offer to publish. It was like being the recipient of one of those random acts of kindness. I often think fondly about that moment when I discovered I had made a book without intending to. I will not recover that sort of innocence, but I will never lose it either.

So I, like many fortunate others, found myself talking to Victor Coleman at the pine table upstairs at Coach House. I had brought the MacDonald material with me, on loan from the Lorne Pierce Collection. Victor had it shot and formed it into a book which was so far true to MacDonald's illuminated broadsides as to reproduce them in colour.

My life has always seemed to me like a benighted meander, but I have been

incredibly lucky in the good people who have crossed my path and changed its course. To thank such people personally is to pull them out of the cultural fabric they are part of and which they helped to create. To them and to me the fabric is the thing. Writing for *Ellipse* I was urged into the elegiac by the loss of bpNichol. Now I'm lamenting the loss of Coach House, that "[communal] event of absurd independence" (15), to adapt one of Margaret Avison's definitions of a poem, and now I single out with gratitude two other comrades, Victor Coleman and Michael Ondaatje.

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# Amusements

## Karl Siegler

(*A shorter version of this article was published in* Blood & Aphorisms *24, Fall 1996—ed.*)

The recent announcement of the closure of Coach House Press is worth a muse or three:

*Muse 1:* In the press release announcing its own demise, Coach House consistently describes itself (though never quite using these words) as an 'editorially driven press,' in other words, a publisher which makes its publishing decisions primarily for cultural rather than for financial reasons. In this respect, Coach House is not unique—in the same generation of publishers one can count a number of other editorially driven Canadian publishers: Anansi (now owned by General Publishing; James Lorimer; Oberon; and Talonbooks. Although these publishers were followed in the 1970s and 1980s by the establishment of a fair number of other editorially driven publishers in every region of the country, what makes this first generation unique is simply this: they were all founded in the 1960s, with their own private capital, well before the appearance of consistent annual government funding of publishing activities in Canada, beginning in Ontario (where all but one of these publishers are based) and at the federal level in 1971, and followed much later, if at all, in other provinces. (B.C., where Talonbooks is located, did not begin this type of funding for its publishers, at a level that has always been far below that of Ontario, until ten years later.) It has been these federal/provincial grant programs that have kept this first generation of editorially driven publishers alive, and allowed other, similar publishers, to be established coast to coast in the past 25 years, a circumstance alluded to in the most interesting part of the Coach House press release, worth quoting in its entirety.

> Coach House Press was founded by printer Stan Bevington, who ran the press until 1986, when it was restructured as a not-for-profit collective headed by playwright and screenwriter David Young. Since

> 1990, it has been directed by publisher Margaret McClintock, and since 1992 it has been a for-profit corporation.
>
> Coach House has, like most other Canadian publishers, always relied heavily on government grants for its survival [publically reported at $250,000 from federal and provincial sources in 1995-6]. In recent years the press has attempted to reduce this dependence; since 1990 through improved distribution through McClelland & Stewart and development of the US market, Coach House has more than tripled its sales and audience [in its most recent fiscal year, 1995-96, Coach House has publicly reported sales of $450,000]. Still, its focus on high-risk literary titles has meant that the press has never done better than break even, even after the grant revenue is applied. Keeping Coach House afloat has always been a tremendous struggle, requiring enormous sacrifices from many dedicated volunteers and staff.

There is, of course, a pattern here. Coach House Press, beginning in the 1960s out of an idealist vision of a printer, Stan Bevington (and artist/designer Rick/Simon), who made their technical skills available to a community of writers; to that community of writers taking over in 1986; to the importing of a professional arts manager in 1990; to finally restructuring itself "for-profit" in 1992. It is, by the latter half of the 1990s, the well known pattern of the monetarist commodification of the soul. What, specifically (other than the evolving fashions of the decades) gave rise to this pattern of development, one might legitimately ask. Could it have anything to do with the 25-year evolution of the federal/provincial grant programs, now contributing about 36% of the publisher's revenues? One quarter of a million dollars annually is, after all, a fair chunk of money which, depending on the terms and conditions under which it is handed out, is going to have a rather profound effect on the direction the applicant is going to take the company in.

*Muse 2:* In his response to the announcement that Coach House was closing its doors after thirty-one years of the culturally vital publication of cutting edge Canadian poetry, fiction, and drama, a publishing program so important that Marjorie Stone, President of the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE) took it upon herself to write to the Minister of Canadian Heritage, urging Sheila Copps to intervene and save the press for the benefit of current and future students of Canada (she didn't), Mike Harris, the Premier of Ontario, did not use the word 'culture.' That didn't surprise anyone, because neither the Government of Canada nor the Government of Ontario know anything



about culture. All Mike Harris said was that he guessed that Coach House "couldn't compete." What an odd thing for a guy who couldn't manage to run a ski resort profitably to say. The market for skiers, after all, is much larger than the market for avant-garde literature. Who is Mike Harris, then, to tell the Coach House board how to run its business?

And right there's the rub. Because in as much as the governments involve know nothing about culture, they know even less about business. Jean Chrétien's silence on the demise of Coach House can be interpreted only as assent. He did, after all, teach Mike Harris everything he knows, which between them, isn't much at all. I mean, what do these guys think? That the directors of Coach House, which did manage to "compete" very will in their chosen field of endeavour throughout the sixties when there were no grants for publishers, and which did manage to "compete equally well for the fifteen years between 1971 and 1986 when federal/provincial funding to publishers was based purely on cultural concerns, suddenly decided one day to 'mismanage' the company and become 'non-competitive' in 1996? That just doesn't make any sense. Where's Mike and Jean's much vaunted "common sense" when we really need it?

So what really happened at Coach House, and why should anyone interested in the maintenance of a uniquely Canadian literature be concerned? It's really very simple, once you realize that it didn't just happen to Coach House. Since 1986, when the Government of Canada froze culturally based Canada Council funding to Canadian publishers, and at an ever accelerating pace since 1992, when the Government of Canada relaxed the ownership requirements in the Canadian book trade, that government has been manipulating Canadian-owned publishers, particularly those specializing in our most culturally important books (poetry, fiction, drama, and serious non-fiction books of social commentary or criticism of interest primarily, although not exclusively, to Canadians) into bankruptcy. The province of Ontario has simply been following the 'leadership' of the federal government in this regard. How did they do it? By making any new funding to publishers after 1986 'business based' rather than 'culture based.' And there has been a lot of new funding since 1986. However, in order for publishers to continue to qualify for this new 'business' funding, they have had to demonstrate that both their sales and their profitability increased year over year. A lot of the new 'business based funding' was for marketing. In addition, publishers were actually solicited and encouraged to borrow money from the same government department(s), in large part against the substantially

increased 'business funding' the Government of Canada committed to the publishers for the five-year period 1992 through 1997, to 'kick start' or accelerate their growth strategies. It was precisely this new access to debt and equity financing, and to big marketing dollars, which helped Coach House, as well as many other publishers, to achieve the kind of growth figures described in their press release—a tripling of sales since 1990 through better distribution and marketing in Canada and abroad.

But there was a big catch involved in this new 'business-based approach.' What made Coach House appear to be such a model for the success of the approach is that they were starting from such a (self-acknowledged) position of deficiency in the areas of marketing and distribution in the late 1980s. The fact that they began from a point where their books were admittedly undersold and inefficiently distributed (one can assume sales of about $125,000 in 1989-90, if sales of $450,000 in 1995-96 represents "more than a tripling since 1990") created the illusion of success for these new 'business-based' funding mechanisms. But what about publishers which already had good and efficient and sufficient distribution for their kind of books in the late 1980s? How were they to both increase their sales and their profitability, year over year, for five years? There were only two ways, and only the second way worked.

Some publishers decided to publish more of the kinds of books the publisher specialized in, and market them well beyond the limit of diminishing returns with all those new marketing programs. But while this achieved higher sales, it did not result in growing profitability. It in fact made those companies less efficient, if you define 'efficiency' in business terms, where it always means 'operating at the limit of diminishing returns.' Now that didn't make any business sense at all, right? And if you read the Coach House press release carefully, that's exactly where they ended up in 1995-96. What does all this mean? Simply that the market for serious literary work of the kin that Coach House and Talonbooks specializes in is about $400,000 to $500,000 per year in current dollars, for about 26 new and re-issued titles annually. Trying to go beyond that puts the publisher face-to-face with the inelasticity of the market for this type of specialized product. Translated into English, it means at this point the niche market becomes saturated, and finding additional customers for these specialized, unique, and Canadian books becomes more expensive than the additional sales this additional effort generates.

The second way Canadian-owned publishers increased their sales and profitability was to begin publishing for foreign, mostly American and



French, markets. Anna Porter of Key Porter books openly acknowledges that her list has evolved in such a manner that while she still publishes Canadian authors, the content and editorial focus of their books is becoming markedly less Canadian, and is in fact intentionally aimed at primarily foreign, not Canadian markets. It is no accident that export sales of Canadian publishers have literally skyrocketed in the 1990s. But they have done so not by the publishers getting any better at exporting intellectual properties primarily of interest to Canadians, but by redirecting the content of their books to cater to the interest of foreign readers and markets. This is exactly how a succession of Canadian governments have shaped the Canadian film industry, running their support programs to help create ridiculously hapless and pale imitations of American film and television productions.

*Muse 3:* In 1995-96 the Government of Canada (followed quickly by the Government of Ontario) defaulted in year three of its five-year commitment to Canadian-owned publishers by cutting its commitment in year four by 55%, and cutting its commitment in year five by a further 12.5% of what was left, for a total default of 62% of what had been 'guaranteed' the publishers. Having enticed the publishers to enter into expansion and marketing plans well beyond the limits of diminishing returns, and take on huge, government-sponsored debtloads, something they never would have done without the existence of these government programs, they cut the publishers off at the knees without warning. They did not, however, forgive a commensurate 62% of the loans those publishers had been encouraged to get into with the same government(s). Oh no, those government loans were and are still repayable, in their full amounts, and with interest.

Had this kind of 'business' dealing been carried out in the private sector, the government players would now be facing the courts on charges of fraud, conspiracy, and entrapment. What followed immediately on the sudden default by the Government of Canada in early 1995 (which included the virtual disappearance of large marketing subsidies overnight) was a serious decline in sales as publishers scrambled to downsize their production and marketing of Canadian books to a more reasonable and businesslike level. This immediate reduction in sales exacerbated the sudden loss in grant support, resulting in far lower revenues than publishers had projected, and borrowed against, in 1995. But since all of this had happened without any warning whatsoever, publishers remained locked into their long-term expense commitments in the areas of author

contracts, employment contracts, leases, and—most important of all—debt financing. By 1996, Canada had a technically bankrupt publishing industry. Coach House was merely the first to acknowledge this, and to shut its doors.

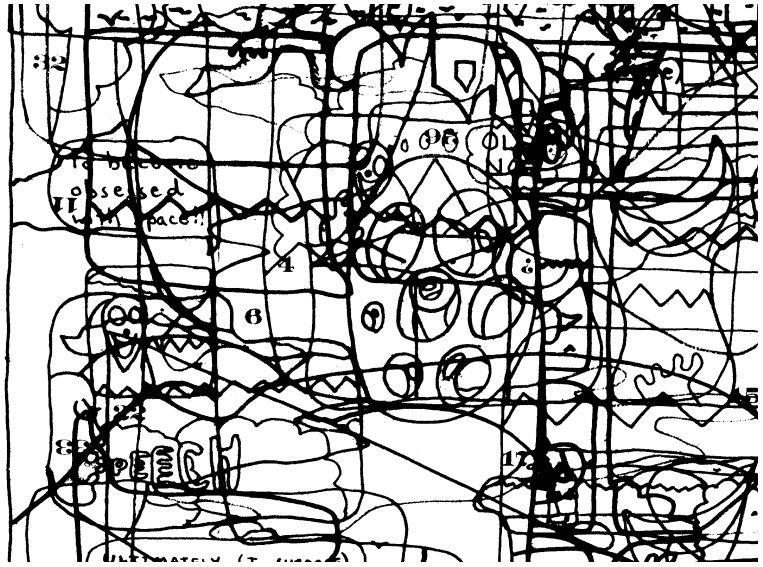
What does any of this have to do with business, or the problem of reducing government debt? Nothing. If the default by the Government of Canada on these 'business-based' programs really were founded on that government's struggle with its own deficit, it should have gone about its cuts to publishers in a businesslike way. It should have said to the publishers, 'Look, we can no longer afford to fund publishing at this level, so when our current commitment runs out in two years, we are going to have to reduce funding by 'X' amount. Publishers would then have had time to restructure in a rational and businesslike manner, and most of them would have found a way to continue their activities. But that's not even the worst of it, because the Government of Canada has proven time and time again that it does have the money. Governments always have a lot of money. What's important is what the choose to spend it on. Within weeks of Paul Martin announcing in February of 1995 that he was cutting support to Canadian publishers by about $20 million, Lloyd Axworthy was putting that same $20 million on the table "to save the Winnipeg Jets," a commercial hockey franchise in his neck of the woods. Within a year of Paul Martin announcing his $20 million cut, Sheila Copps was announcing that her department was going to spend it on a national unity campaign. These are the actions of a government which has lost trust in the people. If Sheila Copps puts that $20 million back into the publishing programs of her Department of Canadian Heritage, Canadian authors, publishers, and readers could continue to help facilitate a real national dialogue which, in the long term, would be a much more substantial contribution to real national unity than a silly little ad campaign that the now thoroughly jaded and cynical citizens will shrug off as another embarrassing joke, increasing their distrust of governments and contributing to the increasing feeling of helpless alienation between Canada's peoples and regions.

There is an aroma of ideology pervading the government's recent actions with respect to Canadian publishers. We are to have a publishing industry, but only one that derives the bulk of its revenues by serving global, not domestic, markets. We are to have national unity, but only one that is based on the most superficial of ad campaigns, not one based on an evolving national discourse among Canadians. The current government



of Canada (and all the federal parties are complicit in this) constitutes, in its truest sense, a colonial government—a government which shapes all its policies to appease foreign interests; a government with no effective national opposition; and a government incapable of the vision required to lead an independent, unique, and distinct nation into its own future. What the current Liberal government simply doesn't understand is that only by giving Canadian communities more, not less independence from what has become its international monetarist agenda, will Canada survive and flourish into the next century.

Detail from end-papers of bpNichol's *Two Novels* (1969).



# **NICHOLODEON**: epitaph

Darren Werschler-Henry

> True 'mourning' seems to dictate only a tendency: the tendency to accept incomprehension, to leave a place for it, and to enumerate coldly, almost like death itself, those modes of language which, in short, deny the whole rhetoricity of the true (the non-anthropomorphic, the non-elegaic, the non-poetic, etc.) (Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man,* 31)

*1. Anniversary.* Monday morning, July 15, 1996. A difficult enough day already. Too close to the anniversary of the end of my marriage to make any real difference emotionally, it was pissing rain outside in the name of pathetic fallacy (strike one). The weather was a real problem, because this was the date of the 4th annual Scream in High Park, the largest outdoor poetry reading in the country. Not only am I part of the organization committee, I was also supposed to be reading (strike two). I phoned Peter McPhee, the Scream Ayatollah, for the word on whether or not we proceed with the festival. Gayle Irwin answered the phone: "Oh, hi Darren... hey, I'm so sorry about your book, and what's happened to Coach House Press...." My response: incomprehension (strike three); my book, stillborn.

> For every poet begins (however "unconsciously") by rebelling more strongly against the consciousness of death's necessity than all other men and women do. (Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 10)

*2. Book. NICHOLODEON*: a book of lowerglyphs, my first collection of concrete and visual poetry, was accepted for publication by Coach House Press in the spring of 1995. It was always an "anxiety of influence" book, a conscious attempt to sort and rearrange sundry fragments of bpNichol's poetic corpus into the digital equivalent of the mosaic ossuaries of the Paris catacombs. *NICHOLODEON* strives to be art as envisioned in the opening pages of Jack Womack's *Elvissey*: delicate sculptures built from the bleached bones of the stillborn and the recently deceased, a Manitoban Book of the Dead.



> The fact that there are two of them signifies the end of all competition, the end of all original reference. (Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations,* 136)

*3. Coach House(s).* Coach House Printing and Coach House Press: my friends and I were always getting them confused, especially at grant application time. And when we'd been around enough long enough to hear the manifold narratives of the Great Schism, they were all different, and often contradictory. Seven blind sages, one elephant, and no omniscient perspective, ever. Printing/Press, part of the same machine, a proper noun despite protestations to the contrary.

> becoming clear to me, in news, distilleries for worms and clouds in the way third persons insinuate (Steve McCaffery, "Lag," *The Black Debt,* 20)

*4. Delay.* It seemed like everybody knew about the death of Coach House before I did. Christopher Dewdney, who was acting as my editor, had been dropping dire hints about the possible demise for months, but did his best to push the book through before everything collapsed. *NICHOLODEON* was initially scheduled for a 1997 release, but the editorial board decided to bump the book ahead a year when another writer was unable to produce a finished manuscript. By July 15, the final edit on the manuscript was long completed. Margaret McClintock and I had decided on a cover design and a size for the finished book. I was days away from beginning the final layout. But people at the press kept avoiding me. I would have worried more if I hadn't been busy with preparations for the Scream. From what I can gather, the editors were notified about the imminent death of the press around July 11. I was out of town for the weekend. Rumours filtered down to all of my friends by the night of Sunday July 14, while they were out drinking at Ilyich's. Some of them had known for days, but said nothing. Others tried to call me that night, but I never received the message. Nor did I ever receive the offical press release that Coach House assured me was in the mail. A weak end.

> Optional steps: Holes can be cut into the cozy and text can be stitched onto the cozy to aid visitors in the correct identification of the grave site. (Anonymous, *Tombstone Cozies for Knitters of All Ages,* 4)

*5. Epitaph.* A deconstructive figure a fortiori because of its uncertain, reversible status: on the head of a grave at the tail of a life, dictated by an absent other but in no sense necessarily faithful to that dictation, capable of re-membering a deceased who was never fully present until the writing of his life at the moment of death. Like all forms of punctuation, epitaphs

are liminal, falling between two states. Not only is *NICHOLODEON* a veritable graveyard of such (un)certain epitaphs—for friends, states of mind, heroes, relationships, artistic movements, and language itself—it also acts as an epitaph for the press in that it marks precisely the dividing point between two states in the life of Coach House. Before it had time to lie in state as the last book out of Coach House Press, it was already "The first book out of the gate from the brand new Coach House Books."[1] Epitaph from a tombstone on the marquee poster for *Return of the Living Dead:* Back from the grave and ready to party.

> If death comes to the other, and comes to us through the other, then the friend no longer exists except in us, between us. In himself, by himself, of himself, he is no more, nothing more. He lives only in us. But we are never ourselves, and between us, identical to us, a 'self' is never in itself or identical to itself. This specular reflection never closes on itself; it does not appear before this possibility of mourning, before and outside this structure of allegory and prosopopoeia which constitutes in advance all 'being-in-us,' 'in-me,' between us, or between ourselves. The selbst, the soi-mème, the self appears to itself only in this bereaved allegory, in this hallucinatory prosopopoeia—and even before the death of the other actually happens, as we say, in 'reality.' (Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man,* 28-29)

*6. Friends.* By the time my conversation with Gayle and Peter was over, there were two messages waiting on my answering service. The first was from Christian Bök, confirming what I had just inadvertently discovered, and offering his condolences. The second was from Victor Coleman and Stan Bevington: "If you're interested, the old guys want to do your book." I told Victor I'd think about it, and thanked him. When I hung up, there were three more messages waiting for me. And when I finished with those, there were another two. And so on. I spent the next three hours on the phone, returning calls from nearly every writer I know in Toronto. This collective show of concern touched me deeply; it was a demonstration of the kind of support that makes it possible to continue to be a writer in a financially depressed, politically conservative era. If Bell had diagrammed the phonecalls in and out of my apartment that day onto a map of the city, it would have delineated the rhizome of an author-function in mourning: a net work.

> Only Jim Hawkins may be innocent but even he is a little too eager to remain impartial and above the struggle which rages within every character in the story, and within himself.... There are no paragons in this story. There



> is no place for respectability on a creaking wooden ship manned by gentlemen of fortune, hell bent on getting rich quick on a blood-soaked hoard placing them only once removed from the villainous scum who accumulated the wealth on a god-forsaken island in the first place. (Ralph Steadman, Foreword to his illustrated edition of Stevenson's *Treasure Island,* 7)

*7. Grants.* Of course, everyone, including myself, had an agenda. My initial, skewed sense of moral certainty about *NICHOLODEON* stemmed from my conviction that its acceptance for publication was a rare instance of the Ontario Arts Council's Writers' Reserve grant program working in the manner that it professes in its Guidelines ("an outright and unconditional [grant] to the writer" that might lead to eventual publication) rather than the manner in which it usually does, despite its claims to the contrary ("A Writers' reserve grant cannot be represented or designated as any form of payment either owed or advanced by the publisher-recommender for past or future writing. Under no circumstances can a grant be substituted for royalties or fees"). I submitted the first seven poems from the manuscript to Coach House Press in the 1994 round of Writers' reserve applications, and received $750.00. That fall, Michael Redhill, who had been serving as an editor for the press, introduced himself to me through Michael Holmes, and asked to see a copy of the full manuscript when I'd completed it. In 1995, the press accepted the book for publication. Fine. But I did spend some nights lying awake wondering if what had got me to that position was the calculating deployment of bpNichol's signature in the book's title and content. On July 15, 1997, there was another cheque, this one for $1,000.00, from the Ontario Arts Council's Writers' Reserve program via the Coach House Press, sitting on top of my desk. It was for a project titled, ironically enough, "The Manitoban Book of the Dead," a manuscript of post-L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poems (after the press collapsed, I had no compunctions about inserting much of that work, and the title, into *NICHOLODEON*). The cheque had arrived Friday the 12th, and I hadn't had time to cash it yet. I stared at it the whole 3 hours I spent on the phone, wondering if it would bounce, and it began to look more and more like one of the boxes of Rice-A-Roni ("the San Fransisco treat") that losing contestants on seventies game shows received as consolation prizes. Thank you for playing. I pulled on my jacket, walked down to the bank in the rain, and cashed the motherfucker.

> you are your favourite letter of the alphabet except h cuz that has already been taken (Bill Kennedy, "APOSTROPHE," 51)

*8. (Ac)H(e).* Think about it: one man's personal obsession with a more or less arbitrary letter of the alphabet has spread to the point where several generations of Canadian poets have internalized it as their own. H is the shiniest toy in the box, and everybody wants it. I've personally witnessed several fights over who gets the "H" copy of an edition of lettered ephemera, maybe even participated in a few. Michael Holmes even had the entirety of Nichol's poem "H (an alphabet)" tattooed on his arm, an act that deepens in significance when one realizes, as anyone who has been tattooed can tell you, straight thick black lines hurt. And since bp's poem "Angel of Mercy," a parody of the international H-logo for hospitals, all Hs necessarily must be blue. One of the ephemeral inserts for *NICHOLODEON* is an envelope bearing the title "Angle of Mercury." It contains two cardstock cutouts of the letter Y. In blue.[2] (Wh)Y, not (w)H(y). Spelling counts.

> [M]ost so-called "accurate" interpretations of poetry are worse than mistakes; perhaps there are only more or less creative or interesting mis-readings, for is not every reading necessarily a clinamen? (Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence,* 43)

*9. Influence, Anxiety of.* As tight-assed and hubristic as Bloom's criticism can be, he does allow for the absolute necessity of the absurd. Through meticulously following texts like the rats' nest of bicycle tire tracks that comprises Alfred Jarry's uphill race through literature, Bloom makes a gradual departure, a minimal swerve (clinamen) away from his heavy investment in literary paternity. But he never quite realizes that some of those tire tracks that he's been following and annotating so carefully may belong to someone other than Jarry, or whoever the poet in front of him happens to be at the moment. This is a form of myopia endemic to critics. Somewhere between one third and one half of the poems in *NICHOLODEON* consist of poetic misreadings of Nichol's work, but they're still in the minority. The smug beauty of Bloom's argument, of course, is that as soon as one makes such a protestation, one proves the strength of the argument, QED. This realization in turn only provokes a sharper swerve. Expect heavy english on the next pitch.

> If 'Pataphysics (according to Jarry) is "the science of imaginary solutions" and thereby the source of answers to questions never posed, then "Pataphysics (diacriticized via the open quotation of a double elision) will be "the literature of all imaginary sciences." (Toronto Research Group, *Rational Geomancy,* 302)



*10. Jarry.* The bulk of dull-as-dirt twentieth century Canadian writing that official literary culture continually foists upon the reading public has had less to do either directly or indirectly with the work of the writers I know than the writing of Alfred Jarry. Some of them came to Jarry through Nichol's work with Steve McCaffery as the Toronto Research Group, others though Nichol's "Pataphysical Hardware Company. Others found traces of it in Situationism, Surrealism, underground comix, punk rock, and many of the other dubious and greasy corners of the glorious mess that is contemporary culture. People don't read in straight lines, much less lines of descent. The question of literary paternity is joyously and hopelessly confused (not to mention politically suspect) in an age of hypertext, the literary analogue of non-nuclear families and in vitro fertilization. If we are anyone's at all, we are Jarry's kids: we accept you, we accept you, one of us, one of us ....[3]

> lost in the k-hole[4]
> (title, track 9 of the Chemical Brothers' *dig your own hole*)

*11. Kenosis.* By the time I got to the reading at High Park, I was feeling pretty empty. For a day where it had rained steadily until early afternoon, we did all right, and around a thousand people showed up over the course of the evening. By this point in the day I had two offers from other small presses to do the book, and the germ of what would become a third, but I hadn't had the energy to mull any of them over yet. It had been an exhausting day; I felt like I'd been emotionally Roto-Rooted. I started to think about Stan and Victor's offer. They were still acting primarily as a printing company at that point. Under his own imprint, Stan had published Michael Holmes' *Satellite Dishes from the Future Bakery (channels 4 & 4.1),* and Matthew Remski's *Organon,* which I'd co-edited with Christian Bök; together with Victor and David Bolduc as the BBC Press, he'd also published Roy Kiyooka's *December-February 87 '88.* At the Scream wrap-up party that night, Stan told me that he had no intention of getting back into business as a publisher, "but one thing we do know how to do is make books." I couldn't argue. There are a lot of Coach House books on my shelf. Over the next few weeks I thought a lot about what it was that I wanted out of a published book. Operating on the assumption that about 10% of the public buys three or more books a month, maybe one percent of that ten (optimistically) is going to be buying poetry. Of that single percentile, a tiny fraction will be buying something other than

canonical poetry. In other words, I realized that I basically knew the entire audience for *NICHOLODEON* personally. So the issue was not one of distribution (an area in which most Canadian small presses fail dismally in any case). What I was left with was my sense of the importance of the book as a material object. The initial discussions I'd had with Margaret McClintock at Coach House Press had discouraged me because she'd immediately ruled out a number of experiments with physical form that had interested me: embossing, foldouts, inserts, colour, new media. Even my desire to format the book as a square (a suggestion which Michael Holmes made in the early stages of the manuscript, which immediately seemed appropriate because many of the poems had a square aspect) was out of the question. None of the other presses that I knew of had the resources or the inclination to actually make the book the way that I wanted it. Stan and Victor's offer was looking better all the time.

FIX SIGNS
(unknown Toronto graffiti artist)

*12. Lowerglyph.* In *The Visible Word,* Johanna Drucker argues that following the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, "The condemnation of the visual aspects of hieroglyphic writing to a subordinate, even insignificant, role was the harbinger of what would be typical of the nineteenth-century linguists' attitude towards all writing" (14). In many respects, that attitude is still with us. Though we live in a society that is becoming increasingly iconic and logo-driven, the response of a typical reader to anything glyphic is, paradoxically, to ignore its material qualities in favour of some other, absent text to which it allegedly alludes: "oh, the bathroom's this way...." There is nothing sacred or hieratic about the way we see glyphs, when we see them at all. What I tried to do in *NICHOLODEON* is reinsert a little uncertainty back into the circuit of reading, to insist on the materiality of the text to the point where it becomes problematic: "Like traffic signs from a parallel world, the job of these poems is to produce a vague sense of anxiety in the reader, fueled by the mistaken belief that they house some kernel of meaning that they desperately wish to communicate, despite nearly impossible odds" ("Surplus Explanations"). If it was up to me, you'd never find the bathroom.

> In my opinion, the sycophantic, almost cult-like legitimacy gained in some circles by associating with Coach House (in whatever incarnation) paints a far grimmer picture of the future of Canadian literature than the institution's demise ever did. (Suzie Snipe [pseud.], *Word magazine,* March 1997, 8)



*13. Manuscript.* When I walked into the Coach House in mid-August, manuscript in hand, something had changed. Victor was talking about starting something he was referring to as "The Press Formerly Known As Coach House," which would publish books in digital form. I wasn't sure how my manuscript fit into that picture yet, if it did at all. He assured me that they'd produce bound photocopies of books, or of "the fetish items formerly known as books" (by this point, the Prince joke was already wearing thin) for people who wanted them, but only in small batches, in order to avoid the problems associated with warehousing back catalogue titles. I wasn't sure I wanted that either; the reason I'd decided on Coach House was because of the care that I knew they'd lavished on books in the past. But I decided to stay the course, despite my apprehension. As a result, I was privy to something quite amazing: the reconfiguration of a venerable Canadian publishing institution into something that a) may become the model for small presses into the next century, or b) will go tits-up within the next two years.

a pillow in a coffin's just as nice as a bed
o baby I love it when you fuck me dead
(Forgotten Rebels, "Fuck Me Dead"

*14. Necrophilia.* So what? It's all diagrammed out for you in *NICHOLODEON,* with tiny little skulls at the bottom of all applicable pages. Besides, necrophilia is in this year, what with the suburban legitimacy of Goth culture (they have annual conventions now, I shit you not) and the release of *Kissed,* the movie adaptation of Barbara Gowdy's story "We So Seldom Look On Love." We're all guilty of it—myself, Margaret's McClintock's version of Coach House, Stan and Victor's version of Coach House—at least as far as the deployment of bp's signature as a sign of legitimacy and continuity with the one of the more interesting figures in recent Canadian literary history goes. That being said, what really chaps my ass are the people who don't realize that an avant-garde of any stripe, mine or theirs, is no longer possible, because in a decentred society, there's nothing to be avant of anymore. I choose to mark out my complicities to the best of my ability in order to figure out what has yet to be done, or what can be rewritten in a more interesting manner. If all of the third-rate Spoken Word waterheads in this country would do the same, maybe some of them would realize that they're reinventing the fifth wheel on the poetrymobile, and move on.

> LEECHES, Physicians, Chriurgeons, and Anatomists employ Bodysnatchers. Sorcerers and Wizards use Ghouls. All may find, if they continue to use the services of such persons, the body of their best-loved friend before them on the dissecting table one foggy morning. (Barbara Ninde Byfield, "Bodysnatchers," *The Book of Weird* 32)

*15. Obtainium.* There's a real pleasure in swiping stuff to make art. Everything, even words, are a re-citation of something from somewhere else. Traces of other narratives, other contexts, extend off infinitely in all directions. Those traces act as heuristic handles for potential readers. Most days, I think that the more traces you leave, the more ways the art object can be manipulated, and the more interesting the art. Part of the fun is trying to figure out the crazy-quilt of samples, but knowing that you don't have to get it all to enjoy the art, because no one ever does. The danger lies in sampling too heavily from one source; I'd rather be DJ Shadow or Beck than the next Vanilla Ice.

> Now Barabbas was a publisher.
> (attr. George Gordon, Lord Byron)

*16. Publishing.* By the time Rick/Simon and I started doing the layout for *NICHOLODEON* in early October, Coach House Books was as well-formed an entity as it is now. Stan and Victor had decided on a sort of compromise for the format of their editions: small initial runs of finely printed books, coupled with more or less simultaneous electronic editions. That suited me fine, because it allowed for the kind of flexibility and input that I was certain was unavailable elsewhere. Stan's whole approach as a publisher is interesting, because it demands input from the writer: he sits you in front a computer loaded with software that you likely know nothing about, and simply expects you to learn it. When you get stuck, he's there immediately with at least three different possible answers, and you can pick the one that suits you best. A Coach House book isn't so much designed as it is evolved. Every time I came up with an idea that I was sure they'd reject (the embossed cover, the foldout, the inserts, the colour text in "Amo(i)re"), the opposite happened: they became even more enthused about it than I was. The only sticking point we had was over the price of the book. I did (and I still do) think that 35 bucks is too much for a book of poetry, even if a version of it is available online for free. We had several fights about that over the course of two weeks, but managed to work out an agreement that we both could stand. They'd sell the book for 18 dollars at the launch as a one-time only price, and they'd



make copies available to me at cost so that I could ensure that my impoverished friends could afford them. They've been incredibly generous to me ever since, so I have a hard time with the argument that Coach House Books is only in it for the money.

From poetry? Give me a break. As for the online version of the book, Stan's brainwave was to design a form that would allow conscientious web surfers to tip the writers whose work they liked. I'm still undecided about this gesture. It's either hopelessly naïve (I've been online since 1990, and am very aware that hardcore net users are extremely reluctant to pay for anything that they can have for free), or totally visionary (at some point, web use will become ubiquitous due to new technologies like web TVs and cable modems, and the bulk of the population will begin to use the Internet in the same way that they do the home shopping channel ... not that the bulk of the population buys poetry. At that point, presumably Coach House Books will have been in the online publishing game for several years, and will begin to reap the rewards). Either way, it's good press.

> Who actually buys books of poetry and reads them? Whart happens to all the paintings of failed artists when they die? Why do you keep smoking when you know what it is doing to your lungs? (David Arnason, "Do Astronauts Have Sex Fantasies?" 94)

*17. Questions.* The pseudonymous "Susie Snipe" poses the following question about the rebirth of Coach House Books in her column in the March 1997 issue of *Word magazine:* "As is typical of their generation, Coach House is part of a literary establishment that would dupe the young into believing that only [sic] worthwhile accomplishments happened before they were born. More depressing still, they seem intent on feeding us those same fading accomplishments in perpetuity. Is that the sort of hopeless future that we really want to promote?" The only pose more tired than this weak-ass "us versus them" generational stance, which completely ignores the incredibly significant presence at Coach House Books of card-carrying disaffected GenX members like designer Chris Bolduc and editor Hilary Clark, would be the indignant reaction for which it begs. Alfred Jarry's dry ruminations on the subject are much more thought-provoking:

> We too shall become solemn, fat and Ubu-like and shall publish extremely classical books which will probably lead to our becoming mayors of small towns where, when we become academicians, the blockheads constituting

> the local intelligentsia will present us with Sèvres vases, while they present their moustaches on velvet cushions to our children. And another lot of young people will appear, and consider us completely out of date, and they will write ballads to express their loathing of us, and that is just the way things should always be. (85)

In the words of the immortal Stan Lee: 'nuff said.

> Regrets: I've had a few,
> But then again, too few to mention
> (Paul Anka, "My Way" [as interpreted in turn by Frank 'the Original Gangsta' Sinatra, Sid Vicious, and the Gipsy Kings])

*18. Regrets.* I never met bpNichol. Nor did I ever see him perform live. But then again, if I had, I probably wouldn't have written *NICHOLODEON.* My mandate was to attempt to move beyond the purely anecdotal "I knew bp when" mode that dominates Nichol criticism in particular and Canadian LitCrit in general. Painstakingly combing over the sacred fragments of Nichol's corpus in order to produce glossaries, annotated bibliographies and the inevitable biographies in order to fix meaning is not only tedious, it also represents a willful ignorance of the polysemy and free play of any text. But what can you do? As Nichol himself noted in the motto to his "Pataphysical Hardware Company, "Anything That Signifies Can Be Sold."

> The disgraceful pictures in nearly every locality corrupt the morals of boys and girls by wicked schemes (S. Hotchkiss [pseud.], "Evil Effects of Pernicious Literature: Nineteenth Century Hieroglyphics," 87)

*19. Sacred Cattle Mutilation.* The sacred is interesting insofar as it supplies a series of useful targets, but any form of blasphemy always presupposes the existence of some superior entity worthy of that blasphemy. That the legacy of bpNichol, and of Coach House itself, can be critiqued and lampooned indicates that there is still something there worth blaspheming. Not that either Nichol or the earliest incarnation of Coach House were afraid of making fun of themselves; one of my favourite Nichol pieces is the cartoon on the title page of *ART FACTS,* which depicts a cartoon human (Milt the Morph), frog, and dog, all with their arms round each others' shoulders. A single thought balloon floats above their heads. Each is thinking the same thing: "Soon I'll off these bastards and become number one in the kids' hearts." Pretty funny, coming from a guy who wrote for *Fraggle Rock.*



> We will be able to read this cartouche both as a title and as a signature.... Where has the cartouche gone? It steals itself. (No) more narrative, (no) more truth. (Jacques Derrida, "Cartouches," *The Truth in Painting,* 214, 220)

*20. Titles. NICHOLODEON*'s sub-title ("a book of lowerglyphs") points to a reference I've only found once in Nichol's published work. The acknowledgements to *ART FACTS: a book of contexts* mention that this book is the third in a series began by *LOVE: a book of remembrances,* and *ZYGAL: a book of mysteries & translations.* These books have always been very important to me; I think that they contain writing that is ultimately more interesting and provocative than anything in *The Martyrology.* The acknowledgements also refer to two books to follow *ART FACTS: OX, HOUSE,CAMEL, DOOR: a book of higher glyphs,* and *TRUTH: a book of fictions.* Nichol died in September of 1988, shortly after assembling the completed manuscript of *ART FACTS.* A posthumous manuscript titled *TRUTH: a book of fictions* (originally intended to be the fifth in the series) appeared from Mercury Press in 1993, but it's a sad, patchwork affair. The state of *OX, HOUSE, CAMEL, DOOR* remains a mystery, though it was to have been published fourth in the series by Underwhich Editions. I asked Paul Dutton about the manuscript, but he didn't remember it, and it remains a virtual book to this day. *NICHOLODEON* is not a substitute for that book, but a lowercase cenotaph, a monument to its absence.

> ubu buddha
> ubermensch
> troubadour
> obese oboe
> beelzeboub
> boobytraps
> scuba gear
> juggernaut
> of bugaboo
> bugger off
> (Christian Bök, "Ubu Hubbub")

*21. Ubu.* If the death of Coach House Press accomplished nothing else, at least it dragged the Ontario Conservative government's agenda for the arts community out into the light of day. Mike Harris' labeling of Coach House as a 'corporate welfare bum' ricocheted across the TV and print media that week; even my parents heard about it ("Say, that business

about Coach House in the news doesn't affect you at all, does it, son?"). There's nothing like a common enemy to galvanize the left; for a few weeks that summer, every writer I know was hyper-aware that what they do has serious political implications, whether they like it or not. Besides, imagining Premier Harris as King Ubu has the added advantage of placing a large, well-defined bullseye across his enormous, sagging gut.

> The poet hosts a parasite.
> (Christopher Dewdney, "Parasite Maintenance" 77)

*22. Vectors.* Most interesting of all is when people take what you've done and translate it (as opposed to simply stealing it and pawning it off as your own), extending the poetic continuum. Christian Bök, Steve Cain, damian lopes and Lucas Mulder have already all done translations of poems from *NICHOLODEON,* many of them better than the material with which they started.[5] Collaboration of this sort interests me both creatively and theoretically, because it makes manifest something that is always the case: poems evolve themselves. Poets are simply the vectors that transport them.

> VAC M
> ("Cenotaph for David UU," from *NICHOLODEON* [insert])

*23. UU.* David UU (Born David W. Harris), another concrete poet, was a contemporary of bpNichol. His own work was by turns incisive and whimsical, but the project of his that impresses and inspires me the most was his Berkeley Horse chapbook series. These exquisitely handcrafted little books contained poetry of all descriptions by nearly every interesting Canadian poet I can think of in the past several generations. They weren't mass-marketed in any way; they sold simply by word of mouth, and through David's voluminous correspondence. The Berkeley Horse series set a very high benchmark for generosity, intelligence and craft that should be the goal of every publisher of poetry, period. The effect of David's death was like Laurie Anderson's lament for her father: "It was like a whole library burned down." Only nobody goes to libraries any more, which is why I think it's part of a poet's job to re-member the secret history of Canadian literature.

> considered then as a complete unit the SECRET NARRATIVE of the alphabet becomes
>
> A ( B D E F G H I J K L N O M R S T P Q ) V =3D X



> (bpNichol, "Re-discovery of the 22-letter alphabet: An Archaeological Report," 43)

*24. X.* There used to be this cartoon on *Sesame Street* about Cowboy X, who rode around yelling "Cowboy X! Cowboy X! Yahoo!" and branding great big Xs all over everything. The townspeople got really annoyed by this, and finally worked up the courage to ask him to stop. He agreed, and promptly changed his name to Cowboy O, with predictable results. I'm not really sure what this says about the state of Canadian letters, but it's probably yet another example of something. It sure would have made a good Grease Ball Comic,[6] though.

> Just say "Thanks, Man" to drugs
> (T-shirt on Yonge Street)

*25. (Wh)Y.* Write this piece. Not really to explain myself, and certainly not to clarify anything. Perhaps because, as Charles Bernstein writes, "Poetics is the continuation of poetry by other means. Just as poetry is the continuation of politics by other means" (160). The borders of *NICHOLODEON* have always been deliberately fuzzy, and this is due to a number of factors: because it is built from collaborations (witting or otherwise), translations, and found material; because of the copious amounts of ephemera that circle the book like a literary asteroid belt; and because of the electronic edition of the book, which continues to grow and change. Appending an essay or two to this object makes sense (only) because I hadn't thought of it earlier.

> Zygal: Pertaining to or having a zygon [an H-shaped fissure of the brain].
> (Paraphrased from bpNichol, *ZYGAL: a book of mysteries and translations,* 125)

*26. Zygal. NICHOLODEON* is an attempt to build a dialectical bridge, but one that will never be finished because it never can be finished. Sometimes it tends in a direction that would lead from my poetics to those of the writers I admire most, living and dead. Sometimes it looks like it spans the distance from Coach House to Coach House. Mostly, it goes from Now/Here to Nowhere. The important thing to me is the process of building; someone else can figure out what to do with it.

*27. &. Supplement.* A Chant for Saint And (Readers' Digest Version):

> and

&
ampersand
ampers&
ampersampersand
ampersampers&
so on

## Notes

[1] Text from invitation to the *NICHOLODEON* launch, Coach House Books, 1997.

[2] When we were discussing what kinds of ephemera we'd like distribute at the book launch, Stan Bevington grined at me and said, "So I've got this whole box of letter Ys. Wanna see 'em?" Cool. So I took them home, and the poem wrote itself two days later.

[3] Ceremonial chant of the eponymous Freaks in Tod Browning's classic film, and of Ramones fans everywhere.

[4] Ketamine, an animal tranquilizer that has become the drug of the moment in the New York and London club scenes, produces a state of detachment and withdrawal that users refer to a s a "k-hole."

[5] Visit http://www.popped.com/hyperglyph for a look at <nicholodeon/nicholodeon>, Lucas Mulder's beautiful and extensive translation site.

[6] The Grease Ball Comics were one of Nichol's smaller, and stranger, publishing ventures.

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# Contributors

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***Julie Beddoes****,* an editor at General Publishing during the 1970s, teaches at the University of Saskatchewan.

***Victor Coleman*** has in various years in Toronto edited and directed Coach House Press, A-Space Gallery, and The Music Gallery. His most recent book is *Lasped W.A.S.P.: Poems 1978-89* from ECW Press.

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***Stan Dragland*** is author of the Coach House books *Journeys through Bookland, Peckertracks, Wilson Macdonald's Western Tour,* and *Bees of the Invisible.*

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***David Rosenberg***'s fourth Coach House book (a collaboration with *The Ant's Forefoot* #11), *The Necessity of Poetry* (1973), is being restored this year, with a new introduction. His latest book, *The Book of David* (Random House, Nov.'97) is about the origin of writing. His *A Poet's Bible* won the PEN/Book-of-the-Month Club Prize, and *The Book of J* (coauthored with Harold Bloom) has been re-translated into several languages, including Japanese. *Excellent Articles of Japan* was his first Coach House 'book.'

***Karl Siegler*** is owner and editor of Talonbooks, a publishing house founded in 1967 and longtime publisher of poetry collections by Phyllis Webb, bpNichol, Brian Fawcett, George Bowering, bill bissett, David McFadden, Fred Wah, and Daphne Marlatt, and of drama by Michel Tremblay, George Ryga, Wendy Lill, Sharon Pollock, John Murrell, David Freeman, Michael Cook, David Fennario, James Reaney, John Gray, Herschel Hardin, Timothy Findley, and others.

***Darren Wershler-Henry*** recently co-edited with Christian Bök the 'Millennial 'Pataphysics issue of *Open Letter*. His visual poetry book *NICHOLODEON* is newly available from Coach House Books.


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