

A Testament to the Future

Andrew Steeves' new collection of essays takes stock of the craft of printing and presents PETER MITHAM with a subtle manifesto for its future.

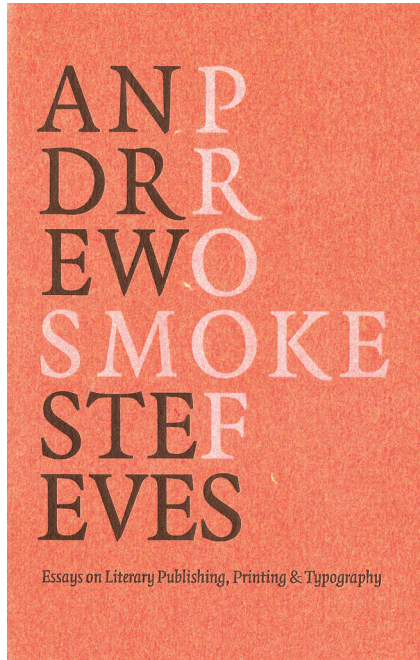
THIS IS A BOOK by a maker of books, his first since a narrow volume of poetry in 1996, enticingly titled *Cutting the Devil's Throat*. It is, one hesitates to add, self-published, if that term can be applied to a publisher's book about his craft issued from his own press that remains consistent in design, content and calibre with the rest of his list.

Smoke Proofs: Essays on Literary Publishing, Printing and Typography is very much, in keeping with this background, a testament at mid-career from Andrew Steeves to the influences and vision that have guided

Gaspereau as one of Canada's foremost literary publishers of its generation. Gaspereau Press, the venture of not only Andrew Steeves but also his business partner Gary Dunfield, is no stranger to members of the Alcuin Society, being a regular winner of the Society's annual Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada.

However, it is Steeves who has been the public face and—if you will—apologist for the press since its inception in 1997. He contributes to the press's social media channels, is a contributing editor to *The Devil's Artisan* (DA), and has done much to explain the ethics of the press in the media and elsewhere.

My own first encounter with Steeves was in a small coffee house on Fredericton's Queen Street late in 1997. The venue wasn't among my usual haunts in that city, but it happened to be the local venue for introducing the *Gaspereau Review*, which promised to be a small quarterly magazine (it would eventually have a run of



16 issues). The sense of place the review expressed piqued my interest. I keenly re-viewed its early titles for the Fredericton *Daily Gleaner* and saw the editorial direction of the press evolve; my last night in New Brunswick before moving to Vancouver in September 1998 was spent at a Gaspereau reading, and I remember waving farewell to Steeves as I left for the bus depot.

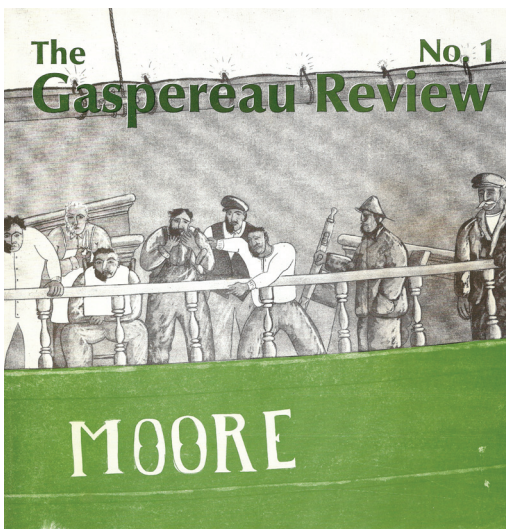
Close to two decades on, the publishing business has changed significantly. In this volume, Steeves' essays chart both his personal journey and his reflections on where the

industry has come from, and the part he believes a press like Gaspereau can play in the literary marketplace. It is more memoir than manifesto: a collection that takes stock of the ideas, rather than the books, that have influenced the press and been practised by it over half a lifetime.

FINDING INSPIRATION IN LIBRARIES

Smoke Proofs has seven chapters (or essays). The first four discuss the importance of personal and institutional libraries in shaping Steeves' imagination and informing his practice of printing, as well as the how mass media and mass access to publishing tools have shaped our understanding of an activity once limited to those with the capital and connections to pursue it.

Some of this is familiar ground, though Steeves puts his own twist on the material. His perspective contributes to the book's character, adding a personal retrospective—his own experience and professional development are



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The Gaspereau Review No. 1 (Fall 1997).

intertwined with the ideas and animate them. “[These essays] shift back and forth between the philosophical and the practical,” he writes, with a note of concern he quickly allays: “The fact is there is no neat divide between these worlds in my own life.” The essays are an opportunity for him to reflect, “testing and proofing one’s work against the ideal,” which he finds in libraries and the works of the predecessors in the trade who have inspired him. Acknowledgement of his father’s influence and his own early forays into publishing with a homemade newspaper give way to his discovery of libraries as a preliminary workbench where he could discover and explore ideas. Steeves pays homage to a cloud of witnesses (as it were) that gently watch over his work: printer Thomas Cobden-Sanderson, typographer Stanley Morison, conservationist Wendell Berry, graphic designer Glenn Goluska, and others.

Consideration of how publishing has evolved in his own life and the life of the wider world in the first four essays gives way in the fifth essay to consideration of the finer points of publishing design as he presents the decisions needed in laying out a poem: how the content of words is conveyed in print versus oral delivery. One senses the influence (never mentioned in the chapter) of Steeves’ sometime-collaborator, poet Robert Bringhurst (Gaspereau published Bringhurst’s essay *The Solid Form of Language*), but the essay

takes issue with the challenge and importance of listening to a text in order to present it properly within the material confines of a printed book.

The sixth chapter—one would hardly call it an essay in the traditional sense—is an interview with Steeves that offers an outside perspective (courtesy of the interviewer) on his own work. It may be the weakest chapter, as Steeves, like all interview subjects, responds to questions not necessarily of his own making. The ceding of control breaks up the book, even as it allows another perspective on his career to emerge.

The final essay, “Literary Publishing and Deep Regard,” even-handedly considers some of the issues at stake in the current publishing environment. William Morris’s ideals may have inspired a generation of fine press printers but Steeves takes his lead from what may best be termed ecologists—Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, Wendell Berry—in an optimistic call to continue renewing the publishing environment (if you will) from the deep well of its traditions even in times of technological change.

“In twenty years I expect to be publishing books in much the same fashion I am publishing them today, employing a mixture of technology, skill and knowledge of my craft to present new texts to the public,” Steeves writes. “Everything else is details.”

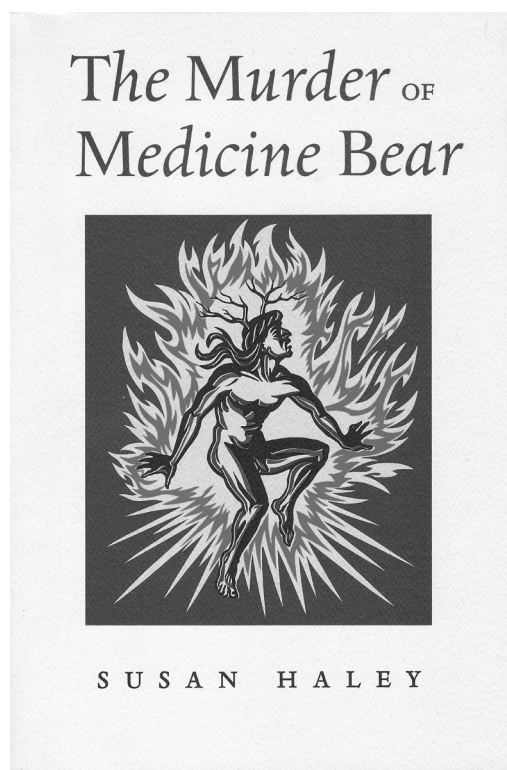
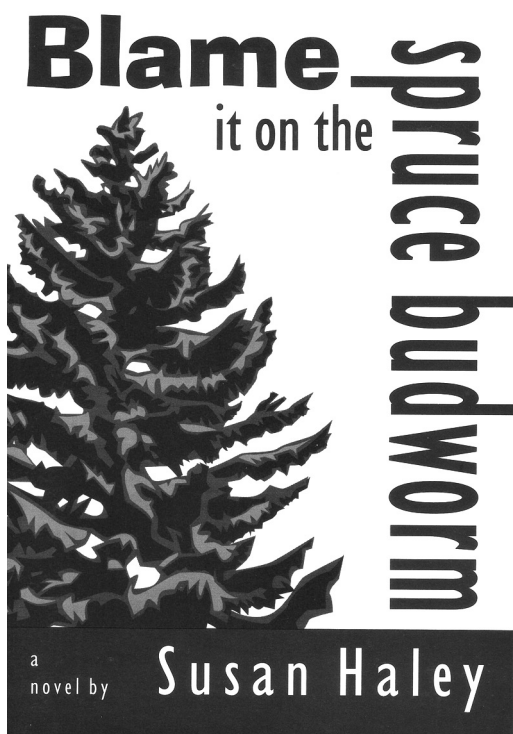
One takes the measure of this by imagining a scribe in the 15th century saying the same things. This is an especially significant exercise for the Alcuin Society, with its awards for book design and moniker taken from that of a scribe who developed Carolingian minuscule (a script that facilitated the legibility and spread of the printed word). Will publishing really change, if reduced to an amalgam of technology, skill and first-hand experience?

IMAGINATION VS.

THE DEMANDS OF COMMERCE

Steeves, however, seems to be asking deeper questions.

Just before reading this small volume, I made good on a long-standing intention to read Czesław Miłosz, *The Land of Ulro* (1985). It is a tough read, and my mind continues to wrestle with the concepts and argument Miłosz sets



Smoke Proofs gives the background to Gaspereau's evolving design sensibilities; these covers for Susan Haley's novels the press published in 1998 and 2003—just five years apart—highlight the shift.

forth. What's inescapable, however, and resonated with me as I read Steeves, was Miłosz's discussion of the imagination and, in many respects, its sacrifice to other interests over the past two centuries. Where Steeves stresses the importance of relearning how printing is done, how the works of the imagination assume solid form, Miłosz explores how the imagination is now in thrall to rational and materialistic concerns. Where art once helped us make sense of the world, this role is now granted to works of quantitative analysis, a perspective that "defies the imagination" and sees humanity through "an eternity of mathematical relations and laws, a spatial dimension purged of time." But for Miłosz, and the imagination, time and space cannot be uncoupled, and science is neither neutral nor separate from the world it describes. Miłosz references Blake, who still granted humanity a privileged place within creation: "Just as the artist bodies forth his work from the essential thing in him, so God, in fashioning man, gives proof of His essence: His divine humanity."

These are lofty ideas, but a profound testimony to embodied experience and the power of the imagination to grasp the known and the unknown together, making sense of both in a single glance such that material facts don't obstruct our view of possibilities. Miłosz acknowledges the profoundly foreign nature of this stance in a world where faith—our imagining the world, including its expression in art—has become something of a wager (yes, he cites Pascal) because giving material form to what we believe in must always contend with material realities.

And what does this have to do with publishing, the concern of Steeves' essays?

Digital books, like knowledge, are the fruit of scientific inquiry that disembodies them from the page into a false eternity, a false infinity. To crib from Miłosz's text, the texts we scroll through appear as "an endless succession of moments lapsing into nothingness" offscreen rather than quires of leaves through which we've passed, and those through which we've yet to



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This keepsake printed for an Alcuin Society event in 2005 illustrates Steeves' evolving use of type as a vehicle for written and visual meaning.

read. And they disappear into “illusory space, indefinite duration,” rather than remaining in whatever material form the codex takes.

And publishers, Steeves argues, are less and less enamoured of the physical book because it represents a cost of doing business. “A publisher, ever worried about his razor-thin profit margins, asks: *Why pay extra to Smyth-sew a book if the reader won't notice the difference?*” Steeves writes, before answering: “This is a human problem, not a technological one.”

But the imagination fails before the demands of commerce; material things cost money, and while small literary presses bow before the bean counters and scale back their investment in craftsmanship, the larger multinationals strategically “tart up their books” (in Steeves’ opinion) with what will catch the buyer’s eye while saving money on design, paper and bindings.

“As we wrestle with questions of profit, quality and technology, we sometimes forget that the long-term survival and success of a text is closely tied to the quality of the physical artefact that will transmit it through time and space,” Steeves writes. “Sometimes, I think we accept shoddy books because we fail to imagine that anything else is possible.”

FAITH IN PHYSICAL BOOKS

And this, perhaps, may be the deeper conclusion to draw from Steeves’ collection of essays, and

his broader experience as a literary press in the current generation; while the technology may change, the value we place on the very skills and imagination required to lend material form to what we imagine has changed. Steeves is right when he says the business has never been an easy one in which to make money; yet there seems even less to go around today, as such a premium is placed on the material forms of new texts.

Although there are those of us who value the physical form of the book, digital editions are much more compact and convenient for most readers. The market for second-hand books is effectively dead, save for those titles that can sell in a matter of weeks, limiting the resale value of most mass-market texts. Writers, meanwhile, continue to struggle with meagre royalties.

Reading this book at a symposium for writers in California this past February was both encouraging and an escape: on the one hand, this book affirmed a future for publishing in some form; on the other, well-known authors at the symposium, such as wine authority Jancis Robinson, couldn’t recommend books as a way for younger writers to make their names. There is too much information at people’s fingertips to give any one writer the kind of authority that commands an audience, a market, of the sort that established her own career. And yet the physical book remains, and likewise Steeves’ faith in print publishers to make it a living thing.

Thirty years ago, Sven Birkerts observed in his essay “Notes from a Confession” that one kind of reading consists of gazing at a shelf of books: “Just to see my books, to note their presence, their proximity to other books, fills me with a sense of futurity.” Writing this spring in *The New Republic*, novelist William Girdaldi picks up on this quote, noting that digital books, lacking material presence, cannot offer any sense of the future.

Smoke Proofs is an eloquent testament to a belief in the future. While acknowledging that physical books occupy the smallest hair’s breadth of time in comparison to the material world, Steeves nevertheless affirms the importance and value of publishers and the books their presses print, in delivering a legacy to the future.

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◀ Peter Mitham is editor of *Amphora*.