

# Designs on Excellence

PETER MITHAM takes measure of the love that bred and continues to foster the Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada.

“WHAT HAS BEEN left out of this article is the story of all the struggles, disagreements and colour of this competition over the years.”

So ended the brief history of the annual competition known today as the Alcuin Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada in the double number of *Amphora* issued for the Alcuin Society’s 40th anniversary in 2005.<sup>1</sup> A decade later, there is more colour—even the annual catalogue of winners has shed the black and white of yore—and the disagreements and struggles have continued at one level or another. But so have the entries and the winners, and if reviews of such competitions are prone to reel off columns of numbers that testify to the work accomplished, history remembers the accomplishments of the winners who have distinguished themselves.

Of course, all such competitions are tilted in favour of those who enter, but history is written by the winners so far as their works enjoy the recognition and support of their peers.

So it is with the Alcuin awards, which this year recognized a small cohort of book designers from among the dozens at work in Canada. The number of publishers has dwindled through consolidation and collapse, but those that remain active continue to demonstrate their ability to adapt to shifting economic circumstances.

“Twentieth century presses such as Nonesuch and Penguin demonstrated how mechanization could incorporate traditional design and production values to produce inexpensive books of distinction,” writes Andrew Steeves in his recent essay collection, *Smoke Proofs: Essays on Literary Publishing, Printing & Typography* (Gaspereau Press, 2014), itself a winner of an Alcuin award this year even as it affirms, and urges, investments by publishers in the activities that make such awards possible.

“Publishing is all about paying attention in the same way that reading is all about paying attention,” Steeves writes a few pages earlier.

“It is about understanding the materials you are working with and the way they function in the world.”

## STOPS AND STARTS IN EARLY YEARS

But, as Steeves points out, acquiring such understanding gets short shrift from publishers focused on margins and expenses (too often at the expense of the value that good design adds to books).

To encourage—and reward—publishers who possessed such understanding, Peter Quartermain suggested to his fellow board members of the Alcuin Society that the Society organize a competition to recognize “the best designed trade book published in Canada in 1980.” The suggestion came forward in June 1981, setting a precedent for future competitions in terms of recognizing books published in the preceding year. The terms were tight: eligible books had to be of no less than 45 pages, published in an edition of at least 500, and sold for no more than \$25.

A handful of entries were received; three categories were established, and the winners included

PROSE: Glenn Goluska, designer of David McFadden, *A Trip Around Lake Huron* (Coach House Press)

POETRY: Quadrant Editions, for Stephen Scobie, *McAlmon’s Chinese Opera* (Quadrant Editions)

PICTORIAL: Frank Newfeld, designer of Judy Thompson Ross et al., *Down to Earth: Canadian Potters at Work* (Nelson Canada)

Close readers will recognize two of the names as later winners of the Robert R. Reid Award and Medal for Lifetime Achievement in the Book Arts in Canada, instituted by the Society in 2007, as much a testimony to the calibre of entries that year as to the kind of designer likely to take part.

Readers familiar with the annual competition will also note that 1981 was 34 years ago, and yet 2015 marked the 33rd round of the event.

A good idea, once proven, is always subject to change, and so it was with the nascent Alcuin awards. The many twists and turns (“struggles, disagreements”) in the early evolution of the awards are charted elsewhere, but the course of love—in this case, of good design—never did run smooth. Getting the right people in place, and the second “annual” awards on track, took two years, and not until 1984 were publishers asked to submit their best-designed books of (we might as well say it) the early 1980s. A total of 116 books from 1981, 1982 and 1983 were received, the winners selected, and awards duly made.

A third competition along the lines of the competition known today occurred in 1985, and the awards themselves were beginning to garner the recognition that boosted their prestige in the publishing industry. By 1987, exhibitions of the winning books began to take place; categories were expanded and criteria loosened to accommodate the full range of books being published in Canada. What had started out as a simple competition became one reflecting the diversity of the book design work performed in Canada, from small, private presses to large corporate entities.

#### INCREASING INTERNATIONAL RENOWN

Today, the Alcuin Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada enjoy international recognition. The past decade has seen the competition come into its own. One might well say that it turned 21, and stepped onto the national and global stage as a respectable adult. A bilingual catalogue of the winning books was produced in 2006, and that same year Friederike Ottnad of the Stiftung Buchkunst in Frankfurt, Germany, invited the Alcuin Society to participate in exhibitions at the two major international book fairs, in Frankfurt and Leipzig. The Stiftung organizes both the book fairs and the international book design competition held annually in Leipzig in February. As of 2006, winning books as selected by the Alcuin Society have been shown as the official Canadian “best designed books of the year” there, and have been Canada’s entrants in the competition.



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*Canada at the Leipzig Book Fair in March 2007.  
(Astrid H. Holzamer photo)*

That same year, the presentation of awards also occurred in Toronto, initially at the Design Exchange gallery but now, often, at the Arts & Letters Club. Award winners were also exhibited at 13 venues across Canada.

The growing stature of the awards attracted the notice of the governor general, who as the Society’s patron, began supplying a statement for the annual awards catalogue in 2007, a tradition that continues to the present.

In 2008, the award winners were displayed in Munich and Tokyo, further increasing awareness of the awards, book design in Canada, and of course the books themselves.

The number of exhibition venues also continued to increase, rising to 22 in 2014, and—for the first time—in every province. While the number of venues this year will drop to 19, the presentation of the books and the interest shown in them remains beyond the wildest imaginings of the competition’s early organizers. The competition remains the only national

competition of its kind in Canada, and it has become one of the Society's chief initiatives.

#### FAST STARTS AND RISING STARS

When the history of the competition was reviewed in 2005, Leah Gordon and Jim Rainer pointed out that some designers were consistent winners; indeed, the outsider might even wonder if anyone else made an effort. Yet the judges for the competition have always changed, and as was noted a decade ago, the consistency with which some designers won awards despite the change in judges "is a testament to the calibre of the designers' work."

Some of those designers are older now; others are dead. Designers who were young then have often borne out their early promise. Still others have emerged even faster than their predecessors. With an eye to the numbers, seven designers had won 21 percent of the awards through 2005, with "some relative newcomers. . . off to fast starts" (Peter Cocking and Andrew Steeves among them).

A decade later, the fast starts of Cocking and Steeves have vaulted them to the head of the standings, with 47 and 46 awards, respectively. Yet design veteran Gordon Robertson, who led in 2005 with 33 awards (he hasn't placed since) and Tim Inkster (who has) are tied in third place, with 33 citations apiece.

Today's rising stars are all women—Jessica Sullivan, Naomi MacDougall and Robin Mitchell-Cranfield—who together have 60 citations between them (a remarkable 33 of them belong to Sullivan).

So, design excellence is still to be found. If the economic hardships publishers have faced in recent years have had any effect, it's in fewer designers taking home the honours. A decade ago, seven designers claimed approximately a fifth of all citations in the competition's history; today, just five do. But excellence of practice remains widespread, as a glance at the scores of names through the years reveals. Mitchell-Cranfield put it best in a 2009 interview with *Amphora*: "I think someone could have a design career in which they're just aiming to do really good, solid work as opposed to sort of standing at the forefront."<sup>2</sup> With fewer books being entered in the competition (just over 200 this year, down from a peak of 252), fewer designers have their work judged.

#### A COLLECTION OF EXCELLENCE

And what of the books themselves? Many have won awards abroad, thanks to the Society's participation in the Frankfurt Book Fair. Since 2006, they have been shortlisted for awards almost every year and have won medals twice. This is a notable achievement; there are often well over 500 international



*Left: Alan Brownoff & Glenn Goluska judging the 25th Annual Alcuin Society Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada.*

*Bottom: Visitors review the entries at the 25th Annual Book Design Awards Gala. (Jason Vanderhill photos)*

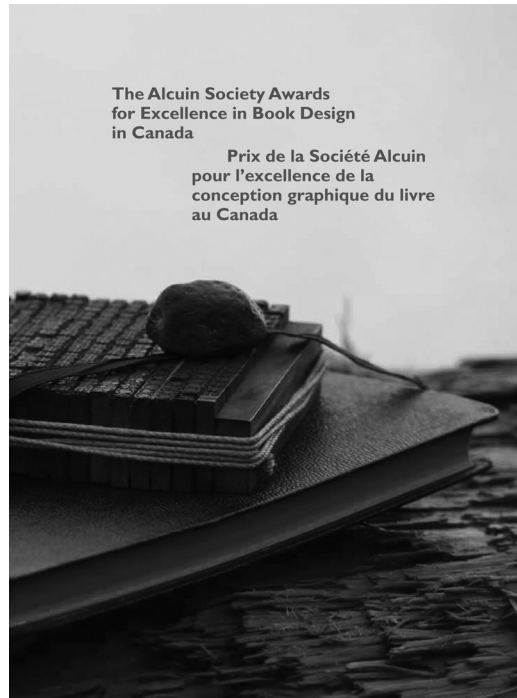






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*Naomi MacDougall (centre) discusses a book with William Rueter (left) and Marvin Harder (right) at the judging panel for the 2012 Awards. (Jason Vanderhill photo)*



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*Cover of the 2009 Awards for Excellence in Book Design catalogue, designed by Markus Fahrner.*

submissions annually, and only 14 awards.

Back home, the winners, with the support of Yosef Wosk (whose financial and moral support have been invaluable in the competition's ongoing success) as well as long-time librarian Eric Swanick, can count on a home at the Special Collections and Rare Books division of Simon Fraser University's W.A.C. Bennett Library. The library has an almost complete collection of all of the winning books since the beginning of our competition 34 years ago, making it an excellent source for studying the history of Canadian book design. The collection was used extensively by Robert Bringhurst when he wrote *The Surface of Meaning: Books and Book Design in Canada* (CISP Press, 2008).

Other libraries now have partial collections of our winning books: the Deutsche Bibliothek in Leipzig, to whom we contribute our books after the book fairs there; the E.H. Norman Library at the Canadian embassy in Tokyo; and the Murray Library, at the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon.

That such a small society should have spurred the establishment of such collections in libraries around the world—entirely without, one might add, government funding—is something that should stir a justifiable sense of accomplishment.

But above all, we should be very proud of our Canadian publications and the designers who make them possible.

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1. Leah Gordon and Jim Rainer, "By Chance, By Design: A Brief History of the Alcuin Society Book Design Competition," *Amphora*, nos. 140/141 (September/December 2005): 15–23.
  2. Peter Mitham, "Making Things Look Nice," *Amphora*, no. 152 (Summer 2009): 5.

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~ Peter Mitham is editor of *Amphora*. This article was written with the assistance of Leah Gordon, who has chaired the Alcuin Society Design Competition Committee since 2003.