

A SAD Story with a Happy Ending

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ALTHOUGH DON ATKINS HAS THE HEART AND SOUL OF A CHEF, the problem is it remains a secret because he doesn't dress the part. He should wear a double-breasted white jacket and a tall white chef's hat. Over the thirty years I've known him, Donald has always been mixing his favourite ingredients: people. Sometimes his new recipe works, sometimes it doesn't. In early October 2001 he suggested coffee with Roberto Dosil "at that Italian place on Marine Drive". I should have smelled the cinnamon!

After we all consumed dark and aromatic cappuccinos, Roberto recalled, quite vividly, his first impressions of his adopted country. Particularly intense was his reaction to the Canadian flag. He knew the story of how democratically the design had been selected. And, that the man who actually created the design was a French-Canadian separatist. Don and I had taken our flag for granted — typically low-key Canadians. Don, with his usual quicksilver mind, concluded by suggesting we should tell our publishing friends to consider a book on the flag. "It's been done before, many times" was my confident response. "Next time we meet I'll bring a list of titles."

The three of us had worked together before. I had been Chair of the Alcuin Book Design Awards for two seasons, Roberto, a founding partner of Praxis Design, had created the exquisite annual Awards catalogue and had been a judge for several years. Directed by Don, Benwell-Atkins printed and mailed copies to Alcuin members and publishers.

Two weeks later a much-chagrined retired publisher couldn't find a single adult book detailing the story of the selection and design of our national emblem. Oh sure there were picture books for tiny tads aged 4-7 and even a pre-teen title with actual words but not a single book for adults on the subject.

Maybe you've noticed that chefs just love to stir the pot. "We'll publish a book on the Canadian Flag — it has to be done," Don decided. "Stanton, you've been 40 years tucked between the covers of the book business, surely you have picked up a few hints of what goes on. Roberto, ever since you sailed up here on a banana boat 25 years ago, you've been itching to design a book on the flag and, of course, I'll look after the books." He meant the accounting which he promptly handed over to his wife Barbara. You can't let a chef near the books, it's a basic principle of accounting.

We three had actual publishing experience together. Initiated by Don, of course, we had produced *The Emily Carr Journal and Sketchbook*, which the Vancouver Art Gallery had for sale during a major Emily Carr retrospective. In our hearts we knew that Emily would have been proud to write and sketch in it, probably extensively, if only she would have had a copy.

Thus, on Christmas Eve morning 2001, we visited our local Royal Bank Business Division. With lowered eyes and hang-dog looks (I recall I was starting a cold), we admitted to the business representative that yes indeed this was a SAD occasion. Don had designated that we had become an acronym. Stanton, Atkins & Dosil contracted into SAD, a somewhat surprising suggestion from a man who resides on Happy Valley Lane in West Van.

Patiently, but intently, she listened as we revealed our plan to publish *I STAND FOR CANADA: THE STORY OF THE MAPLE LEAF FLAG*. We had an outline (it would change), had paid a hefty advance to the author and had hired an editor. All we had to do was sell 18,000 copies to an appreciative publisher. She seemed genuinely happy as we deposited our fortune, it was about \$4,500, into our new corporate account. We didn't discuss a loan at this first meeting, deciding strategically to wait until the new year, seven days hence.

In the Spring of 2002 a team of Ottawa-based researchers were hired, Roberto and his Permissions Assistant began contacting veterans, newspapers, corporations, government departments etc. for the use of images in the book. Macfarlane Walter & Ross in Toronto committed to publish, but in the fall of 2002. Thus SAD Productions became the rarest breed of Canadian Publishers, a packager. They would buy finished copies incorporating their name and logo. Jan Walter suggested we really should change our name. They would market and promote, ship and invoice. We would do everything else according to detailed specifications and a multi-page contract. The agreed publication date was October 15, 2002. That meant finished copies shipped by September 15 and disks to the printer in Manitoba by July 12. Yikes!!! Way back then all our friends assured us it would be a slam-dunk. The Grizzlies immediately left Vancouver. Our Quebec publisher politely backed out due to federal cultural cutbacks. We were on an impossible schedule, we knew we were mad — but this cake had to be baked! Oh yes we did have a

budget which turned out to be as stretched as our schedule. All the major authors, publishers and booksellers get together once a year beneath the shadow of the CN Tower. At the June Book Expo Canada, we were invited to visit our publisher's booth "festooned" with maple leaves and featuring our new book. Fall must have arrived early in Toronto as the leaves had all fallen and been blown away by the time we got there.

Finished books in their happy new covers were on sale in bookstores across Canada on October 15, 2002. We couldn't have been prouder. The design was glorious and the writing was powerful. The SAD boys hosted a launch party in Vancouver with wine, canapés and speeches. The author attended. Even the two high school girls who appear on the back cover were there handing out maple leaf shaped cookies. Thirty-seven books were sold and practically everyone who attended signed them all at least once.

Friends, relatives, acquaintances, neighbours and unsuspecting strangers were arm-twisted to buy our book. A friend in Toronto spent a Sunday afternoon at a local Costco propositioning strangers as a self-described "book slut". Without a French edition, the big national corporate and government sales didn't happen.

By Christmas, without a national author tour, major reviews or press attention 8,500 copies had been sold. These numbers are considered quite good where 5,000 is a best seller by Canadian standards. However, there were almost 10,000 copies left in the McClelland & Stewart warehouse. *The Globe and Mail* and *Vancouver Sun* reviewed after Christmas in their year-end round-ups. The publishing industry's conclusion regarding the fate of new releases in the fall of 2002 was that non-fiction sales were the most dismal in over 25 years.

Sadly, in March 2003, Macfarlane, Walter & Ross, recognized for their editorial excellence, but unfortunately wedded to non-fiction, closed their doors and their contracts and inventory were absorbed by McClelland & Stewart. Paperny Films of Vancouver exercised their option with us and began work on a film for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. CBC-TV ran the film titled A FLAG FOR CANADA in prime time July 1st, 2003. They expected an audience of 200,000 and were astonished with viewing "numbers" of over 400,000. Not bad numbers for a warm summer Canada Day evening. Viewers who had taken speed-reading courses or were blessed with supersonic vision might have caught a

glimpse of our book title and names as the credits flew by at the end.

In early July, copies suddenly appeared in Costco and Chapters at \$19.99. When this McClelland & Stewart promotion ended, the price returned to \$45.00 and retailers began re-stocking for the next Christmas season.

July also saw four new Journals from SAD with Canadian subjects for covers: Provincial Birds, Flowers, Flags and License Plates. Not your usual best-selling merchandise but an interesting experiment.

We are still pursuing a French-language publisher and working on a new book project about the building of the Trans Canada Highway. But now we've learned to take our time and not allow the process to dictate the schedule. One might say we are sadder but wiser. Unquestionably, we're happier.

Mark Stanton was formerly publisher of Raincoast Books, an Alcuin Director, and is a longtime friend of the Alcuin Society.



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