

Of Frigates, Wings, and Maple Leaves: A Centre for the Book in Canada

Thomas Quigley

CANADIANS ALL ACROSS THE COUNTRY favour the creation of a national Centre for the Book. Evidence for this conclusion comes from a national study conducted in February and March 1995, which showed that over 75% of members of the wide-ranging book community agree that a national Centre should be established. This high level of agreement is not surprising, since it reflects an interest and concern about our print culture that has blossomed over the past decade, and current national emphases on the issues of adult literacy and life-long learning continue that reflection. At the same time, the resurgence of facilitated book discussion groups; the popularity of such programmes as “Hot Type”, “Oprah’s Book Club”, “Chapter-a-Day”; and the increasingly sophisticated level of readers’ advice and service demanded by the public, show that the culture of the book is strongly established, and very much a presence, at the national level.

For some time Canadians have shown a growing interest in enjoying and understanding our print culture in all its many forms. Even in the face of an information technology revolution, and actually fostered by it, more books and periodicals are being produced, and Canadians are becoming more and more aware of their own publications and the environment in which they are produced. Whether the interest arises from the perspective of producers, distributors, collectors, libraries, readers, governments, or researchers, each of these groups has a legitimate claim on being part of the “community of the book” in Canada.

Almost everyone will acknowledge that Canadian demography, with a small diverse, multilingual population spread thinly over a large land-mass, presents significant challenges for maintaining a vibrant print culture. But more than this, the book community in this country is fragmented. No single voice speaks for the community as a whole, and more importantly, no single agency acts as a clearing house for the wealth of information about the activities of various players within the community. Numerous organizations play significant roles for advancing and supporting the various segments of the community. By way of illustration, respondents to the national survey in this study identified over 100 different associations that had a stake in the print culture which we enjoy, and if exhaustive research was undertaken to identify all relevant associations in the country, the number would be much higher.

In Canada, as elsewhere, dramatic changes being brought about by

information technology are having a significant impact on our book culture. Some have predicted the demise of the print publications, while others forecast a transformation but by no means a death knell. In addition to technological change, the downsizing of all levels of government across the country has a negative impact on the book community: fewer public dollars are being allocated to either economic or cultural promotion. Some high profile publishers have closed because of a tighter economic climate.

In such an environment, it is imperative that all participants in the book community have at their disposal a means of learning about the diversity of activities in the country. In such an environment, it is also imperative that an appreciation and understanding of print culture be promoted and achieved nationally. Since it had been demonstrated in other countries that a national agency, generally called a Centre for the Book, has been instrumental in fostering the aims just outlined, the 1995 study was undertaken primarily to assess the interests of a wide range of Canadians for the establishment of such a national Centre in this country.

The purpose of the survey, advanced by a steering committee of committed individuals from across the country and supported by the Department of Canadian Heritage, was to ascertain the level of support for the creation of a national Centre and, at the same time, obtain opinions about the activities that the Centre might undertake. The survey was conducted in February and March 1995 in English and French. A master mailing list was constructed using random sampling, from the mailing lists of a number of national associations. It was mailed out to 755 names; 251 questionnaires were returned by the survey's March deadline. Respondents identified a large number of professional or scholarly associations in which they hold membership: 99 in total. Overall there was a prevalence of associations dedicated to specifically Canadian activities.

In the first set of questions respondents were requested to provide their opinion about services that might be offered by the Centre. They were first asked to assess the general significance of six specified services according to a scale of importance. The services were:

- (1) Public Information Service, (2) Coordination of Exhibitions, Lectures, etc. (3) Promotion of Research, (4) Advocacy, (5) National and

International Liaison, (6) Promotion of Literacy & Learning. Respondents considered all services to be important. However, when respondents were asked to indicate which of the proposed services they would use, there was a clear distinction: choices 4 and 6 were clearly less likely to be used, in comparison with the other four services.

Next, respondents were presented with nine research subjects that the Centre might support and asked to consider the importance of each. The research topics were:

- (1) History of the Book, (2) Book Arts and Aesthetics, (3) Reading, (4) Publishing, (5) Authorship, (6) New Information Technologies, (7) Printing and Book Manufacture, (8) Literacy, (9) Librarianship and Archival Studies.

The list of 9 above is ranked in order of importance, with 1 being the highest. There was a significant difference (3%) between choices 8 and 9, and the first 7 choices.

Respondents then considered seven advocacy activities that the Centre might support:

- (1) Ongoing Preservation of Our Written Heritage, (2) Value to Canada of a Literate Society, (3) Open Access to Ideas, (4) Open Access to Information, (5) Value of the Book in Canadian Society, (6) Promotion of Reading Services to All Levels, (7) Reading Awareness Through Non-Print Media.

This list is also ranked in order of importance, with 1 being the highest. In this list there was a sharp drop off (17%) between the first 6 choices and choice 7.

Respondents were next asked to assess the desirability of special services for members. Some possible services were:

- (1) A Newsletter, (2) Advance Notice of Lectures, Exhibitions, etc. (3) Discounts on Books, Conferences, etc. (4) Visiting Privileges at Libraries, (5) Tours of Special Collections.

All services were considered important (this list is also ranked in order of importance, with 1 being the highest). In this list there was a sharp drop off (17%) between the first 4 choices and choice 5. The most desirable service was a newsletter, with many suggesting that such a service be provided electronically.

The final survey question was designed to determine the level of support for establishing a national Centre for the Book in Canada. The

responses indicated strong support for such a venture. Very few respondents were strongly opposed to the idea. Those who were opposed expressed concern about another agency competing with their organization for a share of the public purse or potentially duplicating the work of other organizations. Although respondents to this survey were drawn from different constituencies of the book community and represented different interests, they frequently expressed similar opinions. Respondents who did express a solid interest in the creation of a Centre were concerned that it not articulate too broad a mandate initially. Rather, the supporters envisaged a relatively small administrative unit that would build a broad reputation based on individual successful projects.

Other countries have shown that a national agency, generally called a Centre for the Book, can be instrumental in fostering awareness and appreciation of the importance of print culture in all its many forms. Such centres nurture literacy and reading programmes, support research endeavours, and undertake advocacy roles in an age of rapid change.

A number of events and reports over the past decade have both formed the preparatory foundation and provided the momentum for proceeding with the establishment of a national Centre for the Book in Canada. Indeed, the holding of this event, the "Reading Canada" national forum, is in itself witness of this fact. We, as Canadians, must remember that as we look forward into the 21st Century, it is important that we recognize the legacy of the last 250 years of print culture in this country. We have a common, shared interest in understanding ourselves through our culture, a fundamental component of which is the book. The 1995 national survey on establishing a National Centre for the Book in Canada records, for the first time, our opinion and our vision of what this Centre can be, and the survey's achievement strategically positions us. By focussing on study, promotion and awareness, the Centre will play a significant role in bettering our sense of our own collective psyche. I believe we are ready to move forward; it is now the time for us as a nation, to reap the benefit that a Canadian Centre for the Book will bring.

Thomas Quigley has had a distinguished career as a librarian at the Vancouver Public Library. He has won awards for his work in the adult literacy movement. He also teaches as an adjunct faculty member at the School of Library, Archival & Information Studies at the University of BC.