

BOOK REVIEW

Peter Mitham

The Perilous Trade: Publishing Canada's Writers by Roy MacSkimming. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2003. 464 pp. \$39.99. ISBN 1 55199 073 3.

Some books boast so many details that one can't avoid finding something of interest in them. Roy MacSkimming, *The Perilous Trade: Publishing Canada's Writers*, is one such book.

Sometime in grade school I discovered Edmund Cosgrove, *Canada's Fighting Pilots* (1965), a book I still have. I rediscovered the title in MacSkimming's introduction to his study of publishing in Canada during the latter half of the 20th century. Telling the story of how he became involved in publishing, MacSkimming notes that Cosgrove's book was the first title he edited as an employee of Clarke, Irwin in Toronto.

The anecdotal style of MacSkimming's introduction mingles throughout the book with reflections on the development of Canadian book publishing, the writers to whom it gave an outlet, and the tastes of the readers it supplied. In doing so, MacSkimming doesn't overwhelm readers with facts nor does he lapse into broad generalities. Case studies

anchor a discussion that develops a portrait of publishing in Canada that is both a satisfying narrative and an invitation to further inquiry.

From a West Coast perspective, *The Perilous Trade* gives MacSkimming greater scope to discuss themes summarized in his article on B.C. publishing in the *Encyclopedia of British Columbia* (2000). At the same time, it sets the stage for more academic considerations of the book trade's development such as that being prepared for the three-volume *History of the Book in Canada* to be published by the presses of the University of Toronto and the Université Laval. But unlike the *History of the Book in Canada*, which concludes in 1980, MacSkimming's discussion takes readers to the end of the 20th century, and a bit beyond.

While MacSkimming's case-study approach prevents him from mentioning every publisher in the last 60 years, he does make significant progress towards this end with the publishing ventures of Bill Bissett mentioned as readily as Broken Jaw of Fredericton and Gaspereau Press of Kentville, Nova Scotia.

However, MacSkimming steers clear of the fine press publishers such as Barbarian and Heavenly Monkey, to name



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two local examples, despite their being as daring in their own way as the larger trade publishers. For a consideration of their efforts, one will have to wait for the *History of the Book in Canada*.

MacSkimming is also short on the role publishers played in designing books. Though he notes the Alcuin Society's design awards, design itself is ancillary to his main interest in the personalities and trends in the publishing sector. While design plays a significant role in building publishers' identities and a market for their books, it is less colourful than the characters in the industry (many of whom appear in the rich assortment of photos included in MacSkimming's book).

Perhaps the emphasis on personalities

and players — reflected in the wealth of names indexed at the back — is appropriate, given MacSkimming's personal involvement in the industry. From his beginnings at Clarke, Irwin he became co-founder of New Press in Toronto in 1969 and later served as publishing officer with the Canada Council. He has also written extensively on books and publishing in Canada.

Though *The Perilous Trade* is just one take on the history of publishing in Canada, it is a well-researched and entertaining read. It provides solid insights on a world that, if MacSkimming's epilogue is any indication, is passing away.

Peter Mitham is a new member of the Alcuin Society.





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