

Towards a History of Design in Canadian Children's Illustrated Books

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Responses to the question "How would you describe your personal aesthetic of book design and what you hope to achieve in Canadian picture book design?"

Frank Newfeld: "My personal aesthetic of book design: Lovely. What I hope to achieve: Effective successful communication, with as much freedom of flight-of-fancy as the traffic could gainfully bear." (Mail interview, Sept. 2002)

Michael Solomon: "Taste and a sympathetic relationship with a given text and suite of illustrations; ready and apt communication of theme, mood, period; but also sometimes surprise and dissonance when fruitful and interesting." (Mail interview, Oct. 2002)

From the beginning of the development of picture books in the nineteenth century as a distinctive publishing genre, designers have integrated text and pictures within the physical totality of the book, creating a balanced aesthetic and facilitating communication. The design movement in picture books has a shared history with graphic design and general book design and has been deeply influenced by trends in the wider design community. While very few children's books by Canadian authors and illustrators were published in Canada before the 1960s, the rapid growth world-wide of children's publishing in the last 40 years has been paralleled in Canada by the development of children's book lists by trade publishers and the foundation of publishers specializing in Canadian children's books. This new interest in children's books within Canadian publishing has been particularly strong in the area of children's illustrated books, most notably the genre of the picture book (Saltman). Many Canadian illustrators, editors, and designers, who began their work in graphic design, commercial art, and general trade book publishing, have moved into the specialist area of children's publishing and have contributed to the development of a distinctive Canadian children's picture book design aesthetic. While some scholars have largely dismissed children's illustrated books produced in Canada before the 1970s as unworthy of serious consideration, it is clear that a closer study of the role of graphic and book design in Canada will document the small but important body of children's illustrated books produced in this country before the 1970s and will locate these works within broader trends in Canadian publishing and design. Thus, an understanding of the history and development

of graphic design and general book design in Canada can illuminate the context in which the publishing of Canadian illustrated books for children has developed and can begin to document the contributions of Canadian illustrators, editors, and designers to the creation of the picture book as a design genre.

Precursors: Illustrated Book Design in the 18th & 19th Centuries

The development of the picture book as an aesthetically integrated whole in which pictures and text mutually expand and extend one another is a relatively recent phenomenon within the specialized realm of publishing for children, although precedents existed in the work of several artists who worked as illustrators. Books designed explicitly for children emerged on the market in England in the eighteenth century. While some of these early books, particularly the more expensive publications, were carefully designed and illustrated with steel or copper engravings, the majority of children's books were cheap chapbooks and tracts illustrated with a few crude woodcuts that were often only vaguely related to the text, with little visual or aesthetic appeal. One exception was the work of John Newbery, the first children's publisher, printer, and bookseller in England, whose books incorporated lively texts and illustrations. Newbery used elegant flowered Dutch paper for bookcovers in a deliberate attempt to appeal visually to his young readers.

Another significant development in early book design for children was William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (1789), in which Blake experimented with the integration of image and text to produce what he called an "Illuminated Book" (*Early Children's Books*) (see Image 1). Each page featured a hand-lettered poem by Blake framed by an illustration that extended and expanded on the mood of the text. Unlike the majority of early illustrated books, in which letterpress and engravings were printed separately, the hand-lettered text and pictures for each page of *Songs of Innocence* were hand-engraved on a single copper plate, hand-printed in coloured inks, and then hand-coloured. Although Blake's work did not reach a wide audience among his contemporaries, *Songs of Innocence* may be considered one of the first articulations of an integrated picture book design aesthetic in which the page design, letter forms, text, and images all complemented one another.

Blake's view of the book as a handcrafted object of aesthetic integrity

Image 1: William Blake, *Songs of Innocence* (1789)



was deeply influential on subsequent generations of artists who designed illustrated books for both adults and children. It is possible to trace a genealogy of design from Blake's illuminated books, in which words and images were harmoniously blended, to the consciously medievalizing illustrations of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in the 1850s and 1860s. Rossetti had studied Blake's work and contributed commentary on his illustrations to the second edition of Alexander Gilchrist's 1880 *Life of Blake* (Rossetti). In his own work, Rossetti explored the dual relationship of text and image throughout his paintings

and poetry, creating images that explicated texts and texts that commented on images (Ainsworth). Like Blake, Rossetti saw the potential of the book as an aesthetic object, designing every aspect of his 1870 *Poems* from the selection of typeface to the endpapers and the cover.

Rossetti's aesthetic theories influenced William Morris's belief in the importance of handcraft and his dedication to reviving the medieval role of the artist as craftsman, which in turn directly inspired Walter Crane, perhaps the first real illustrator-designer of the picture book for children. Although Edmund Evans, the noted printer and engraver, also worked with illustrators Kate Greenaway and Randolph Caldecott in the production of a revolutionary series of handsomely produced toy books, it was Evans's collaboration with Walter Crane that would transform graphic design in the picture book. In books like *The Baby's Own Aesop* (1887), the meticulous integration of text and illustrations into an overall decorative image, the innovative page layout, and Crane's calligraphic treatment of text revealed Crane's debt to the Morrisean tradition and in turn had a profound influence on the emergent aesthetic of picture book design. Crane's design career, which consistently revealed his interest in handcrafts and a loosely interpreted historicism, extended beyond

Image 2: Walter Crane, *The Baby's Own Aesop* (1887)

children's books to encompass painting, illustrations for books, and designs for wallpaper, furniture, and clothing. While Randolph Caldecott's lively line, humorous caricatures, and experiments with visual subtexts were influential in the development of picture books in England and North America, it was Crane's interest in the possibility of illustration as a decorative element that enhanced the book as a total aesthetic object that was widely adopted by his design

peers, who were attracted to his goal of turning artists into craftsmen and craftsmen into artists (Pantazzi) (see Image 2). Crane's aesthetic theories received wide circulation through his 1896 publication *The Decorative Illustration of Books*, in which he argued that successful illustrators integrated text and image with the architecture of the printed page.

The Early Canadian Scene

In a two-part article published in 1996, Will Novosedlik suggested that graphic design in Canada between the late nineteenth century and 1940 was primarily influenced by the design aesthetics and ideals of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement. The Canadian Society of Applied Arts, organized in 1903 by artist G.A. Reid, was founded with an explicit commitment to original design and expression as exemplified by the Arts and Crafts movement (Novosedlik, "Part I"). An Arts and Crafts design aesthetic, transmitted from England through the medium of influential design magazines like *The Studio* and through Arts and Crafts-influenced American publications, heavily influenced designers working with Canadian publishers and printers in various genres, including calendars, exhibit catalogues, magazine illustrations, book covers, book illustrations, and commercial art. For example, the work of many of the Canadian illustrators who published their work in the Toronto Art Students' League calendars between 1893 and 1904 exhibits the

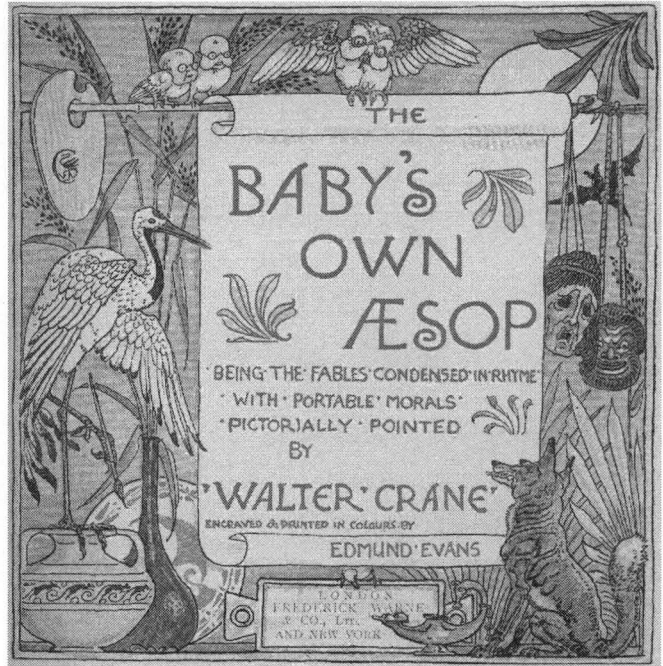
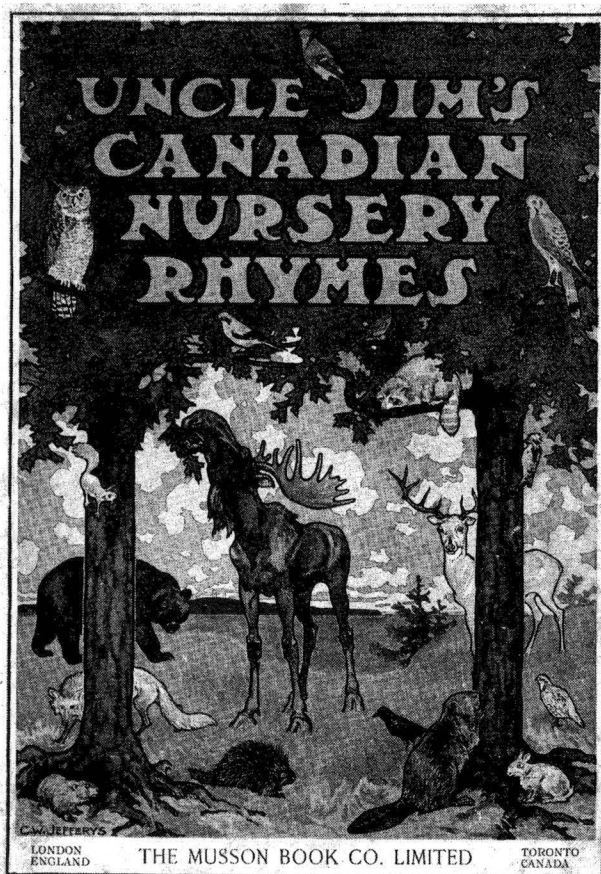


Image 3: C.W. Jeffreys, *Uncle Jim's Nursery Rhymes* (1908)



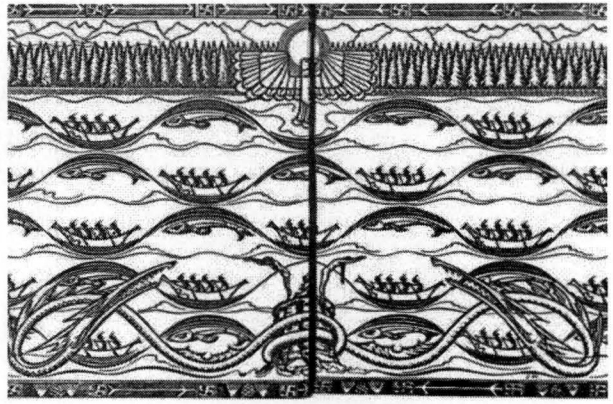
direct influence of an Arts and Crafts design aesthetic in their deliberate adoption of decorative flatness (as opposed to painterly dimensionality) as well as in the heavily decorative borders, consciously medievalizing typefaces, and highly ornamental surfaces that characterized Morris's designs for the Kelmscott Press (Pantazzi). Canadian designers working for the major publishers in Toronto also incorporated a combination of woodblock illustration with hand-lettering, a stylistic aesthetic that dominated Canadian book design

into the 1940s and that was arguably a mark of the movement's "preference for the hand over the machine" (Novosedlik, "Part I").

Although the design aesthetic of the Arts and Crafts movement was to influence Canadian design for several decades, at the same time a distinctively Canadian idiom was introduced with the deliberate use of images and motifs drawn from the local natural world, clearly evident in some of the very few illustrated children's books published in Canada during the first half of the twentieth century. For example, in David Boyle's *Uncle Jim's Canadian Nursery Rhymes* (1908) (see image 3), the book designer and illustrator Charles W. Jeffreys (who would later illustrate Canadian history textbooks, historical novels, newspapers, and magazines) skilfully combined Canadian nature images with hand-lettered text, recalling the design aesthetic of the picture books of Evans and Crane. According to Sybille Pantazzi, Jeffreys "decorative use of stylized Canadian motifs" anticipated the work of the Group of Seven, a similarity further reinforced by his own determination to create distinctly Canadian art for a new generation (Stacey). Pantazzi further notes that the marginal vignettes and title pages of the naturalist works of Ernest Thompson Seton, equally popular with adults and children, showed some similarity to the work of Jeffreys.

Jeffreys interest in the use of Canadian imagery, hand-lettering, and

Image 4: J.E.H. MacDonald, *Legends of Vancouver* (1922)



woodblock illustrations was also evident in the illustration and design work of J.E.H. MacDonald. One of the founding members of the Group of Seven (Reid; Hunter), MacDonald was employed by Grip Limited, the famous Toronto commercial design firm. MacDonald, whose commercial and fine arts careers were inextricably intertwined, designed and illustrated books for McClelland and Stewart and for Ryerson Press, skillfully incorporating decorated end-papers, illustrated title pages, and vignettes in attractively designed trade publications that appealed equally to adults and to children. For example, the strongly rhythmic and lively endpapers that MacDonald designed for the 1922 edition of E. Pauline Johnson's *Legends of Vancouver* (see image 4) combine a frieze of conifers and jagged mountain peaks with bands of undulating waves, reminiscent of Celtic interlace, that bear canoes propelled by paddlers seen in silhouette, in a design of considerable complexity and energy suited to Johnson's vigorous reinterpretation of Coast Salish stories. Similarly, MacDonald's design for the title page design of Bliss Carman's *Ballads and Lyrics* (1923) combines hand-lettering with a Kelmscott-style decorative border that prominently features a stylized image of an Ontario trillium, effectively fusing Morris's decorative principles with Canadian themes (Stacey). Both works also demonstrate the commitment of McClelland and Stewart at this period to excellence in book design and production (Spadoni and Donnelly).

Hand-lettering and woodblock illustrations were also employed in the work of MacDonald's son, Thoreau MacDonald, renowned for his work in Canadian book design. The work of the younger MacDonald exhibited a greater simplification and stylization of form that had begun to move away from elaboration of the page surface favoured by the earlier generation. Although predominantly recognized for his design and illustration work in texts for adult readers, MacDonald illustrated and designed one of Canada's first alphabet books, *A Canadian Child's ABC* (1931) (see image 5), written in verse by R.K. Gordon. MacDonald's strong design sense is evident in the integration of his hallmark hand-lettering with elegantly simple pen and ink illustrations, each alphabet letter illuminated with characteristically Canadian images of landscapes and wildlife and scenes of sugaring-off and outdoor hockey games,



thematically integrated with the text in a unified page design (Edison).

According to Novosedlik, although the simplicity of Thoreau MacDonald's work

“betrays a more modernist hand than that of his immediate predecessors, his interest in natural and rural imagery reflects the distance that separated Canada from the revolutionary developments concurrently taking place in European design” (Novosedlik, “Part I”). In his emphasis on the natural world, MacDonald shared an interest with the majority of Canadian designers of the period, whose work reflected natural themes and motifs and continued to favour “handwork” rather than the deliberate modernism, mechanization, and rejection of ornamentation popularized by the Bauhaus in Europe (“Part I”). As Margaret Edison notes, MacDonald's art persuades us “to pause and consider a little before sweeping away everything in the name of material progress.” And, indeed, MacDonald's experimentation in the 1930s with his own private press, the Woodchuck Press, and his interest in the graphic possibilities of the wood-cut have closer affinity to the work of contemporary British artists and designers like Eric Gill and Paul Nash (Selborne), who were dedicated to art as fine craftsmanship. As Edison notes, it was in the private press that “author, designer, artists and printer all come together.” MacDonald's design aesthetic was not limited to small-scale private press work, however: his influential work for trade projects exemplified Canadian books in the interwar period, as in the 1938 English-language edition of Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine*. In 1944, he wrote and designed *The Group of Seven* (Ryerson Press), which brought the work of his father and contemporaries to a wider audience. MacDonald's stylized pine tree, featured prominently on the title page, was a design element that had appeared in varying formats throughout his career.

Canadian Graphic Design in the 1940s and 1950s

Throughout the interwar period, the small community of professional graphic design in Canada was centred in the Toronto and Montreal areas. The very few book designers of the period also worked in general graphic design and commercial art, and there continued to be a symbiotic

relationship between graphic arts and the book trade. The expansion of graphic design in the postwar period paved the way for the expansion of design work in the book trade and laid the foundations for the nascent children's book industry, which would flourish in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s.

It was only in the 1940s that an interest in industrialism, combined with a more European abstraction, and the influence of modern American design appeared for the first time in Canadian design, promoted by discussions of the social role of the graphic designer and of the place of abstraction, symbolism, and modernism in art in the pages of *Canadian Art Magazine* (Novosedlik, "Part I"). The growing role of design in Canada in the 1940s was evidenced by the establishment of Canada's first design firm, Eveleigh-Dair, in Montreal (Cossette). Though largely self-taught, Carl Dair had a "broad knowledge of typographic history and an awareness of modern European design," whereas Henry Eveleigh, who had completed formal art training at England's Slade School, had a "flair for concepts and illustration" (Donnelly). Although the Eveleigh-Dair partnership only lasted a short time and was dissolved in the early 1950s, Dair's subsequent solo work included the design of the first completely Canadian typeface, "Cartier," for the centennial in 1967, as well as the publication of a highly influential book, *Design With Type*.

Throughout the 1950s, the now-established influence of European modernism was also evident in the work of designers belonging to the Art Directors' Club of Toronto. As Novosedlik notes, "Designers enthusiastically imbued their work with the shapes, colors and structural schemes of established modernists such as Mondrian and Miro" (Novosedlik, "Part I"). However, until the mid-1950s, modernism was not particularly reflected in Canadian publishing. The majority of books were "modelled on other books or relied on the creativity on the part of Miss Jones in the production department or the printer's choice," according to Leslie Smart. The situation was compounded by the limited type range of many printers and by the relative isolation in which the few professional book designers worked (Smart), although the publishing world in Toronto was too circumscribed to prevent designers and artists from encountering one another's work.

The situation began to change in the latter half of the 1950s. There was a new interest in Canada in the role of typography in design, influenced

by the European studies of Carl Dair and Allan Fleming. Fleming, who worked in the 1950s for the typographical firm Cooper and Beatty and then as art director for Maclean's magazine until joining the University of Toronto Press in 1968, was keenly interested in creating designs in which "every element on the page [was given] a voice" (Donnelly). Fleming promoted a new creative use of type as a medium of visual communication rather than as a textual element subordinate to and supporting visual design (Novosedlik; Rueter). Interest in typographical innovation was further encouraged by the formation in 1956 of the Society of Typographic Designers of Canada (TDC), based in Toronto, which held annual shows that brought the work of new designers to the attention of the design community (Donnelly; ; Toye). Canadian interest in typography and type design also resulted in the formation of the Guild of Hand Printers in 1959, which influenced contemporary design through its preservation of and play with "the rapidly vanishing medium of metal type, hand typesetting, and the privately owned, hand-operated letterpress," harkening back to the earlier interest in handcraft among Canadian designers (Donnelly). Nonetheless, illustration (particularly narrative illustration) rather than bold typographic experimentation remained the predominant visual method of communication in commercial art and design throughout the 1950s (Donnelly).

These developments in general graphic design, particularly in the field of typography, had an effect on book design of the period and strongly influenced the Canadian book designers of the 1960s. The overall output of illustrated children's books produced by Canadian publishers in the 1940s and the 1950s, however, remained very limited, and no significant Canadian picture books were published in this period. What children's publishing existed was concentrated in the textbook market and in the trade publications of McClelland and Stewart, Oxford University Press, and Macmillan of Canada. Typical of the work of this period are the colour and black-and-white illustrations by Clare Bice for his *Across Canada: Stories of Canadian Children* (1949). Egoff somewhat unfairly described Bice's work as "conventional pictures of Canada" that were "realistic in a narrow sense" (*Republic of Childhood*), although she also praised his earlier *Jory's Cove* for its "type, wide margins, illustrations, and pictorial end-papers." In *Across Canada*, the straightforward, workmanlike

Image 6: Theo Dimson, *The Sunken City* (1959)

quality of Bice's illustrations, the rather poor registration of the colour printing, the plain grey cloth binding, and the stripped-down serif typeface convey a design aesthetic allied to the textbooks of the period rather than to an aesthetically integrated work. More visually exciting were the well-designed illustrated books for children issued by Oxford University Press in Toronto in the late 1950s, including Cyrus Macmillan's *Glooskap's Country and Other Indian Tales* (1959), illustrated by John A. Hall, and James McNeil's *The Sunken City and Other Tales from Round the World* (1959) (see Image 6), with black-and-white illustrations by



noted graphic designer Theo Dimson, both of which are stylistically reminiscent of contemporary European graphic design in their play of scratchy fine lines against areas of solid black. However, despite Oxford's artistically innovative publications, the majority of Canadian children's books of this period were noted for their rather pedestrian, textbook-like design and limited production values. Further study of publishing history in the immediate postwar period is needed to determine why Canadian publishers so notably lagged behind their American counterparts in the creation of appealing full-colour picturebooks and illustrated books for children, although it is clear that the small market, relative to the United States and Britain, and the primary role of many Canadian publishers as agents for foreign presses inhibited the development of robust children's lists.

The second part of this article will appear in a future issue of Amphora or on the Society's web page (www.alcuinsociety.com).

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