

A Tale of Three Presses (Part One)

In my experience it is an exception when collectors of modern first editions focus their efforts on the publisher not the author. The decision to collect a publisher is often a daunting and capricious undertaking where the collector sacrifices control of what is on his or her shelves to the editorial whim of the press in question. The infrequent occasions when I have decided to collect a publisher have been prompted by a confluence of design, production values and editorial approach which have resonated for me. The 2002 Gaspereau Press catalogue captures this well when it describes their books as “cultural objects in both content and physical form.” The assumption behind collecting a press (apart from assembling a fine collection of books) is that the cumulated output provides a context and continuity which enhances cultural understanding.

My first experience in setting out to collect the total output of one publisher was with Blackfish Press. Operating in B.C.'s Lower Mainland from 1971 through 1982, Blackfish was the result of the youthful enthusiasm of poets Allan Safarik and Brian Brett. They published their own work along with that of friends and several of Canada's (and in the case of Kenneth Rexroth, the USA's) most respected writers in trade and limited editions.

Proudly proclaiming that their books were “Made in British Columbia without government funding,” Safarik and Brett did the design and printing of several of their titles. The *Blackfish* output totalled 14 books, many in multiple editions, along with four issues of the *Blackfish* literary journal, four broadside folios and four broadsides. A number of these titles stand out today as among the most appealing Canadian literary publishing from this period.

Of special note are Al Purdy's *On the Bearpaw Sea*, published in 1973 in three editions, including one of 25 bound in calf-skin; Kenneth Rexroth's *On Flower Wreath Hill*, published in 1976 with 2,000 in paper wraps (a staggering print run for Canadian published poetry from today's perspective) and 200 numbered and signed copies bound “in the Japanese manner”; and a personal favourite, *Poems of French Canada*, translated by

F.R. Scott, in four editions including “38 signed & numbered copies in slipcase ... printed on Lugo Grey Grandee text and handbound in the Japanese manner in handmade yuezen paper (19 copies in black pattern, 19 copies in red pattern).” Blackfish Press exemplifies meaningful publishing which can take place outside the mainstream, fuelled by a passion for literature and the printing and publishing process.

For a collector, Blackfish Press combined the appealing attributes of good writing, interesting production values and, perhaps most importantly, manageable output. The two other presses I am currently collecting certainly have the first two requirements but are more prolific. Gaspereau Press and McSweeney's Books are very different in terms of their editorial approach and production aesthetic, but they are making some of the best-looking and more interesting books being published today.

I was late starting, so completing a collection of Gaspereau Press's output seems quixotic at best. I think it was Robert Bringhurst's *Ursa Major* (2003) which prompted my collecting interest. The care taken in design and production of this and other Gaspereau titles is clearly validated by several Alcuin design awards. I decided to learn more, and started contacting Gaspereau, both ordering the backlist still available and establishing a standing order for future publications. The standing order seemed the only way to ensure obtaining limited editions of established authors. And it is these limited editions which present a seemingly insurmountable challenge in completing a collection of the press. I'm five years into seriously collecting Gaspereau and my want list runs to approximately 25 items published between 1997 and 2008.

Gaps in my collection include a series of truly limited editions ranging from a total edition of six copies (George Elliott Clarke's Governor General's Award-winning *Execution Poems*) to a number of editions of 12, 15 and 25 copies. Realistically, the one chance of finding all of these editions is to purchase the collection of another enthusiast who has lost interest, become destitute or died—not of course that I would wish the latter two of these circumstances on anyone who clearly has good bibliographic taste.

The promised bibliography of the press,

*Gaspereau Gloriatu*r, Vol. 3, will no doubt add to my want list, especially if it annotates Gaspereau's abundant ephemera including catalogues, posters and promotional pamphlets. Throughout its existence Gaspereau has been a job printer as well as publisher, and this pragmatic approach to financial survival initially disqualified the press from Heritage Canada financial support. While a sane collector (an oxymoron perhaps?) might choose to consider grocery store flyers and other commercial printing for the Kentville, Nova Scotia, community outside collecting parameters, how can you exclude lovely productions such as Robert Bringhurst's *Wild Language*, printed in 2006 for Nanaimo's Institute for Coastal Research?

It is also important to note that Gaspereau is a press where later printings may be significant. Publisher Andrew Steeves noted at an Alcuin lecture in 2005 that he intentionally introduced textual and design changes into subsequent printings of titles such as Thomas Wharton, *The Logogryph* (2004).

There are some specific challenges in completing the Gaspereau collection. First is their eclectic output. While searching shelves of Canadian poetry looking for the askew *g* featured on Gaspereau spines since 2002 is manageable, my tolerance for scouring the religion section for a first printing of James Perkin's *Devotional Diary: Short Prayers for Busy People* (illustrated by Alex Colville!) is limited. Gaspereau's frequent use of vertical obi bands (a paper wrap-around on the rear cover with the book description and price), while aesthetically pleasing, often results in incomplete or damaged copies on the second-hand market; the paper bands often suffer from shelf wear and are frequently missing.

Obstacles aside, collecting Gaspereau's output is immensely satisfying, regularly producing outstanding books. One hopes publishers Steeves and Gary Dunfield—despite recent cutbacks to their publishing program (see sidebar)—continue to prosper in the exceedingly difficult environment literary publishers currently face.

~ Paul Whitney is city librarian at the Vancouver Public Library. This is the first of two columns focusing on the collection of specific publishers. The next column will examine McSweeney's Books.

Gaspereau looks forward



This spring, Gaspereau Press announced that it was cutting two and a half staff positions and planning to reduce its publishing program from 12 books a year to eight. Press revenues needed to be brought in line with expenses.

While the rationale might not sound surprising in the midst of a recession, Gaspereau's Andrew Steeves told *Amphora* that the issues confronting the press extended back to the first days of the credit crisis. During 2006 and 2007, Indigo Books & Music Inc. (operator of the Chapters and Indigo bookstores) returned tens of thousands of dollars' worth of stock to Gaspereau (among other publishers) as it sought to restructure its credit arrangements.

"Our sales levels were retroactively way below what we had believed," Steeves says. "We should have cut back right away, but for a number of reasons we delayed and this compounded our problems."

Now, what Steeves calls the "work your way out approach" has taken Gaspereau back to its origins, but with experience gleaned from its successes. There are still two full-time staff in the bindery and pressroom, Emily Leeson continues to handle marketing part-time, while Gary Dunfield and Steeves are handling more of the day-to-day work on top of management duties.

Moreover, Gaspereau's list may not suffer the drastic cuts originally announced. "We're planning on 10 books next year, down by only two titles from 2008. We'll see how well we are able to handle a list that size in 2010 and reassess at that point," Steeves says.

Peter Mitham