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## taking issue

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### Canadian Literature: 'Not For Sale!'

— Russell McDougall

Why is it that Canadian publishers cannot make the Australian connection? Why is it they continue to embarrass their authors whenever they travel to the South Land? Writers embark on reading tours, as recipients of prestigious awards (The Australia-Canada Award, for instance) or as invited guests of international festivals of literature - and their publishers cannot even manage to send their books to their various Australian destinations in time to take advantage of what is essentially free promotion. To put it bluntly, they continually fail to 'cash in' on the spontaneous demand of readers who are often coming to Canadian literature enthusiastically for the first time. Do they simply not understand the implication of geography - the tyranny of distance? Or is it that they simply cannot be bothered?

An American publishing representative in Australia has gleefully drawn my attention to what has apparently been a minor controversy recently in the *Toronto Star* concerning the visit by Vancouver Island writer Jack Hodgins to Australia in March 1990: the inability of Macmillan Canada, publishers of most of his titles, to get his books to Adelaide in time for Hodgins' highly successful reading at Writers' Week during Adelaide's Festival of Arts. As one of the organisers of that event, as chairperson of Hodgins' reading session (as well as of sessions by Canadian writers Rudy Wiebe and Michael Ondaatje at the previous festival) and as an enthusiastic supporter of Canadian literature in Australia, I want to comment on the shameful absence of Hodgins' books from the Adelaide Writers' Week bookshop - and, even more importantly, also to put this into larger perspective, for this kind of thing happens all the time to Canadian writers abroad. In fact, I wonder why it is not the cause of a national scandal in Canada, rather than of an occasional minor sensation in a literary gossip column.

Perhaps I should say, to begin with, however, that my writing like this is not a case of the 'my Daddy is bigger than yours' syndrome that Margaret Atwood thought she discerned once (wrongly I believe) in John Matthews' book *Tradition in Exile* (over thirty years ago) comparing Australian and Canadian literatures. If one were to compare the national publishing houses in Australia and Canada

there would not be the slightest doubt which country's literature is the best served on the home front. In the past few years, Australia has lost every one of its national publishers to multinational groups, so that I look with a degree of envy toward the Canadian situation. Also, small presses and regional publishers that so proliferate in Canada have never been a major presence in Australia. Off hand, I can only think of a handful of independent publishers that are prepared to take risks publishing innovative and exciting things - such as the Fremantle Arts Centre Press, the University of Queensland Press and some of the new Aboriginal publishing ventures, like Magabala in Western Australia. So I am not tub-thumping here.

Let's look at a couple of case histories.

The Adelaide Festival takes place for three weeks in March every two years. For the 1988 Writers' Week, we invited both Rudy Wiebe and Michael Ondaatje from Canada. Ondaatje had just published *In The Skin of a Lion* with the international publisher Picador. His books arrived at the site in plenty of time for his reading to a large and enthusiastic audience who subsequently hurried off to buy up all the stock of his available titles, and his books have enjoyed some profile in Australian bookshops ever since, selling to a small but steadily growing readership. Rudy Wiebe, who publishes with McClelland and Stewart, was a different matter altogether. As soon as the Writers' Week Committee knew for certain that he was able to attend, the officially appointed bookseller wrote to McClelland and Stewart requesting information about his titles in print - and stating quite plainly the dates by which they would be needed. That was August 21st, 1987 - for the festival in March of the following year. Unfortunately, the letter was sent to the publisher's previous address, on Hollinger Road rather than University Avenue, and later, when the books had failed to arrive, McClelland and Stewart suggested to an understandably disappointed and angry Rudy Wiebe that 'somehow that letter was not transmitted to our present location'. Strange, then, that although McClelland and Stewart did not reply to that misdirected missive, a letter arrived from Longhouse Book Shop on October 3rd stating 'McClelland and Stewart has given us your letter requesting information... and asked us to help you fill whatever orders you may want.' That was October 3rd, by which time the bookseller had necessarily begun to explore U.S. avenues for acquiring the books. Eventually, the books did arrive, courtesy of Baker and Taylor (a U.S. distributor with an office in Australia); but at a price doubled by the distributor's mark-up and by freight costs from Canada to the U.S. Wiebe was delighted to find all of his work on sale in Adelaide, and horrified at its cost. In sympathy, the bookseller agreed to lower the price and accordingly made a loss on every sale.

Australian booksellers, if they want to stock a Canadian title, are often forced to go outside Canada in an effort to acquire stock. Some years ago an Adelaide bookshop which enjoys a reputation as Australia's foremost specialist in women's writing received a customer order for books by Canadian writer Margaret Laurence. After unsuccessful inquiries in Canada - Canadian publishers rarely

answer their mail, apparently, as has been noted more than once in the national book columns of Australia - the bookshop decided to import an illegal U.S. Bantam edition. Eventually, the bookshop did manage to acquire the Canadian edition - though not from Canada. It had to be ordered from the United Kingdom through a small-press distributor. In effect, this meant that a Can. \$3.95 paperback, after Canada-United Kingdom freight and distributor's costs added, sold in Australia for almost Aust. \$14. Naturally, readers bought the cheaper illegal U.S. edition.

For the 1990 Adelaide Festival of Arts, the Writers' Week committee invited Jack Hodgins from Canada. He publishes with McClelland and Stewart, and also with Macmillan Canada.

Organising a Writers' Week on the scale of the Adelaide Festival naturally takes an enormous amount of time and effort and is not without its timetabling difficulties. Planning for one festival begins almost immediately that the other has concluded. For reasons that need not be gone into, but beyond the committee's control, Hodgins' was a rather late invitation, and his acceptance was considered something of a coup. He was the perfect choice: a high-profile Canadian writer whose work we all admire, a serious writer, but known also to be a great entertainer, and with a long-time interest in Australian literature. (Hodgins was winner of the Australia-Canada Literary Award in 1985, has reviewed Australian books on several occasions in the Canadian press - and his novel, *Innocent Cities*, is partly set in and inspired by historical connection with Australia.)

Because of the urgency, the bookseller faxed McClelland and Stewart on December 20th, 1989, marking the request for information 'urgent'. On January 19th an order was placed, requesting specifically 'supply by air'. The publisher faxed a return message three days later: 'Please advise whether you require the hardcover or paperback.' January 24th: another fax from Adelaide: 'Please supply paperback.' February 19th fax: 'Are Jack Hodgins books on way? Please confirm.' McClelland and Stewart replied: 'According to our warehouse these have been shipped to you.'

How far do Canadian publishers think Australia is from North America? A package sent by sea will normally take three months to arrive here.

From Adelaide, January 21st fax: 'Please clarify - are Jack Hodgins' books coming by air? What date were they sent?' The reply came one whole month later: February 22nd fax: 'Unfortunately your books were shipped by 'Book Post' on January 24/25... even though I had requested shipping by air at your request and expense. This would have cost around \$60 Canadian. I have since requested they send you a further 10 books by Air Freight which left our warehouse this afternoon... however the cost will be approximately \$120.00 You should receive these within a few days. I would hope that we can split this cost...' Needless to say, none of these books arrived on time.

The order to Macmillan for books by Hodgins fared even worse. A fax went from Adelaide on January 19th, specifically requesting that they be sent 'by AIR'. Twelve days later came a faxed response from Macmillan requiring prepayment.

As a member of the Australian Booksellers' Association, the bookseller appointed by Writers' Week is entitled to usual trade terms of payment upon receipt of invoice and books. However, as Macmillan's request had already caused unnecessary delay, there was not time to argue the point and so the bookseller issued the cheque for prepayment early in February. Two weeks later: 'Are Jack Hodgins' books on way? Please confirm.' Macmillan replied in the affirmative. Jack Hodgins' reading, which I chaired on March 13th, was one of the great successes of Writers' Week 1990. His books from Macmillan arrived at the book site the next day - a day too late. I then rescued my own personal copies, which I had lent for display purposes, from the book-buying area. Except for a few copies solicited from the Canadian High Commission, mine were the only Canadian books present on the crucial day: they had a large sign attached to them - *NOT FOR SALE*.

It was particularly irksome for the bookseller, having been forced to prepay for books that did not arrive for the event, to read some months later the *Toronto Star's* reporting of the publisher's version of the story, where Mr Ron Besse, the owner of Macmillan, is cited as saying that 'his firm not only sent the books but absorbed expenses for air freight...'

Canadian literature in Australia owes its struggling existence to four strange phenomena: first, a handful of academic enthusiasts, members of the Association for Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand, whose teaching is fraught with the difficulties of obtaining even the most basic texts; second, Penguin Australia's rather pathetic Canadian list; third, Canadian authors whose publishers compel them to serve as mules whenever they travel abroad, carrying their books in their baggage and paying hefty fees for its being overweight (Hodgins suffered this time for refusing to comply with this, to my mind completely unreasonable, request); and last, but not least, the diplomatic bag.

This last in fact explains how the Canadian High Commission was able to supply at least a few copies of Hodgins' books to the Writers' Week bookshop. After waiting almost a fortnight for a response to the first fax sent to Macmillan on January 19th, in desperation the bookshop telephoned the High Commission in Canberra, which in turn telexed the Arts Promotion division of the Department of External Affairs in Ottawa, requesting that someone there phone Macmillan. It seems hardly coincidental that Macmillan finally faxed its reply (the request for prepayment) later that same day. Two weeks later, it was McClelland and Stewart's turn to need prompting from External Affairs. Obviously, the Arts Promotion division did not have much faith in either publisher, for it telexed Canberra a little later to say that copies of Hodgins' books published by both would arrive by the next diplomatic bag.

Janette Turner Hospital's books might be considered the exception to the rule of Canadian literature in Australia - 'Not for Sale' - as they were at Writers' Week this year, even if she were not. But that is because, although she is certainly considered a Canadian writer in Canada, she has managed to persuade her Australian publisher that she is an Australian author - and is marketed here accordingly.

The details of the disastrous failure by Canadian publishers to promote the national literature abroad could be multiplied almost *ad infinitum*. Often what happens is that the Canadian publisher sells all Commonwealth rights to the United Kingdom - which, of course, hardly ever bothers to distribute Canadian titles to Australia and in fact often does not exercise its rights even in the United Kingdom. It was for this reason, for instance, that, when Timothy Findley embarked upon a reading tour of Australia he discovered that legally none of his books could be made available here.

Canadian literature in Australia probably has a higher profile at the moment than at any other time in its history. The international publishers - Penguin (Robertson Davies, Findley, Clarke Blaise), Virago (Atwood) and Picador (Ondaatje) - have given it that profile. So has the Canadian government, through its various funding bodies, which has devoted a considerable amount of money in recent years to promoting Canadian literature in Australia, even to the point of offering travel incentives to Australian academics who are willing to guarantee fifty per cent Canadian content in their courses for the next three years of teaching after their return from Canada. Sad to say, these courses rarely last. How can they? The publishers are too unreliable in supplying the books! Without publishers' support, the Canadian government's promotion of Canadian literature overseas is simply a waste of Canadian taxpayers' money.

By way of contrast, all praise to the small publishers of Canada! Whether or not it is because they have a more immediate enthusiasm for the books they publish I cannot say, but certainly they are able to send books here with a minimum of confusion and bother and, although they can afford it far less than larger publishers, they do not balk at the occasional air-mail expense, for they recognise that some markets are not born and must instead be made.

The implication of the *Toronto Star's* report was that the number of books ordered by the Writers' Week bookseller from Hodgins' Canadian publishers (forty altogether) was too small to be considered significant. Let me just point out, then, that the attendance at Writers' Week last year was approximately 28,000 people, who were entertained by 64 speakers representing 13 countries. Some single-writer sessions drew an audience of over 2000. Only one writer's, one country's books were not present in time for the event - the Canadian writer, Jack Hodgins. Yet he so impressed 'industry' people at his reading that *Innocent Cities*, which has since been published with McClelland and Stewart in Canada, was picked up also by the University of Queensland Press and was published in Australia in March 1991. In any case, surely it is not the number of books sold on the day that counts, but rather the sales potential that is generated for the future. And Australians, relative to the size of the population, buy more books than any other country in the English-speaking world.

When England and the United States divided that world into two great publishing empires Canadian readers were effectively denied access to Australian books, just as Australian readers were denied Canadian books. But times are changing. With the removal of trade restrictions in Australia and the freeing up of

the Australian book-buying market, Australian readers have their eyes on the literatures that have been largely inaccessible to them in the past. Canadian publishers, then, might do well to think again about the assumed isolation of their market area. They might even reconsider the unlikely benefits of selling all Commonwealth rights in one package to the United Kingdom. At the very least, they might seek not to continue embarrassing their writers overseas.

Unbelievably ironic though it may seem, the Adelaide Festival coincided with a Canadian government-sponsored publishers' delegation to Australia - aimed at increasing the market for Canadian books! So let me conclude with an equally ironic little tale from a colleague at the University of Queensland, also a Canadian literature enthusiast, Professor Alan Lawson. A few years ago he was invited to the Badlands conference in Alberta, where the Australian and Canadian literary cross-connections were vigorously debated. Canadian author Robert Kroetsch was a keynote speaker. Lawson has for five years now been wanting to set Kroetsch's popular novel *Badlands* on the syllabus of his Canadian literature course. For most of that time, his letters to the publishers have been unanswered. Only once did he manage somehow to solicit a reply - which he relayed to Kroetsch on the occasion of the keynote address at the Badlands conference: Kroetsch's publishers insisted, quite simply, that they were not Kroetsch's publishers!