IN QUEST OF THE ELUSIVE

Within the human race there is a small sub-species with an overly developed acquisitive sense. The men become financiers and garner fortunes; their women collect diamonds and other baubles. More sophisticated types channel their mania into worthwhile acquisitions such as rare books and works of art. What great library or art gallery but is the richer because of some private collector; the Medicis, the J.P. Morgans, the Eric Harvies are true benefactors of humanity, for they preserve man's cultural heritage.

I have known people who collect trivia, the jetsam of our industrial age, match-box tops or the geegaws out of popcorn packets. But the real queers among collectors are the bibliographers, for they collect not the corporeal, but only a whiff of its essence. To psychoanalysts the bibliographer is basically a bibliophile who, too poor to buy books, finds an outlet for his frustrations by copying book titles on scraps of paper. Yet I would like to think that these eccentrics are also preservers of our cultural heritage.

I first felt twinges of the mania when as a graduate student I discovered western materials I never dreamed existed, and my case worsened when my supervisor suggested the need for a regional bibliography. I might have recovered from the mania without any permanent impairment, had it not been for an invitation to tell an undergraduate English club about materials which prospective regional writers might exploit. And so I started writing titles on the backs of used catalogue cards and filing the cards in a shoe box. Came the night of my talk. It was the coldest night of the year, and only a dozen hardy writers turned up. As for me, by this time I was hooked on the habit of collecting titles.

My intention was to have a bibliography compiled in a matter of months. In my blissful ignorance I assumed that most of the literature on the West was contained within the walls of the University of Saskatchewan Library. Now, after many years of searching through major libraries on this continent and in Europe, I admit that I probably have not yet rounded up that last title.

Why are the titles relating to the Prairie Provinces so elusive? Many publications were ephemeral by nature. Perhaps few other regions of the world have had such a high percentage of early descriptive publications intended for the perusal of persons outside the region; I allude to the scores of immigration pamphlets. Further, until recent decades there has been a paucity of local library and archival depositories in the Prairie region, where Prairie titles might be expected to repose. Even if a library had regional pamphlets, these were likely to be in dusty storage, unappreciated and uncatalogued.

He who is starting on a bibliography must first establish the coverage of his compilation, and then decide on its organization. How strange that a regional

bibliographer quickly finds that he must exclude certain forms of material as too unmanageable, and certain topics as peripheral to the central theme. Within my terms of reference, as set out in my first preface, I decided to strive for completeness. This meant defying a basic tenet held by bibliographers; namely, that one should see every publication included. Some titles for which I had only the vaguest and most incomplete references were included. Predictably, this led to some duplication under different entries, but a dozen or more duplicates out of 4,500 titles is perhaps excusable — I hope.

Many of the publications issued about the Canadian West were printed not by the regular book trade, but by amateurs who were casual about providing a proper title page. Sometimes a pamphlet's cover title had a variant or completely different title within. The bibliographer might not know the cover title of a pamphlet, for the wrappers were likely to have been removed by a zealous librarian in binding it. The printers of many pamphlets seemed indifferent to the importance of place and date. Finally, in the many corporate entries it was often difficult to establish the issuing body.

Still in this confessional mood, I shall admit that a major weakness in my bibliography is that only one edition is listed. More difficult to sort out than the editions of a regular book published simultaneously in Toronto, New York and London, were editions of certain immigration pamphlets bearing the same title but for different years, a fact which can only be determined by a careful reading of the text. There were also immigration pamphlets published in several languages, deceptively posing as the same edition in translation; on careful comparison one might find that testimonials of satisfied settlers were of different racial groups according to the country to which each was directed.

Having admitted the errors of my bibliographical ways with respect to the body of the compilation, I come now to the indexes.

The subject index, which is arranged by broad topic with the titles listed chronologically, is in a sense a short-title catalogue. Initially it was my intention to preface each subject list with a bibliographical essay indicating major works and adding data on other sources such as serials and manuscripts. Many years later when the first edition was nearing completion, the bibliographer's spirit had flagged; the potentially valuable essays remained unwritten.

The title index is the least satisfactory of the three indexes. Nineteenth century titles tended to be rambling and descriptive, with the first words often having little value for purposes of identification. Should the bibliographer prepare a keyword index of titles? A second problem with titles was that certain phrases with slight variations thereof were used ad nauseam; for example "Manitoba and the great North-West" and "The last best West". My title index is helpful, but not reliable.

The unusual feature of the author index is the biographical notes. Originally I was undecided whether to include such notes until I realized I was accumulating in my head information often difficult to come by. I have always regretted that while undecided on policy, I failed to gather information on some authors and for these the data went unrecorded.

A problem of the innovator is his isolation when he is in need of practical advice. I have always appreciated the criticism given me by Bernard Amtmann,

Canadiana dealer in Montreal. He recalls that he tried to dissuade me from including a feature he now considers most useful – the author notes.

Great advances in bibliographic control of world literature have occurred since 1946, the year the Canadian Library Association was organized. There was no National Library in Canada and, of course, no national union catalogue the researcher could consult. In my library (the University of Saskatchewan) the printed Library of Congress Catalogue was available only to the letter G and the British Museum Catalogue just to C. Bibliography rooms were sparsely furnished with bibliographical tools, none of the shelf upon shelf of G.K. Hall catalogues of great libraries that we have today. As I have indicated, even when the bibliographer visited a library he could not be sure that the institution considered Canadiana titles worth listing in the catalogues.

Another difference between the immediate post-war period and today was that money for travel or for scholarly research was non-existent then. My visits to libraries were usually at my own expense, and during holidays; a few days in the Christmas season, a few hours between trains were prime research time.

One of my happiest hunting grounds was the Legislative Library of Manitoba, the oldest library on the Prairies. Many regional treasures were shelved in the Librarian's Office, but there was a vast cavernous library storeroom deep in the bowels of the building under the Legislative Chamber, and there, often lying about in piles on the floor, were immigration pamphlets and the library of the old Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba. It was an eerie place, for one walked halfway across the floor before reaching the light switch pillar. One pre-New Year's season I worked alone for a couple of days in the Legislative Building; the librarians and legislators were gone, and only the door guard and I remained in that great building. I thought the guard eyed me suspiciously each time I entered; was I a cabinet minister toiling over new legislation in preparation for the January sitting, or a Guy Fawkes laying gunpowder under the Legislative Chamber? I was afraid to fraternize with him lest he ask how I had gotten the master key to the Library.

Travel in those days was by train, and I thought nothing of curling up for the night in the day coach. On this particular visit I caught the westward train about 10:00 p.m. and celebrated the New Year asleep on a red plush seat.

Another Christmas season I was in Regina doing research, and spent Christmas in a hotel room. About dusk I sauntered out looking for my Christmas dinner only to find all the restaurants in the centre of town closed. As I later learned, the CCF government had decreed shortly before that waitresses must be paid overtime for working on Christmas, and restaurateurs, adamant, had closed their eateries. Walking the deserted streets in the bitter cold, I met a policeman buried to the ears in the collar of his buffalo coat. He said he had seen a partly-opened food dispensary on the other side of the railway tracks. When I found this establishment the proprietor was not paying overtime; his wife and teenage daughter were cooking and serving. I waited nearly two hours, with my gastric juices churning at the savory odors all about. Each time a starving soul opened the door, an Arctic chill gripped me round the ankles, while behind me an ancient Mountie, in the flat voice of the very old, told how he had frozen and hungered on the Yukon Trail in '98.

The time I “did up” the New York Public Library that city was enduring a debilitating heat wave. The natives, whose normal mortality rate was a hundred per diem, were dying by three hundred per day. In the library, as I stood thumbing through catalogue drawers, the perspiration from my brow seeped through my eyebrows to plop in big drops on my glasses, blinding me. I spent as much time wiping spectacles as copying titles.

A bibliographer must be as relentless in his pursuit of book titles as the detective following clues.

Take the case of the “first document printed in Manitoba”. In a musty tome, I read that a copy of this first imprint had been sealed in the cornerstone of Winnipeg’s city hall in the year 1875. But what was the document? The problem was how to get access to it. Should I have taken my chisel and mallet to the corner and risk being picked up by Winnipeg’s “finest” for public nuisance? No, I preferred to wait - and wait. Finally, a dozen years later, the swinging steel ball of progress laid the old Victorian building low. When I beheld the document (or rather a xerox of it), it was a broadside, “A few reasons for a crown colony” printed in 1859 by Manitoba’s first abortionist.

Or consider the search for the imprints of the Rossville Mission Press – those minute books of religious literature printed in Cree syllabic by the Reverend Messrs. Evans and Mason. I have located Rossville titles – several of which are in all probability the only copy extant – in Victoria University in Toronto, the B.C. Archives, the New York Public Library, the Newberry in Chicago, and the British Museum. When one finds a book one really cannot quite believe could have been printed, one experiences the ecstasy of the poet Keats “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”,

“Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken.”

An equally interesting search to me was that for the Red River broadsides of 1869-70. Most of these had been gathered into the Manitoba Archives and the Public Archives of Canada. But who had bought a key broadside at auction in Montreal for nearly \$800 a few years previously? I tracked it down. And that left two broadsides missing. All copies of one had allegedly been destroyed by order of Louis Riel. A year ago I spoke at the National Conference on Bibliography in Vancouver: afterwards a lady came up and said “I am a great-great-niece of James Ross, one of the Red River Settlement printers, and I have a scrapbook of broadsides.” And so she did, including the one which mounted men had removed from all walls in the Settlement that January day in 1870.

One summer morning outside my office in the library a man was waiting. He introduced himself as a bibliophile and collector. He was a senior civil servant in Ottawa, and his job took him abroad three or four times a year. It was his hobby, he said, to search through book stalls in foreign cities for Canadiana. Once in Paris in his rummaging he had come across an account published in France in 1813 which described a journey from Montreal to the Athabasca country. There was no record of this book in any Canadian library or bibliography. He invited me to visit his home in Ottawa to inspect it. Well, I was in Ottawa often enough, but I thought I would wait to contact him until I had

the second edition of my bibliography in preparation. When that time came, I learned that he had been dead for two years, and his library dispersed.

Then there was the mystery of Lord Strathcona's biography. I was working in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives in England, when a young man, a fellow researcher, came up and said, "In your bibliography you list a "Life of Lord Strathcona" by W.R. Richmond, and give a private source for your information. I have looked for this book in Canadian libraries, and, since arriving in London, in English libraries. As it was published in London, I can't understand why it is not in the British Museum."

I thought for a moment, and recalled that in the late 1940's a man had come into my office in the University of Saskatchewan Library with his personal annotated copy. He told how one morning, early in the century, the book had gone on sale in London bookstores. Lord Strathcona, then a crusty old gentleman and Canada's High Commissioner, had obtained a copy and had not liked what he read about himself. He threatened a libel suit unless the publisher withdrew the book immediately, and by 2:00 p.m. the book was gone from the bookstores. Any copy extant has to have been purchased before 2:00 o'clock on that particular day. I could not help my enquirer in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, because, you see, I had forgotten the name of the man in Saskatoon and a few years back had tossed an apple box or two of my card records into the garbage. However, there are now two copies in Canadian libraries, of which one is ours. We bought it a few months ago for a song from a book dealer who obviously had not checked my bibliographical note on the rarity of the item.

For many years I had wanted to explore European libraries for Canadiana, because I suspected that they would contain immigration literature and settlers' memoirs. In 1971 this was made possible by the Canada Council, and I was able to pass through 17 countries in seventy days. In memory's eye the National Libraries of Europe are a bright montage of buildings, books, and experiences.

I suppose I never realized how ridiculous a bibliographer appears to sane, ordinary folk until I was travelling in Europe. In breakfast rooms and on trains I would meet Europeans who would say, "Come you for business or for the pleasure?" I was always nonplussed by the question, for I have never decided whether to categorize bibliographic research as fun or as work. So I would say, "I come in search of Canadiana." Then I would see in their eyes the same look of amazement Jason saw on the faces of the rude inhabitants on distant strands when he beached his craft and said, "I come looking for the Golden Fleece", or Sir Galahad when he rode forth on his white charger among the simple serfs and villeins and said, "I go in quest of the Holy Grail".

In European libraries I found what I was searching for — books and pamphlets relating to the Prairie Provinces. I shall confine myself to one story. In the National Library of Finland a distinguished elderly librarian acted as my translator of a book written by a Finnish home-steader who had settled west of Red Deer. The settler had the usual pioneer experiences, but one autumn he wrote that he had decided to go "mamuski" hunting. He admitted it was foolish of him and that he would have to sell a load of hogs to raise the money. My mentor paused, saying, "I thought I knew every word in the Finnish language. Hmm; perhaps mamuski is an East Karelian dialectical term. Do you know what prairie animal a mamuski might be?" I, too, was puzzled. But I said that I could see the

root of the word mammal in “mamuski”, so he must be after big game, perhaps mountain sheep or goats. We flipped the page to find that the settler was doing his hunting in New York. It turned out that he had decided it was time to marry and raise a family, so he was looking for a “mamma” for his future children – he had invented a Finnish word. Well, the settler had inserted an advertisement in a Finnish newspaper, and twenty girls had responded. In New York he wined and dined them – but not all at once. He told them, he said, of the beauty of the primeval forest, the cold winters, and the long winter nights – all of which would appeal to a Finnish girl. At the end of a month he chose a young lady whom he described as “beautiful, charming, healthy and virtuous.” Of course, the reader knows this description may be suspect, because as the Finn was writing his memoirs thirty years later, the successful candidate was looking over his shoulder.

A bibliography is more than a record of books; it is a record of the people who wrote and published. Some prairie poets might have better ended up mute inglorious Miltons in country church yards, than to have published their literary remains. But I feel sympathy, nay affection, for all these people who expressed such creativity as they had, even as I, in the preparation of a book or pamphlet. And they owe me something, too, for by my record the names of many have been preserved from oblivion.

Such snippets of biographical information as I have given in my author index have been obtained by pursuing a variety of clues – internal evidence, or through year after year of city directories and the morgue files of newspapers. Once my information came from the Registrar of Vital Statistics, who sent me a death certificate sufficiently decorative to make it suitable for framing, and a bill for \$3.00.

I continue to watch for death notices to add to my “Author’s Revision Copy”. Most of the authors I now find are very advanced in years. Two of the last whose earthly record I closed with a few strokes of a pen were Eva Hasell and George Spence. In the 1920’s Miss Hasell came out from England to drive a Sunday School caravan so that rural children in isolated communities might have religious teaching. She published her adventures in books to raise money for the next year’s caravan. She died in England last year at the age of 86 years.

George Spence was a former long-time Saskatchewan MLA and cabinet minister. As he was born in 1879, I assumed three years ago that he was long dead, and wrote to Regina for his death date. The Legislative Librarian, an old friend and one that I had wearied with many last minute requests, wrote back, “George Spence is still alive; I saw him on the street just a few days ago.” Three months ago my pen closed his earthly record at the age of 96. I recall when I was very young hearing my elders tell how he had walked 50 miles to his homestead carrying a bag of tree seedlings to plant a wind-break. During the drought of the 1930’s he was chairman of the PERA which provided the money for the scooping out of hundreds of farm “dug-outs” to catch the spring run-off so that prairie livestock might slake their thirst.

Yes, each of these two, in different ways, tried to make the prairies a better place in which to live, one by satisfying the thirst of the soul, the other the thirst of the land.

My bibliography is "Dedicated to the Homesteaders among whom were my father and mother." A dedication often has subtleties which the reader cannot quite comprehend. Why did I not say "among whom were my parents". The answer is that my mother, before her marriage, homesteaded in her own right, most unusual for a woman.

In the spring of 1973, just before the second edition went to press, I decided on a last fling in the Library of Congress. On arrival I asked a senior reference librarian if I might have access to the card file of that part of the National Union Catalogue which had not yet been published in book form by Mansell. He led me back through a narrow archway. I told him that I had published a bibliography relating to Western Canada some years ago, and was now updating it. He stopped in his tracks, causing me to nearly collide with him.

He said, "Why, you must be Peel."

I was surprised and asked, "Are you familiar with my bibliography?"

He said, "Yes, I went through your original bibliography when it was first published, and later your supplement, looking for author information. As a hobby I try to complete the Christian names and dates of authors, where these are missing, in the L.C. official catalogue. Over the years I have added a hundred thousand bits of information."

It pleased me to contemplate that Western Canadian author entries in library catalogues, perhaps all over the world, are more complete because of my searches. This is psychic income — and being untaxable is all the sweeter.

Users of my bibliography, particularly booksellers, have played a game for years — trying to find pamphlets "Not in Peel." The booksellers play for cash, hoping to hit the jackpot with a rarity. These Canadiana dealers are my best source of post-publication information on pamphlets I have missed; and I acknowledge my indebtedness to them. Is my latest edition complete? Well, not quite, since the game of finding western items which eluded me still continues. The second edition appeared just before Christmas, 1973. Not long after the New Year, my publisher, the University of Toronto Press, received a letter from an old gentleman in Ottawa who owned an unlisted pamphlet. He wrote "I do not know if Mr. Peel is still alive, but if he is not, would you please pass this information on to whoever is carrying on his work." The publisher replied emphatically, I am happy to say, that I was still alive and well. And being alive I continue the quest for the elusive — that last missing pamphlet.

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