Canadian Children's Books


None who are collecting or investigating early Canadian children's books would deny their need for a retrospective bibliography, or at least a comprehensive checklist. While most of the important Canadiana bibliographies cite some children's books, there is no single reliable and sufficient bibliographical source in the field, and Bernard Amtmann's two contributions, regrettably, do not alter this fact.

In Early Canadian Children's Books, 1763-1840, Amtmann 'proposes to examine what was produced and printed in Canada prior to 1840, suitable for and available to juvenile readers, even if not always intended for them'. It may be foolish to quibble with this definition — certainly most bibliographers of children's books allow themselves some such latitude; yet Amtmann's expansion of his definition to embrace almost anything in print — 'namely the classics, the poets, the dramatists, the moralists and lesser moralists' — effectively obscures the parameters necessary for a definitive, or even a very useful, bibliography. For example, there are citations here for psalms and sermons, biographies, histories, and broadsides, almost none of which were addressed to children; Oliver Goldsmith's Rising Village is included, although Amtmann avows that 'no extensive attempt has been made to cover the field of Canadian poetry.' A substantial but hardly exhaustive number of textbooks is cited. Simply put, there is both too much and too little.

Equal in complexity to the problem of identifying a 'children's' book is that of selecting a 'Canadian' children's book. The 412 citations in Part One include works printed or published in Canada (in French, English, native languages, and Latin), and those written by Canadians but published abroad. This section Amtmann deems 'relatively exhaustive,' in contrast to the more selective 'sampling' of 95 entries in Part Two, which lists works that are about Canada or the Canadian Arctic, but are neither written by Canadians nor printed or published in Canada. The latter is intended 'to show the nature rather than the extent' of the publications it represents.

A Bibliography of Canadian Children's Books ... 1841-1867 appears to continue the
earlier volume, presumably using the same selection criteria. There is no introduction
to clarify these points, even though the 641 entries have not been divided into two parts.
(Titles falling within the scope of the first volume's Part Two seem largely omitted in
this one.)

The principal limitation of these bibliographies stems from their total reliance on
other published bibliographies for both the selection of titles and the information in the
entries, which typically include author, title, a varying number of publication facts,
format, and the bibliographical source(s) for the citation. Asterisks identify books of
fewer than one hundred pages, but more precise pagination statements would have
greatly enhanced the value of the bibliography as a tool for distinguishing variants.
Notes describing the bibliographical history of titles are rare, which leaves all but
subject experts quite dangerously unenlightened in regard to original place and date of
publication. Entries are arranged alphabetically by author, with brief indexes providing
access by pseudonym and by title for works published anonymously.

It is the insufficiency of bibliographical detail that is most disappointing in Amt-
mann's works, while the 53 full-page illustrations (mostly of title pages) in the first
volume and the generous amounts of white space (for additions and corrections?) on the
pages of both are the most pleasing qualities of the works. Each has been issued in a
limited edition of 250 copies, and specialists who are not discouraged by the prices of
these paperbacks may want to have their own copies until a more definitive bibliog-
raphy of early Canadian children's books is produced.

The 1978 revision and expansion of Irma McDonough's widely-used bibliography of
English and French Canadian children's books that are currently in print employs
essentially the same selection criteria and organizational principles as the 1976 version,
but newcomers would nonetheless appreciate a complete recapitulation of this infor-
mation including, in particular, the compiler's definition of 'Canadian' (according to the
earlier Foreword, 'books written about Canada and Canadians published in Canada and
elsewhere, and those written by Canadian writers on any subject or theme'). Citations
of some 1,500 of 'the most informative, relevant and excellent books for young people'
are arranged in broad subject classes, thirteen for English titles and nine for French, with
further subject subdivision. There are separate French and English sections for profes-
sional reading, periodicals, and prize-winning books. Publishers' series are listed to-
gether, with appropriate cross-references from subject classes.

Each entry includes author, title, illustrator, publisher, date of publication, paging-
ation, price for cloth and / or paper, ISBN, and a brief annotation characterizing the
content and, infrequently, containing some critical observation. Annotiations are writ-
ten in the language of the book. For English books, the reading level of the intended
audience is only occasionally indicated in the entry by the phrase 'for older [or younger,
middle, or mature] readers', but for entries in French, suitable age levels are specified by
year for all titles. While there are obvious hazards attendant on the specification of age
level, it is nevertheless an extremely useful element of information for librarians and
others using this bibliography as a selection or advisory tool. And, in principle, consis-
tency among the entries in the provision of this or any other information is desirable in
a bibliography. Presumably to conserve space and eliminate the repetition of 'Toronto',
the place of publication is omitted from the entries, which, coupled with the referral of
readers to other sources for publishers' addresses, prevents this useful work from stand-
ing as an independent bibliography outside the context of Canadian libraries and bookstores and beyond the time period for which it is current.

The format is attractive, with antiquarian illustrations serving as headpieces for the subject sections and sufficient typographical variety to facilitate browsing. An author-title index and a brief list of bookstores across Canada specializing in Canadian children's books are included.

The *Children's Book Review Index* resumed publication with this issue in 1977, after a year's suspension. It cites reviews of children's books from some 290 periodicals, including the major children's literature reviewing journals in the US, as well as general titles such as *Saturday Review*; few Canadian titles are among them (scanning the list revealed only *Canadian Forum* and *Canadian Geographical Journal*). Entries are alphabetized by author and include title, review source, volume, date, and page number. A title index and a complete list of periodicals indexed appear in each issue. The fact that all reviews cited in CBRI are also cited in *Book Review Index* compromises the value of this tool, though it is a relatively economical source for specialized children's collections that may have access to the most relevant source periodicals, but not to the larger index. Coverage of Canadian books, however, will probably continue to be light.

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