A Tribute to Bruce Braden Peel (1916-1998)¹

Merrill Distad²

Bruce Peel began life as he was to go on; being a pioneer and a forerunner: he anticipated the Armistice which ended the Great War by fully two years, when he was born, the oldest of three children, on November 11th, 1916. Bruce's parents, William Peel and Alice Switzer, farmed a homestead near Ferland, in southern Saskatchewan, close to the international border.

When Bruce was eight, his father died of asthmatic complications, leaving him and his two younger sisters, Doreen and Wilma, to be raised by their mother. The farmland itself was leased out to a neighbour, Mr Brander, who continued its cultivation. The resulting revenue, along with the sale of the equipment and most of the farmstock, raised sufficient money to secure the family from want. Moreover, Bruce's maternal uncle, James Switzer, owned a prosperous spread nearby. But despite the proximity of family and neighbours, a sense of loneliness pervaded prairie homesteads in the 1920s and 1930s which even the advent of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation could not wholly dispel.

Reaching manhood in the years of the Great Depression, Bruce spent the year 1936-37 earning a teacher's credential at the normal school in Moose Jaw. This was a reliable, if somewhat stereotypical choice to guarantee one a career, or at least a job to fall back on in those hard times. In 1937 he began teaching school in rural Saskatchewan, and later in Saskatoon. But he had higher ambitions, which required a more rigorous education. However, the combination of the depression and the outbreak of war entailed further delay. Unfitted for military service by the condition of his eyes, he nonetheless volunteered to serve his country, and wound up painting ships at the Lakehead. After that interlude, he returned to Saskatchewan, where he took both bachelor's and master's degrees.

1 This tribute was read at the Annual Conference of the Bibliographical Society of Canada/La Société bibliographique du Canada in Edmonton on 19 June 2000.

2 Merrill Distad is Associate Director of Libraries, University of Alberta

Then, encouraged by Professor Simpson of the History Department, he went east to earn a library degree at the University of Toronto.

Professor Simpson influenced both his career decision to become a librarian, as well as Bruce Peel's return to the University of Saskatchewan in 1946, when he was appointed curator of the Adam Shortt Collection of Canadiana — of which more presently. In 1950 Miss Margaret Fullerton consented to become his wife, and the following year he 'dragged' her to Edmonton, before she could finish her undergraduate degree at Saskatchewan, but for which action, Margaret has told me, she had virtually forgiven him ... forty years on.

Hired by the University of Alberta's chief librarian, Miss Marjorie Sherlock, as her chief cataloguer, he rose to the position of her deputy, and when Miss Sherlock married in 1955, and resigned her post, to take up domesticity, he was named her successor, as "Librarian to the University," a distinctive title of which he was always inordinately proud. Robert Blackburn once told me that upon succeeding Stewart Wallace as chief librarian of the University of Toronto in 1954, he invited Bruce Peel to become his associate and second-in-command. The offer was politely declined. According to his wife Margaret, he also received and refused offers from such places as McGill and Western Ontario; male librarians in those days being a much-sought-after minority to fill senior administrative posts. Margaret Peel believes that Bruce resisted all these tempting offers because of his unwillingness to leave his beloved prairies.

Had Bruce Peel done nothing more than pursue his career as a library administrator, he would be remembered both with awe and no little envy. Awe at his achievements, and envy at the timing of his career to coincide with an era of unprecedented growth in universities and their libraries. His most obvious achievement as an administrator was to guide the growth of the University of Alberta Library from a very modest size to its present rank, as one of Canada's three largest research libraries.

Indeed, as a library planner and builder he was responsible for developing six library facilities on the Edmonton campus (including the Cameron and Rutherford libraries), as well as the development of the original library collection at the University of Calgary, while it was a "branch plant" campus of the UofA. He served on seemingly endless library committees and boards, and as an advisor on library building design ranging from Hay River in the NWT to Iran in the Middle East. As a member of the seminal Commission on Canadian

Studies (1976-81) chaired by Professor Tom Symons of Trent University, he drafted documents on the role of libraries in supporting Canadian studies, and on the need for a national microfilming project. The later presaged the creation of the Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions (CIHM), on whose Board of Directors he would also serve.

As a founder of institutions, Mr Peel — as he was always referred to in those more deferential times — must also be credited with fostering the creation of both the University of Alberta's library school and its press. While he found the recruitment of new librarians a congenial excuse for travel, he was at the same time made mindful of the need for a library faculty here, to provide for the needs of the prairie region. And in the words of Norma Gutteridge, a former director of our Press,

"Mr Peel was an early supporter of the establishment of a University Press, and ...did a great deal to foster its development once it had come into existence. It is doubtful if the Press would have grown and prospered as it did without his encouragement and work behind the scenes."

Bruce Peel's library career was rich in service not only to his own institution, but also to the profession at large. The record of that service filled many pages in his curriculum vitae, and resulted in such honours as the presidency of the Library Association of Alberta (LAA), the Canadian Library Association (CLA), and the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL). In 1982, the year of his retirement, he was honored with the Canadian Library Association's Award for Outstanding Service to Librarianship, and later, in 1991, by an honorary doctorate conferred by the University of Alberta.

However, as you are all aware, Bruce Peel was much more than merely a very successful librarian. Indeed, his interests and activities were so numerous and varied, that its hard to know where to begin. So, as all good historians should, I will start this part of the story at the beginning, at the University of Saskatchewan in 1946, a significant year if only because it marked the beginning of Bruce Peel's library career

Placed in charge of the Dr Adam Shortt Collection of Canadiana, which the University of Saskatchewan had acquired in 1918, and continued to build over the subsequent decades, Bruce Peel had undertaken the task of providing it with a comprehensive catalogue, when a chance meeting with members of the undergraduate English Society led to an invitation to speak on the collection's regional

resources. Thus, he began a card file of western Canadian titles, in preparation for his forthcoming talk, and “the rest,” as the saying has it, “is history.” The subsequent decision to produce a published bibliography that focused on the Prairies was — he once confessed to me — one he would never have undertaken, if he had known what he was getting into!

That was the beginning of a lifetime devoted to tracking down and collecting bibliographic references. The project that he confidently expected to take no more than a year or so, in fact took ten years before the publication of his *A Bibliography of the Prairie Provinces* in 1956. The publication of a bibliography almost invariably flushes other titles from the bushes, and by 1963, a 130-page supplement was needed to record 475 new entries, along with addenda and corrigenda to the first edition. A cumulative second edition appeared in 1973, and that was still not to be the end of the hunt.

Meanwhile, however, Bruce Peel had other interests to occupy him, and these resulted in a lengthy and impressive stream of publications historical, biographical, bibliographical, genealogical, and journalistic. In his phenomenally productive spare time he studied heraldry and philately, and assembled significant collections of postage stamps and bookplates — the latter now resides at the University of Calgary. The subjects of his publications are wide and varied, and while they deal primarily with Canadian topics, and particularly with the early settlement and publishing history of western Canada, they also range from a sketch of the ninth-century Byzantine Patriarch Photius (fl. 858-890) to a study of Christopher Columbus’ house and library.

His historical and biographical studies were always based upon solid and precise research, but were rendered with a popular flair and a desire to appeal to the lay reader. Perhaps the best known, and certainly the most entertaining of these, is his 1972 book *Steamboats on the Saskatchewan*, which began life as the script for a television documentary. Based on years of research in old newspaper files and the archives of the Hudson’s Bay Company, it recounts, with many a delightful anecdote, the perilous history of riverboat navigation westward from Grand Rapids on Lake Winnipeg along both the north and south branches of the mighty Saskatchewan River. Indeed, who can forget colourful figures like Captain John Segers, who piloted sternwheelers from the Mississippi to the Yukon to the Nile, where he participated in the Gordon Relief Expedition, only to end

his career in Nome, Alaska, in 1903, when a tidal wave deposited his last command, high-&-dry on top of a warehouse?

It is, however, for the *Bibliography of the Prairie Provinces* and his other publications on the history of early western Canadian printing and imprints, that Bruce Peel is best known as a scholar, and upon which his high reputation among both bibliographers and historians rests.

He often demonstrated that mixture of perseverance and pertinacity, that marks the best scholars as well as bibliographers. While preparing the first edition of his *Prairie Bibliography*, he was frustrated to find that something called "*the first document printed in Manitoba*" had never been described, but was inaccessible since being entombed within the cornerstone of Winnipeg's town hall in 1875. With the passage of another 15 years, however, urban 'renewal' came to the rescue in the form of a wrecker's ball! On February 17th, 1962, with the aid of "*two screwdrivers, three cold chisels, two hammers, four aldermen, and a mayor*," the old City Hall's time capsule was opened, and disgorged — among other things — a 34-line broadside of 1859 entitled "*Eight Reasons for a Crown Colony*." This long-sought item became entry #208 in the second edition of Peel's *Prairie Bibliography*, and it also enabled him to complete his excellent monograph on *Early Printing in the Red River Settlement, (1859-1870), and its Effect Upon the Riel Rebellion*, which was published in 1974.

A refusal to take no for an answer, or to settle for half-a-loaf, was another of Bruce's traits as a bibliographer. He had been denied access to the still-uncatalogued files of the old Department of the Interior while compiling his first edition of the *Prairie Bibliography*, but later, as the second edition was almost ready for the press, he persuaded the Librarian of the Public Archives of Canada (as they were then styled) to allow him access in search of immigration pamphlets. As he described it:

"En route home after a final fling in the Library of Congress, I visited Ottawa and in one day with the help of a strong-armed young archivist slung some 300-400 jam-packed archival boxes off shelves, ran an exploratory finger along the letters' edges to feel for hard edged pamphlets. And then tossed the boxes back up on the shelves. As anticipated, the boxes were a well-stocked cache of immigration pamphlets." [Peel, 2nd edition, p. xi]

And thus, several-score more trophies were added to the hunter's bag.

On at least one occasion, the bibliographer in Bruce Peel trumped the library director. My good friend David Goa, Curator of Folklife at The Provincial Museum of Alberta, tells of how he managed to wangle a borrower's card at a time when access was much more tightly controlled than it is now. After being rebuffed by the Library's line-managers, he approached Bruce Peel and introduced him to two Russian-language books dealing with the history of the Doukhobors in Canada, that were "not in Peel." Bruce was, of course, delighted, and when David added that he had a serious need for user-access to the University Library, Bruce replied, "*Well, OBVIOUSLY you do,*" and he made it so.

Bruce Peel's contributions outside of the Library also brought him numerous honours, including election to the presidency of both the Alberta Historical Society and the Bibliographic Society of Canada. The former body also awarded him its Scroll for Outstanding Contributions to Alberta History, while the latter awarded him the Marie Tremaine Medal for Outstanding Contributions to Canadian Bibliography. At various times he was also the recipient of the Queen Elizabeth Silver Jubilee Medal, and the Golden Cross of Merit from the Polish Government in Exile, for his contributions to, and support of, Slavic bibliography.

My acquaintance and friendship with Bruce began five years into his retirement, for I only arrived in Alberta in 1987. As kindred spirits, however, we met regularly, usually over lunch at the Faculty Club, where we discussed bibliography, books, and the joys of "the hunt." Bruce maintained a small office in the Rutherford Library, where he continued to collect and compile new prairie bibliographic entries, many of them supplied by booksellers such as Tom Williams in Calgary and Dick Spafford in Regina.

Bruce would regularly appear in the Cameron Library to cadge discarded 3" x 5" catalogue cards, on the backs of which he recorded details of each newly discovered item "not in Peel" — personal computers were a mystery he chose not to explore. As the number of new entries grew, he contemplated issuing a supplement to the second edition of the *Prairie Bibliography*, as he had done with the first edition. By 1990, however, the number had grown to be quite substantial, and he was informed by his publisher, the University of Toronto Press, that inasmuch as stocks of the second edition were all but exhausted, they desired to publish a fully cumulated third edition.

On several occasions, I urged him to accept the Library's help with the clerical work, and he always politely declined, I believe both from an unwillingness to impose upon the Library, as well as a desire to stick to his own, tried-&-true method of doing things.

The UofT Press offered to undertake the keying-in of all the entries, old and new, but also offered him the option of receiving two disbound copies of the second edition, to enable him to continue his scissors-&-paste-up mode of revision. To our later, further regret, he chose the latter option. As a result, the work on the third edition progressed but slowly, and the onset of Parkinson's gradually brought even that degree of progress to a halt.

The end came on November 30th, 1998, and four days later, we carried him to his last resting place, on a flat stretch of open ground just east of Edmonton, a gravesite chosen for its close resemblance to the prairies he so loved and did so much to celebrate. A short time later, Ernie Ingles and I made an undertaking with Bruce's family to complete the revision of the third edition, and see it through the press. In the spring of 1999 Ms Darcy Sharman, a student in the MLIS programme, was employed to enter the 4000-odd items of the second edition and 2000-odd new additions into a ProCite database, and a contract was signed with the University of Toronto Press, which was essentially a continuation of the contract signed by Bruce Peel in the 1950s and renewed by him in 1972 and 1991. Ms Sharman completed the task of data-entry in June, 2000, and I am pleased to announce that the third edition should appear in 2001, thus ending a very long odyssey.

Bruce Peel was an average-sized man, physically speaking. He stood only 5-feet 10½-inches tall, and wore a size 7 & 3/8s hat — this information courtesy of a surviving cap-and-gown order dating from his honorary degree ceremony in 1991. But in the fields of Canadian librarianship and bibliography, he looms as something of a giant, responsible on the one hand for building libraries and the library profession in Canada, and on the other for producing bibliographies which helped define and record Canadiana long before Canadian studies came into fashion. Bruce Peel spent a lifetime producing, collecting, organising, and describing the printed word in Canada. The professional careers of most of us in this room today, and our very presence here under the aegis of the Bibliographic Society, are testament that his was a life well-spent, and that his memory is worthy of our admiration and tribute.