Retirement Address, 17 June 1991¹

William Toye

Over the years I have amassed what has turned out to be a large number of files that I labelled PERSONAL because the correspondence in them did not relate directly to business or to any one book. They mainly contain letters about queries, invitations, congratulations, general shoptalk, and personal exchanges with authors out of the context of their books. While placing them in the filing cabinet I bought to store them in at home, I riffled through them and many memories came to me, some of which I'll share with you. Over the last year or so I've often found myself reminiscing about my past in publishing and seen my listeners' eyes glaze over. But this occasion surely gives me license to reminisce a little, and I can only apologize in advance for any boredom I cause.

There is a story in my family that sounds apocryphal but that I remember quite clearly. When I was under ten – because my father died when I was that age – I was being driven down University Avenue towards his office on a Saturday morning and we passed the Oxford University Press, just above Dundas Street on the west side of University.² It was a very distinctive building, the replica of a Jacobean gentleman's London house, named Amen House after the Oxford University Press building in London. Of course I didn't know any of these things, but I said: "I'd like to work there someday."

Towards the end of my last year at Victoria College, when I was quite sure I wanted to be a publisher's editor – when, I see now, the idea of wanting to enter the feeble Canadian publishing industry must have seemed eccentric – an interview was arranged for me by someone at the College who had a connection with someone on the staff of Oxford. I was told that the only opening was a job in the warehouse. I said I'd be glad to have this. I was called back by someone else, was hired, and put in what was called the Order Department where, long before the days of computers, every order and customer's name

1 This address was presented in the Island clubhouse of the Royal Canadian Yacht Club, Toronto.

2 The Press moved to Don Mills, a suburb of Toronto, in 1963.

Figure 1. William Toye, December 1993. Photo by Jean Milner.

was recorded on a card bearing the author and title of a book, with stock totals reduced by hand according to the orders. This job came to me before the day I graduated – about a week ago this month, in 1948. I was delighted. I learned the Oxford list, recording orders on cards, and was glad to work nights on occasion to release large backorders for our dictionaries, which after the war were delivered in spasmodic floods. The big boss, the Manager, W.H. Clarke – who had his own imprint, Clarke, Irwin, and was preparing to establish his firm on St Clair Avenue West – was on a long trip in western Canada. When he returned and asked to see me, I was made to feel – in the politest possible way – that he would not at all have hired such an unimpressive know-nothing new graduate to add to the Oxford complement that he was about to free himself from. But I didn't care. I was perfectly at home with the list, and at Oxford.

Mr Clarke, with his wife Irene, ran a very patriarchal business. They brooked no argument about wages, allowed no smoking or alcohol consumption, and gave as their annual bonus a Christmas dinner at the King Edward Hotel, with a silver spoon as a gift, an author as guest speaker, and skits by the staff. I have always considered it a strange irony that it was my singing part in a Gilbert and Sullivan skit about the separation of Clarke, Irwin from Oxford, and Oxford's becoming the agent for the Columbia University Press, that persuaded Mr Clarke that I wasn't so bad after all. After that he couldn't have been nicer.

I had been promised a raise after six months. When a year had passed and nothing was said, I began to talk worriedly to my mother and others about this. What should I do? In an act of courage that surprises me today, I asked for an appointment with Mr Clarke, which was granted, entered his impressive oak-panelled office with fireplace, and reminded him of my promised raise. The other evening, in one of the PERSONAL files I referred to earlier, I came upon a handwritten letter, dated 11 August 1949, on stationery that has an Oxford crest and W.H. Clarke, Manager, in the upper left-hand corner, and the Oxford name and address on the right – *all engraved*. It reads:

Dear Mr Toye,

I have not forgotten your request for an increase in salary in consideration of added responsibilities in the Elementary and Secondary educational field. I have asked Miss Moody to increase your salary to \$40 per week (without cost of living bonus) as of 1st July last. This is a substantial increase but one which in my view has been well earned.

Yours sincerely,
W.H. Clarke

I wonder what my salary was before! I have no idea what he was thinking of when he said my increase was well earned. Perhaps it was that he had previously handed me the galley proofs of three books and asked me to produce them. I accepted the proofs calmly, got in touch with the various suppliers who generously introduced me to book production (and who remained in my life for many years), and they were published in the fall of 1949. One of them was *The Grandmothers*, a novel by my former English professor, Kathleen Cobourn, who later became a renowned Coleridge scholar. She was a professor I held in high esteem, partly because she gave me self-confidence as a writer in a remark she wrote on one of my essays

and in the discussion we had about it afterwards. When I read her galleys I found not only typographical errors but many passages and sentences that were unclear or awkward – though, on the whole, the text was beautifully written. What to do? How could I make changes in the work of my former professor? An appointment was arranged, we went over my changes – and she accepted everything! That was the beginning of my career as an editor.

Over the ensuing years I engaged in the work of most of the Press's departments. I travelled across the country once visiting universities and Departments of Education. I edited some schoolbooks, including an adaptation of an English-produced French grammar for Alberta, which included an accompanying record that I had great fun casting and directing at RCA-Victor. I worked on the Third and Fourth Editions of *The Oxford Canadian School Atlas*. I was Production Manager for thirty-odd years, designing all the books for much of that time. It is strange to recall that when we bought a Multilith machine,³ the forerunner of Tim's Hamada, I ran it. Whenever we needed more stationery, or a circular was required, I had to drop everything and ink up the machine in the back of the building. How I hated it! This went on for a long time – I forget how long. It was a red-letter day for me when I persuaded Charles Johnson, the manager, to let me hire someone to run it full time.

I became interested in book design and taught myself typography – I now have a good many books on both subjects. In the middle fifties the Typographic Designers of Canada was formed, mainly by highly skilled Englishmen who were shocked by the poor standard of Canadian book design. They had as their ally the late Allan Fleming, a Canadian typographic designer who was actually better than all of them and who had a great influence on me. (He designed a logo for our school department that was used for many years.) A couple of years later I was thrilled to be asked to join, and soon became its secretary. I was dubbed a Licentiate because my work was not good enough for full membership. I was not in the least surprised or depressed by this. I was simply challenged to increase my expertise, and my fellow members were a great help to me. I believe it was in 1960, after my self-designed book *The St Lawrence* was published, that I became a full member. And for two years in the early sixties I was president, when I remember having a wonderful array of guest-speakers at our regular meetings, who included many of the big international names

3 An offset printer for office use.

in design and typography. I particularly remember time spent with Hermann Zapf, who designed the Palatino and Optima typefaces. From 1958 to 1964 the Rolland Paper Company subsidized an annual book-design competition, which our association administered. The subsidy included paying the jurors, financing a catalogue, and an exhibition of the winning entries, along with award certificates and a banquet. I still have the catalogues in my office. Those were great times.

I became a founding editor, with its instigator Robert Weaver and others, of a literary magazine, *The Tamarack Review*, which began in the fall of 1956 and came out quarterly for twenty-five years supported by government grants and a great deal of volunteer effort. I produced and proofread virtually every issue – until towards the end when I alternated with John Robert Colombo. In its time it was the leading literary magazine in Canada and published the first or early work of many Canadian writers who are now famous, or at least well known. We had the farewell party on the Oxford premises, thanks to Lorne Wilkinson's generosity, when the *Tamarack* ceased publication in February 1982.

Another big event in my life in the fifties was the publication in 1959 of my book *The St Lawrence*, which was planned to coincide with the opening of the St Lawrence Seaway. It is a history of the river that I wrote deliberately to interest high-school students in Canadian history – partly by interweaving a great many quotations from primary sources, which to my knowledge had never been done before. It won the children's book award of the year, but it was taken up by adults, and I have a big file of letters from readers – the last one, amazingly, received only last year. The pleasure I had in researching it, in writing it on the dining-room table at home, in designing it, in seeing it successfully published in Toronto and New York (it had several printings), and in the reviews (particularly a wonderful one in *The New Yorker*), has never been equalled by anything else I've done. It led to my compiling for British Collins an anthology on Canada for their series of national anthologies. This was published in 1962. The royalties from both books enabled me to produce a down payment for my house and to pay for renovations.

One of my jobs was to produce the annual juvenile catalogue, and I knew the distinguished English list very well. I was inspired to try to create some Canadian books that were worthy of it – at a time when there were not that many Canadian children's books, and very few good ones. I did not produce a big list, but some titles were published

in London and New York and went on selling for many years, and some won awards. One day in November 1967 the young Elizabeth Cleaver went to Judith St John, the head of the Osborne Collection of Early Children's Books in the Toronto Public Library, and told her that she wanted to start a career as a children's book illustrator. Judith said that the Friends of the Osborne Collection were having a meeting that evening and that I'd be there. "You should come and meet Mr Toye," she said. Elizabeth did. She showed me slides of two collages that she had done. They were beautiful. I told her that I was helping two young women compile the first anthology of Canadian verse for children, which became *The Wind Has Wings*, and that I was looking for an illustrator. She would be an excellent choice. I had never before, and have never since, made such a quick, spontaneous commitment, but I was later thankful that I had. I didn't hear from Elizabeth until January, when she phoned. Her voice sounded weak and distant as she asked if I still wanted her to illustrate that book. "Yes," I said, "but what's wrong? You don't sound well." "I'm in the hospital," she replied. She had had a colostomy and had nearly died. She never tired of telling me later that after that phone call the graph on her chart took an upward swing. Her doctor was pleased but surprised, and asked her what had happened. She told him that she now had something to live for. She began her first illustration about three months later and the book was published in the fall of 1968 to great success. Her method was to make linocuts for her figures and monoprints with wonderful textures and colours, which she tore for her backgrounds. Elizabeth was a very courageous person, and courage was needed because I was a hard taskmaster as we worked together in her Montreal apartment. I made her create new improved compositions over and over, often saying: "No, you can do better!" Sometimes, in the early years of our association, there were tears, but she recovered quickly and persevered. And she took great delight in seeing that the picture we ended up with was streets ahead of her first one. We did eight Oxford books together (and one non-Oxford), and I wrote the texts for most of them. Her last book, *The Enchanted Caribou*, was published shortly after she died in the summer of 1985, but she saw it. Sadly, the cancer recurred in her liver. Once more I received a phone call from her in hospital. I went immediately to Montreal, joining her brother and sister, and she died three days later. A few hours before, she held out her hand and said goodbye, and thanked me. I thanked *her* for the legacy she was leaving for children, saying something about each book and

recalling her creation of them. As she listened she smiled and closed her eyes. Then she fell asleep.

One of my most memorable experiences was editing *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature*. You will not know it because it has long been out of print. But after it was published in Centennial Year, 1967 – at the very beginning of the new Canadian nationalism and of an upsurge of interest in Canadian studies and Canadian literature – it won for the author, Norah Story, a Governor General's Award and sold over 20,000 copies. The idea of a *Companion* was first raised in 1960, and the response in England was that Canadian literature was thin but that a short *Companion* would no doubt be justified. In 1962, out of the blue, Norah Story wrote to say that she had retired from the Public Archives and felt she was qualified to write a *Companion to Canadian Literature*. It soon became clear that she was much better qualified as a historian, and the book that resulted was heavily weighted on the history side. The project was handed over to me and she came to Toronto to meet me in December 1962. I asked for sample entries and found them too slight. More detailed entries came in and I covered them with changes and queries and comments. They would come back much improved. There followed a difficult period during which Miss Story objected very much to my changes, and finally wrote complainingly to my boss, Ivon Owen, saying that she had been forced to go to a psychiatrist who told her that I was a young whipper-snapper (I wasn't all that young) who was over-eager to show how much he knew. Ivon replied most supportively about my work, saying that I was helping her produce reasonably definitive entries, which he could see were being greatly improved. I then went to Ottawa to have a talk with Miss Story's former boss, the head of the Archives. He was no help. We chatted, I told him about my problem, and all he said was: "Norah Story is a very difficult woman. Let's go for lunch." As we left the elevator on the ground floor, who should be standing in the corner of the hall – not close enough to require a greeting – but Miss Story. No word was spoken as we walked out. I often wondered if that had anything to do with the next turn of events. Some months later Miss Story sold her house and moved to an apartment on Charles Street, just two blocks away from my house. From then on there was a sea-change. Our collaboration proceeded to the very end without a hitch. The routine was that we would go over a pile of my edited entries every Sunday evening. She would give me a drink of rye whisky – her preferred drink – and a nice dinner, and we'd then go over the

current entries. Norah Story's gabble was so entertaining that I've always wished I could have recorded it. One evening we got to the entry on Mackenzie King. She immediately told me about their very formal relationship. He would invite her for dinner at Laurier House, telling her that she would be called for by his chauffeur. After dinner they withdrew to the upstairs drawing room where the lighted portrait of his mother hung. In a frivolous mood, I asked her if he had ever made a pass at her. She took this quite calmly. "No," she said, "the only personal thing he ever said to me was that my eyes were like Mussolini's." A month or so before publication, in the early fall of 1967, I was invited to the Park Plaza bar to meet the Canadian editor of *Time*, who wanted to write a story on the *Companion*. He plied me with drinks and questions, repeatedly asking for funny stories. I was resistant until my third drink, when I said that I did have a funny story but couldn't tell him because he would publish it. "Oh, no I wouldn't do that," he said. "Please tell me." So I weakly related the Mackenzie King anecdote. We had arranged a huge publication party for the *Companion* and our other fall books in the ballroom of the Royal York Hotel. The day before, *Time* came out. There was a big story on the *Companion*, a photograph of Norah, and the caption read: "Eyes like Mussolini's." I was mortified. What if Norah was so furious she refused to come to the party? An hour later the phone rang. It was Norah. She was very bubbly, obviously thrilled with the attention. After telling me what her friends had said, she asked: "How did they get the story about Mackenzie King?" I confessed that I had told them. She simply lectured me about how unjust I was to make fun of Mackenzie King because he was a very important prime minister. I took this humbly, much relieved.

It gives me pleasure to recall that after that very rocky beginning, Norah won the Governor General's Award, we had already become friends, she often entertained me, and the time came when she asked me to write a letter to the senior citizen's home of her choice. When she died I gave the eulogy at her memorial service.

Another highlight was *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, a project that took over three years and could not have been undertaken without the blessing of Lorne Wilkinson. It will soon go out of print, and the enquiries I've had about a second edition have not received a satisfactory answer because I do not feel equal to such a task. It produced no stories that I can remember – except for this anecdote. In the spring of 1983, when it was entering galley-proofs and I was nervous about the length, I was travelling in southern

France with one of my nephews, who was studying there, and had a nightmare: the book was 1200 pages long! I woke up in a fright. It ended up at 898 pages – which was long enough, and far longer than had been originally intended.⁴

I have edited a great many books and I didn't find any of them easy. Most of them required enormous effort. In one of my files I came upon a report from a visitor from Oxford, England – in the late 1960s – who said that I was busy rewriting other people's books. This was an exaggeration. I always had my production duties. And I almost always had an anthology on the go, which required a different and less arduous input. I believe Oxford has published more and better anthologies than any other publisher. Some went into several editions and a number are still in print. Realizing the need for Canadian material in schools, I co-edited with Bob Weaver the first anthology of Canadian literature for schools, published in 1973, which I'm glad is still selling in its Second Edition. Bob's four collections of Canadian short stories are still in print and his fifth has just been published. The first one made its debut in the World's Classics series in 1960 – so thirty years to remain in print and keep selling is quite a record.

Nevertheless I do know that I have a rather negative reputation for bringing about extreme revisions of books. The wonderful thing is that I've unfailingly received acceptance of my work from the authors (with one notable exception, which occurred this very year, when the book was cancelled). Well, I do remember vividly an explosion from Eugene Forsey, of happy memory. He of course was a very good writer and he easily accepted all my minor changes. But one afternoon, when we were sitting in his office overlooking the Parliament Buildings, I nervously drew his attention to a very obscure sentence about a point of law and asked if he would clarify it. He threw the page down and exclaimed: "*This book will be the death of me! I should never have started it!!*" He shuffled over to the window, stood there for a minute, then slowly walked back (while I sat in petrified silence). "Well," he said, "I think we could say ..." – and he gave me a perfect revision. "Thank you, Eugene," I said. "That's just right. Don't you think it's better?" "Well, yes" – and he apologized for being "shirty." Many of the books we publish are by writers who do not possess any marked writing ability, and the choice

⁴ The second edition, published in 1997, expanded to a little over 1200 pages – making his nightmare come true.

was to let them be incomprehensible, illogical, boring, and possibly incomplete in their information, or to try to make their texts clear and readable. I chose the latter course always, and in order to speed up the process I continued my office work at home. One reward was to produce occasionally a very successful book of lasting value – though not as many as my bosses would have liked. Another was that I made friends of many of my authors. Come to think of it, there has been a preponderance of poets – Frank Scott, Arthur Smith, John Glassco, Miriam Waddington, Peggy Atwood – whose books *didn't* have to be worked on heavily. I suppose that tells me something.

I leave Oxford with mixed feelings – not about retiring because, among other things, I'm glad to relinquish the stress of untangling and releasing the texts of difficult books, and look forward to creating a new life for myself. My mixed feelings have to do with looking back and evaluating what I've done. I certainly worked hard. My single status enabled me to give more of my private life to Oxford than is customary. But to paraphrase something Eugene Forsey said in his *Memoirs*, I'm disappointed that with all that effort I didn't accomplish more, and that some of the things I did weren't better done. I think of poor decisions I made, and of at least one book I rejected that became very successful and that we *should* have published. On the other hand, I realize that such thoughts are standard and commonplace at the end of a career.

I am also very conscious of the fact that whatever I did do could not have been done without the support and encouragement of others. The Oxford University Press – which in a way I singled out as an object of dedication at an early age – not only provided me with a working life, but it has also enriched my life as a whole. Its managers are remembered for countless acts of generosity and encouragement – in spite of the dissatisfactions I'm sure I aroused from time to time. In the spring of 1953 Charles Johnson, who succeeded W.H. Clarke, gave me two months' leave with pay to visit the business in London and Oxford and to have a grand tour of Europe. He had a troubled career, and troubled relationships with people, but this was a wonderful act of kindness to a young employee. His successor, Ivon Owen, was an intellectual mentor and a close friend. Lorne Wilkinson, who succeeded Ivon at a difficult time, renewed the spirit of the firm with great adroitness and gave me every consideration. Lorne's successor, Michael Morrow, while bringing Oxford into a new era of publishing, has been a mainstay in my work, evincing support at every turn, and I'm grateful to him.

Among the other people I have worked with, Roger Boulton was a wonderfully vibrant colleague and friend for over twenty years – and we're still friends. Richard Teleky, who has just left us, is missed this evening. As you know, he is an entertaining pal of mine and a brilliant originator of ideas that came to life in books of his own as well as in some of mine. I salute you all.

I'm apparently not leaving Oxford entirely because I have two books yet to finish, starting in August – and maybe I'll be editing the odd one in the future. So you'll be seeing me around. In the meantime I thank you all for participating in this occasion, and for your gifts and good wishes.

We should probably start thinking of the next boat!

SOMMAIRE

Lorsque William Toye prit sa retraite à titre de directeur de l'édition à Oxford University Press Canada en juin 1991, il se rappela des faits saillants de sa longue carrière d'éditeur devant les membres du personnel, au pavillon Island du Royal Canadian Yacht Club, dans le port de Toronto. Son premier souvenir remonte à son enfance. Il se souvient d'avoir passé devant un bel immeuble sur l'University Avenue, à Toronto, dans la voiture de son père, et d'avoir dit qu'il aimerait y travailler un jour : il s'agissait d'Amen House, où s'était installée Oxford Press. (En 1963, la maison déménagera à Don Mills, alors une banlieue de Toronto.) Il commença à travailler dans cet immeuble en 1948, une semaine avant d'obtenir son diplôme universitaire. Il décrit ensuite le travail qu'il accomplissait et qu'il aimait dès le début à titre de nouveau membre du personnel. Il décrit aussi d'autres fonctions et d'autres activités. Il apprend notamment à devenir typographe ; il devient l'un des directeurs fondateurs de la revue littéraire *The Tamarack Review*, qui parut durant vingt-cinq années ; il écrit un livre sur l'histoire du Canada qui eut beaucoup de succès, destiné aux jeunes et intitulé *The St Lawrence* (1959) ; il découvre et collabore avec Elizabeth Cleaver, la célèbre illustratrice de livres pour enfants ; il est responsable de l'édition du *Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature* (1967) de Norah Story, ainsi que de son propre *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (1983). Il discute aussi de son travail avec des auteurs et des collègues.