
This intriguing story of one of Canada’s most distinguished publishers occasionally surprises but confirms what previous reports suggested. We have been tantalized by the work of Bruce Whiteman and David Young, John Morgan Gray’s wonderful memoir *Fun Tomorrow*, Brian McKillop’s fascinating chronicle of plagiarism (*The Prophet and the Spinster*), and Douglas Gibson’s 2011 memoir *Stories about Storytellers*. Following her work on Mazo de la Roche, Adele Wiseman, and Ellen Elliott, Ruth Panofsky now gives us the unique history of Macmillan of Canada (MCC), which was both subsidiary and original publisher.

Because control of the Toronto branch resided in London and New York, Panofsky moved beyond the Canadian branch’s rich archive at McMaster University to investigate the vaster archives of the Macmillan Group in England and New York. Given Macmillan’s penchant for many mission statements of its commitment to serious literature and quality productions ever since the founding of the London house in 1843, her suspicions were raised by gaps in private correspondence in the UK archives and the lack of actual manuscripts in the MCC archives. Panofsky discovered “an ideological bias embedded in each archive that I struggled to overcome. Finally, each collection lacks material that might facilitate a reading that counters the traditional view of Macmillan. The want of such evidence delimited my attempt to offer an alternative reading of Macmillan – although this introduction should convey the force of my determination to forge a nuanced account of the Macmillan Company of Canada” (20).

The result is no earth-shaking cover-up at MCC beyond McKillop’s revelation of Frank Wise’s misuse of funds and a spinster’s accusation that H.G. Wells plagiarized her history of the world. The second president, Hugh Eayrs, could be irrational and vindictive. There is the usual male paternalism: Eayrs treated the astute Mazo de la Roche as a “girl” needing career advice; in secret correspondence, Ellen Elliott’s male colleagues – Daniel Macmillan, Lovat Dickson, and the urbane John Grey – dumped the unsuspecting Elliot from her executive position. The shabby treatment of MCC by its last owners, Maclean Hunter and Ron Besse’s Gage/Canada Publishing Corporation, is cheerless reading.

The Toronto branch was established in 1905 to protect and distribute the educational and trade books of its two parent houses.
In detailing the six “reigns” of presidents and editors, Panofsky’s achievement is to bring to life the personalities of Frank Wise, Hugh Eayrs, Ellen Elliott, John Morgan Gray, Hugh Kane, and Douglas Gibson, who forged the house identity by publishing Canadian authors. Merely publishing a Canadian book purchased from a foreign principal did not make you much of an original publisher. They persuaded the parent firms that original ventures advanced the cultural needs of the nation. They nurtured their authors, sought out manuscripts, suggested new topics, saw books through production, obtained international publication for these authors, and held their hands. Wise and his education editor John Cameron Saul proved this with Canadian textbooks by working with teachers and education departments. Eayrs’s risk with W.H. Hume’s translation of Maria Chapdelaine (1921) was so successful that London and New York agreed to let him publish domestic authors. Over the next five decades the branch published some of the major Canadian writers of the past century: Morley Callaghan, Donald Creighton, Robertson Davies, Mavis Gallant, Grey Owl, Stephen Leacock, Hugh MacLennan, E. J. Pratt, and Mazo de la Roche, to name only a handful. This is Macmillan of Canada’s permanent legacy, whose publishing programs helped shape the Canadian identity.

The excitement about Canadian books in the 1920s encouraged Eayrs to stick with de la Roche, Frederick Philip Grove, Grey Owl, and Dorothy Livesay. Ellen Elliott, hampered by the Depression and London’s wartime ban on domestic trade books, discovered Irene Baird, P. K. Page, and W. O. Mitchell. Between 1946 and 1973, as Canadian literature reached towards the skies, John Gray’s constellation included Callaghan, Creighton, and Davies, and during the tumultuous 1970s, he reluctantly presided over the sale of the Toronto house. Into the 1980s, Hugh Kane improved finances, secured John Diefenbaker’s memoirs and Dennis Lee’s Alligator Pie. As the sun set on MCC, Douglas Gibson, one of Canada’s great book editors, sustained Mavis Gallant and Alice Munro. Frustrated by owners who cared more for backlists and the bottom line than for distinguished books, Gibson in 1986 decamped to McClelland and Stewart, trailed by many of his authors whom he published under his own imprint.

Panofsky chose the “literary history side” (9–10) and deliberately minimized business history, copyright, audience-reader reception, and book design. Her approach will therefore encourage further investigations of “comprehensive author-publisher studies” (273n81).
Nevertheless, she reminds us of the challenges faced by the managers: standing up to London and New York, realizing that educational books are the bread and butter, and acknowledging that most Canadian books did not sell well. Macmillan survived catastrophic changes to the book industry in the Great Depression. In the middle of the nationalist fervour of the 1960s, it was devastated by changes in educational publishing, which led to London’s decision to sell MCC, and then it lost the market battle to international subsidiaries as the agency system crumbled. The old publishing village described by James King, Roy McSkimming, Ruth Panofsky herself, and soon, by Sandra Campbell, is gone. “Canadian” publishing is now dominated by HarperCollins, Penguin, and Random House. Ironically, Kildare Dobbs, one of the editors of the 1950s, titled his MCC obituary, “Macmillan was Canadian Long before It Was Canadian-Owned.”

Ruth Panofsky’s book appears in the Studies in Book and Print Culture series from the University of Toronto Press, and it includes photos, an excellent bibliography (dividing archival papers, personal interviews, and major books and articles), and a useful index. There is no endnote number 187 on page 185, but the source for endnote 188 on that page is found in endnote 187 on page 289, so no information is lost, in spite of the two missing superscript numbers. Her style is free of academic jargon, although Eayrs would have been surprised to learn that he had “consecrating authority” (77). As a guide for “mapping culture,” this readable book is a must for anyone interested in book history in Canada. It describes a venerable life:


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Over a recent lunch-time conversation with an intelligent friend who is a voracious reader, I suggested Stan Persky’s Reading the 21st Century: Books of the Decade, 2000–2009 when she asked me for recommendations. Persky is a university philosophy professor and a literary critic, and his collection of reviews covers what he has