The infrastructure matters. Where would literature be without all of the editors, agents, publishers, booksellers, librarians, reviewers, and readers who, although not authors, nevertheless decisively contribute to its production and reception? This was one of the points made by Margaret Atwood in a question-and-answer session hosted by Robert Lecker and the Department of English at McGill University on 28 October 2016. From our beginning, it has been a basic principle of the Bibliographical Society of Canada, which exists for the explicit purpose of furthering knowledge of the ways in which texts, especially Canadian texts, pass from idle imaginings in the green room to the drama played on the public stage. The four excellent essays that follow reveal the principle in wonderfully new ways, but the principle itself continues unchanged.

It is a privilege to introduce an article by my father. I.S. MacLaren last appeared as an essayist in the Papers/Cahiers twenty-three years ago (vol. 31, no. 2, 1993) with his study of Samuel Hearne. (I remember proofreading transcriptions of Hearne’s field notes at our old dining-room table in Edmonton in exchange for pocket money.) I.S. MacLaren – Dad – returns today with a signature analysis of the tortuous path that explorers’ texts and artworks go down on their way to publication. Captain James Cook and the Irish-Canadian painter, Paul Kane, became published authors through a four-fold process that has broad applicability to early printed travel books and serious consequences for the authenticity that we ascribe to them. The infrastructure, from editors to patrons, certainly affected the transformation of Kane’s wanderings into his Wanderings (1859), with substantive consequences for his depictions of the First Nations of western North America.

Heather Murray and Yannick Portebois deepen the history of nineteenth-century social reform through the story of William Orr, an advocate of simplified spelling and the publisher of the Canadian Phonetic Pioneer. In promoting Pitman shorthand, Orr strove to rationalize the transcription of the English language, so that years might be shaved off of the arduous process of learning to read and...
write. His means may appear “kwiksotik,” but his end was nothing less than the spreading of literacy to all classes of society. Like Atwood, he was concerned with the social channels through which literature really reaches people.

Canadian literary agents are another such channel, playing a vital but largely unrecognized role in the production of books. In his article, Robert Lecker (a literary agent himself) pieces together the history of this unsung profession, which, as he argues, extends back past the 1950s, the commonly assumed date of origin in Canada, into the late nineteenth century. His goal is to reveal the larger fabric of production in which literary creation in this country has long been enmeshed, and he succeeds, bringing to light notable figures such as the Montrealer, Doris Hedges, who was active as an agent in the 1940s but about whom too little is known.

Finally, it is a pleasure to introduce Henning Hansen’s remarkable article on nineteenth-century Swedish reading patterns. Hansen interprets caches of primary evidence that will be the envy of every historian of reading: extensive borrowing and sales records from a parish library, a bookshop, and a commercial lending library, some of which have only very recently come to light. The analysis of these records reveals lending practices varying according to class, gender, and (urban or rural) location, and it is fascinating to track the differential rates at which Henrik Ibsen’s and August Strindberg’s works, for example, reached the public through each institution. The credit for the shepherding of this article through peer review and copyediting goes to my associate editor, Alison Rukavina.

We have opted to merge the spring and fall numbers of this fifty-fourth volume of the Papers/Cahiers into a single issue, in view of the substantial contributions within it and the complexity and expense of the images. On behalf of the publications committee, I wish you enjoyment of these essays, as well as of the subsequent book reviews, all of which will be found to manifest the view that the infrastructure matters.