

**Norman Ravin**

Concordia University, Montreal

## Thoreau and Spadina Dreamers Unite: Idealistic Communities in Canadian Publishing

# ABSTRACT

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The rise of Canadian national identity in the 1960s contributed to a flourishing small press movement across the country. One of the most impressive, long-standing and influential presses of this era was Coach House Press, located near the University of Toronto. Book design, creative forms of editing, collaborative and community-oriented work all became a focus of idealism in the Coach House context, as its founders borrowed from earlier international models, but relied, too, on the Canadian moment to devise new ways to disseminate and create literary culture. More recently, a similar idealistic model in publishing and press work has appeared in Nova Scotia at Kentville's Gaspereau Press. Gaspereau's founders, like those at Coach House, have searched for an alternative plan and method—through an in-house dedication to the craft of design and bookmaking—that is unlike that applied by mainstream publishers. One could argue that the two outfits represent a counter-tradition in Canadian cultural life, a dedication to artisanal work, as well as to forms of collaborative editing and design. With the publishing and bookselling industry under great pressure in Canada from shifts in technology and government support, counter-traditional models like Gaspereau Press present the possibility of unique forms of cultural output and marketing. Behind such efforts we recognize philosophies and notions of cultural community that run counter to major trends. This paper examines the history of both presses, specific publications, and the impact of such work on the broader Canadian literary scene.

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In the spring of 2012 mass student demonstrations filled the main boulevards of downtown Montreal. Police on horseback boxed hundreds of students at intersections, arrested them and carted them off to detention. A short fifteen-minute bike ride across town, in my leafy neighbourhood, one would not have had a clue that anything was amiss in the city. A similar experience—seemingly absurd but somehow common in moments of historical importance—is described in Stefan Zweig’s posthumous memoir *The World of Yesterday*. Zweig reports that life in his corner of Austria in the mid-thirties—collapsing as it was under the pressures of rising fascist politics—retained a relative calm and routine from the point of view of the local street corner. Newspaper readers in London, he felt, had a better understanding of the shifting ground than those in the immediate vicinity of change. Zweig was witness to shattering events, yet his sense of our experience of important cultural shifts is applicable to less momentous occasions as well.

In the spring and summer of 1988, quite unknowingly, I was a bystander to the dismantling of one of the key idealistic enterprises of post-war Canadian creative life. At the time I was a twenty-four-year old would-be writer between graduate programs, who had offered his services to the designers and printers at Toronto’s Coach House Press. The press was run out of modest red brick buildings that were found by way of an alley behind Huron Street, in the neighbourhood of the University of Toronto. My luck was good the day I wandered into the place, though I was shabbily dressed and brought no background experience in bookmaking or design with me, and the owner-manager and house genius of the Press, Stan Bevington, and his book designer Gord Robertson took me on. I would learn to strip up film, which is how type and book covers were set in those days. In the meantime, in the background, at board and editorial meetings I did not attend, the relationship between Bevington’s Coach House print shop and its better known publishing arm was collapsing, the beginning of the end of one of the most idealistic and influential independent cultural outfits in post-war Canada.

The founding of Coach House Press predated by two years the brouhaha and government largesse surrounding Canada’s 1967 centenary. But its haphazard early years echoed aspects of the counterculture. In 1968, Bevington was appointed house printer at Rochdale College, which was housed in a concrete apartment tower on nearby Bloor Street. A short-lived experiment in student-run education and co-operative housing, it reflected a tentative meeting ground between mainstream goals and the city’s counterculture. At Rochdale, Bevington shared an apartment with Rochdale’s semi-official “writer in residence,” the still green and as yet

unpublished fiction writer Matt Cohen. Cohen's appreciation of Coach House in its earlier years—its peculiarity and its difference from other mainstream publishers—is noteworthy:

What was liberating and unique about Coach House was that it was a community that had given itself over to the exploration of aesthetics and aesthetic experience, in truth more visual than verbal. Oh, the scorn that was heaped on these bedraggled hippies for caring more about art than commerce. But why? At twenty-five years old should poets be worrying about how to increase their audience to 113 people or should they be exploring the possibilities of verbal expression? . . . Although Coach House did print and sell books, in the late sixties and early seventies, it was less a commercial press than a movement. This put it in step with the new political currents of the time, but of course in opposition to the much more old-fashioned political and literary precepts of the old-line houses like M&S and Macmillan. . . . At Coach House everything was questioned: the nature of narrative, the very acceptability of narrative itself, the nature and construction of sentences. (Cohen 145–46)

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Cohen's view of the Press's activities is telling, in light of his tendency to dismiss the more popular expressions of counterculture dissent and youth activism at the time. Cynical about leftist sit-ins, the mayhem at Rochdale, and the drug culture that imbued Yorkville with a kind of Haight Ashbury-esque zaniness, the goings-on at Coach House struck him as, in many ways, too idiosyncratic, too deeply felt, too independent and unpredictable to be lumped in with the broader Yorkville scene.

It is fair to say that Coach House formulated its goals in a haphazard and non-ideological way. Bevington had learned to use linotype while working for small-town newspapers in Edson and Fairview, Alberta—cow towns on the fringes of the oil boom. And though he was attracted to Toronto by his acceptance at the University of Toronto's Fine Arts Department, his first foray on the fringes of the downtown counterculture represented a combination of printing know-how and streetwise entrepreneurial verve. In answer to the national discussion about the search for an appropriate national flag, Bevington printed, distributed and sold thousands of would-be Canadian flags to the denizens of Yorkville's hippie hangouts in the student neighbourhoods around the University of Toronto (Reid 23). The first book he hand-set was Wayne Clifford's 1965 *Man in a Window*, which set the stage for Coach House's early productions. A slim poetry volume, illustrated using nude photography by collaborator Dennis Reid, it fit the category of book making that a compatriot from those early years described as "aesthetic adventures in their own

right” (Barbour 16). This goal was reflected in early Coach House output, which focused not only on experimental writing, but challenged mainstream, market-driven notions of what a book should look like and feel like in your hand. Coach House eschewed the 8½ x 5½ inch trade format in favour of unusual shapes—some more commonly found among children’s trade books—which included such notably spectacular experiments as George Bowering’s *Baseball*, published in 1967. Shaped like a college dorm athletic pennant, its cover made from green felt, this was a book that defied bookstores and libraries to come to terms with how to shelve it. In a similar vein, in 1967, the Press produced bpNichol’s Gaspereau *Wild Thing for the Troggs*, a flip poem in celebration of the Troggs’ 1966 hit. And in 1967, poet-artist Roy Kiyooka’s *Nevertheless These Eyes* asserted the idea of a book that paid equal attention to text, illustrative materials and unusual print and binding. The cover of Kiyooka’s volume was wrapped in a shiny, almost reflective tin foil, which echoed the poems’ reiteration of mirrors, faces and eyes, while the colour of print in the book’s interior shifted from black to aubergine. As the Press developed its distinctive look, further design distinctions, familiar to collectors of fine books, included heavy paper inside and uncoated cover paper, making use of minimal illustrative content with special attention to the design potential of type.

A development that distinguished Coach House after 1975 was its editorial board, made up of writers, each of whom brought titles to the Press and saw them through the editing and publication stage. Early writer editors included bpNichol, poet and later novelist Michael Ondaatje, poet Victor Coleman, and the poet-critic and academic Frank Davey, who were joined by Bevington in his role of printer-cum-publishing manager. Editorial meetings were held in the press building’s loft, at a rough wooden kitchen table, in sight of shelves full of the press’s past publications, and in close proximity to the coffee maker and Bevington’s wheels of colourful paper samples used to choose cover stock.

One of Bevington’s early compatriots characterizes his founding of a publishing house this way: “Neither would he do it with arts grants nor with academic dispensation—but rather through his commercial operation of job printing. How often in a century is such a person born?” (Rosenberg 10).<sup>1</sup> This depiction of the Press, making unusual and challenging books while also printing all forms of ephemera, religious newsletters and

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<sup>1</sup> One encounters here the mythmaking that descended on Coach House as its early accomplishments faded from view; in fact, early books do acknowledge government support, although in some cases this may have gone directly to the authors, rather than to the press. Kiyooka’s *Nevertheless These Eyes* acknowledges The Canada Council, as does Bowering’s *Baseball*.

posters, reflects another key aspect of the Coach House equation. One not only controlled, but *had one's hands on* all sides of the business, content, craftsmanship, all the way down the line to distribution. In fact, in the summer of 1988, in what was a period of transformation at the Press, Bevington was still known to fill the back of his gold Porsche with oddball novels and slim poetry volumes in order to make deliveries to far-flung bookstores. Outside on a picnic bench, eating lunch with a pressman or the master of the binding machine, we would watch him head for the hills, his car's back end weighed down with literature.

In an expansive memoir, published in 1997, ex-editorial board member Frank Davey highlights a number of the Press's key characteristics. Rather than relying on a traditional promotion and advertising budget, the Press pursued what Davey thinks of as community building. Rather than promote single titles, the focus fell on

promoting the press, its various cultural connotations and its authors collectively. . . . Through this strategy we hoped to create a nation-wide community of people who would regard themselves as Coach House Press booksellers, readers, aficionados, and collectors . . . who would seek our books out even though they were not widely advertised or distributed. (46)

Lavish posters—for Michael Ondaatje's 1973 collection *Rat Jelly* and Matt Cohen's poetry book *Peach Melba* (1974)—followed the trends in music posterizing, toward creating beautiful, fanciful and provocative things that stores would want as much for permanent decoration as for short-term promotion. An "annual entertainment," a kind of hootenanny for poets and more prosaic creators, furthered the notion of a Coach House community, and was likely inspired by the late sixties trend, à la Andy Warhol's Factory, of Happenings (Davey 47).

Davey opposes these undertakings to what he suggests represented mainstream publishing culture in Toronto of the late sixties and seventies, a culture, in his words, of "prizes, the media celebration of prizes, commercial editorship, cocktail parties, regular CBC appearances, hard-cover novels, one-season fads . . . a culture that tends to equate sales success with quality, celebrity and international recognition with social importance to Canadians . . ." (52). By the mid-eighties, with Bevington tiring of the twin responsibilities of running a print shop and overseeing, or, at least, collaborating on a publishing program, many if not all of these mainstream goals had come to guide Coach House's output and marketing strategies. One

of the most devastating shifts, which took hold in 1987, was the transformation of the editorial board, the “replacement,” as Davey tells it,

of a group of friends who had got together in 1975 to publish books they would like others to be able to read with a group of strangers who got together as employees, corporate directors, and editorial advisors to run a business. The process of alienation of the editors from each other and of the editors from management had begun. (Davey 64)

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In this portrayal of the Press’s collaborative approach, and even in its earlier guise, a decade before, in Bevington’s collaborative experiments with silkscreen and handset printing, we find a suitable analogy to the Press’s activities in the development of a band of musicians: the crucial role of personal chemistry; the guidance and talent of a lead figure in the collaborative effort; the awareness of each player’s specialized talents, what each player might bring to the band’s distinctive sound; the awareness of predecessors’ influence alongside the willingness to experiment, to not necessarily have a plan, a packageable goal; and, certainly, the acceptance of the margins as a suitable place to develop one’s creative chops. In the Coach House scenario the goals were local, though to an extent focused on links to like-minded communities and writers in western Canada, or among writers and publishers of a particular stripe in the United States. On this front, the press sought out like-minded Americans, such as Allen Ginsberg, who donated his long poem “Iron Horse,” which Coach House brought out in 1972. They were certainly anti-corporate, pro-counterculture, though they were not, as seems inevitable today, ever insistent on being part of some wider, ever-expanding globalized populist movement. In the alley off Huron, you could look through the many-paned windows at the Heidelberg offsets, whirring like a well-oiled jet engine, and that, surely, was the heart of the matter.

As seems inevitable with great musical outfits, the source of idealism, personal chemistry and creative energy and idiosyncrasy runs its course, or is shuttered by outside interference, by the overweening goal of making it big, or simply by the inability to remain on the cutting edge of a cultural and creative milieu. The disappearance of that special Coach House recipe in the 1980s, however romantically one might wish for another outcome, may have been inevitable. The surprising story in present-day Canadian publishing, at a time of otherwise overall darkness, strangeness and precariousness among book publishers and sellers, is the rise of Gaspereau Press, formed in 1997 by Andrew Steeves and Gary Dunfield in the town of Kentville, in Nova Scotia’s Annapolis Valley. How different the setting of this undertaking from downtown Toronto, though the Press does have creative neighbours: not

far down the highway at Acadia University in Wolfville, at Halifax's Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and, a little further off, at the creative writing program at Fredericton's University of New Brunswick. Just as the inception of Coach House depended on key personalities, Gaspereau Press was founded by a pair of practical-minded polyglot figures, who began as hit-and-miss novices in bookmaking and editing. As Andrew Steeves tells it, he began haphazardly—in a fashion not unlike the early days of Coach House—first with a computer-designed literary magazine, before moving, almost inadvertently, toward the publication of a first book of poetry, then, gradually acquiring the materials needed to make books in-house. First among these tools was a Selby binder, coincidentally the same machine used at Coach House—looking, to the novice, like a set piece from Chaplin's *Modern Times*. This was followed by a twenty-year-old Omni-Adast 724p Press, which led Gaspereau to move toward design choices that included the use of heavy paper inside, uncoated cover stock with illustrative features drawn, most readily, from a lively and artistic use of typography. All of this highlighted, in a way more spectacular than that seen at Coach House, that books might be viewed and handled and appreciated as “physical objects” as much as for their content. In an account of his vision entitled “The Right Kind of Crazy,” Steeves highlighted the need to create

cultural objects that are meaningful in their conception, execution and result. It is a vision for keeping the manufacturing process small enough—close enough to craft—to ensure that everyone involved can keep their sights on the common goal and share in the value and the dignity of the work. It is a vision for publishing books whose commercial purpose does not override their cultural purpose. Not many people of my generation have attempted to combine the range of technologies and activities we combine at Gaspereau Press. (40–41)

This statement, in an uncanny way, recalls the depiction of Stan Bevington, early in this paper, which ended with the query, “How often in a century is such a person born?” (Rosenberg 10). In view of Steeves's goals, the answer seems to be: at least twice. Steeves's difference from his predecessors can be seen in his intellectual, even philosophical approach to his project, his more straightforward presence through interviews, essays and introductions to certain Gaspereau titles, where he accepts the role of spokesperson and interpreter of the work at hand. Some of his statements directly recall the early Coach House project. “You are a better publisher,” he told one interviewer, “if you control projection. And you are a better printer if you have control over the content. It's a response to the fragmented manufacturing

process of the post-industrial world: a process where the same hands and minds are involved from start to finish” (Moulton 13).

This summation of the commitments that motivate work at Gaspereau, its roots in the handiwork of bookmaking, collaboration with local writers, photographers and artists rooted in the local landscape, highlights the importance that place can claim in creative work of all kinds. We might view this as an ecological approach to book publishing—the mining of a cultural network that surrounds one’s immediate workplace. One recent Gaspereau publication highlights the possibilities of this approach. In 2009 the Press brought out an annotated edition of Henry David Thoreau’s 1851 essay *Walking*. Catalogue copy for the title informs us that the essay was “inspired by the author’s habit of working in the mornings and devoting the afternoons to local explorations, thinking, observation and exercise—that is, walking.” Thoreau’s essay opens with a lament over neighbours stuck indoors, and turns to the matter of choosing a walk’s direction, offering, as Steeves’s catalogue copy puts it, an opportunity to examine the “quality of the wilderness” in the Massachusetts woodland surrounding the cottage he built on land owned by Ralph Waldo Emerson. For Thoreau, the exploration of “the wilderness in his country” helped him consider the “wildness in literature, and the process of learning” associated with discovering these things (*Gaspereau Press Catalogue*).

Naturally, Thoreau’s essay is readily available to be downloaded as an electronic document on any number of web sites devoted to the author and his work. The Gaspereau edition might be considered a thing hewed, handmade, not unlike the kind of artefact that Thoreau himself hacked out of the forest lands that surrounded him as he sauntered on his afternoon way. The book is unusual in size—just 4½ x 7 inches—so a cosier fit in the hand than the average trade paperback; its signatures are sewn, rather than glued; it is bound in a cover using a handmade paper jacket produced at the Press by Gary Dunfield. (When I visited the Press, I was shown a bucket which was part of this process, so low-tech expectations, patience and good humour might be considered part of the recipe). Gaspereau’s edition of *Walking* includes illustrations made from wood engravings by Wesley Bates.<sup>2</sup> It behaves, then, as an object of great personal dedication, handiwork and thoughtful design. Herein one finds a crowning example of the idealism asserted by both the early Coach House and presently at Gaspereau: a highlighting of in-house craftsmanship and design; collaborative work shared by writer,

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<sup>2</sup> Bates was born in the Yukon in 1952. He was based at Nova Scotia’s Mount Alison University until 1977, when he moved to Ontario to pursue a career as a painter and printmaker.



artist and pressman; some echo of place, which may reflect the local ecology of the press or something more diverse and further afield; all of which follows from goals that defy, or aim to rewrite, market expectations.

The Coach House Press, in the decade between 1965 and 1975, existed on the fringes, as some sort of counterpart to the explosion of independent cultural activity that was partly motivated by Canada's newfound national identity. The rise of Gaspereau Press reflects no such context, but rather, the independent impulse and accomplishment of its two founders. No doubt, the Coach House example offered a model by which Gaspereau could find its way. One enters all such communities, if one wishes to, with great idealism, a certain intrepid adventurousness and a lack of pre-set expectations. Such literary outcomes tell a particular, even peculiar story about the writing and publishing life in Canada, and they present some of the pleasures of a walk in unfamiliar woods.

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