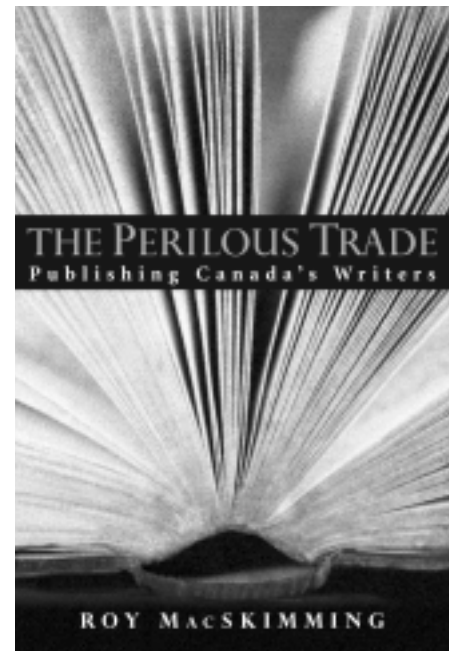


Fifty years of Canadian publishing; or, fifty ways of absolutely guaranteeing to go broke

Roy MacSkimming, *The Perilous Trade: Publishing Canada's Writers*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2003.

Review by Philip Cercone



First, by way of disclosure, I am acquainted with Roy MacSkimming. During my two terms as president of the Association of Canadian Publishers (ACP) in 1989 and 1990, I hired him to run our Ottawa office. MacSkimming's task was to coordinate ACP's political campaign and to keep pressure on the government to enact new structural measures. He was perfect for the job and now has proven to be the perfect person to write the first book on the history of the Canadian-owned, English-language publishing industry.

The Perilous Trade: Publishing Canada's Writers is a marvelous autobiographical and highly opinionated, yet very balanced, history of Canadian publishers and the culture they created in the past 50 years. Based on hundreds of audiotaped interviews from 1998-2002 with Canadian publishers, publishing professionals, and writers, and augmented with the printed records dealing with Canadian publishing, MacSkimming has crafted a worthy account of Canadian firms and individuals who cared mightly

for Canadian books and authors, and tried to create a vibrant, indigenous, book industry. Along with MacSkimming's recounting of the attempt to build a solid publishing industry, we meet the dreamers, idealists, patriots, mavericks, bleeding hearts, acid-heads, US draft-dodgers, and authors-turned-publishers, who in Tolkien fashion had to fight tooth and nail with their bankers, governments, court-appointed monitors, and powerful multinational corporations in their quests to develop Canadian literature.

What a surprising number of these individuals, more often than not, also had in common in their publishing decisions was a disregard for the bottom line and a belief in their cultural mission. No wonder then that some fell by the wayside, broken-hearted.

MacSkimming is indeed the right person to write the first comprehensive history of this industry. He has been involved in one way or another with the publishing industry for over 30 years. He is the author of six previous works: two novels (*Formentera* and

Out of Love); and four non-fiction books, the last two dealing with hockey, *Gordie: A Hockey Legend* and *Cold War: The Amazing Canada-Soviet Hockey Series of 1972*. He has been a publisher, starting in the shipping and ending in the editorial room of Clarke, Irwin, and then as a founding partner with Dave Godfrey and James Bacque in the five-year life of New Press, which closed in 1974. He then went to the *Toronto Star* where he served as a book editor and columnist, and later in the decade to Ottawa where he worked for the Canada Council as a granting officer in the book division. Later he returned to writing and consulting part-time, including his stint as gun-slinger for the ACP.

It seems from the candid stories he recounts in the book that everyone MacSkimming interviewed revealed all to him. This may have been due to the fact that he himself had been involved with the industry. The pages of the book are full of industry gossip and facts.

For public policy minded readers, the book serves as a primer on Canadian cultural policy. Of all the cultural endeavours in Canada, publishing is the one that has best delivered the goods. Not only have Canadian authors become household names in this country, but they are also phenomenally well known around the world. Their successes would not have been possible had it not been for publishers making their case to government that federal support was essential to the survival of the firms. Even for international conglomerates, except for the genre of textbooks, publishing is a money-losing venture. For English-Canadian publishers there are the added problems that they must compete with the well over 200,000 books published annually elsewhere in their language — principally in the UK and the US — along with the fact that they are situated next to the American giant houses, which underprice their books.

Given that Canada does not have a sufficient enough population to sustain its publishing industry — my own estimate is that it would need to have a population of some 120 million people; 90 million readers in English, and 30 million in French — Canadian publishers and writers have lobbied hard for federal support. MacSkimming describes brilliantly the creation of the Canada Council in 1957 and its block-grant support since then to publishers; Ontario's own support for publishers

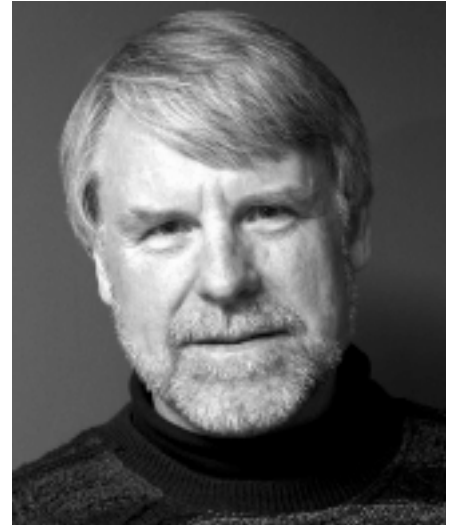
His riveting account of the rise of Chapters is instructive. Created in 1994 by venture capitalist Larry Stevenson, Chapters was supposed to be the answer to every Canadian publishers' dream; it turned out to be the publishers' worst nightmare ever.

through the Ontario Arts Council; the establishment in 1979 of the Canadian Book Publishing Development Program (later the Book Publishing Industry Development Program — BPIDP) to provide "industrial" support to Canadian-owned publishers; the creation of the Association for the

Export of Canadian books in 1973; Perrin Beatty's 1992 announcement of a new federal publishing policy, which diluted the Baie-Comeau policy, but tripled the budget of the BPIDP — it was later in 1995 cut by 55 percent, and restored in 1997 by Heritage Minister Sheila Copps. All the above initiatives, and some others, were not taken as a result of good and proper planning: they were always direct responses to crises in the industry.

All these government responses would not have been made had not it been for the countless days spent by Canadian publishers making the case to government — some like Karl Seigler of Talonbooks put as much time into his trade Association as he did with his own firm. This process first began, as MacSkimming points out, in the watershed year of 1971 with the creation of the Independent Publishers Association, which broke away from the Canadian Book Publishers Council and in 1976 became the Association of Canadian Publishers, which has repeatedly lobbied the federal government for structural publishing industry measures to promote and safeguard Canadian publishers. Usually, the response was in the form of grants. As an aside, to show how different the needs of Canadian publishing are from its counterparts in the US and UK, one only need look at publishers' comportment at their respective annual meet-

ings. In Canada, when members of ACP meet annually, three days are devoted to public policy questions, and only a few hours to its business meeting and workshops. In the US and UK, it's the other way around: three days are spent on workshops, and only a few hours on public policy questions.



David Zimmerly

Roy MacSkimming: "The right person to write the first comprehensive history of Canada's book industry."

MacSkimming, gives brief but informative histories of the myriad companies involved in Canadian publishing, although some Ontario firms and individuals tend to hog the spotlight — such as the endless crises at M&S over the past 40 years. And his riveting account of the rise of Chapters is instructive. Created in 1994 by venture capitalist Larry Stevenson, Chapters was supposed to be the answer to every Canadian publishers' dream; it turned out to be the publishers' worst nightmare ever.

Chapters drove out the small independent booksellers and then with its monopoly wreaked havoc on the publishing industry by first withholding payment to publishers and distributors well beyond 90 days and then returning for credit scores of truckloads of books it had used as wallpaper for its box stores over the intervening five years. This led to yet another crisis in Canadian publishing whereby Larry Stevenson made money by selling Chapters to Heather Reisman's smaller chain, Indigo, while the rest scrambled to recover. Some were not so lucky, for example,

General Distribution Services (GDS), part of the Stoddart Publishing Canadian empire and the distributor of 62 other Canadian publishers, was forced into bankruptcy protection and ultimately into oblivion. The unsecured GDS Canadian publishers were left with their pockets picked clean.

The bookselling chain Chapters/Indigo — now even bigger with 89 superstores and another 181 conventional outlets — is for some publishers the only game in town, as it controls in some cases 80 percent of their print-runs. Also, school libraries

are in sad shape in every province, while less and less attention is being given to books by the print media.

What is needed most, in addition to the measures proposed by MacSkimming, is federal help — a kind of transfer payment grants — to help the “have not” provinces support their indigenous houses. But ultimately, it is my view that those Canadian-owned publishers who will ultimately survive will have to accentuate their export strategies and publish books that have not just a Canadian audience in mind. They

must, instead, go global and sell books aggressively in the international market. For a firm not to do so risks either becoming another footnote in Canadian cultural history or being relegated to farm-team status for foreign publishing conglomerates.

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