Portrait of a Press: Canadian Biblioasis Thrives in "South Detroit"

By Isla McKetta

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AS DETROIT CONSIDERS selling off major artworks to stay afloat, the literary scene just across the river in Windsor, Ontario is flourishing. It's there in "South Detroit" that Biblioasis is publishing some of the best poetry, fiction, and nonfiction in the world from authors including Clark Blaise, Mia Couto, Nancy Jo Cullen, Bruce Jay Friedman, Ryszard Kapuściński, A. F. Moritz, Alexandra Oliver, Anakana Schofield, Goran Simic, and David Starkey. The "BiblioManse" is also home to the literary magazine Canadian Notes & Queries *and a bookstore that hosts everything from the latest celebration for Alice Munro to bookbinding workshops. Here Daniel Wells, founder and publisher of Biblioasis, answers a few questions about the origins of the press, the state of publishing in Canada, and how Detroit's economic strife is affecting its Canadian neighbors.*

ISLA MCKETTA: Before Biblioasis was a press, it was a bookstore. What made you start the store?

DANIEL WELLS: In 1998, I was finishing my master's at university, and I needed a break. I'd always wanted to work in a bookstore, but I could never find a job, so when I bought about 5,000 books at an auction for a pittance and discovered some very valuable titles there — first editions of Hemingway and Tasha Tudor and much else besides — I decided to take a year or so off and try my hand as a bookseller. It was almost accidental. I knew that I wanted a life spent with books, but wasn't quite sure what shape it would take. Like most, I suppose, I assumed it would be as a writer. In any case, I opened the bookstore fully expecting it to fail within a year — everyone told me it would fail — and then I'd get it out of my blood and go on and get a doctorate. But it didn't fail, and therefore there's one less unwanted professor of the Scottish Enlightenment struggling away for tenure.

I guess what I'm trying to get at is that the bookstore was accidental, and much that has happened after, and the various shapes and permutations this whole literary press experiment has taken since, have been equally accidental. Three to four years in, I got asked to help organize a book festival in town [the Windsor Festival of the Book, since renamed Bookfest Windsor], which, again accidentally, I ended up running for several years, and that gave me a taste of literary programming and promotion, putting me in touch with people like John Metcalf, one of the leading short story writers and editors in the country (Alice Munro has said, and rightly, too, that he is the author of some of the best short stories ever written by a Canadian) who ended up having a seminal influence on the shape Biblioasis has taken. I got to invite a lot of authors I admired to the festival and became very friendly with them — writers like Clark Blaise and Goran Simic and Terry Griggs and Caroline Adderson — many of whom I've since come to publish.

What got you excited about starting a press?

I took bookbinding classes and got tired of making empty notebooks, decided to try chapbooks; a guy named Dennis Priebe walked into my shop one day and made himself a temporary job building shelves for $250 a week in my

basement, and over beers one night at a local tavern I learned he'd been a typesetter for 30 years, his lit. press cred. stretching back to the earliest days of Canadian literary publishing. I could go on.

Without any of this Biblioasis wouldn't have got started as a press at all, or at least wouldn't be the press it is today. But once that first book arrived from the printer, nearly 10 years ago now, and I saw that "Biblioasis" on the title page, I was hooked. There've been more than 130 others since, with 20 more in this (our 10th) year, and what promises to be our best yet.

You also publish *Canadian Notes & Queries*; how do you feel the three businesses feed one another?

There's tremendous symbiosis. Especially the bookstore — and we are back to having an open bookshop again, new and used, with antiquarian titles dating back, in a few cases, 500 years. I feel as if this just is the way it should be. There was only a small period in publishing history when publishers were not booksellers; where booksellers made the sort of strict distinction between new and used: right into the mid-19th century it was quite common for the bookseller and publisher to be one and the same, and even well into the 20th some of the most important publishers in New York and London and elsewhere had storefronts. Melville House had a storefront. Drawn and Quarterly still does, and it remains a vibrant center for literary life in their city and community. We hope Biblioasis, as press and bookstore, proves to be the same.

Tell me more about the people behind Biblioasis.

Well, you know about me, a failed historian of the Scottish Enlightenment. And John Metcalf, perhaps the leading literary editor in Canada for 40 years, and one of the great scouts of new talent. And Dennis Priebe, without whom Biblioasis wouldn't have had a chance of getting off the ground.

Without getting into a line-by-line breakdown, perhaps it's sufficient to say that we're a rather motley crew of literary enthusiasts. Most of the editorial work, until quite recently, has been provided for the love of it, meaning entirely voluntarily: John Metcalf has edited half of our fiction titles, and been the guiding spirit of the press; Eric Ormsby, one of the great Canadian and American formalists, has been poetry editor for seven years; Stephen Henighan, a noted translator, author, and critic, has helped to spearhead the translation series. I'm not quite sure why or how I was able to bring these folks to the Biblioasis banner, but I'm lucky to have done so. In terms of in-house staff there's Tara Murphy, who handles most publicity and much else besides, and is pretty tireless; Chris Andrecheck, who's developed into a fine typesetter and production manager; and Kate Hargreaves, who's responsible for a striking new visual aesthetic for our most recent books.

How have you all found each other over the years and what is the spirit that unites the staff?

How does anyone? By shared taste and ambition and opportunity and blind luck. What keeps us together is a rather volatile mixture of faith that this is something worth doing, pleasure, love, passion, and a thin monetary gruel which keeps poverty mostly at bay. And, without trying to make too much of it, some concept of service is at the heart of what binds us as well: a belief that the work we do matters, and makes the world a better place. John Metcalf has said the primary recompense he's had for more than 40 years of tireless editing is the pleasure of being able to share in the lives and work of some of the most engaging people and talented artists in the world. I think that this is something we all understand and recognize.

What would you describe as the aesthetic behind the press? I've especially loved some of your books in translation including works by Mia Couto, Mauricio Segura, and Liliana Heker. How do you source your authors and translators?

On the most basic level, of course, at least with our literary titles — we also publish more commercial titles to help keep the doors open — we just publish books we like. But over time, we've come to be known as the Canadian press for the short story, and one of a handful dedicated to largely formal poetry. We're also one of the few who regularly publish literary criticism. And we may be the only press in the country with a focus on international translation. There are a few presses which publish back and forth between Canada's official languages — French and English — but few which translate at all outside of them. And none which look outside of the country's borders. It's one of the things which make Biblioasis unique.

Though it might be hard to pin down a strict individual aesthetic for the press — anyone who really knows anything about them will know that John Metcalf and Stephen Henighan have extremely different taste — if forced to try and pin it down, I'd say that the press pays almost exclusive attention to the way its writers employ language and a belief that this cannot be separated from either the structure or the narrative or a work's meaning. Whether our writers are offering a retelling of the Odyssey or a sense of what life is like in the first decade of the 21st century in a Canadian industrial town along the American border, if they haven't got the words right, the structure right, then their work is not for us.

We source our books the way most do: solicitation and encouragement. Mainly though, we keep an eye on magazines and journals and websites and writing programs.

The translation program runs differently than the rest of our more native programming. I am, sadly, a monoglot, and I rely heavily on Stephen Henighan to put together the translation series. He's the head of the languages department at the University of Guelph, with a focus on Latin American and Lusophone literatures; I think he speaks and reads half-a-dozen languages and can translate from three to four of these. He's largely been responsible for the shape of the translation series to date.

What kind of support do you receive from the Canadian government? How has that affected the way you do business?

Biblioasis is just over nine years old. For the first five to six years, we really received very little government funding, though that's changed over the last few years. I think it's safe to say we're still one of only a handful of presses whose sales outstrip government support, but recent increases in our funding, both provincially and federally, have really helped us grow and expand.

Beyond making more things possible, doing more books and growing at a faster rate, I'm not sure funding has affected the way we do business much. We decided early on that, though we're a Canadian press, we wouldn't limit ourselves to within our borders when searching out talent. If the first question a publisher asks of a writer is where they were born or where they come from, then they're probably not doing a very good job. The Canadian aspect of our list takes care of itself: it's the community we move within. But we're just as open to work from elsewhere: literature doesn't recognize political borders.

That was part of the inspiration behind the translation series. Though it was also through writers in translation that I first discovered literature. Jules Verne, as a child, and Voltaire, Stendhal, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Goethe, Patrick Chamoiseau, and others in university. It was their work, as much as anything I read originally written in English, which

made me excited about literature and writing. I hoped, through the translation series, to capture some of this excitement. Also, I thought, if we could draw on the whole world we couldn't help but make our entire list better and stronger.

I hear that you receive much less support for works in translation, and yet that's an important part of your catalog. Tell me more about that.

You're right: there's next to no funding for the translations we do. If we translate a French writer from Quebec, that's one thing; but when we do a book by Horacio Castellanos Moya or Mihail Sebastian or many of our other translation series authors, we have to get very creative. Everything comes out of pocket, and every book is expensive. One of the things we're trying to figure out is how, as a technically for-profit company, to raise some money to help fund more translations. It's probably the area of the press I would like to expand the most, but the costs associated with even doing what we do place a tremendous strain on our resources.

How does being so close to the US border affect Biblioasis? And have the dramatic financial difficulties in Detroit had any effect on Windsor as a whole and Biblioasis in particular?

It's like that line in Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" about South Detroit. Everyone in the area knows that if there's a South Detroit, it's Windsor; indeed, it was one of the first names of the place before it became a city, when it was just a ferry stop on the way to Detroit proper. Most of us here in Windsor think of Windsor-Detroit as one larger metropolitan area. We go to the clubs and follow the sports franchises, use the museums and restaurants.

At the press, we even started an "Imported from South Detroit" campaign aimed at US booksellers and media last year, highlighting this connection: no one in the US knew where Windsor was, or cared. But Detroit, of course, is another story. We've got some great T-shirts and swag with a pretty damn cool logo for this.

I'm not sure if the financial difficulties Detroit has faced have affected us here too much. Windsor was hurt to a lesser degree by the recession last decade, and led the country for a time in unemployment: I think we were somewhere around 13 or 14 percent, though we're back below seven now, and below the national average. But compared to Detroit, that's nothing. If anything, we've just become more protective of Detroit and its image. The city helps to shape our own views of ourselves as Windsorites, and many of us feel as if we're in this thing together.

If being close to Detroit has affected the press in any way, it's tied to a geographical mindset. Whereas many others in Canada and Canadian publishing have historically looked to England or Europe, it was natural for us to turn our attention to the US. We see the border, in many ways, as imaginary, and we're more influenced by a lot of what is happening in Detroit and elsewhere in the US than we are by what is going on in Toronto or Montreal or Vancouver. It was natural for us to think about the US market and to make selling our books and authors in the States a priority. This isn't the case for many Canadian presses. And perhaps this explains, in part, why it is that though we're still a young press — 10 years old this fall — we're better known in your fair country than most presses who've been at this game three to four times as long. It comes down to where your head is turned, and we look out onto Detroit almost every single day.

Is your logo inspired by Don Quixote?

Yes. The inspiration was twofold. Three or four years into establishing Biblioasis as a press, it hit me that publishing, or at least literary publishing, is a fool's errand. There was a moment of real despair when I finally realized both the task I'd set for the press and my inability to walk away from it. I think almost everyone who cares deeply about

something most people care nothing about has experienced this kind of despair at one time or another, and the concomitant realization that the despair doesn't change a thing, and that they are going to continue on out of some odd mixture of love and compulsion. That despite everything, they'll keep tilting at those windmills. The logo was a way to acknowledge this.

I also wanted the windmill as a reminder of the essential comedy underlining this enterprise, as a reminder to try and keep the proper spirit, to laugh and not take myself or this whole Biblioasis thing too seriously.

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