

# THE CULTURE OF SMALL PRESS PUBLISHING IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

by

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# Abstract

This report focuses on small press publishing within the context of the Pacific Northwest and has been written in two sections. The first section traces the history of small press publishing in the North American continent, explores its current state of operations—especially within the Pacific Northwest community—lays down the features that set it apart from big press publishing, and highlights the various risks these small press publishers take to continue enriching literary diversity. The second section is a case study of Ronsdale Press as an example of a Pacific Northwest small press publisher. It traces the history of Ronsdale Press, then explores its current work flow and its identifying features, thus establishing it as an essential member of the Pacific Northwest small press publishing community.

Keywords: *small press; small press publishing; golden age of publishing; age of acquisitions; niche publishing; regional publishing; Pacific Northwest*

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# I. Introduction

Over the summer of 2016, I interned at Ronsdale Press in Vancouver. Founded in 1988 by Ronald Hatch, a retired English Professor from the University of British Columbia, Ronsdale Press is a publishing house run by three members, that publishes usually about 12 literary titles annually. Interning with the team of Ronsdale Press, I observed for the first time the workings of a press with such a small scope of operations. Before entering the Masters program at Simon Fraser University, I had worked within the editorial department of multinational companies such as Oxford University Press India. Compared to the scope, manner, and complexity of operations at a multinational company, Ronsdale Press emerged as a distinctly small publisher with a simple work flow and limited scope, as well as select readership.

The fact that a press can be run just by three members that make up an entire staff amazed me when I started interning there. While I pondered why one would work in a profession with such limited resources, I looked up other presses in Vancouver to see if they followed parallel structures. Over the course of my research, the term “small press publishing” started to come up repeatedly. So, how did this kind of publishing come about? Delving into its origin, I found that the history behind its establishment in North America spanned almost two centuries, taking the form of a powerful movement shaped—among other factors—by some formidable names from the heydays of publishing, both in the US and Canada. Even more interesting was the fact that of all the small press publishing hubs established within North America, the Pacific Northwest—where Ronsdale Press is based—became apparent as a very creative hub of the movement. While the reasons behind this have been explored in the report, the most important question, however, is why enter small press publishing? Why are small press publishers willing to plow ahead with such limited resources at hand? More importantly, what drives a small press publisher to carve out a niche for itself in a publishing world dominated by corporate giants and international blockbusters? Where and how does the small press publisher with its selective mandate fit in? Clearly, there is more to publishing than fame, blockbusters, and huge profits.

The first section of my report tries to answer these questions by tracing the reasons behind the emergence of small press publishing in North America, and then by attempting to define it within the current publishing scenario. The report then lays down the features that set small press publishers apart from their larger trade book counterparts with unique mission statements, more personal working relationships, and a willingness to risk their careers on unknown authors in order to publish niche and regional literature—the latter highlighting the significance of the Pacific Northwest as a region. Taken together, this report attempts to establish small press

publishers as promoters of literary diversity but also cautions against the financial hardships, which threaten its viability in the long run. The second section is a case study encompassing my internship at Ronsdale Press and draws similarities between the history, operations, and features of this press and other small press publishers within the Pacific Northwest publishing community—thus establishing Ronsdale Press as an important member of this community.

## 2. Small Press Publishing

One end of the publishing spectrum is dominated by large trade book conglomerates and littered with internationally successful books and authors. The other end contains the small press publishers whose focus is either niche or regional, authors are mostly local, and output is extremely selective. While their success stories might not be known internationally, nor may they ever achieve the fame bestowed upon their giant counterparts, they have an undeniable presence as promoters of literary diversity within the publishing world. This section traces the emergence of small press publishing, defines it within the current publishing scenario, and identifies the features that set it apart from multinational publishing.

### 2.1 History of Small Press Publishing

Small press publishing has a rich literary history that can be traced back almost two centuries. What began as a protest soon took the form of a movement, eventually establishing a “significant fringe industry”<sup>1</sup> all over North America. This sub-section looks at the defining moments that shaped the small press movement in North America.

#### 2.1.1 The Alternative Movement and Publishing in the US

In a 2016 article published online by *Publishing Research Quarterly*, Melanie Ramdarshan Bold chronicles the history, legacy, and current setting of small press publishing within the Pacific Northwest by building upon examples of fifteen presses based out of this region. To explain how the small press movement took shape, she starts with the very first protests against a publishing scene severely monopolized by British authors.<sup>2</sup> Back in the early nineteenth century, printers mainly printed books while authors held copyright and had the responsibility to ensure book sales. The realization that book publishing could actually be a profitable business led to a series of negotiations between authors and printers culminating in the royalty system—the publisher prints,

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1 “Small Presses,” *Canadian Encyclopedia*, accessed May 25, 2017, [http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/small-presses/#h3\\_jump\\_0](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/small-presses/#h3_jump_0).

2 Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, “An ‘Accidental Profession’: Small Press Publishing in the Pacific Northwest,” *Publishing Research Quarterly*, no. 32 (2016): 84–102, doi 10.1007/s12109-016-9452-9.



publishes, and distributes the books and the author gets a percentage out of the sales. However, without an international copyright law in place in nineteenth-century US, American publishers were also free to publish books from other countries, especially those written by British authors, without having to pay them any royalties. In other words, they were free to pirate literature. Racing to outbid each other in a desire to make more profits and minimize losses, they successfully turned American publishing into an industry but started off the piracy wars of 1840 and 1870—one positive result of which was the availability of “a great deal of serious literature to a large audience of readers.”<sup>3</sup> Of course, the downside to all this was that an abundance of British rather than American literature was made available to the masses.<sup>4</sup> This threat to the American literary identity led to the first wave of what Bold has called “the alternative publishing movement.”

During the nineteenth century it was British authors, published illegally, that proved most popular during this period: American authors were overlooked by commercial American publishers as a result. Consequently, some of the first stirrings of the alternative publishing movement grew out of the aspiration to publish American authors. Unlike later movements, this one was led by authors rather than publishers, with key authors and titles being self-published in response to/protest against the lack of support from large, commercial publishers of the time.<sup>5</sup> (Bold)

Notable examples of authors who self-published their books in the latter half of the nineteenth century—starting off a movement that opposed commercial publishing—included Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, and Mark Twain. Thus came into existence seminal works such as Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*—books that helped define American values, character, and culture<sup>6</sup> and stand in opposition to publishing choices governed purely by financial motives. In other words, differences in ideology had already begun making their presence felt in the publishing world from the nineteenth century.

With the publishing industry centralized in the north east, the period from the late 1800s to early 1900s saw control of book publishing in the hands of a chosen few who were mostly men. During the early twentieth century, most of the businesses were family-owned and dominated by strong personalities who largely demonstrated early nineteenth-century world views towards literature, thus refusing to experiment with new content.

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3 Robert McLaughlin, “Oppositional Aesthetics/Oppositional Ideologies: A Brief Cultural History of Alternative Publishing in the United States,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 37, no. 3 (1996): 171–186, doi.org/10.1080/0011619.1996.9936491.

4 Ibid.

5 Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, “An ‘Accidental Profession’: Small Press Publishing in the Pacific Northwest,” *Publishing Research Quarterly*, no. 32 (2016): 84–102, doi 10.1007/s12109-016-9452-9.

6 Ibid.

These personalities, like the second Charles Scribner [of Scribner and Sons], tended to be aristocrats who exemplified the sound ethics as well as the solid prejudices of Victorian Americans.<sup>7</sup> (McLaughlin, Robert)

Dissatisfied with such squeamish views and restricted vision, a wave of publishers rose in ideological opposition to content being published in the early twentieth century, thus ushering in the “Golden Age of Publishing.” This, according to Bold, was the next defining moment in the small press publishing movement.<sup>8</sup> This era marked the period from 1920 to 1940 and was a time when “books were most beloved by a reading public.”<sup>9</sup> While there is a debate about the exact number of years that define the Golden Age,<sup>10</sup> this was the time when publishers such as Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.; Harper and Brothers; Little, Brown; and Doubleday were helmed by influential men who “instead of focusing on reprints, [ ] began to produce new content, and forge identities and reputations for themselves.”<sup>11</sup>

Alfred A. Knopf ... put as much emphasis on the appearance of a book as on its contents ... Little, Brown, then in Boston, was “WASPy to the core,” cultivating “an aura of Henry James respectability.” Henry Kissinger could not resist this quality and chose the publisher for the first volume of *White House Years*.<sup>12</sup> (Friedman, Bruce)

Interestingly, it also helped that these publishers moved in elite literary circles comprising prestigious and award-winning authors. For example, personal friends of Frank N. Doubleday (founder of Doubleday) included Andrew Carnegie and Rudyard Kipling while Alfred A. Knopf was known to spend time with Pulitzer Prize-winning authors such as John Updike and Willa Cather.<sup>13</sup> This was also the era when editors gained greater autonomy over the written word with brilliant and famous men such as Maxwell Perkins taking on even more famous names of the likes of F. Scott Fitzgerald

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7 Robert McLaughlin, “Oppositional Aesthetics/Oppositional Ideologies: A Brief Cultural History of Alternative Publishing in the United States,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 37, no. 3 (1996): 171–186, doi.org/10.1080/0011619.1996.9936491.

8 Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, “An ‘Accidental Profession’: Small Press Publishing in the Pacific Northwest,” *Publishing Research Quarterly*, no. 32 (2016): 84–102, doi 10.1007/s12109-016-9452-9.

9 Bruce Jay Friedman, “Al Silverman’s ‘The Time of Their Lives,’” *The New York Times*, September 12, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/13/arts/13iht-idbriefs13C.16078181.html>.

10 Ibid (According to Friedman, Al Silverman claims it lasted through to the 80s in *The Time of their Lives: The Golden Age of Great American Book Publishers, Their Editors and Authors*. [Blackstone Audio Inc., 2008])

11 Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, “An ‘Accidental Profession’: Small Press Publishing in the Pacific Northwest,” *Publishing Research Quarterly*, no. 32 (2016): 84–102, doi 10.1007/s12109-016-9452-9.

12 Bruce Jay Friedman, “Al Silverman’s ‘The Time of Their Lives,’” *The New York Times*, September 12, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/13/arts/13iht-idbriefs13C.16078181.html>.

13 “Knopf is eulogized as ‘Greatest Publisher’ in U.S.,” *The New York Times*, last modified August 16, 1984, <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/08/16/obituaries/knopf-is-eulogized-as-greatest-publisher-in-us.html>.

and Ernest Hemingway.<sup>14</sup> All in all, the Golden Age was a time marked by influential men in all aspects of publishing who made history with the choices they made and the books they published.

... Knopf has been the gold standard in the book trade, publishing the works of 17 Nobel Prize-winning authors as well as 47 Pulitzer Prize-winning volumes of fiction, nonfiction, biography and history ... *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, would be rejected by 15 others before Doubleday published it in 1952. More than 30 million copies [were] in print [as of 2007] making it one of the best-selling books in history.<sup>15</sup> (Oshinsky, David)

“The Age of Acquisitions” started in the 1960s when Random House acquired Alfred Knopf, thus heralding “the beginnings of the publishing industry being subsumed into larger, mass media conglomerates.”<sup>16</sup> With the paperback revolution, the pressure was on mass producing bestsellers, and a desire for profits led to further strategic acquisitions and mergers. The cultural responsibility to continue publishing regional and local talent was thus picked up by those that dared to remain independent and entrenched within their own communities. With the big publishers mostly located in the north-eastern part of the United States, the small press movement was free to take root throughout the country, with publishers springing up in all sorts of remote locations. While “there are creative hubs across North America, [the Pacific Northwest gradually emerged] as a particularly creative region”<sup>17</sup> with regard to the small press movement.

Examples of small presses that sprung up around this time in the Pacific Northwest and still exist today include City Lights Publishers established in 1955 in San Francisco to publish key Bay area writers;<sup>18</sup> the Oregon-based Calyx Press, established in 1976 by four women to celebrate women’s literature and art;<sup>19</sup> and Copper Canyon Press, founded in Washington State in 1972 to publish poetry exclusively.<sup>20</sup> Although small, they were not without recognition for their achievements. City Lights Publishers was acknowledged for its “significant contribution to major developments in post-World War II literature”<sup>21</sup> in 2001, while Calyx Press helped launch careers of Nobel Prize

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14 Alex Clark, “The lost art of editing,” *The Guardian*, February 11, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/feb/11/lost-art-editing-books-publishing>.

15 David, Oshinsky, “No Thanks, Mr. Nabokov,” *The New York Times*, September 9, 2007, [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/09/books/review/Oshinsky-t.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/09/books/review/Oshinsky-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

16 Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, “An ‘Accidental Profession’: Small Press Publishing in the Pacific Northwest,” *Publishing Research Quarterly*, no. 32 (2016): 84–102, doi 10.1007/s12109-016-9452-9.

17 Ibid.

18 “City Lights Bookstore,” *Wikipedia*, accessed July 15, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City\\_Lights\\_Bookstore](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City_Lights_Bookstore).

19 “History,” *Calyx*, accessed April 9, 2017, <http://www.calyxpress.org/history.html>.

20 “About Us,” *Copper Canyon Press*, accessed April 9, 2017, [https://www.coppercanyonpress.org/pages/aboutus/aboutus\\_history.asp](https://www.coppercanyonpress.org/pages/aboutus/aboutus_history.asp).

21 “City Lights Bookstore,” *Wikipedia*, accessed July 15, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City\\_Lights\\_Bookstore](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City_Lights_Bookstore).

winners such as Wistawa Szymborska<sup>22</sup> and Copper Canyon Press has published National Book Award winning American poets such as Hayden Carruth and Ruth Stone.<sup>23</sup>

## 2.1.2 Publishing in Canada

The Canadian book publishing industry in its formative years was not without its share of struggles, many caused by cheap competition and illegal import from US publishers. Among the original Canadian companies to start in the 1800s, all of which were based out of Toronto, John Lovell and Son was the most successful, having published names such as William Kirby—known for the classic historical novel *The Golden Dog*—and Michel Bibaud, the first Canadian to be credited with writing a book in verse.<sup>24</sup> However, the most influential Canadian firm of the nineteenth century was the Ryerson Press. Established originally in 1829 as the Methodist Book Room to publish books on theology, by 1879 it had expanded into trade book publishing with 37 titles published in the year 1897 alone. Following in its footsteps, soon other publishing houses sprang up between the years 1876 and 1913, including the University of Toronto Press, Oxford University Press Canada, Macmillan Co. of Canada Ltd. and McClelland and Goodchild<sup>25</sup>—the latter of which was soon to turn into one of the most successful publishers of Canadian literature, McClelland and Stewart.

The early 1900s were marked by setbacks to the book publishing industry brought on by various factors including a decline from overproduction in the 1920s, and the Great Depression in the 1930s.<sup>26</sup> However, it was also during the early 1900s that John McClelland emerged as an important figure in Canadian publishing. Having initially worked for the Methodist Book Room, he and his former colleague Frederick Goodchild started McClelland and Goodchild in 1905 and in 1913—after George Stewart, another former colleague, joined them—the publishing company became McClelland and Stewart. John McClelland was reputed to having published “more Canadian authors than almost all other publishers combined,”<sup>27</sup> thus spearheading the firm as a promoter of Canadian literature. While John McClelland paved the way, his son Jack McClelland gradually

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22 Barbara Roether, “Oregon’s Calyx Press: A Literary Survivor,” *Publishers Weekly*, August 20, 2001, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/print/20010820/34921-oregon-s-calyx-press-a-literary-survivor.html>.

23 “About Us,” *Copper Canyon Press*, accessed April 9, 2017, [https://www.coppercanyonpress.org/pages/aboutus/aboutus\\_history.asp](https://www.coppercanyonpress.org/pages/aboutus/aboutus_history.asp).

24 “Michel Bibaud,” *Wikipedia*, accessed July 16, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michel\\_Bibaud](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michel_Bibaud).

25 “English Language Book Publishing,” *Canadian Encyclopedia*, accessed July 8, 2017, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/english-language-book-publishing/>.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*

took over the helm and in the 1950s and '60s,<sup>28</sup> McClelland and Stewart became to Canadian literature what Alfred A. Knopf had been to American literature, thus ushering in Canada's very own Golden Age of Publishing.

Jack McClelland claimed to have fallen into the publishing profession accidentally. Having previously served as an editor at Clarke, Irwin, he claimed to have given up on persuading the press to publish "his kind of books" as he called it.<sup>29</sup> During the time he co-headed McClelland and Stewart, the company "presented itself as an aggressive proponent of Canadian culture"<sup>30</sup> and was increasingly dominated by a Canadian-based catalogue comprising esteemed literary authors such as Margaret Atwood, Leonard Cohen, and Michael Ondaatje, to name a few. In a 1985 *Quill & Quire* article, Jack McClelland was quoted as saying, "It would be fantastic to publish books out of your basement ... to crank out whatever you believed in, whatever the country ... needed to read and know. That was what I wanted to do someday, and the sooner the better."<sup>31</sup> McClelland's ideology rings the same notes as Knopf's who "intended to publish what he considered to be the best literature whether it sold or not."<sup>32</sup> According to a recent article honouring the death of Jack McClelland at 81, "Under his leadership, McClelland and Stewart became the biggest name in Canadian publishing. The company and the man also became a strong voice for Canadian culture and a national identity."<sup>33</sup>

Without M&S, we would not have the early works of Leonard Cohen, of Mordecai Richler, of Mavis Gallant, of Alice Munro. It created a place for Canadians to talk to each other.<sup>34</sup> (Dewar, Elaine)

While one of the most influential, McClelland and Stewart was not the only firm trying to promote Canadian literature. Clarke, Irwin, Ryerson Press, and the University of Toronto Press were among the other notable few that were also choosing to publish books on Canadian culture, although unfortunately, this phase of the big presses striving towards a nationalist identity declined gradually in the face of financial struggles.<sup>35</sup> The declining shift in the ideology of the big presses became apparent in the 1960s and early '70s following the recession in the "book industry [that]

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28 "Jack McClelland," *Wikipedia*, accessed July 8, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McClelland\\_%26\\_Stewart](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McClelland_%26_Stewart).

29 Roy MacSkimming, *The Perilous Trade*, (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 2003), 21.

30 Rowland Lorimer, *Ultra Libris* (Toronto, ON: ECW Press, 2012), 74.

31 Roy MacSkimming, *The Perilous Trade* (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 2003), 21

32 Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, "An 'Accidental Profession': Small Press Publishing in the Pacific Northwest," *Publishing Research Quarterly*, no. 32 (2016): 84–102, doi 10.1007/s12109-016-9452-9.

33 "Canadian publisher Jack McClelland dead at 81," *The Globe and Mail*, last modified April 8, 2009, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/canadian-publisher-jack-mcclelland-dead-at-81/article22507223/>.

34 Kristin Nelson, "How Canada's book publisher McClelland & Stewart became German-owned: author," *CBC Radio*, July 14, 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-july-14-2017-1.4203051/how-canada-s-book-publisher-mcclelland-stewart-became-german-owned-author-1.4203067>.

35 Rowland Lorimer, *Ultra Libris* (Toronto, ON: ECW Press, 2012), 74.

lasted into the 1950s.”<sup>36</sup> The paperback revolution of the ’60s led to even cheaper competition from the American markets; thus the major Toronto-based houses started mass producing their own paperback bestsellers and rejecting books that lacked international appeal.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, this period also marked the era of acquisitions in the North American continent and with firms growing into imprints of international companies, publishing decisions were heavily influenced by marketing demands. Unable to get out of its massive debts of about half a million dollars a year,<sup>38</sup> Ryerson Press was acquired by McGraw-Hill (a US firm) in 1970.<sup>39</sup> McClelland and Stewart, on the other hand, continued disseminating literature on Canadian culture but as a firm with mounting financial debts<sup>40</sup> and had to be eventually bought out.<sup>41</sup>

With the fate of the big presses uncertain, the Canadian small press publishing movement had found the opportunity to establish itself. With hands-on control over what they wanted to publish, small press publishers sprang up throughout the country—similar to their US counterparts—and took on the responsibility of maintaining national and cultural identity by publishing titles that needed to be published. The 1960s and ’70s were the decades when the movement in Canada, and particularly in British Columbia, “exploded with underground, alternative, and politically engaged writers, some of whom were associated with the University of British Columbia’s Creative Writing Department.”<sup>42</sup>

The creation of the Canada Council in 1957 also sped up the establishment of small presses in Canada. Established by the federal government in an effort to decentralize cultural output, the Council was the culmination of a report by the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences, chaired by the former Governor General Vincent Massey and popularly known as the Massey Commission. The report—released in 1951—encouraged a

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36 “Small Presses,” *Canadian Encyclopedia*, accessed May 25, 2017, [http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/small-presses/#h3\\_jump\\_0](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/small-presses/#h3_jump_0).

37 Ibid.

38 Rowland Lorimer, *Ultra Libris* (Toronto, ON: ECW Press, 2012), 74.

39 “English Language Book Publishing,” *Canadian Encyclopedia*, accessed July 8, 2017, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/english-language-book-publishing/>.

40 Rowland Lorimer, *Ultra Libris* (Toronto, ON: ECW Press, 2012), 74.

41 Developer Avie Bennett bought M&S in 1985, ran it for 15 years, then donated 75% of the shares to the University of Toronto while selling the rest to Random House Canada. In 2011, U of T sold its shares to Bertelsmann. Now M&S is an imprint owned by Random House. (Kristin Nelson, “How Canada’s book publisher McClelland & Stewart became German-owned: author,” *CBC Radio*. [July 14, 2017], accessed July 18, 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-july-14-2017-1.4203051/how-canada-s-book-publisher-mcclelland-stewart-became-german-owned-author-1.4203067>).

42 “Small Presses,” *Canadian Encyclopedia*, accessed May 25, 2017, [http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/small-presses/#h3\\_jump\\_0](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/small-presses/#h3_jump_0).



“cultural awakening”<sup>43</sup> in Canada, thus leading to the establishment of the Canada Council for the Arts whose mandate, among others, was to provide grants in an effort to assist Canadian-owned publishers.<sup>44</sup> “[A] lot of the presses started up in the late ’60s and the early ’70s—Talon and New Star and so on—and the chief reason for them starting up was the Canada Council,”<sup>45</sup> affirmed Brian Lam—the publisher of Arsenal Pulp Press. Talon Books started as a poetry magazine at Magee High School in Vancouver in 1963, and then moved to UBC in 1965. By 1967, the magazine had published enough young authors to establish itself as a Vancouver-based literary book publisher.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, an informal group of writers and editors working for the cultural weekly *The Georgia Straight* got together in 1969 to publish literary supplements into the weekly *Straight*, within a decade of which the Vancouver-based New Star Books was born.<sup>47</sup>

While the development of the Canada Council supported the Canadian small press movement, its services and grants went out to visual and fine arts including music and opera and so, were not limited to book publishing alone. Eventually, a political movement demanding financial support exclusively for a Canadian owned and controlled book publishing industry started gathering storm.

Beginning in the late 1960s and continuing into the 1990s, authors, book publishers, some booksellers, the federal and some provincial governments and some members of the book community mounted a concerted effort to establish a domestically owned and controlled book publishing industry.<sup>48</sup> (Lorimer, Rowland)

These efforts of the publishers led to the creation of groundwork for the development of Canadian book publishing as laid down by the Ontario Royal Commission on Book Publishing in 1971. The most important decision made by this Commission led to the establishment, in 1972, of cultural subsidies set up by Canadian governments, to support both writing and publishing and to “help cover the deficits publishers incur by publishing literary titles.”<sup>49</sup> Another landmark feature of this decision was the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP). Created in 1979, the program “established a workable, stable regime for financial assistance to Canadian publishers [and] remain[ed] in force [in 2012] but has been renamed the Canada Book Fund,” wrote Lorimer.<sup>50</sup>

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43 Rowland Lorimer, *Ultra Libris* (Toronto, ON: ECW Press, 2012), 70

44 “Small Presses,” *Canadian Encyclopedia*, accessed May 25, 2017, [http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/small-presses/#h3\\_jump\\_0](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/small-presses/#h3_jump_0).

45 Jerome Gold, *Publishing Lives*, (Seattle: Black Heron Press, 1990), 475.

46 “About Talon Books,” *Talon Books*, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://talonbooks.com/about-us/>.

47 “About New Star, Books,” *New Star Books*, accessed July 16, 2017, <http://www.newstarbooks.com/about.php>.

48 Rowland Lorimer, *Ultra Libris* (Toronto, ON: ECW Press, 2012), 79.

49 *Ibid*, p.80.

50 *Ibid*, p. 83.

These developments gave small press publishers the means to take over the cultural responsibility of publishing cultural, regional, and marginal content and more and more small press publishers started coming up through the '70s and all through the '80s. For example, Anvil Press, a small press publisher based out of Vancouver, was established to [initially] publish subTERRAIN magazine in 1988.

The desire amongst those involved at the time was to eventually publish a line of literary titles—books from new, virtually unknown authors who were starting to make a name for themselves on the Canadian literary scene.<sup>51</sup> (Anvil Press)

Last but not the least, a development that has worked in favour of the small press movement, specifically in BC, has been the establishment of BC BookWorld. Founded by the award-winning Canadian writer, editor, and publisher Alan Twigg in 1987, BC BookWorld is “Canada’s largest-circulating publication about books.”<sup>52</sup> The magazine aims to deliver objective information about books, rather than reviews, to the most number of people.<sup>53</sup> And according to Lam, “It’s made a huge impact on publishing in BC. It has a really populist perspective and treats books as news. It’s reaching people, in a very non-elitist way, who aren’t necessarily looking at book reviews and aren’t particularly interested in the arts. I think it’s having a positive effect.”<sup>54</sup> While the magazine carries news about latest authors and book releases to its readers, Twigg also maintains a supplementary online resource that lists more than 10,000 entries on BC authors and their contributions towards enriching BC literature.<sup>55</sup>

To summarize, both in the US and Canada, the small press movement followed parallel routes towards eventual establishment. Publishing on both sides of the border reached its peak between the early to mid-1900s, while the subsequent era of acquisitions and sales symbolized the shift in the ideology of the publishing world. With the big presses in turmoil, the small press movement was free to take root and sprang up in all possible locations and regions throughout the continent. Notably, the main difference between the history of both movements lay in the financial aspect—namely, the creation of Canada Council, and subsequent foundation of the Canada Book Fund—which was largely absent from the history of the American small press movement. The small press movement—on both sides of the border—established itself as an important alternative to global conglomeration and controlled outputs. While the big names eventually gave in to pressures

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51 “About Anvil Press,” *Anvil Press*, accessed March 23, 2017, <http://www.anvilpress.com/About-Us/>.

52 “Alan Twigg,” *Harbour Publishing*, accessed July 18, 2017, <http://www.harbourpublishing.com/author/AlanTwigg>.

53 “History of BC BookWorld,” *BC BookWorld*, accessed July 18, 2017, <http://www.bcbookworld.com/history.htm>.

54 Jerome Gold, *Publishing Lives*, (Seattle: Black Heron Press, 1990), 480.

55 “Search BC Author Bank,” *ABC BookWorld*, accessed Aug 8, 2017, <http://www.abcbookworld.com/>.



brought on by financial demands and mass-market appeal, the small press movement took it as an opportunity to take root and carry on with the mission of publishing literature rooted in cultural, regional, and national values.

## 2.2 Current State of Small Press Publishing

This sub-section attempts to define small press publishing within the current publishing world. It identifies the characteristic features of a small press publisher thus echoing the history behind its creation and its continued existence in this day and age. It also highlights the financial risks these small presses take and what it means for their survival on the fringes of a publishing world where output is still largely dominated by the big few.

### 2.2.1 What is Small Press Publishing?

Within the current publishing scenario, small press is a term used to define a publisher that makes annual sales below a certain level. The annual sales' figure for American small press publishers tends to be around US\$50 million or less<sup>56</sup> while Canadian small press publishers make annual revenues anywhere between CAD \$50,000 and \$250,000.<sup>57</sup> These revenues suggest a small scope of operations: the presses are usually run by less than 10–15 members,<sup>58</sup> they tend to publish less than 20 titles annually,<sup>59</sup> and several operate their presses right out of their houses.

For example, Pacific Northwest publishers that fit this definition include Arsenal Pulp Press, Future Tense Books, and Perfect Day Publishing. Vancouver-based Arsenal Pulp Press is run by a total staff of five and publishes about 14–20 titles annually. Future Tense Books, based out of Portland, Oregon, is spearheaded by Kevin Sampsell, the editor and publisher, includes just three

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56 Dean Smith, "The New World of Publishing: What Should Indie Publishers Be Called?" *The Writing and Opinions of Dean Wesley Smith* (blog), September 8, 2012, <http://www.deanwesleysmith.com/the-new-world-of-publishing-what-should-indie-publishers-be-called/>.

57 "Small Presses," *Canadian Encyclopedia*, accessed May 25, 2017, [http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/small-presses/#h3\\_jump\\_0](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/small-presses/#h3_jump_0).

58 This average range is derived from my research on PNW presses and their staff, including those cited in my report. Most are run by less than 10 members.

59 Ibid.

other members, and only publishes a couple of books per year.<sup>60</sup> One of Portland's most recent publishers to join the small press publishing community, Perfect Day Publishing, was founded in 2011 by author and publisher Michael Heald and remains a one-man operation, releasing one title a year—with seven published books to its credit so far.<sup>61</sup>

This manner of operation is in stark contrast with that of global trade book publishers that employ staff and print titles by tens of thousands annually across continents, and have huge, impressive offices located right in the hub of publishing capitals such as Toronto and New York, announcing their presence from miles away. A good example is Penguin Random House, the largest publishing house in the world after the merger of Penguin and Random House in 2013. It employs 10,000 people globally, prints about 15,000 titles annually<sup>62</sup> and according to a recent *Publishers Weekly* article, made a record profit of 557 million euros [~800 million dollars CAD] in 2015.<sup>63</sup> Simon and Schuster, one of the Big 5 publishers,<sup>64</sup> releases over 2,000 titles annually and earned revenues worth US \$780 million [~1052 million CAD] in 2015.<sup>65</sup> According to *Interview Insider*, it employs 1,100 people in the US and another 200 people around the globe.<sup>66</sup>

These highly contrasting statistics between small and big press publishers imply that the difference continues to be one of ideology, belief, and choice. Even with limited resources, small press publishers seem to enter and work in this profession willingly because they believe in it. As Jerome Gold of Seattle-based Black Heron Press observes in his book *Publishing Lives*, for which he conducted several interviews with small press publishers based in the Pacific Northwest, “I grew to see [small press] publishing as an investment of the publisher's life and not as a career . . . [it] pervades all aspects of the ways in which they view the world and live in it.”<sup>67</sup>

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60 “About Future Tense Books,” *Future Tense*, accessed Mar 23, 2017, <http://futuretensebooks.com/about-future-tense/>.

61 “About Perfect Day Publishing,” *Perfect Day*, accessed June 4, 2017, <http://www.perfectdaybooks.com/>.

62 “CEO Markus Dohle Announces Penguin Random House Global Leadership Team,” *Penguin Random House*, July 1, 2013, [http://global.penguinrandomhouse.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/PenguinRandomHouse\\_PressRelease.pdf](http://global.penguinrandomhouse.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/PenguinRandomHouse_PressRelease.pdf).

63 Jim Milliot, “Penguin Random House Reports Record Profits in 2015,” *Publishers Weekly*, March 22, 2016, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/financial-reporting/article/69731-penguin-random-house-reports-record-profits-in-2015.html>.

64 Valerie Peterson, “The Big Five Trade Book Publishers,” *The Balance*, May 15, 2017, <https://www.thebalance.com/the-big-five-trade-book-publishers-2800047>.

65 “Global Publishing Leaders 2016: Simon & Schuster,” *Publishers Weekly*, August 26, 2016, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/71336-global-publishing-leaders-2016-simon-schuster.html>.

66 Heather Wood Rudolph, “Interview Insider: How to Get Hired at Simon & Schuster,” *Cosmopolitan*, July 16, 2015, <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/career/a42999/interview-insider-simon-and-schuster-career-jobs/>.

67 Jerome Gold, *Publishing Lives*, (Seattle: Black Heron Press, 1990), 15.

## 2.2.2 Features of a Small Press Publisher

While a small number of staff and low annual revenues help define a small press publisher, the following features also characterize them and set them further apart from their larger trade book counterparts.

The three main features that characterize a small press publisher are:

- a. Unique identities
- b. Close author ties and personal care
- c. Financial risk takers

### a. Unique Identities

The identity of a publishing company manifests itself through its published works, which, in turn, have their roots in the company's mission statement. In other words, the identity of a press is synonymous with its mission statement. Collin's English Dictionary defines mission statement as a document on which the company states its objectives and the services it intends to render.<sup>68</sup>

While every publisher, small and large, has a mission statement to abide by, the uniqueness of a small press publisher's mandate lies in its niche or regional appeal. The niche output becomes apparent as they set about publishing underrepresented themes, experimental forms of literature, and other community-related works while the regionalism manifests itself in literature based in, or about the publisher's specific region—in this case the Pacific Northwest. An interesting point to mention within the context of the Pacific Northwest is that while some presses are solely regional in scope by virtue of the content and authors they publish, others expand to include diverse themes and national authors, thus maintaining a balance between the Pacific Northwest identity and the ideals of small press publishing by experimenting with various content.

### Niche Publishing

The word "niche" refers to something small and specialized. Small press publishers usually specialize in niche output by publishing underrepresented or experimental forms of literature—as mentioned above—to a small and dedicated group of readers. As far as publishing

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<sup>68</sup> "Mission statement," *Collins Dictionary*, accessed March 22, 2017. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/mission-statement>.

underrepresented forms of literature goes, the mission statement of Arsenal Pulp Press is a good example:

Arsenal Pulp Press is a book publisher in Vancouver, Canada with over 300 titles currently in print, which include literary fiction and nonfiction; cultural and gender studies; LGBT and multicultural literature; cookbooks, including vegan; alternative crafts; graphic novels; visual arts; and books in translation.<sup>69</sup>

This mission statement is strategic in the sense that sure sellers such as cookbooks and books on arts and crafts provide the revenue to sustain the more serious literature dedicated to voicing the LGBTQ community. By aiming at the underrepresented LGBTQ community, particularly, Arsenal Pulp Press has established its own small but niche group of readers.

I'm always interested in issues of identity whether its cultural, sexual or—and that sort of led me to what we're trying to accomplish at [Arsenal] Pulp Press, which is getting involved with projects that challenge the status quo.<sup>70</sup> (Lam, Brian)

Microcosm Publishing of Portland is a great example of a press that publishes experimental forms of literature, having contributed to the “indie zine culture” of Portland. The following is a part of Microcosm’s mission statement:

Portland’s most colorful, authentic, and empowering publishing house and distributor, Microcosm Publishing is a vertically integrated publishing house that equips readers to make positive changes in their lives and in the world around them. Microcosm emphasizes skill-building, showing hidden histories, and fostering creativity through challenging conventional publishing wisdom with books and bookettes about DIY skills, food, bicycling, gender, self-care, and social justice.<sup>71</sup>

Appealing to Portland’s “zine” readers, the press publishes on diverse themes from punk rock to radical politics to the bicycle revolution. Even more interesting is their confession of having operated out of milk crates, windowless basements, a church, and even a credit card company.<sup>72</sup> These days they “operate out of a shop near the vegan mini-mall in Southeast Portland”<sup>73</sup> where one can find a zine on every conceivable subject along with other interesting paraphernalia.<sup>74</sup>

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69 “About Arsenal Pulp Press,” *Arsenal Pulp Press*, accessed March 22, 2017, <http://www.arsenalpulp.com/aboutus.php>.

70 Jerome Gold, *Publishing Lives*, (Seattle: Black Heron Press, 1990), 477.

71 “About Microcosm Publishing,” *Microcosm Publishing*, accessed July 18, 2017, <https://microcosmpublishing.com/about>.

72 Ibid.

73 Cameron Pierce, “10 Portland Powerhouses Bringing the (Good) Hurt to Publishing,” *Lit Reactor*, September 27, 2013, <https://litreactor.com/columns/14-portland-powerhouses-bringing-the-hurt-to-independent-publishin>.

74 Ibid.

## Pacific Northwest Publishing

About 3,000 publishers of books, newspapers, and magazines are estimated to operate in the Pacific Northwest region alone.<sup>75</sup> This region has also been called particularly creative by various studies.<sup>76</sup> In order to understand the appeal and significance of regional publishing within the Pacific Northwest, one must first delve into the regional identity and the reasons ascribed to its creativity.

One of the reasons is seen to be attributed to the overwhelming association of the Pacific Northwest with the environment. Often referred to as Cascadia, the Pacific Northwest is a region in Northwest America that includes the US states of Oregon and Washington, the Canadian province of British Columbia with northern reaches up to Alaska (US) and Yukon (Canada) and south into Northern California (US).<sup>77</sup> The region is home to a diverse mix of ecosystems from vast marine reserves, miles and miles of rocky coastlines, snow-capped mountains, and sparkling glacial lakes to stretches of high desert, giant redwoods, lush rainforests, and unpredictable weather. Anisse Grosse's article in the *Publishers Weekly* explains how the environment of this region shapes the lives of the residents as they are "informed by and in touch with the natural world. That attitude is reflected in the books that are released by the area's publishers."<sup>78</sup>

The influence of nature on everyday Northwest life carried over to its literature and culture. This has been the case as far back as when the first tribes settled the region thousands of years ago and began telling stories about it. This obsession with landscape pervades all of Northwest literature.<sup>79</sup> (King, Geoff)

Regarding BC specifically, Lam explained:

BC has a really vibrant writing and publishing community. I think that comes from the fact that we are so far removed from the rest of the country... [ ] I think there's the sense that the Rocky Mountains which divide BC from the rest of Canada are a real physical border that separates us and makes us different. There are quite a number of publishers that have made a success of just servicing and publishing for the community here in British Columbia.<sup>80</sup>

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75 Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, "An 'Accidental Profession': Small Press Publishing in the Pacific Northwest," *Publishing Research Quarterly*, no. 32 (2016): 84–102, doi 10.1007/s12109-016-9452-9.

76 The sources include literature that explores the Pacific Northwest such as *Nature's Northwest* by William G. Robbins and Katrine Barber and *On Sacred Ground* by Nicholas O'Connell.

77 "Cascadia," *Wikipedia*, accessed March 23, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacific\\_Northwest](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacific_Northwest).

78 Anisse Gross, "Publishing in the Pacific Northwest: Indie Spirit," *Publishers Weekly*, November 18, 2016, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/72082-publishing-in-the-pacific-northwest-indie-spirit.html>.

79 Geoff King, *A Companion to American Indie Film* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

80 Jerome Gold, *Publishing Lives*, (Seattle: Black Heron Press, 1990), 480.

The best example of such a publishing house is Harbour Publishing. Situated in the pristine and isolated coastal village of Pender Harbour on BC's Sunshine Coast, the press publishes works relevant to and set in the West Coast of the country. From non-fiction to fiction to poetry, each of the works published by this press is intricately woven with the environment, from harbours and quays to coastal villages and rainforests, and reflects the lives of the people ensconced in it.

Harbour Publishing is well known for the Raincoast Chronicles, a series of anthologies on BC coast history and culture, of which twenty have now been produced. The Canadian Historical Association [recognizes] that Harbour Publishing "has nurtured and brought into being a remarkable range of works that capture the essence of British Columbia."<sup>81</sup> (Harbour Publishing)

Another example is Portland-based Timber Press, which started as a publisher of gardening books but expanded later "to include regional field guides...[and] general-interest books about the PNW."<sup>82</sup>

The work that we do is very much defined by the region that we live in. We spend a lot of time outdoors. The natural world that surrounds us definitely informs our publishing program. We value the environment, conservation—the importance of the natural world and honoring it.<sup>83</sup> (Juergens, Kathryn; Director of Marketing and Publicity, Timber)

Although the environment plays an important role in Pacific Northwest literature, the region's indigenous and ethnic diversity is also important. While King already alludes to the first tribes that settled here thousands of years ago, the diversity of the region increased even further as African and Asian immigrants arrived to build railroads in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>84</sup> The diversity fuelled creativity as seen in arts and crafts, farmers' produce, regionally brewed coffee, fine food, craft beer, and gradually a liberal, progressive attitude towards culture and politics. This diversity, in turn, inspired a rich literary tradition. Take, for example, the richly evocative poetry of the critically acclaimed American Navajo-Warm Springs-Wasco-Yakama poet, lecturer, and educator, Elizabeth Woody.<sup>85</sup> Her first book of poems titled *Seven Hands, Seven Hearts* was published in 1994 by Eighth Mountain Press—a Portland-based small press publisher of feminist writers—and contains themes "rooted in the Northwest landscape, the histories of her

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81 "About Harbour Publishing," *Harbour Publishing*, accessed March 23, 2017, <http://www.harbourpublishing.com/about.php>.

82 Anisse Gross, "Publishing in the Pacific Northwest: Indie Spirit," *Publishers Weekly*, November 18, 2016, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/72082-publishing-in-the-pacific-northwest-indie-spirit.html>.

83 Ibid.

84 "Reading the Region: Writing Home," *Centre for the Study of the Pacific Northwest*, accessed March 23, 2017, <http://www.washington.edu/uwired/outreach/cspn/Website/Classroom%20Materials/Reading%20the%20Region/Writing%20Home/Writing%20Home%20Main.html>.

85 "Elizabeth Woody," *Wikipedia*, accessed March 21, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth\\_Woody](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Woody).

ancestors, and the ongoing struggle to define what it means to be a tribal member, an American, and a woman at the end of the twentieth century.”<sup>86</sup>

The history, creativity, and environment of the region taken together form the Pacific Northwest spirit and contain a treasure trove of stories that must be told. The story-tellers when starting out are quite small. With regional works lacking immediate commercial appeal, most are outright rejected by larger publishers in the east. This is where the small press publishers of the Pacific Northwest community step in to publish them, irrespective of whether their books can make significant profits, thus greatly enriching regional literature. For example, Epicenter is an American small press publisher that exclusively publishes non-fiction books based in and about Alaska. Kent Sturgis, its publisher, dedicates Epicenter’s success to a book called *Two Old Women* “written by a [then hardly known] Athabaskan Indian woman up in Fort Yukon, Velma Wallis.”<sup>87</sup> Interviewed by Gold at a time when they were about to publish the book, Sturgis was asked for his reasons for deciding to publish an obscure writer. He replied, “It’s a book that needs to be published.”<sup>88</sup> The book went on to sell over a million copies worldwide and has been translated into 18 languages.<sup>89</sup>

Small press publishers stand out from their big trade book counterparts with unique identities geared towards niche and regional outputs, thus greatly adding to the literary world. As Forest Avenue Press of Oregon aptly puts it, “Why should we in Oregon...wait on people in New York to realize that this is an important story? Why should writers in Oregon tie their sense of themselves as writers to gatekeepers in New York?”<sup>90</sup> In this way, small press publishers act as important facilitators of literary diversity.

## b. Closer Author Ties and Personal Care

While developing unique identities allows small press publishers to garner a dedicated readership, this cannot be maintained without a well-nurtured press-author relationship. Small press publishers are known to develop stronger ties with their writers and also care more for their books than

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86 “Seven Hands, Seven Hearts: Prose and Poetry,” *Amazon*, accessed July 19, 2017, <https://www.amazon.com/Seven-Hands-Hearts-Prose-Poetry/dp/0933377304>.

87 Jerome Gold, *Publishing Lives*, (Seattle: Black Heron Press, 1990), 117.

88 *Ibid.*

89 Anisse Gross, “Publishing in the Pacific Northwest: Indie Spirit,” *Publishers Weekly*, November 18, 2016, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/72082-publishing-in-the-pacific-northwest-indie-spirit.html>.

90 Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, “An ‘Accidental Profession’: Small Press Publishing in the Pacific Northwest,” *Publishing Research Quarterly*, no. 32 (2016): 84–102, doi 10.1007/s12109-016-9452-9.



their larger trade book counterparts. According to Bold, a lack of infrastructure is the reason why small press publishers seem to be able to do this. With mergers and expansions, bigger companies develop large overheads, with several departments to account for and countless deadlines to meet. Consequently, editors “have less time to spend, and support, authors.”<sup>91</sup> At small press publishers, according to Arsenal Pulp Press, fewer infrastructures mean “fewer degrees of separation between management and authors.”<sup>92</sup> As previously discussed, small presses are usually run by very few people and therefore, often the same person is the publisher, the editor, and the marketer of the books. With fewer doors to send the book through, all, or at least most, members of the press pay great attention at every stage of production, without rushing to meet innumerable market-driven deadlines. Thus, in turn, they gradually develop a closer bond with the authors, all the while coaxing them to do their best work.

A point that goes in favour of small press publishers bestowing better care and attention on their books and thus developing better author ties is that bigger publishers are always on the lookout for the next best thing. With the big presses chasing profit-makers, the editor’s autonomy over the written word is known to have lessened, with the editors being pressured to meet various slotted deadlines rather than dedicate more of their time to “careful editing.”<sup>93</sup> This point has also been echoed in an article, published in *The Guardian* back in 2011, which lamented the loss of the art of editing:

For some years now ... there have been murmurs throughout publishing that books are simply not edited in the way they once were ... by the shift in contemporary publishing towards the large conglomerates, and by a greater emphasis on sales and marketing campaigns and on the efficient supply of products to a retail environment geared towards selling fewer books in larger quantities.<sup>94</sup> (Clark, Alex)

Authors published by small press publishers also tend to echo the viewpoint that they, and their books, receive more personal care at small presses. The following is from the perspective of author Wendy C. Ortiz, whose *Excavation: A Memoir* was published three years ago by Future Tense Books.

My book was making the rounds ... in early 2013, and the rejections I received ... included adjectives such as “strong,” “compelling,” “powerful,” and “beautiful,” in addition to how “tough” the topic is, and how difficult it would be to sell... with Kevin [Sampsell], I knew my book would get the benefit of ... integrity and cutting-edge quality that [ ] independent presses are

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91 Ibid.

92 Ibid

93 Ibid.

94 Alex Clark, “The lost art of editing,” *The Guardian*, (Feb 11, 2011), accessed February 11, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/feb/11/lost-art-editing-books-publishing>.



known for... Kevin's guidance through the whole process was personal and kind. I recognize these as hallmarks ... I can't say I would have experienced with a [larger trade book] publisher.<sup>95</sup>

A second reason authors believe they receive greater personal care and attention from small press publishers is that quite a few of these presses are author-run, thus giving them first-hand knowledge of how to work with fellow authors. For example, Howard White, who runs Harbour Publishing, is an award-winning author himself,<sup>96</sup> while Ron Smith, the founder of BC-based Oolichan Press, recently published his book *The Defiant Mind* with Ronsdale Press to critical acclaim,<sup>97</sup> and Sampsell has been published by one of Portland's well-reputed small press publishers, Tin House.<sup>98</sup>

### c. Financial Risk Takers

Promoting literature with selective focus and to a limited audience is a financially risky venture—the downside of being unique. This is especially true in Canada where, according to Rowland Lorimer, “compared to many larger countries with developed economies around the world, Canada has a national domestic market that is insufficient to warrant publication of new literary voices.”<sup>99</sup> Add to this, the competition provided by the American book publishing market and the limited readership makes sense. This, in fact, is the very reason that led the Canadian book publishers to lead the political movement demanding financial support for a Canadian-owned book publishing industry.

While the establishment of the Canada Council and later, the Canada Book Fund have gone a long way to ensure survival of Canadian small press publishing, the American counterpart does not fare so well because there is no such funding available to them. Hence, even though there is no direct competition from the Canadian book publishing market in the US, the absence of, or insufficient, funding is by far the biggest threat to the survival of the small press industry there. In fact, Lam had been quoted as saying to Jerome Gold, “One good thing about being in Canada is that we get a lot more funding than what I hear is available in the US.”<sup>100</sup> Gold did not disagree.

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95 Kevin, Larimer, “Let's Just Do This: Eleven Small-Press Authors and their Publishing Partners,” *Poets & Writers*, November/December 2014, [https://www.pw.org/content/lets\\_just\\_do\\_this](https://www.pw.org/content/lets_just_do_this).

96 “About Howard White,” *Harbour Publishing*, accessed March 21, 2017, <http://www.harbourpublishing.com/about.php>.

97 “The Defiant Mind,” *Ronsdale Press*, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://ronsdalepress.com/books/defiant-mind-the/>.

98 Cameron Pierce, “10 Portland Powerhouses Bringing the (Good) Hurt to Publishing,” *Lit Reactor*, September 27, 2013, <https://litreactor.com/columns/14-portland-powerhouses-bringing-the-hurt-to-independent-publishin>.

99 Rowland Lorimer, *Ultra Libris* (Toronto, ON: ECW Press, 2012), 80.

100 Jerome Gold, *Publishing Lives*, (Seattle: Black Heron Press, 1990), 472.

This is where acquisitions seem like a strategic move. For example, based out of Berkeley, California, Seal Press started off in 1976 as a small press publisher dedicated to feminist literature.<sup>101</sup> However, priorities can change depending on how far one can take the struggles. While talking about such priorities with Ruth Gundle of Eighth Mountain Press, Gold mentioned, “Seal Press’s circumstances are [now] such that she has to think of the company because she has employees and she has to take care of those employees.”<sup>102</sup> This conversation took place sometime around the year 1990. Seal Press is now an imprint of Perseus Books, part of the Hachette Group.

The survival of the small press movement is essential to maintaining literary diversity. The following is how Booktrope—a Seattle-based publisher—phrased it:

We’re not just doing these things because of the economics of it; we’re also doing it because of the social side of it too. If we let this continue, we have these tastemakers that are doing this, sort of, oligarchical, society that they get to tell us what we get to read and think.<sup>103</sup>

Sadly, Booktrope recently shut down its operations.<sup>104</sup> The threat of such a fate looms larger over American small press publishers than their Canadian counterparts. Most of the American small press publishers are family businesses run with the help of personal savings and bank loans. However—government grants and subsidies aside—Canadian small press publishers are no strangers to financial bankruptcy either, thanks in large part to the already limited domestic market they serve, combined with tough competition from their neighbours. It is also quite common to see some small press publishers working other regular jobs to make ends meet while on the side they run their publishing business to fuel their creative needs. The pressure in such cases can be quite overwhelming. To cap it all, literary output is still largely dominated by the big trade book publishers housed in the east in both countries.<sup>105</sup> Everything put together—on both sides of the border—small press publishing endures financial risks brought on by lack of, or insufficient, funding, low scope of output, and select or limited readership. Limited readership, in turn, limits the scope of sales and hence small press publishers are never known to benefit from huge profits.

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101 “About Seal Press,” *Seal Press*, accessed March 27, 2017, <https://sealpress.com/about/>.

102 Jerome Gold, *Publishing Lives*, (Seattle: Black Heron Press, 1990), 117.

103 Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, “An ‘Accidental Profession’: Small Press Publishing in the Pacific Northwest,” *Publishing Research Quarterly*, no. 32 (2016): 84–102, doi 10.1007/s12109-016-9452-9.

104 Calvin Reid, “Booktrope To Shut Down Operations,” *Publishers Weekly*, May 2, 2016, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/70132-booktrope-to-shut-down-operations.html>.

105 Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, “An ‘Accidental Profession’: Small Press Publishing in the Pacific Northwest,” *Publishing Research Quarterly*, no. 32 (2016): 84–102, doi 10.1007/s12109-016-9452-9.

In addition to lack of funding, the direct financial risks that small press publishers take manifest themselves in the following ways:

- Publishing text that is controversial or experimental—and thus has a scope of sales limited to a select readership
- Publishing text that is regional in scope—and therefore limited to regional readership
- Taking a chance on new literary voices—thus leading to probable losses from low sales in a market driven by proven and established names
- The farm league phenomenon—losing successful authors to bigger publishers, usually based on the east coast

### Publishing Text That is Experimental or Controversial

The best way to approach this point is to take the example of Arsenal Pulp Press, which opposes right-wing conservatism with its published works representing LGBTQ literature, as has been previously discussed under its unique identity. For example, among other books, the press has published *When everything feels like the movies*, a young adult story about a gay teen, which won the Governor General’s Literary Award.<sup>106</sup> Accolades aside, the fact remains that while such books are perfectly in sync with the mandate of the press, they contain themes the world is only slowly warming up to. Therefore, the readership is quite niche and huge profits cannot be expected from the sales of these books, thus emphasizing the financial risk the press takes by publishing controversial text.

### Publishing Text that is Regional in Scope

This point applies to almost all the presses in the Pacific Northwest and especially those that are solely regional in scope, either by the content or through the authors they publish. Take for example, *Birds of the Pacific Northwest* published by Timber Press or even *Raincoast Chronicles* by Harbour Publishing. While the first one is a best-selling comprehensive guide on bird species common to Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and British Columbia,<sup>107</sup> the other is a critically acclaimed and award-winning mammoth collection of literature “covering every imaginable aspect of Northwest history

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<sup>106</sup> Anisse Gross, “Publishing in the Pacific Northwest: Indie Spirit,” *Publishers Weekly*, November 18, 2016, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/72082-publishing-in-the-pacific-northwest-indie-spirit.html>.

<sup>107</sup> “Birds of the Pacific Northwest,” *Timber Press*, accessed July 19, 2017, [http://www.timberpress.com/books/birds\\_pacific\\_northwest/shewey/9781604696653](http://www.timberpress.com/books/birds_pacific_northwest/shewey/9781604696653).

and folklore.”<sup>108</sup> Yet, neither has ever attained international success, nor has the scope for it, thereby catering to limited, regional readership—and emphasizing the financial risk the presses take by publishing regional literature. This is also why several regional presses are opting to publish on other topics as well. For example, Forest Avenue of Oregon started in 2012 as a grassroots organization to support and promote Oregon writers primarily but over the years they have diversified.

We continue to retain a spirited and often tangy Pacific Northwest flavor, but going national has allowed us to increase diversity, maximize sales and media attention, reach more readers, and discover amazing manuscripts.<sup>109</sup> (Stanfill, Laura; Publisher of Forest Avenue Press)

## Taking a Chance on New Literary Voices

While the big names of the east might think twice before publishing a new name or—as is mostly seen—reject the unknown author altogether, small press publishers are known to do otherwise. For them the story matters more and if they believe the author has potential, then she or he will be published. According to Bold, “Emerging . . . and non-mainstream authors often face difficulties when trying to publish with large, mainstream publishers. Thus, small publishing companies—that do not focus on sales or the bottom line—are important gatekeepers.”<sup>110</sup> The probability of low sales has never stopped small press publishers from doing what they think is right.

For example take Gray’s Publishing of BC, which was one of the first presses to take root west of Toronto in 1962. It was established by Gray Campbell, a man who decided to take a chance on a blind veteran’s war tales. The manuscript was initially rejected by publishers in the east. Campbell then went on live television to enter a contest so he could win it and raise the capital to publish the book himself. He was successful. Wrote Roy MacSkimming, “Windsor’s *Blind Date* run off four pages at a time on an old-fashioned flatbed press, appeared in 1962, the first of sixty titles from what would be henceforth be known as Gray’s Publishing.”<sup>111</sup> While taking this chance on a new literary voice helped bring a blind soldier’s memoir to life, it also allowed Gray to start off his own publishing house, which went on to publish 61 titles until the year 1982.<sup>112</sup> Another example includes Harbour Publishing’s *Fishing With John*—an unlikely West Coast love story between an

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108 “Raincoast Chronicles First Five,” *Harbour Publishing*, accessed July 19, 2017, <http://www.harbourpublishing.com/title/RaincoastChroniclesFirstFive>.

109 “Forest Avenue Press,” *Entropy*, accessed July 8, 2017, <https://entropymag.org/forest-avenue-press/>.

110 Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, “An ‘Accidental Profession’: Small Press Publishing in the Pacific Northwest,” *Publishing Research Quarterly*, no. 32 (2016): 84–102, doi 10.1007/s12109-016-9452-9.

111 Roy MacSkimming, *The Perilous Trade* (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 2003), 220

112 “Campbell, Gray,” *ABC BookWorld*, accessed July 19, 2017, [http://www.abcbookworld.com/view\\_author.php?id=2548](http://www.abcbookworld.com/view_author.php?id=2548).

urban city woman and a coastal fisherman.<sup>113</sup> The book was nominated for the Governor General's Award and while the country's publishing hub in the east might not have her in their catalogues, Edith Iglauer is now one of BC's well-known writers, thanks to Harbour Publishing. These examples make it clear that had the small press publishers not been around, an entire, locally diverse literary community of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry writers would not have existed. This is where the willingness of a small press publisher to stake their career on a new literary voice is evident. As editor Tony Perez of Tin House in Portland sums up simply, small press publishers have "access to writers who are outside of the gaze of the New York literary world."<sup>114</sup>

Another way to look at this is by analyzing why the big trade book publishers are seen as "risk-adverse." For instance, take Ortiz's *Excavation: A Memoir* mentioned previously. Talking about the book and its history of rejections, Sampsell has been quoted explaining the lack of risk-taking at big presses this way: "When you're dealing with a big company, there are so many doors to pass through, more people who have to give it their approval. You have editors in charge of other editors, and you have marketing people trying to figure out what the next big thing is, and ... if one of them isn't comfortable with representing your book ... you can't get a deal with them."<sup>115</sup> In an online article in *The Daily Beast*, Rob Spillman, editor of the literary magazine *Tin House*, observed, "the stakes for them have gotten too high. Indies have low overhead, are nimble, and rarely work by committees. We can do a two thousand print run on a first book and break even. No way any of the [big publishers] could do that."<sup>116</sup>

These statements do not imply that the conglomerates do not publish new literary voices at all. They do, but their heavy dependence on already established names is well documented.<sup>117</sup> Therefore, echoing Spillman and Sampsell, the bigger trade book counterparts are simply less likely to publish an unknown name than a small press publisher. With lower print run a logistical impossibility for the big presses, the next big thing matters more. The contrary is true for small press publishers who would go out on a limb to publish what they believe in, whether or not the

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113 "Fishing With John," *Harbour Publishing*, accessed March 21, 2017, <http://www.harbourpublishing.com/title/FishingwithJohn>.

114 Anisse Gross, "Publishing in the Pacific Northwest: Indie Spirit," *Publishers Weekly*, November 18, 2016, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/72082-publishing-in-the-pacific-northwest-indie-spirit.html>.

115 Kevin Larimer, "Let's Just Do This: Eleven Small-Press Authors and their Publishing Partners," *Poets & Writers*, November/December 2014, [https://www.pw.org/content/lets\\_just\\_do\\_this](https://www.pw.org/content/lets_just_do_this).

116 James McGirk, "Are Indie Presses the Minor Leagues of Publishing?" *The Daily Beast*, June 13, 2013, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/06/13/the-splashy-debut-novel-is-dead-or-is-it.html>.

117 Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, "An 'Accidental Profession': Small Press Publishing in the Pacific Northwest," *Publishing Research Quarterly*, no. 32 (2016): 84–102, doi 10.1007/s12109-016-9452-9.

book turns into the next best thing—thus putting themselves in the path of probable financial losses from a venture that fails to do well.

## The Farm League Phenomenon

While the farm league phenomenon does not directly imply a financial loss, it does imply the loss of a direct route to steady sales or possible profits. In order to understand this, one must first dive into what the term “farm league” means. Corporate trade book publishers acquire more than imprints; they are known to scoop up authors with hits under their belt. This works well with the fact—as mentioned earlier—that corporate giants mostly publish commercially successful authors. This is akin to a “farm team,” “farm league,” or “feeder team”<sup>118</sup> system, as it has been variously called, implying a system similar to minor league sports teams, which train players to be scooped up by major leagues. While large trade book publishers are loathe to publish first-time writers, their views change with proven potential for profits. This is a downside small press publishers inevitably put up with because when offered a more lucrative contract with a bigger publisher, not many authors are willing to show unwavering loyalty to their first publishers.

Many internationally successful authors started their careers with small publishers. However, these authors inevitably leave to publish with bigger companies that can offer larger advances and marketing budgets: the big companies based in New York and Toronto publish the most commercially successful authors.<sup>119</sup> (Bold)

Take for example an author first published by Hawthorne Books. Founded in 2001 in Portland, Hawthorne Books is a reputed small press publisher, with award-winning titles to its credit. The press received national acclaim with major releases *Clown Girl* by Monica Drake and *The Chronology of Water* by Lidia Yuknavitch.<sup>120</sup> Following the success of *Clown Girl*, its film rights were optioned, and Penguin Random House offered Drake a \$10,000 advance for her next book. Hawthorne could only offer \$1000, so Drake jumped ship. Regarding the move, Hawthorne Books said, “There was absolutely no hard feeling. I was delighted for her, it shines the light back on our catalogue and our books. A win for everyone.”<sup>121</sup> While this lack of bitterness on the part of small press publishers shows their commitment to their work, it also emphasizes the financial risk they indirectly have to endure due to the farm league phenomenon.

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118 “Farm team,” *Wikipedia*, accessed March 23, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farm\\_team](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farm_team).

119 Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, “An ‘Accidental Profession’: Small Press Publishing in the Pacific Northwest,” *Publishing Research Quarterly*, no. 32 (2016): 84–102, doi 10.1007/s12109-016-9452-9.

120 Cameron Pierce, “10 Portland Powerhouses Bringing the (Good) Hurt to Publishing,” *Lit Reactor*, September 27, 2013, <https://litreactor.com/columns/14-portland-powerhouses-bringing-the-hurt-to-independent-publishin>.

121 Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, “An ‘Accidental Profession’: Small Press Publishing in the Pacific Northwest,” *Publishing Research Quarterly*, no. 32 (2016): 84–102, doi 10.1007/s12109-016-9452-9.

To summarize, small press publishers are defined by marginal annual sales and a small scope of operations. Forging unique mission statements by delivering literature to select readership—niche or regional—is an identifying feature. This uniqueness is further accentuated by their passion for their work and by the strong ties they are said to develop with their authors. Smaller infrastructure and a small staff handling everything go a long way in aiding with that. Staking their career on publishing what they believe in—without a thought to profits—has its financial downfalls but that does not stop the small press publishers from being the “risk-takers” they are increasingly known to be.

Small press publishers are deeply driven by their beliefs and passions to enter this trade, as has been established so far in the report, and will continue scouting for new talent and diversifying literature as long as they are in operation. However, with marginal profits and the fate of the publishing industry in the hands of a powerful few, the future does not look too bright. Lack of funding and financial losses are quantifiable threats and cannot be overcome by sheer optimism or will power. Perhaps that is why Talon Books describes setting up small press publishing in the current profit-driven publishing world as a “fool’s mission.”<sup>122</sup> Bold’s conclusive statement makes for an apt ending here, “More support, whether it is from local and national governments, larger transmedia conglomerates, readers, or local community, is required”<sup>123</sup> for the continued survival of small press publishers, and for literary diversity to be maintained, thus ensuring a healthy publishing world.

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122 Ibid

123 Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, “An ‘Accidental Profession’: Small Press Publishing in the Pacific Northwest,” *Publishing Research Quarterly*, no. 32 (2016): 84–102, doi 10.1007/s12109-016-9452-9.



## 3. Case study of Ronsdale Press

This case study has been written from the vantage point of my internship at Ronsdale Press and takes the discussion on small press publishing further by adding one more press to the examples already covered by Bold and Gold in their article and book, respectively. This section attempts to draw parallels between the first section on small press publishing and Ronsdale Press, a Vancouver-based publisher. It draws out the features, attributes, and significance of this press within the small press publishing world while also observing Ronsdale's allegiance to its regional roots within the Pacific Northwest community.

### 3.1 History and Current Work Flow

As noted earlier in the introduction, Ronsdale Press was established in 1988 by Ronald Hatch, a retired English professor from the University of British Columbia. Around that time Hatch had been actively reviewing poetry for the *University of Toronto Quarterly*. His work with the magazine—in which he read all the poetry books published annually and reviewed the best—made him realize that the scope of poetry being published in Canada was quite limited. With a vision to experiment with different forms of poetry, he decided to start a publishing house of his own. Before long the press had grown to publishing notable works not only in experimental forms of poetry but also in literary fiction and non-fiction as well as books for children and young adults.

At the time, back in 1988 ... I could see that many of the publishing houses were moving to choose and promote only one kind of poetry. It occurred to me that I could expand the kind of poetry being published in Canada if I were to choose different kinds of poets. To do this, I needed to have a publishing house ... [B]efore long we were receiving such good manuscripts that Veronica [my wife] and I soon expanded the press so that we were doing some 11 to 12 books a year ... today we have some 250 books in print.<sup>1</sup> (Hatch)

As a member of the small press movement of Canada, Ronsdale Press benefits from its association with the Canada Council and also has strong ties with the historic movement that led to the creation of the Canada Book Fund. Hatch delved into how it all started, explaining it was difficult initially to plan for future seasons because the time the Canada Council took to determine the eligibility of the books for a grant was uncertain but once everything fell into place, the press went full steam ahead:

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Hatch, email message to author, February 17, 2017.



At the very beginning, we were allowed to apply to the Canada Council only after we had published four eligible books. This allowed us to go on what was called Project Grant, and at that time it meant that any book we wanted to publish had to be submitted first to the CC and be approved as an eligible book ... Once we had a certain number of books published, we were then allowed to go from Project Grant to Block Grant. This meant we could publish the books without the CC first approving them. Then, at the end of the year, we could apply for our Block Grant, with the jury then deciding on the grant having looked at the books published for the year.<sup>2</sup>

Initially established to publish poetry, the press has diversified to focus on different styles of writing in genres other than poetry. Now Ronsdale Press accommodates authors from across Canada writing in fiction, non-fiction, and children's literature as well. Conducted out of the Hatches' house in Vancouver, BC, this press publishes about 10–12 titles annually and is run by a total of three staff members—Ronald Hatch, Veronica Hatch, and Meagan Dyer. Ronald Hatch is the publisher and acquisitions editor for non-fiction and poetry. Veronica Hatch is the acquisitions editor for children's books, and Meagan Dyer is the publishing assistant who manages the day-to-day administrative tasks along with playing the role of the content and copy-editor for most of the titles. While design and typesetting operations are mostly carried out by contractual employees or freelancers, the last stages of production—including copy-editing and proofreading—are again handled by in-house staff. As far as marketing goes—from launches to book signings to author talks—Ronsdale Press vigorously promotes each of its books in conjunction with its authors, several of whom have won awards.

Publishing a book is not a mean feat. From acquisitions to production, from designing to packaging, from marketing to launch, there is plenty to do. Pulling it off with just three in-house staff is evidence of the dedication behind each book ever published by Ronsdale Press, many of which have won numerous accolades. Every member contributes significantly from acquisitions to the final launch stage of the publishing process, but there is always so much to do and so few people to do it. Thus the intern is able to get a lot of hands-on experience. As an intern here, I have been involved with a variety of tasks—from writing rejection letters and back cover copy to designing book launch posters and a web ad, to copy-editing manuscripts. Due to the absence of sub-departments dedicated to different genres, the copy-editing tasks have been as varied—with the inclusion of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry—as they have been exciting. With just three in-house staff running an entire press (sometimes with the help of interns and freelancers)—and about 10–12 titles published annually—Ronsdale Press clearly meets the definition of a small press publisher.

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald Hatch, email message to author, July 8, 2017.

## 3.2 Features of Ronsdale Press

While Ronsdale Press can be defined as a small press publisher through its scope of operations and number of staff, this sub-section explores in detail the features that establish it as a small press publisher of the Pacific Northwest community.

### a. Unique Identity

The mission statement of Ronsdale Press implies a pan-Canadian involvement as the press strives to disseminate thoughtful literature comprising crucial biographical, historical, social, and environmental themes. As stated in its mission statement, the press aims “to publish the best of Canadian writing from all quarters [in order to] give Canadians new insights into themselves and their country.”<sup>3</sup> Thus the press has a social agenda to increase awareness of Canadian culture. While the press is not solely regional, it does publish work strongly rooted in British Columbian themes of environment, history, and culture, thus striking a fine balance between small press publishing that continuously experiments with niche content and diverse forms of literature, and the Pacific Northwest spirit of the region. According to Ronald Hatch, 60% of the authors published by the press are regional and the rest come from different parts of the country.<sup>4</sup>

An excellent example doing justice to the press’s pan-Canadian identity is Ron Smith’s *The Defiant Mind* published in the fall of 2016. While Smith himself is a BC-based writer and small press publisher of the Pacific Northwest Oolichan Press, his work has wide, national appeal. The book has already garnered strong critical praise as a biographical memoir by a stroke survivor, and provides poignant insight into the serious medical issue faced by Canadians.<sup>5</sup> What makes this non-fiction memoir compelling as well as insightful is that it is “a first-person account of a massive ischemic stroke to the brain. Smith takes the reader inside the experience and shows how recuperation happens, the challenges of communication, the barriers to treatment, the frustrations of being misunderstood and written off, the role of memory in recovering identity, the power of continuing therapy, and the passionate will to live.”<sup>6</sup> Another example would be Alain Dubuc’s *Portrait de famille*, the English-language translation of which, titled *Is This Who We Are?*, was published in October 2016 and raises some serious questions regarding Quebec’s identity in relation to the rest of the country.<sup>7</sup> Finally,

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3 “About Ronsdale Press,” *Ronsdale Press*, accessed March 23, 2017, <http://ronsdalepress.com/about>.

4 Ronald Hatch, email message to author, August 10, 2017.

5 Nine in ten Canadians have at least one risk factor for stroke (“Risk & Prevention,” *Heart and Stroke*, accessed July 8 2017, <https://www.heartandstroke.ca/heart/risk-and-prevention/>).

6 “The Defiant Mind,” *Ronsdale Press*, accessed July 19, 2017, <http://ronsdalepress.com/books/defiant-mind-the/>.

7 “Is This Who We Are?” *Ronsdale Press*, accessed July 19, 2017, <http://ronsdalepress.com/books/is-this-who-we-are/>.

Doris Gregory's *How I Won the War for the Allies* published in 2014 is a lively memoir of "the life of a woman soldier in the Canadian Women's Army Corps overseas in London during WWII."<sup>8</sup> These examples clearly indicate Ronsdale's commitment towards disseminating Canadian literature comprising important contemporary, social, and historical themes with a broad, national appeal.

Not to leave Pacific Northwest themes of Ronsdale's unique identity behind, in 2015 Ronsdale Press published the award-winning *Uncharted Waters* by Jim McDowell, a "veteran British Columbian historian."<sup>9</sup> The book takes a look at the explorations of the west coast that is now a part of Canada's Pacific Northwest by the lesser-known Spanish voyager José María Narváez. It went on to win the 2016 Independent Publisher Book Award's (IPPY) Silver Medal for Best Regional Non-fiction, Canada-West. According to Robin Inglis of *The British Columbia Historical Federation Magazine*, "McDowell has not only done Narváez, but also BC's historical narrative, an important service."<sup>10</sup> A second example is Gordon Hak's *The Left in British Columbia* which explores, among others, late-nineteenth-century BC themes of environmental protection and women's equality.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the award-winning *Cascadia: The Elusive Utopia* is a collection of essays that explores Cascadia's culture and spirit. BC Bookworld named it one of the "10 Books to Celebrate 150 Years"<sup>12</sup> in a feature on BC's 150th anniversary. These three examples constitute books that promote regional literature, making the publisher, Ronsdale Press, an essential member of the small press movement of the Pacific Northwest. In addition, Ronsdale won the Jim Douglas Award for BC Publisher of the Year in 2014. The Douglas award symbolizes "Ronsdale's strong roots in British Columbia, even while publishing works reflective of a pan-Canadian experience."<sup>13</sup>

## b. Closer Author Ties and Personal Care

Unlike larger companies with larger overheads, complex infrastructure and greater ambitions, Ronsdale espouses the ideals of a small press publisher with simpler infrastructure, fewer staff, and few titles published each year. As the publisher, acquisitions editor, and senior editor, Hatch is uniquely positioned to work closely with authors at every step of the publishing process. This

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8 "How I Won the War for the Allies," *Ronsdale Press*, accessed July 19, 2017, <http://ronsdalespress.com/books/10393-2/>.

9 "Jim McDowell," *Ronsdale Press*, accessed March 23, 2017, <http://ronsdalespress.com/authors/jim-mcdowell/>.

10 "Uncharted Waters," *Ronsdale Press*, accessed March 23, 2017, <http://ronsdalespress.com/books/uncharted-waters-the-explorations-of-jose-narvaez-1768-1840/>.

11 "The Left in British Columbia," *Ronsdale Press*, accessed March 23, 2017, <http://ronsdalespress.com/books/left-in-bc/>.

12 "Cascadia The Elusive Utopia," *Ronsdale Press*, accessed March 23, 2017, <http://ronsdalespress.com/books/cascadia-the-elusive-utopia/>.

13 "Ronsdale Press," *Literary Press Group of Canada*, accessed March 23, 2017, <http://www.lpg.ca/house-ronsdalespress>.

facilitates a consistent, well-paced communication between author and publisher, thus allowing the latter to coax the best and the most creative work out of the author. As a result, the press tends to develop strong author ties.

A look at the editorial practice at Ronsdale Press confirms the above. Says Hatch, “We expect the author and the editor to work together on all suggested revisions. Some books require a great deal of editing; others, not so much. In many cases, the author and editor will work together over many drafts—sometimes over the duration of a year or more.”<sup>14</sup> While the press has its own publishing dates to meet, from the above statement it is clear that careful editing trumps the rush to meet multiple market-driven deadlines. Furthermore, the flexibility of giving every book its due amount of time, thus bestowing great care and attention on every project, is what small press publishers are increasingly known for, as has been explored in the first section of this report.

While the press does its part, its authors are not far behind in confirming the mutual relationship. In a 2006 Writers’ Union of Canada survey, members of the union were asked about their experiences in working with small presses. Regarding Ronsdale, one author said “go for it – great to work with.”<sup>15</sup> A few authors have even sought out the press for its reputation as a notable publisher of the genre they want to write in. For example, Pamela Porter is a Governor General Award-winning author of children’s books published with Groundwood Books (an imprint of Anansi Press) in Toronto. However, she publishes her poetry with Ronsdale Press. “Pam has had a great success with Groundwood, which publishes only children’s books. I believe she came to Ronsdale with her poetry books because she had heard that we published poetry and had a good reputation,” said Hatch.<sup>16</sup> So far Pamela Porter has published four volumes of poetry with Ronsdale, including *Cathedral*, the third collection, which “was shortlisted for the 2011 Pat Lowther Award; her poems have won the Vallum Magazine Poem of the Year Award, the Prism International Grand Prize in Poetry, and have been shortlisted four times for the CBC literary awards.”<sup>17</sup> The fact that the author always comes back to Ronsdale to publish her poetry confirms the ability of the press to develop strong ties with its authors.

Another point that works in favour of building such ties lies in the fact that Ronsdale launches, markets, and promotes its books in close conjunction with its authors. This is a positive move for several authors who are quite energetic about promoting their own books and therefore are willing

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14 Ronald Hatch, email message to author, February 17, 2017.

15 “Publishers’ Report Card Results,” *Writers’ Union*, 2006, accessed June 15, 2017, [https://www.writersunion.ca/sites/all/files/attachments/publisherreportcardresults\\_1.pdf](https://www.writersunion.ca/sites/all/files/attachments/publisherreportcardresults_1.pdf).

16 Ronald Hatch, email message to author, July 8, 2017.

17 “About Pamela Porter,” *Ronsdale Press*, accessed July 9, 2017, <http://ronsdalepress.com/authors/pamela-porter/>.

to turn up for several author talks and book signings along with the in-house staff of the press, thus deepening the commitment both the press and author have towards making the published book a success.<sup>18</sup> What is even better is that the lack of departments or the “fewer degrees of separation”<sup>19</sup> (as explained in the first section of the report) implies that the marketing team comprises the same familiar faces as the acquisitions and editorial team. With such ease of familiarity at every step from acquisitions to launch, the bond is bound to be a strong one.

## b. Financial Risk Taker

Like other small press publishers, Ronsdale Press is not afraid to take financial risks by publishing works that fit its mandate. The risks manifest themselves in the following ways:

- Publishing literature, such as poetry, to a niche audience—thus limiting scope of sales to readers of the poetry community
- Publishing literature that is solely regional—and thus has a regional scope
- Publishing new and emerging authors<sup>20</sup> as is clear from their mission statement—thus leading to the probability of low sales in a market controlled by the well publicized few

## Publishing Literature, such as Poetry, to a Niche Audience

Regarding niche forms of literature, many believe that publishing poetry is a risky venture because the cultural hold of this genre seems to be vanishing slowly. According to a recent article in *The Washington Post*, “In 1992, 17% of Americans had read a work of poetry at least once in the past year. 20 years later that number had fallen by more than half, to 6.7%.”<sup>21</sup> An article in *The Atlantic* as far back as 1991 lamented the fact that poetry is, “no longer part of the mainstream of artistic and intellectual life [in America], it has become the specialized occupation of a relatively small and isolated group.”<sup>22</sup> While a recent article in *The Globe and Mail* does hint at resurgence of poetry readers in Canada at least, it applauds the source as the Internet, which makes it easier for

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18 Meagan Dyer, in discussion with the author, June 12, 2016.

19 Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, “An ‘Accidental Profession’: Small Press Publishing in the Pacific Northwest,” *Publishing Research Quarterly*, no. 32 (2016): 84–102, doi 10.1007/s12109-016-9452-9.

20 “About Ronsdale Press,” *Ronsdale Press*, accessed March 23, 2017. <http://ronsdalepress.com/about>.

21 Christopher Ingraham, “Poetry is going extinct, government data show,” *The Washington Post*, April 24, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/04/24/poetry-is-going-extinct-government-data-show/?utm\\_term=.c4612e5ec928](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/04/24/poetry-is-going-extinct-government-data-show/?utm_term=.c4612e5ec928).

22 Dana Gioia, “Can Poetry Matter?” *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1991, <https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/poetry/gioia/gioia.htm>.

readers to read and share poetry.<sup>23</sup> This still leaves literary small press publishers of poetry with their readership limited to a small group of poetry readers whose tastes lie more towards the appeal of the physical book. According to BookNet Canada, “in 2016, Poetry sales accounted for 0.37% of the entire print book market in Canada, [a jump] from 0.20% in 2015.”<sup>24</sup> Ronsdale Press has a reputation for publishing poetry with predominant themes of environment, culture, and indigenous issues and several of its poets have won awards and critical acclaim but—as indicated by the low overall statistics above—the fact remains that its audience is as niche as ever. This limits sales accordingly and huge profits do not usually enter the picture, thus emphasizing the financial risk the press takes by publishing a genre like poetry.

## Publishing Literature that is Solely Regional

As discussed in the previous section of this report, this is a risk every regional publisher bears and Ronsdale is no stranger to it. In addition to the Pacific Northwest-themed examples already mentioned as part of Ronsdale’s unique identity, take *Runaway Dreams*, a poetry collection authored by Richard Wagamese and the recipient of the George Ryga Award for Social Awareness.<sup>25</sup> Wagamese is a reputed Native author whose work explores “contemporary First Nations Life.”<sup>26</sup> This collection is regional—strongly rooted in BC and Pacific Northwest themes—and while critically acclaimed in Vancouver, it has not yet achieved national or international success. Several other such examples of award-winning books published by Ronsdale Press are best known only to readers within this region. Therefore, with scope limited only to regional readers, huge profits again cannot be expected from the sale of such books, thus emphasizing the financial risk Ronsdale takes by publishing regional literature.

## Publishing New and Emerging Authors

Like other small press publishers, Ronsdale Press is not afraid to take risks by publishing new and emerging authors, driven only by the passion to publish what furthers the mandate of the press. The most recent example is a non-fiction book called *Finding John Rae* written by first-time author Alice Jane Hamilton, and published in March this year. *Finding John Rae* is an inspiring true story of celebrated Arctic explorer Dr. John Rae, who discovered the much-fabled Northwest Passage.

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23 Russell Smith, “Canadian poetry’s unlikely renaissance,” *The Globe and Mail*, September 19, 2012, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/canadian-poetrys-unlikely-renaissance/article4554863/>.

24 “Print poetry sales grew by 79% in 2016,” *BookNet Canada*, March 15, 2017, <https://www.booknetcanada.ca/press-room/2017/3/15/print-poetry-sales-grew-by-79-in-2016>.

25 “About *Runaway Dreams*,” *Ronsdale Press*, accessed Apr 10, 2017, <http://ronsdalespress.com/authors/richard-wagamese/>.

26 Ronald Hatch, *Ronsdale Press Catalogue 2016*, (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2016). 21.



A work of creative non-fiction, this biography begins in 1854, when on a mapping expedition, a chance encounter with an Inuit hunter leads Rae to uncover the gruesome mystery behind the long-lost Franklin expedition.<sup>27</sup> While themes such as cannibalism make for gripping stories and there are several books on and about the Franklin expedition, almost none written in recent years explore the story from John Rae's side. Thus the willingness of the press to go ahead with first-time author Alice Jane Hamilton makes sense in this instance. Not only is Hamilton Rae's great-great-granddaughter, which lends credibility to the subject matter, but more to the point she has written the book from the perspective of John Rae himself, "a forgotten hero," and his discovery of the Northwest Passage—a theme that has not been explored much in recent literature. The story goes beyond the mystery surrounding the Franklin expedition and traces the life of Rae as, belittled by Victorian society for daring to reveal the truth, he struggles determinedly to get back his reputation. Moreover, staying true to Ronsdale's historical themes, Hamilton offers a background comprising the early years of nineteenth-century Canada, during the "most colourful and profitable days of Canadian shipbuilding"<sup>28</sup> and a rapid expansion of the timber trade—thus bringing an important aspect of Canadian history to her readers.

Carol Ann Shaw is another talent discovered by Ronsdale Press. As an author based in the Cowichan Valley, Shaw's stories embody the west coast spirit and its wonders. Her recently released young reader novel *Hannah and the Wild Woods*—the third in the Hannah trilogy—is set in Vancouver Island with a backdrop of the Pacific Rim National Reserve's beaches, Sitka spruce ranges, and the rarely seen Vancouver Island wolf, *Canis lupus crassodon*. Using a crucial environmental theme as a sub-plot, the novel exhorts readers to keep beaches clean of plastic and save the environment. Shaw's writing style is fresh and the central character Hannah endears herself immediately to readers as an enthusiastic and fearless young girl who is as keen to save her beloved beaches from pollution as her newly formed friend Kimiko from trouble. The book recently won the Chocolate Lily Award, a BC young readers' choice award.<sup>29</sup>

David Starr is yet another good example of an emerging BC-based author whose third book, a young readers' novel called *The Nor'Wester*, was published this year by Ronsdale Press. Written in confident tones, the novel is set in the early 1800s and follows the adventures of a young Scottish boy who runs from a troubled past and ends up in the Canadian wilderness with the famous trader Simon Fraser as they discover what later comes to be known as the Fraser River—also making the novel's strong Pacific Northwest theme evident.

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27 "Finding John Rae," *Ronsdale Press*, accessed July 10, 2017, <http://ronsdalepress.com/findingjohnrae/>.

28 "Shipbuilding and Ship Repair," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, accessed July 10, 2017, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/shipbuilding-and-ship-repair/>.

29 Meagan Dyer, in discussion with author, June 10, 2017.

While none of the authors from the examples started out with a proven track record for success, the press still went ahead with them as it believed in publishing what they had to offer—either because their writing enriched Pacific Northwest literature or brought an important bit of Canadian culture and history to its readers. Due to the willingness of the press in staking its next best release on these relatively unknown authors, published literature is that much more diversified and the literary world is that much more vibrant. Ronsdale’s mantra does not seem much different than that of Epicenter’s Sturgis, whose answer to publishing literature by unknown authors was simply that it needed to be published, and this in spite of the probability of low profits and financial risks. Clearly, all of this accords with why small press publishers believe in risking their profession on new authors, maintaining literary diversity being paramount always.

To summarize, Ronsdale Press is another great example of a small press publisher of the Pacific Northwest community in Vancouver, BC. Having grown out of one man’s vision to expand the forms of poetry being published in Canada, the press now publishes essential works of literary significance by authors across Canada, particularly British Columbia, thus maintaining a fine balance between diversified literary output and a strong Pacific Northwest focus. From staking its career on little known authors in a bid to augment literary diversity to developing strong author ties in hopes of publishing their best work yet, this press clearly embodies the features, ideals, and ambitions of Pacific Northwest small press publishing.



## 4. Conclusion

As explored in the first section of this report, small press publishing has a rich literary history that dates back almost two centuries on both sides of the border. Publishing saw its heydays around the mid-1900s with the helm of the literary world in the hands of a powerful few located in the northeastern part of the continent. Soon after, with the publishing scenario shifting to accommodate increasingly market-driven demands, the Golden Age ended, and acquisitions and mergers entered the picture. With the publishing industry being reshaped and decentralized, small press publishing found the opening it needed to spring up in all sorts of locations throughout the continent—the Pacific Northwest manifesting itself as a more creative hub of the movement. The one marked difference between the two movements on either side of the border lay in the financial grants available to the Canadian counterpart—which was largely absent from the American movement.

Within the current publishing scenario, small press publishing describes presses that are usually run by less than ten members and make annual profits below a certain level as compared to the big trade book publishers, which employ thousands of staff and make annual profits in millions. However, the difference between the two types of publishers continues to lie in ideology, belief, and choice as seen throughout the history of the small press movement. Small press publishers continue to take the less profitable route because they believe that in doing so they fulfill a greater purpose in service to the written word, by maintaining literary diversity.

Small press publishers have unique mission statements with a niche or regional focus. The niche appeal manifests itself as they publish experimental or underrepresented forms of literature while the regionalism is evident from the literature dedicated to the publisher's region, in this case the Pacific Northwest. The latter has been called a highly creative region, perhaps because of its strong association with the environment coupled with its diverse ethnic background, thus resulting in a rich heritage, the stories about which need telling. While big names in the east might reject the very stories either because the teller is unknown or the idea might not be profitable enough, small press publishers of the Pacific Northwest community step in to fill the gap. With a small scope of operations and simple infrastructure, small press publishers are also known to develop more meaningful author ties and seem to care more for their books than their larger trade book counterparts, whose focus on profit-making blockbusters and greater emphasis on sales and marketing campaigns has led to this distinction in the first place.

Using various examples, statements, and cited sources, this report establishes that small press publishing is a financially risky venture—either by virtue of the type of literature they publish or due to their willingness to take a chance on new literary voices. While small press publishers do not eschew profits, they are willing to go ahead with new authors if they believe their story must be told—whether or not it is profitable. In this way, small press publishers are the gatekeepers that regulate literary diversity. The downside to the same is that once in a while authors of the bestselling books are scooped up by the big publishers in what is known as the farm league phenomenon. This way, a good chance the small press publisher might have at making large profits is gone. However, profits aside, small press publishers are in this profession through a deep commitment to their beliefs and they continue with it as long as they are financially viable—an inescapable fact that ultimately decides the future of a small press publisher. Financial viability cannot be treated lightly because in the long run it is the difference between bankruptcy and survival and lack of funding is a threat that looms larger over the American small press publishers than their Canadian counterparts. However, Canadian small press publishers do not have it easy either, due to the already limited domestic market they serve and tough competition from the US. To cap it all, literary output is still largely dominated by the big names of the east on both sides of the border. I agree with Bold when she says that more financial support is required—no matter the source—so that the small press movement, as a whole, can continue flourishing and enriching literary diversity.

The second section of the report increases the number of examples of small press publishers put forth by Bold and Gold, with the inclusion of Ronsdale Press. Written as a case study from the vantage point of my internship at this press, this section traces the history of Ronsdale Press, the reasons for its emergence, its association with the Canada Council, and its current work flow. It then ventures into the features of Ronsdale Press, exploring the press's unique identity—which strives to maintain a balance between a pan-Canadian appeal and a strong allegiance to Ronsdale's Pacific Northwest roots—its close ties with its authors, the care and effort it bestows on its books, and the financial risks it takes either through the scope of the literature it publishes or through the authors it nurtures. All of it taken together, Ronsdale Press espouses everything small press publishing stands for and is an essential member of the Pacific Northwest small press publishing community.

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