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Review of "*Collecting Stamps Would Have Been More Fun*": *Canadian Publishing and the Correspondence of Sinclair Ross, 1933-1986* selected and with an introduction by Jordan Stouck; annotations by David Stouck

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“Collecting Stamps Would Have Been More Fun”: *Canadian Publishing and the Correspondence of Sinclair Ross, 1933–1986*. Selected and with an introduction by Jordan Stouck; annotations by David Stouck. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2010. xxxiii + 303 pp. Photographs, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 paper.

A book not just for completists, the Stoucks' effort succeeds in illuminating the publishing record of one of Canada's most secretive authors. For those who have not read much criticism on Ross, this book will aid in understanding one very representative mid-twentieth-century Canadian author's publishing and artistic struggles.

Most striking is Jordan Stouck's note-perfect introduction, one that is academically rigorous yet free of jargon and platitudes. Stouck begins at, well, the beginning, in noting that Ross's *As For Me and*

My House is “an originary text in western Canadian literature,” although Ross himself “perceived his literary career as a failure.” From a publishing perspective this is true; from a literary standpoint, not exactly. Ross’s first novel became a best-seller, but only after it was given a boost by publishers eager to start a Canadian canon (and to profit from that), about seventeen years after its initial publication.

Ross has never really enjoyed any kind of literary celebrity, in the ways that contemporary Canadian writers Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje and Alice Munro have. Given what Ross writes about—dour prairie existence and (later) lives of crime, combined with a pessimism often on display in his letters—it’s no wonder. A somewhat withdrawn and secretive man, who was closeted for most of his life, Ross’s cheerless public face is one that easily spelled out recalcitrance.

The book’s title and cover photograph (somewhat unfortunately) do little to raise the esteem of Ross’s public face. A picture of a very aged Ross, joined with one of his embittered statements, is almost enough to make one put the book down before beginning.

This would be regrettable, as, aside from Jordan Stouck’s introduction and David Stouck’s superb annotations, the book’s contents reveal a complex and conflicted man who certainly affected many of those close and not-so-close to him. Furthermore, reading Ross’s letters is often akin to the experience of reading Ross at his finest. One example will suffice: in a letter to Doris Saunders, Ross writes of his experiences with fellow service men, waiting to be shipped out from wartime Ottawa in 1942: “Because I had come close to farmers and white collars, I thought I knew men, but how I was ‘kidding’ myself. A good deal of what you discover is disappointing, very little of it is to be altogether condemned.” Ross’s perfect rhythm and distilled analysis are pleasures unto themselves. It may be difficult to get past the sour notes; but for those of us who have always wanted more of Ross’s talent, then this fine, revealing book will more than suffice.

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