

Love and Revolution: A History of New Star Books

by
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Abstract

This report is a detailed history of New Star Books and considers the following: the context of its founding in terms of the political movements of the times; changes in editorial choices based on the publisher; the introduction of a new imprint with a place-based focus in the mid 1990s; the obstacles faced in setting up sales and distribution agreements; and the difficulties faced by an independent publishing house in a challenging market. This report will then conclude with an overview of the publishing house and its impact on Canadian publishing history.

Keywords: Canada; Vancouver; independent; publishing history; sales and distribution

Dedication

To my father who always pushed me to be the best I could be, I am forever indebted to you. To my family, Elizabeth and Hansel, your support has kept me going in the darkest times. To my friends, you know who you are, this degree would not have been possible without you. To Rob, you know how I feel.

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Chapter 1.

Introduction to New Star Books

New Star Books is an independent Canadian book publishing company located in Vancouver, British Columbia. Publishing between six to eight new titles each year, their list is comprised of literary fiction, experimental poetry, and socially-critical non-fiction.¹ The press has published more than 300 titles since its founding in 1970.² “New Star Books” was officially created in 1974, but originated in the late 1960s with the founding of *The Georgia Straight* and *The Georgia Straight Supplement*, respectively.³ Before examining the founding of New Star Books in itself, it is important to first understand *The Georgia Straight* as well as its political leanings and the timing of its creation in 1960s and ‘70s Vancouver counterculture.

This project begins by delving into the founding of New Star Books as a literary supplement to *The Georgia Straight*, a weekly news and entertainment newspaper that was originally underground and operated as a collective. First, the historical and political background of the newspaper and its founding will be provided and used to explain how the publishing house, first known as “*The Georgia Straight Writing Supplement*,” was initially set up. This foundation will be used throughout the report to juxtapose and understand New Star Books as a publishing endeavour. Understanding the social and cultural contexts within which the publishing house was first created is imperative to appreciating its current lists and editorial choices.

From May to September 2023, I interned at New Star Books as one of a total of three members of the team—the other two being Rolf Maurer, the publisher, and Melissa Swann, the managing editor. For most of the year, Maurer and Swann run the house with outside contractors doing book design and developmental and structural editing. They generally hire an intern for the summer to perform the following duties:

¹ New Star Books, 2023 Fall Catalogue, <https://www.newstarbooks.com/pdfs/catalogues/nsb-2023-2-fall-catalogue.pdf>.

² Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

³ Jerome Gold, *Publishing Lives: Interviews with Independent Book Publishers in the Pacific Northwest and British Columbia* (Seattle: Black Heron Press, 1995), 456–70.

- proofreading manuscripts at the final stages of production;
- maintaining and updating the ONIX database according to BookNet Canada requirements;
- continuous management and updating of the website using the FileMaker Pro database;
- undertaking publicity for forthcoming titles by contacting potential reviewers and magazines and pitching the books;
- organizing and managing book launch events;
- maintaining inventory by regularly checking the distributor database and sending books if necessary;
- helping with distribution by logging invoices and packing and shipping books;
- reading through unsolicited submissions to select manuscripts that meet New Star's requirements.

I decided to apply to New Star Books because I wanted to work for a small publishing house and learn as much as possible about the publishing process and how it works in Canada, specifically. Before I began my internship, I wanted to learn what I could about this leftist independent house. However, other than the New Star Books website and some newspaper articles, I could not find much on the house. The lack of information online piqued my curiosity because this publishing house has been around for at least fifty years, surviving the perils of a difficult industry. Thus, knowing that my position as an intern would give me access to data as well as Maurer's own knowledge of the house, I decided to work on a history of New Star Books for my Master of Publishing report. I based the title of this project report on a book that New Star Books published in 2010, *City of Love and Revolution: Vancouver in the Sixties* by Lawrence Aronsen. I believe that the origin of New Star Books in Vancouver in the late sixties made it suitable to use this book's title. Further, I used the words "love and revolution" in the title to refer to "love of books" and "revolution of the publishing industry."

1.1. *The Georgia Straight* as an Underground Collective

To begin, let us define underground collectives. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, "underground," in this context, is "something that is secret or hidden, usually because it is not traditional or is shocking or illegal."⁴ Further, *The Georgia Straight* is defined as a "collective" because a variety of writers, including Stan Persky and Pierre Coupey, were

⁴ "Underground," Cambridge Dictionary, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/underground>.

involved in the foundation of this radical newspaper, the first edition of which was stitched together in founder Dan McLeod's apartment.⁵

More specifically, Coupey's own words on the atmosphere in Vancouver at the time of the founding of *The Georgia Straight* are particularly telling:

There was a general atmosphere of anti-hippie and anti-youth actions on the part of the Vancouver police and various establishments that would refuse to serve you if you looked like you were hippie-ish. There was a general atmosphere of repression in the city.

At that time Tom Campbell was the particularly obnoxious mayor of Vancouver. There had been many instances of police brutality. It got to the point where it felt as if one had a responsibility to do something because the paranoia on both sides—the fear and the misinformation—was such that there could be no real dialogue. And the *Vancouver Sun* was the *Fox News* of the time, full of stories about crazed druggies and propaganda to terrify parents: “watch out for your high school kids, those evil guys on 4th Avenue are going to get them.” There was an undercurrent of fear and hostility.⁶

In order to fight the system and the propaganda being levelled against artists like themselves, *The Georgia Straight* was founded in 1967 and was famously shocking with “vulgar” comics and sex-advice columns.⁷ As Glavin noted, “it has never been possible to trust *The Georgia Straight*. The newspaper cannot be trusted to behave properly or respectably, the way a newspaper is expected to behave.”⁸ Consequently, the *Straight* faced many legal challenges. Then-mayor, Tom Campbell, found various ways to harass the newspaper. He began by pulling the *Straight's* business license, which McLeod got overturned in court. Municipalities began banning the sale of the newspaper on the streets, but the paper continued to be sold despite the threat of arrests, which was

⁵ Terry Glavin, “Sorry, We’re Still Open,” in *The Georgia Straight: What the Hell Happened?*, eds. Naomi Pauls and Charles Campbell (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1992).

⁶ Jenny Penberthy, Brian Ganter and Pierre Coupey, “Plains and Straits: On the Founding of The Georgia Straight,” *The Capilano Review*, Winter 2011/3, <http://www.coupey.ca/on-founding-the-georgia-straight/>.

⁷ Pauls and Campbell, *The Georgia Straight*.

⁸ Glavin, “Sorry, We’re Still Open.”

described by *Straight* editor, Bob Cummings as follows: “Being charged with an offence, taken to court, locked up in prison, is a constant possibility for everyone who publishes or writes for an underground newspaper.”⁹

Moreover, the *Straight* was even charged with criminal libel for mocking a judge in a case that went on for years. They were also charged with multiple counts of obscenity and inciting to commit an indictable offense for the content of the newspaper in the short span of two years—1967 to 1968.¹⁰ The intimidation was so extreme and prejudiced that it caused Allan Fotheringham—who was a major figure in Canadian journalism and a former *Vancouver Sun* columnist—to note that “someday some scholar interested in the law and its abuse is going to do a serious story of how authorities in this town have attempted to intimidate and bust the *Straight* by persistent harassment and prosecution.”¹¹ It is interesting to note that now in the context of this project report, this quote by Fotheringham appears prescient.

1.2. A New Star Rising in Publishing

1.2.1. Creation of *The Georgia Straight Literary Supplement* and Series

Many of the writers associated with *The Georgia Straight* wanted to publish literature, and consequently created *The Georgia Straight Literary Supplement* in 1969, which featured work by writers such as *Straight* editor/publisher Dan MacLeod, supplement co-founder Stan Persky, Jack Spicer,¹² George Stanley, and¹³ George Bowering.^{14,15}

⁹ *The Georgia Straight: What the Hell Happened?*, eds. Naomi Pauls and Charles Campbell (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1992).

¹⁰ Glavin, “Sorry, We’re Still Open.”

¹¹ Allan Fotheringham, “The Allan Fotheringham Column,” *The Vancouver Sun*, December 14, 1973, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/492773032/?terms=Straight&match=1>.

¹² Over time, Jack Spicer has become, what the Poetry Foundation calls, “a towering figure in American poetry.” His collections include the posthumously published *A Book of Music* (1969) and *After Lorca* (1957).

¹³ Born in San Francisco, poet George Stanley has published six books, including *Gentle Northern Summer*, *Opening Day*, *The Stick*, and *You*. He is the recipient of the 2006 Shelley Memorial Award for Poetry (New Star Books. n. d.).

¹⁴ Canada's first Poet Laureate, George Bowering has won the Governor General's Award twice and is an Officer of both the Order of Canada and the Order of British Columbia.

Within a year, the supplement began publishing prose and poetry, both experimental and traditional. However, internal issues within *The Georgia Straight* resulted in many of the writers/editors from the weekly paper moving to “*The Georgia Straight Writing Series*.” Writing out of what was known as the “York Street commune” in Kitsilano, Vancouver, the publishing endeavour was soon renamed the “Vancouver Community Press” in 1972.¹⁶

1.2.2. New Star Books

By the early 1970s, the nature of the collective had changed rather drastically, with the editorial focus now on non-fiction—mainly current affairs and politics. As Rolf Maurer, current publisher at New Star Books, noted in his 1992 interview with Jerome Gold, “a decision was made in the early ’70s that certain kinds of non-fiction books about politics were more important than bourgeois pastimes like poetry.”¹⁷ This change in focus eventually resulted in the publication of *Two Roads* by Jack Scott in 1971,¹⁸ a largely positive account of the People’s Republic of China. This book was a representation of the then-left’s idea that China was a model example of socialism, while Soviet imperialism was obviously not. Based on the publication of the book and the increased focus on political writing at the cost of poetry, the name of the publishing endeavour was changed to “New Star Books” in 1971. Steve Garrod, who was part of the collective, called it a “good political name,”¹⁹ reaffirming the collective commitment to political and non-fiction titles.^{20,21}

The below quote from the *Vancouver Sun* clearly defines the atmosphere around the press in the early 1970s:

While a mimeograph whirs and clicks in the basement ... Steve Garrod looks up from the kitchen table assortment published by New Star Books and says with a

¹⁵ New Star Books, “About,” accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.newstarbooks.com/about.php>.

¹⁶ New Star Books, “About.”

¹⁷ Gold, *Publishing Lives*, 461.

¹⁸ Scott Macrae, “A New Star is Rising in Publishing,” *The Vancouver Sun*, November 21, 1975.

¹⁹ Macrae, “A New Star,” 34.

²⁰ New Star Books, “About.”

²¹ Gold, *Publishing Lives*, 461.

grin: “As you can see, we’re not really a literary press.” Garrod, 27, is one-fifth of a collective or, as he puts it, “unincorporated partnership which runs New Star Books from the basement of a comfortable Kitsilano house.”²²

At the time, New Star Books was run by: Steve Garrod, a cannery worker; Barb Coward, 26, also a cannery worker; Lanny Beckman, 31, a mental health activist who founded the Mental Patients Association;²³ Rick Gordon, 30, a carpenter; and Gary Coward, 35, a “househusband.”²⁴ It thus made sense that their motivation behind creating and running this publishing endeavour was “a real need for a Canadian publisher specializing in working class political, historical and cultural books.”²⁵

However, the road to the formal and legal creation and registration of New Star Books as a press was far more complex, as initially no one had thought to register the entity with the government. Regarding this issue, in an interview with Jerome Gold, Maurer said, “the ownership history is an interesting one because it started out not really owned by anybody. It was just a group of people—it was really a collective effort in the true sense of the term, and nobody really took the trouble to look after the legal niceties of registering ownership, registering names, things like that.”²⁶

The lack of definition of ownership did come back to haunt them, as in the late 1970s, there were major disagreements among the writers as to not only the direction of the press, but also whether the press should exist at all. At this time, Beckman took initiative to register the press, consolidate the writers who wanted to stay at the press, and most importantly, set the mandate “to publish books about politics and social issues, broadly speaking, from a left social democratic, left socialist, perspective.”²⁷ The next chapter will discuss this process along with the shift to Maurer as publisher in more detail. The timeline in Figure 1 documents this change in publishers and notes related milestones that are discussed in later chapters.

²² Macrae, “A New Star,” 34.

²³ Madness Canada, “Lanny Beckman Papers, circa 1970-1975,” accessed September 20, 2023, <https://madnesscanada.com/resources/archives/lanny-beckman-papers/>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Macrae, “A New Star,” 34.

²⁶ Gold, *Publishing Lives*, 457–58.

²⁷ Ibid.

1967	FOUNDING OF THE GEORGIA STRAIGHT
1972	NEW STAR BOOKS FOUNDED AS A COLLECTIVE
1975	LANNY BECKMAN BECOMES PART OF THE COLLECTIVE AS AN EDITOR
1978	LANNY BECKMAN BECOMES PUBLISHER OF NEW STAR BOOKS
1978-1981	NEW STAR BOOKS PUBLISHES STAN PERSKY AT THE HEIGHT OF HIS POPULARITY
1981	ROLF MAURER BECOMES PART OF NEW STAR BOOKS AS AN EDITOR AND TYPESETTER
1990	ROLF MAURER BECOMES PUBLISHER OF NEW STAR BOOKS
1990-2010	NEW STAR BOOKS TAKES ON OTHER PUBLISHING ACTIVITIES SUCH AS DISTRIBUTION FOR CLIENTS
1994	ROLF MAURER BEGINS THE TRANSMONTANUS IMPRINT WITH TERRY GLAVIN
2016	DISTRIBUTION AGREEMENT WITH UTP
2020	SALES AGREEMENT WITH AMPERSAND INC

Figure 1. Timeline of the History of New Star Books

Chapter 2. Publishers at New Star Books

This second chapter will focus on the editorial aspects of the lists created by the successive publishers of New Star Books: Lenny Beckman (who held the position from 1978 to 1990) and Rolf Maurer, who has been running the house since. While Beckman was primarily interested in political non-fiction, Maurer expanded the range of genres to experimental fiction and poetry, in a clear callback to the underground *Georgia Straight*.²⁸ Additionally, Maurer even began a new non-fiction imprint called “Transmontanus” to publish works that told stories of British Columbia.

Overall, this chapter will examine the transition from one publisher to the next in terms of their editorial choices and the consequent impact on the publishing house. This examination contextualizes the history of New Star Books as a Canadian independent publisher of non-fiction as well as experimental fiction and poetry.

2.1. Lanny Beckman: The Activist Publisher

2.1.1. Introduction

Lanny Beckman was raised in Vancouver and began studying psychology at the University of British Columbia in the early 1960s. Beyond his major, he was interested in film, art, and politics. By the mid-1960s, Beckman was a graduate student at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he was first faced with “radical American ideas” about race and student activism.²⁹ His education, interests, and experiences would eventually lead to him back to Vancouver and to working at New Star Books.

In the context of the history of this publishing house, it is important to understand Beckman’s political and activist background and how that contributed to him becoming a writer and later, a publisher. A significant milestone was the publishing of “On the Mentally Oppressed: A Personal Story” in *The Georgia Straight*, which, as already discussed, was the newspaper from which New Star Books emerged. This article was “a

²⁸ Gold, *Publishing Lives*, 456–70.

²⁹ Madness Canada, “Lanny Beckman Papers.”

deeply confessional and strongly political article about mental health” and drew “ideas and inspiration from the gay rights, civil rights, feminism and the student movement.”³⁰ In 1971, a year after writing this article, Beckman began the Mental Patients Association (MPA), an activist and advocacy group to fight for the rights of people with mental health concerns.³¹

Soon, Beckman began his first publishing endeavour in the form of a newsletter-turned-tabloid called “In A Nutshell.” This publication became quite popular with an expanded distribution list beyond the MPA and including mental health practitioners across Vancouver.³² Eventually, Beckman left the association in 1975 to become an editor at New Star Books. At that time, there was no publisher as the house was being run as a collective. Later, in 1978, he became the first publisher of the press. However, his support for issues regarding mental health remained as can be seen by his publishing of *Shrink Resistant*, “English Canada’s first collection of mad memoirs” as well as multiple articles in *This Magazine*, *Canadian Dimension*, and *Outlook* in a similar period.³³

2.1.2. Lanny Beckman at New Star Books

Beckman joined New Star Books as an editor at a tumultuous time in Canadian publishing—the mid-1970s. Before he became a part of the publishing industry, there was already a reckoning taking place. Canadian publishers were struggling to keep up with the much larger UK and US industries that were dominating the market.³⁴

In the early 1970s, Canadian publishers came together to ask for federal support and “structural intervention to allow them to achieve a reasonable return on their investment of capital and resources in bringing to Canadians books of cultural value and for which

³⁰ Lanny Beckman, “On the Mentally Oppressed: A Personal Story,” *The Georgia Straight*, December 29, 1970, p.15.

³¹ Madness Canada, “Lanny Beckman Papers.”

³² Madness Canada, “MPA – In A Nutshell Collection, 1971-1981,” accessed September 20, 2023, <https://madnesscanada.com/resources/voices/mpa-in-a-nutshell-collection-1971-1981/>.

³³ Madness Canada, “Lanny Beckman Papers.”

³⁴ George L. Parker, *The Publishing Industry in Canada 1918 to the Twenty-First Century*, (Hamilton, Ontario: McMaster University, 2009), <https://digitalcollections.mcmaster.ca/hpcanpub/case-study/publishing-industry-canada-1918-twenty-first-century>.

there were significant Canadian markets.”³⁵ As Maurer, current publisher at New Star Books, put it in my conversations with him: “between 1974 and 1978, was precisely the period when Canadian publishing started becoming more formalized. Provincial and federal funding organizations were created to look after [publishers] ... this was when publishing became institutionalized in Canada.”³⁶ However, Beckman had a head for business and eventually established the press on a more sustained commercial basis by setting up distribution channels with local partners, as discussed later in this section. Further, he knew how to work with the kind of structure the government had set up, though he was always at war with them regarding the publishing of books on political and corporate corruption.^{37,38,39}

At the same time, in the early 1970s, New Star Books was going through a rough patch, as the collective running the house was coming apart of the seams due to major disagreements about the direction of the press and whether it should even exist—seemingly because they believed that the press had run its course and there was major disagreement in terms of whether the press should be more political or literary.⁴⁰ Additionally, the members were also in their mid-20s and moving forward in different directions. Maurer said, “the story that I heard [was] that the group had taken the decision to autonomously dissolve and let the press disappear. Stan and Lanny were among the smaller group of people who were at the core, who said ‘wait a minute ... we have created this thing over the last five few years ... let’s keep it going by signing some papers.”⁴¹ And so, they did by paying an incorporation fee with the help of Beckman’s cousin, who was a lawyer. They then registered the company in 1978 with Beckman as the sole shareholder. As Maurer recounts, Beckman had to figuratively and literally change the locks on the collective members who had already begun taking away office

³⁵ Rowland Lorimer, “Book Publishing in English Canada in the Context of Free Trade,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 16, no. 1 (January 1991), <https://cjc.utpjournals.press/doi/full/10.22230/cjc.1991v16n1a582>.

³⁶ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

³⁷ Lanny Beckman, “Letters to the Editor,” *The Province*, July 24, 1983.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Kim Bolan, “Pattison-owned Firm Reverses Decision to Distribute Biography,” *The Vancouver Sun*, July 10, 1986.

⁴⁰ Gold, *Publishing Lives*, 457.

⁴¹ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

equipment because the press did not “exist” anymore.⁴² As Persky was the co-founder of the *Georgia Straight Supplement* that preceded New Star Books, his support of Lanny Beckman seemingly helped ensure that the latter was able to take over the press.

2.1.3. The Editorial Focus of New Star Books: 1978–1990

When Beckman became a part of the collective running New Star Books in 1975, he was part of a subgroup that wanted to make the press more political and an instrument of political struggle.⁴³ As a mental health activist, this direction was important to him, especially in terms of the difference he wanted to make as a publisher. Moreover, Beckman disagreed with the members of the collective who were focused on experimental literature and wanted to maintain the original intent of *The Georgia Straight Supplement*. However, the fact that they quit around the time that Beckman took over worked in his favour because he was able to focus on political non-fiction without pushback.⁴⁴

More specifically, Maurer says, “The Quasi-Maoist [sub]group (that Beckman was a part of) was very dominant in the press at the time and considered literary art to be Bourgeois excess and unnecessary. [They] wanted to put out political tracts of a Trotskyist nature.”⁴⁵ Maurer went on to say that New Star Books was focused on being a Marxist Progressive left—not just in terms of their editorial list, but also the social milieu in Canada. This was the dominant theme between about 1978 and 1990, when Beckman headed the press.⁴⁶

Here, regarding the success of the press at the time, it is important to note the significance of Stan Persky’s strong involvement with the running of the publishing house. Persky has been called “easily one of the most significant figures in the rise of British Columbian writing and publishing during the 1970s and 1980s” by the Vancouver

⁴² Gold, *Publishing Lives*, 457.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ From conversations with Rolf Maurer and Sarah Vasu.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Gold, *Publishing Lives*, 456–70.

Public Library.⁴⁷ Persky published popular political books with New Star Books including *Son of Socred* (New Star Books, 1979), *At the Lenin Shipyard: Poland and the Rise of the Solidarity Trade Union* (New Star Books, 1981), and *Bennett II* (New Star Books, 1983). As Maurer notes, to keep up with demand for Persky’s writing, Beckman had to access local mass market distribution channels to get thousands of paperback books into racks in every supermarket and drugstore. This was possible because the distributor was locally owned and willing to work with a local publishing house.⁴⁸ This kind of demand for a local author/publisher and the willingness of such a distributor to work with a niche publishing house is unusual. It speaks to the entrepreneurial skills of the team at New Star Books, the closeness of local community at the time as well as the general understanding of the importance of local and Canadian stories. Overall, such a partnership is considered unique from today’s perspective of the industry and highlights the importance of telling the history of New Star Books.

On the success of “brilliant-but-reclusive” Beckman, Howard White—the publisher at Harbour Publishing, an award-winning independent publishing house also in British Columbia⁴⁹—noted:

... during [Beckman’s] tenure, New Star became known for very topical (and critical) books about current affairs [...] These were some of the most necessary BC books of the time that now stand as an unmatched historical testament to BC life of those times. But New Star was not solely focused on BC. They also published *Sandino’s Daughters* and *Poor Women Speak Out* by Margaret Randall [...] and many more—an astonishing body of work in retrospect whose influence was probably much greater than we even realized at the time. Certainly, Noam Chomsky thought so, or he would not have given three of his books to New Star to publish.^{50,51}

⁴⁷ “Stan Persky,” Vancouver Public Library, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.vpl.ca/literarylandmarks/stan-persky>.

⁴⁸ Rolf Maurer in conversation with Sarah Vasu.

⁴⁹ Harbour Publishing, “About,” accessed September 28, 2023, <https://harbourpublishing.com/pages/about>.

⁵⁰ “Rolf Maurer,” BC BookWorld Archives, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://abcbookworld.com/writer/maurer-rolf/>

Despite the success of New Star Books, Beckman eventually found that it was time to step back for what appears to be personal reasons. Overall, it was a period of tumultuous change in publishing,⁵² and he apparently had had enough.⁵³ As highlighted throughout this paper, periods of change in the industry made the functioning of smaller houses, such as New Star Books, that much harder. Meanwhile, after his successful stint as publisher at New Star Books, Beckman participated in several documentaries regarding mental health with the MPA and continued to write and advocate for better and more compassionate treatment of patients.⁵⁴

Before he moved on from New Star Books, Beckman handed over the reins to the capable hands of Maurer, who had already been working at the publishing house for about 10 years at that point. After being made publisher—a post he still holds in 2023—Maurer made changes to the editorial focus of the house and took it back to that of the 1970s by re-introducing experimental literary fiction and poetry.⁵⁵ The next section will examine Maurer’s background, his time at the publishing house, the changes he made, and the struggles the house faced with the changes in the industry.

2.2. Rolf Maurer: The Literary Publisher

2.2.1. Introduction

Like his predecessor, Beckman, Rolf Maurer was born and raised in Vancouver, and earned a BA in English from UBC. On the road to his later role as editor and publisher at New Star Books, he held the following roles: he was co-editor at Ubysey—UBC’s official, independent student-run paper—from 1976 to 77; he was then a junior reporter and copy editor for *The Province*; later, he became assistant editor of the BC Teachers Federation Newsletter from 1980 to 81. His experiences as an editor seem to have prepared him for his eventual appointment to New Star Books in 1981 as an editor and

⁵¹ Noam Chomsky re-issued *Class Warfare: Interviewed by David Barsamian* with New Star Books in 1997. It contained two books in one: *Chronicles of Dissent* and *Keeping the Rabble in Line*.

⁵² Canadian publishing was going through a period of change at this time and was struggling to compete with the much larger and more influential US and UK publishers.

⁵³ Rolf Maurer in conversation with Sarah Vasu.

⁵⁴ Madness Canada, “Lanny Beckman.”

⁵⁵ Gold, *Publishing Lives*, 456–70.

typesetter under Beckman.⁵⁶ Further, I believe his journalistic experience served him well when sourcing and commissioning stories and titles for the publishing house, especially for the non-fiction and Transmontanus lists.

2.2.2. Rolf Maurer at New Star Books

Maurer told me the following on how he came to take on his current role:

[...] one of the possibilities that we were discussing at the time (1990) was the possibility of me leaving [...] without getting into too much detail, there were personal conflicts with other team members and they wanted me to leave. [But] Lanny decided that he would rather have me there than them, so when I said that I got to go (I wanted to leave at that point) he said, 'wait not so fast.' There were four people running the press at the time [including Maurer and Beckman] [...] the other two people announced at that meeting that rather than pursuing fixing the issues, they would rather just leave.⁵⁷

The above quote demonstrates Beckman's confidence in Maurer, who had been working for New Star Books for almost ten years at this point. Despite their differences in terms of the direction of the press, Beckman believed in Maurer's abilities to run the press. This was probably because at that point, Maurer had been doing a little bit of everything from tracking down unpaid invoices and filling out forms for government grants to deciding which manuscripts were worth publishing and packing books and fulfilling orders.⁵⁸

At this time, the financial existence and continuance of the press was at the forefront of Beckman's mind. He thus approached Maurer and made him an offer to take over the company, which he accepted. In retrospect, Maurer notes that it was not a great offer, but that they both assumed that there would be a continued growth in the industry in the 1990s as it had been in the 1980s, but unfortunately this was not the case. Thus, while

⁵⁶ "Rolf Maurer," BC BookWorld Archives.

⁵⁷ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

⁵⁸ Gold, *Publishing Lives*, 460.

on paper it seemed like a deal with a lot of potential for growth, it worked out to be quite onerous.⁵⁹

When Maurer took over in 1990, New Star Books started doing more experimental and literary-focused publishing as discussed in the next section. He also reintroduced poetry, which had been set aside in Beckman's time. Maurer told me that he did not agree with or feel right about the earlier decision made by the press to stop publishing literary works, which is why bringing back experimental fiction and poetry was one of the first things on his agenda as publisher.⁶⁰

2.2.3. The Editorial Focus of New Star Books: 1990–present

The change of editorial focus from Beckman to Maurer was immediately evident with the publishing of literary works. Additionally, creative non-fiction—such as the books published under the Transmontanus imprint—was also being included in the lists alongside the explicitly political publishing already set in place by Beckman.⁶¹ It is worth noting that despite Beckman's focus on political publishing, in the 1980s, the house had undertaken some amount of literary publishing mostly at Stan Persky's behest.⁶² Thus, the inclusion of new literary works was not that shocking. However, the decision to publish poetry had some pushback.

As Maurer recalls, under his editorial vision, the first book of poetry that New Star Books was interested in was the first edition of *XEclogue* by Lisa Robertson.⁶³ When he suggested it to the people he was working with, they were unimpressed.⁶⁴ However, a few years later, in 1994–95, Stan Persky had another pivotal moment in the direction of the press, as he convinced those “cool” on the idea of publishing poetry to take on George Stanley's latest manuscript, *Gentle Northern Summer*. This was the first book of poetry on New Star Books' newly revived poetry list. As Maurer notes, the publishing of poetry increased towards the end of the decade, in particular when the house published

⁵⁹ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ New Star Books, Catalogues (Vancouver, 1985–1991).

⁶² Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

⁶³ It was published by Tsunami Editions in 1993 and later republished by New Star Books in 1999.

⁶⁴ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

another of Lisa Robertson's books— *Debbie: An Epic* (1997)—which was nominated for a Governor General's Award.^{65,66}

Moreover, Maurer was also interested in including critiques of society as expressed in literary works in his publishing lists. This was why New Star Books backed away from the overtly political covers of the books and catalogues, as seen in Figure 2.⁶⁷ Further, throughout the 1980s and '90s, Maurer remembers struggling against what he thought was a lack of support from the BC Arts Council and Canada Council for the Arts.⁶⁸ Upon conducting research into this lack of support in those years, I found that there was a severe lack of funding coupled with government-directed budget cuts throughout the country, and for the arts in general, which may explain why the funding bodies seemed to not support New Star Books.^{69,70, 71, 72} This lack of support for the arts industries was cited by Canada Council for the Arts as being due to inability to keep up with inflation and the idea that publishing houses should form "natural markets."⁷³

Maurer was not one to stand down from a fight, and he was already politically active in publishing. Taking a cue from his predecessor, Maurer became part of a lobby effort to sway the Arts Councils' reductionist and outdated view of creative non-fiction. The push was to encourage a broader view of this type of non-fiction as reflective of people's experiences and not just to narrowly define the genre as "literary non-fiction." In this endeavour, Maurer and his fellow lobbyists were successful: "it became more acceptable

⁶⁵ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

⁶⁶ Poetry Foundation, "Lisa Robertson," accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/lisa-robertson>

⁶⁷ New Star Books, Catalogues.

⁶⁸ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

⁶⁹ Jamie Portman, "[the Canada Council has again Warned the...]," *CanWest News*, October 31, 1990, <https://www-proquest-com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/wire-feeds/canada-council-has-again-warned/docview/460990888/se-2>.

⁷⁰ "Canada Council Report," (Ottawa: The Canada Council, 1980).

⁷¹ Anita Elash, "Council Tightens Funding Criteria," March 23, 2004, *Quill & Quire*, <https://quillandquire.com/omni/council-tightens-funding-criteria/>.

⁷² "Letters: Liberals Breaking CBC Promise BC: [FINAL Edition]," *The Windsor Star*, September 27, 1996, <https://www-proquest-com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/newspapers/letters-liberals-breaking-cbc-promise-bc/docview/254204210/se-2>.

⁷³ Duncan John Low, "Federal Arts Policy 1957-2014. The Rhetoric & The Reality" (PhD diss., Simon Fraser University, 2016), 84–102.

to have overt political content in your work. It's part of what I struggled for [...] there is nothing contradictory about embracing a progressive position and creating literary art.”⁷⁴

Changes in the Catalogues: 1989–1990

While New Star Books was including literary fiction and poetry in its lists, the house was still publishing political non-fiction, now with the support of government funding bodies. However, Maurer did not want the catalogue covers to be overtly political as there had been a change in the overall direction of New Star Books. He wanted to make a bit of a break with the past without repudiating it.⁷⁵ To ensure more neutrality and that the design accurately represented the lists being published, the catalogues also underwent drastic change as shown in figures 2 and 3 below.

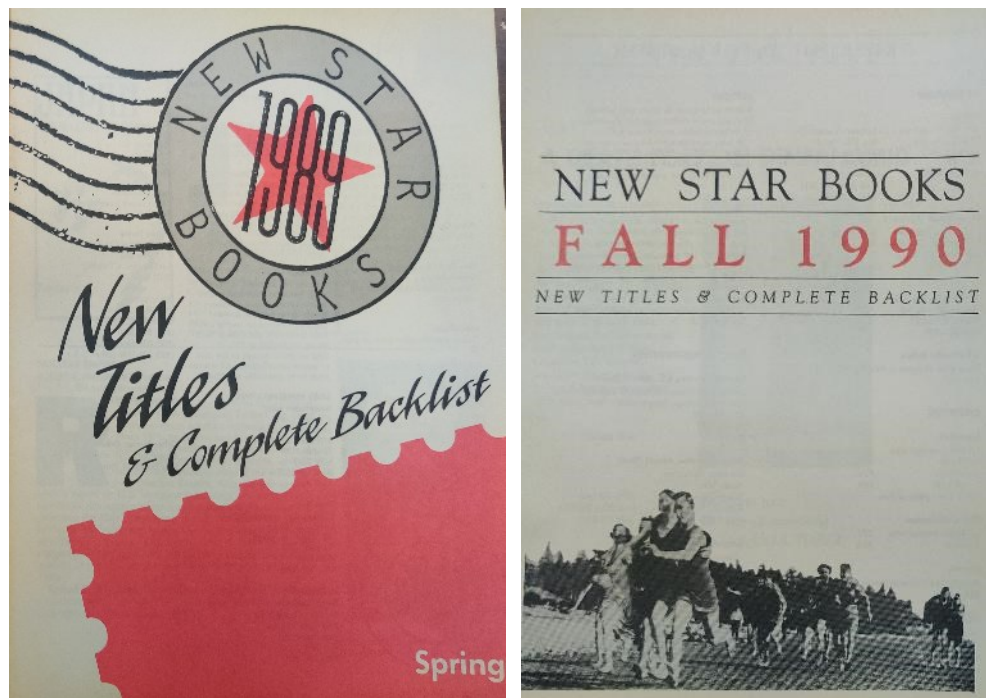


Figure 2. New Star Books Catalogues from 1989 (left) and 1990 (right). ^{76,77}

The catalogue from the spring of 1989 has clear political references with the use of red and the prominent positioning of the star as references to the leftist Maoist orientation of

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

⁷⁶ Pictures taken by Sarah Jane Vasu.

⁷⁷ New Star Books, “Catalogues.”

New Star Books at the time, as noted by Maurer.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, a year later, in the fall of 1990, there was a marked difference: the red is retained but the black and white image is more artistic in that it seems to refer to an upcoming book and unassuming in terms of the clearly non-political nature of the image. There is also a vast shift from the use of symbols to that of an image.

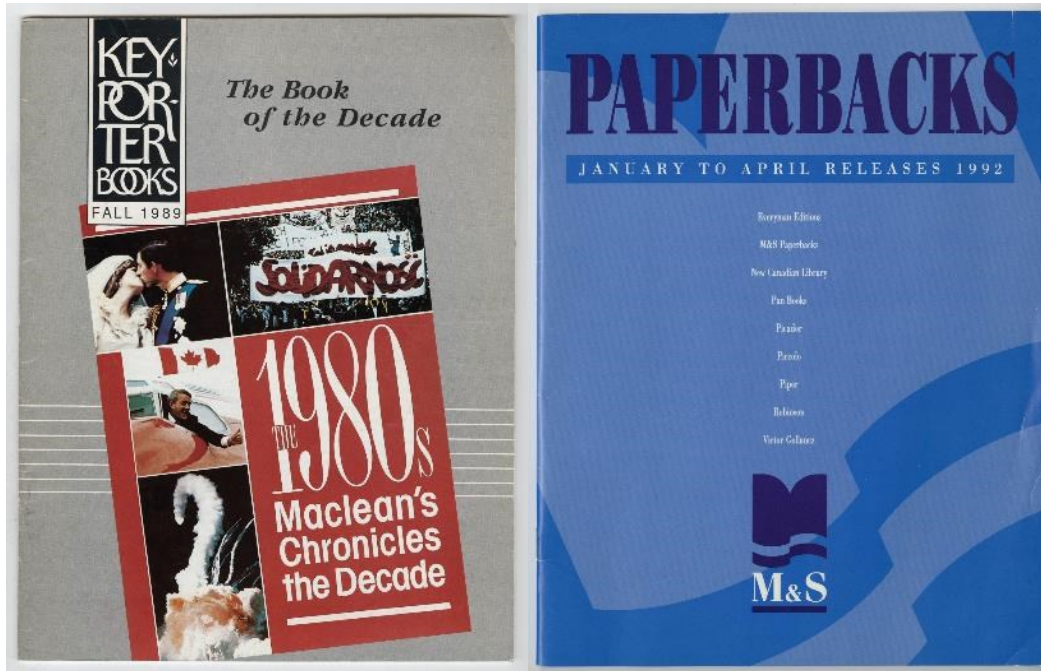


Figure 3. (a) Key Porter Books Catalogue for Fall 1989; (b) McClelland & Stewart Paperback Catalogue for 1992^{79,80}

In comparison to other catalogues of Canadian independent publishers from the same time that published similar genres of books, New Star Books had a simpler design than Key Porter Books but a similarly basic design when compared to McClelland & Stewart. The Key Porter Books catalogue from the fall of 1989 uses a red-and-white splashy book cover to offset the grey background. The book cover of choice can be considered political but appears to be chronicling the decade rather than taking a political stance. Meanwhile, the McClelland & Stewart catalogue stands out because of the use of bright and darker shades of blue, but remains basic in terms of design choices. Further, this

⁷⁸ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

⁷⁹ McMaster University Archives, *Key Porter Books fonds*, 1980-present, McMaster University Libraries.

⁸⁰ McMaster University Archives, *McClelland & Stewart Ltd. Fonds: M&S Archives—Catalogues & Newsclippings*, 1980-present, McMaster University Libraries.

catalogue takes no political stance and seems to simply announce the incoming books without any hint of what is to be expected.

Reconsidering the Name of the Press

Around 1990, Audrey McClellan—who joined the house in October 1988 and still edits for New Star Books⁸¹—and Maurer seriously considered changing the name of the house to make it more modern.⁸² Initially, they thought about reverting back to the name of the holding company that owns the property from which New Star Books operates—Vancouver Community Press, which had also been the name of the press between 1972 and 74. However, they decided not to because as Maurer says, “I had no problem with the political insurgent status of the press ... throughout the 1990s and 2000s, political troublemaking has continued to be one of the things that we try to do.”⁸³

I believe that, for the scale of the publishing that New Star Books undertakes, retaining the name makes sense. This is because if they had a more generic name such as those with the names of the founders, there would not be public curiosity over why New Star Books has retained a rather unique and political name. It is thus a way for New Star Books to communicate their objectives and values. Further, if Maurer and McClennan had chosen to use the old name of “Vancouver Community Press,” the press would have appeared more focused on community rather than their leftist political origins. Additionally, since New Star Books did well under Lanny Beckman and was fairly well known especially in publishing circles, retaining the name for the sake of brand identity and continuity was also the right move.

2.2.4. Other Publishing-related Activities

In the early 2000s, publishing became much more difficult with the advent of new technologies and the consequent rise of e-books, self-publishing and print-on-demand.^{84,85,86} Consequently, in the early 1990s up until the mid-to-late 2000s, New Star

⁸¹ “Rolf Maurer,” BC BookWorld Archives.

⁸² Gold, *Publishing Lives*, 461–62.

⁸³ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

⁸⁴ University of Minnesota, “The Influence of New Technology,” in *Understanding Media and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2016), <https://open.lib.umn.edu/mediaandculture/chapter/3-6-the-influence-of-new-technology/>.

Books took on publishing-related activities as a way to increase cash flow to help maintain the functioning of the house.⁸⁷ Consequently, to keep New Star Books functional—in addition to reducing the number of full-time employees to two or three—Maurer responded in two ways:

First, he undertook other publishing-related Activities. At the time, it was possible to produce people's books on their behalf by undertaking parts of the publishing process such as typesetting, design, and production as well as the brokering of printing services. These activities were performed for individuals and more often, organizations and institutions, all of which was for-profit. Examples include *The Auto Accident Survivor's Guide* by Jill Franklin (2005), published by Crown Publishing—for which New Star Books undertook the typesetting and design as well as brokered the printing,⁸⁸ and *Staying True, Staying the Course* (2009) published by the Carold Institute, a social activist community group, for whom New Star Books provided production and printing (brokering) services^{89,90}

Second, distribution was the other activity that New Star Books undertook that Maurer notes “was less profitable [but] ... more in line with our mandate as we saw it.”⁹¹ Consequently, the press took on distribution for a few micro presses that did not have their own trade distribution. This included presses, such as the Tsunami Editions, Commodore Books, LINEbooks, and authors from the Kootenay School of Writing, such as Michael Barnholden, Peter Culley, and Susan Clark.^{92,93}

⁸⁵ Turner-Riggs, “Economic Profile of the Canadian Book Publishing Industry: Technological, Legislative and Market Changes in Canada’s English-language Book Industry, 2008–2020,” March 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/corporate/transparency/open-government/economic-profile-book-publishing-industry.html>.

⁸⁶ Susan Lawrence, “The Future of Canadian Publishing,” *Quill & Quire*, June 24, 2013, <https://quillandquire.com/omni/the-future-of-canadian-publishing/>.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Jill Franklin, *The Auto Accident Survivor's Guide* (Mississauga, Ontario: Crown Publications, 2005).

⁸⁹ The Carold Institute, *Staying True, Staying the Course* (Ottawa, Ontario: The Carold Institute, 2009).

⁹⁰ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² New Star Books, “Spring 2008,” accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.newstarbooks.com/pdfs/catalogues/nsb-2007-1-spring-catalogue.pdf>

Overall, it can be said that Maurer’s time at New Star Books has been successful. While New Star Books has remained a very small publishing endeavour—which was intentional—they have published important books. This was noted by Howard White, who introduced Maurer at an awards show when *BC BookWorld*, the provincial book trade newspaper, awarded Maurer the Jim Douglas Publisher of the Year Award in British Columbia in 2011.⁹⁴

[...] [Rolf] kept doing great books. [...] *Asper Nation: Canada’s Most Dangerous Media Company*⁹⁵—the only book by the only publisher who had the guts to talk about the elephant in the room that was our converging media. And increasingly under Rolf, a return to the quality literary titles by such writers as George Bowering [...] George Stanley, Marie Baker⁹⁶ and others.⁹⁷⁹⁸

Nevertheless, the importance of these books is juxtaposed against the difficulties faced by New Star Books to reach a wider audience. Specifically, the importance of political books, such as *Asper Nation* and the *Postmedia Effect*,⁹⁹ having a larger audience cannot be overstated. Overall, the impact of financial difficulties and lack of funding for small independent publishing houses in the 21st century come into sharp relief.

However, it is difficult to compare the tenures of Beckman and Maurer as they operated at different periods in Canadian publishing. Beckman was able to use local distribution to sell books of interest throughout BC in particular. However, after Beckman left in 1990, there were major changes through the late 1990s and early 2000s regarding “distribution, consumer purchasing patterns, and international economic downturns.”¹⁰⁰

⁹³ New Star Books, “Spring 2011,” accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.newstarbooks.com/pdfs/catalogues/nsb-2011-1-spring-catalogue.pdf>.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ *Asper Nation: Canada’s Most Dangerous Media Company* (New Star Books, 2007) is a book by Marc Edge, who continues to fearlessly write on the topic of corporate media.

⁹⁶ Marie Baker is an Anishinabe poet, author, activist, and performance artist. She was named the inaugural winner of the “Blue Metropolis First People’s Literary Prize” in 2015 for *Indigena Awry*, a poetry collection published by New Star Books in 2013.

⁹⁷ “Rolf Maurer,” BC BookWorld Archives.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ *The Postmedia Effect* published by New Star in 2023 and written by Marc Edge examines how corporations and vulture capitalism are destroying Canadian news media.

¹⁰⁰ Parker, *The Publishing Industry in Canada*.

There were also technological advancements with the rising popularity of e-books and self-publishing.¹⁰¹ Thus, Maurer took over during a difficult time for independent publishing in Canada, and the fact that New Star Books has survived these tumultuous times is indeed commendable. However, there has been a price to pay in terms of reduced reach and lack of widespread attention even in Vancouver where the press is located. Additionally, this reduction in reach and attention over time can also be seen with the Transmontanus imprint introduced in the next chapter.

¹⁰¹ University of Minnesota, “The Influence of New Technology.”

Chapter 3.

The Transmontanus Imprint at New Star Books

This chapter focuses on the Transmontanus imprint, which was introduced by Maurer in 1994 and publishes non-fiction writing on social, environmental, and cultural issues in British Columbia. I am most interested in understanding the reasoning behind such a specific imprint, whether it was successful, and if so, how. This report will also provide information on Terry Glavin and Rolf Maurer, the editors of the series, and the expertise they bring to the table. Understanding their editing and curation choices for the series will help in defining the nature of the imprint, the stories it tells, and its focus on place. I will also use examples from the series to highlight the types of books that were published and how they related to the original intent of both Glavin and Maurer.

3.1. Creation of Transmontanus in 1994

Shortly after taking over the press in 1990, Maurer, current publisher at New Star Books, set up Transmontanus as an imprint with the help of Glavin in 1994.¹⁰² In my conversations with Maurer, he mentioned that the creation of the imprint was a confluence of two major factors as discussed below. First, Maurer wanted to publish local writing about British Columbia that was beyond what New Star Books had already done, which in 1994, had been books on political non-fiction as well as local cultural histories from a “left Marxist Progressive perspective.”^{103,104}

Second, Maurer also wanted to replicate similar models of imprints that told local British Columbian stories. The example he used was Raincoast Chronicles by Harbor Publishing, the original intention of which was to “put BC character on the record.”¹⁰⁵ However, Maurer admits that for his tastes, “the Chronicles were a little bit of what we used to call [...] steamboat publishing—a reference to [...] what you see in colonized

¹⁰² Roy Macskimming, *The Perilous Trade: Book Publishing in Canada, 1946–2006* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2007).

¹⁰³ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹⁰⁴ New Star Books, Catalogues.

¹⁰⁵ “Raincoast Chronicles,” Harbour Publishing, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://harbourpublishing.com/collections/raincoast-chronicles>

places like British Columbia, which present history as starting in 1800.”¹⁰⁶ Overall, while Maurer wanted to imitate the Raincoast model at the most basic level, he did it in a way that was more comprehensive and contextual, going beyond colonialist interpretations of history.

3.1.1. Terry Glavin and Transmontanus

At the time of the creation of this imprint, Terry Glavin was a full-time reporter at the *Vancouver Sun*, but was also undertaking creative writing about the province of British Columbia.^{107,108} Overall, Maurer’s goal was to present British Columbia from the standpoint of what was then a trend in cultural studies—an emphasis on place. According to Barker and Jane—whose book on cultural studies provides a comprehensive overview of the field and its originating theories—“culture is located, to all intents and purposes, within flexible but identifiable boundaries. That is, culture is understood to be a facet of place.”¹⁰⁹ The examination of place within culture studies was particularly popular in the 1990s when Transmontanus was set up, as can be seen by Homi Bhabha’s seminal work, *The Location of Culture* (1994).¹¹⁰

Here, it is important to note that the plan was to have history be an important foundational tenet of the Transmontanus series. It is no surprise then that Maurer first approached Glavin as a potential partner for this project, as the latter was already writing about British Columbia in the tone that Maurer wanted to set for the imprint.¹¹¹ Further, they had already worked together when New Star Books published *A Death Feast in Dimlahamid*, which was published in hardcover in 1990, followed by a paperback of the same edition. In the late 1990s, New Star Books re-issued *Death Feast in Dimlahamid* in

¹⁰⁶ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹⁰⁷ “Terry Glavin,” BC BookWorld Archives, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://abcbookworld.com/writer/glavin-terry/>

¹⁰⁸ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹⁰⁹ Chris Barker and Emma A. Jane, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (SAGE: London, 2016), 28.

¹¹⁰ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge: London and New York, 1994).

¹¹¹ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

paperback with minor editorial revisions, and this edition sold out in 2022. According to Maurer, each printing was of around 2000 copies.¹¹²

However, at the time when Maurer approached him, Glavin wanted to publish a weekly local news magazine that was rooted in British Columbia. Based on the Raincoast Chronicles, mentioned in the previous section, Maurer also wanted to create multi-authored issues or books. However, these proved to be difficult to wrangle. Additionally, Maurer notes that they decided to limit the word count of books in the series to be between that of a magazine article and a full-fledged book. At 25,000 words, writers who had up to then only been writing longer journalistic essays, would now have a bigger space to stretch the boundaries of their work without having to write a 60,000-word book. This proved to be a good decision as this word count proved to be what Maurer calls “a medium-sized springboard ... that was really attractive for writers trying to, and wondering whether they could, do this kind of thing.”¹¹³

Regarding the naming of the imprint, Maurer mentions that it is based on the sturgeon fish in Fraser Valley in southwestern British Columbia.^{114,115} The name “transmontanus” is a play on the words “trans” and “montanus,” as the fish are found on the other side of the mountains.¹¹⁶

In the end, the two decided to do a series of books with a book being published every quarter in order to meet both of their visions as editor and publisher of the imprint. They also decided that Glavin would be the acquiring editor and set the tone by authoring the first book in 1994, which predictably was about the sturgeon in Fraser River. It was called *A Ghost in the Water* (New Star Books), and it has since gone out of print.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ From Rolf Maurer’s conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Government of British Columbia, “Fish & Habitats– White Sturgeon (*Acipenser transmontanus*) in British Columbia,” accessed September 20, 2023, <http://wwwwt.env.gov.bc.ca/wld/documents/whsturgeonfaq.pdf>.

¹¹⁶ Travel British Columbia, “Fraser Country,” accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.travel-british-columbia.com/vancouver-coast-mountains/fraser-country>.

3.2. Examples of Important Books from the Series

I will now examine examples of books from the series in terms of how they fit in with the founding requirements of Transmontanus. This will highlight how Maurer fulfilled his goal of imitating the Raincoast model while creating a comprehensive and contextual series.

“A good example of the original intent [of the series],”¹¹⁷ as Maurer calls it, is *Mudflat Dreaming* (New Star Books, 2018)—the latest book in the Transmontanus series.

Written by academic and feminist scholar, Jean Walton, the book tells the story of two counter-cultural communities on the waterfront in Vancouver in the 1970s. Specifically, *Mudflat Dreaming* “traverses the intersecting domains of activist and documentary film, waterfront environmentalism, urban land use, utopian experiments, and working class struggle.”¹¹⁸

However, unlike *Mudflat Dreaming*, according to Maurer, there were a few in the series that “kind of drifted” away from the original intent.¹¹⁹ These were less about a place and more about the person traveling through them such as was *Red Laredo Boots* by Theresa Kishkan (1996), which was number six in the Transmontanus series. This book was a series of essays that examined the author’s experiences in travelling through historically fascinating regions of British Columbia.¹²⁰

Meanwhile, other “drifters” were books, such as *Clam Gardens* (New Star Books, 2006), that were not “about a specific place but a more generalized [take] on the use of a place.”¹²¹ This book by artist and writer, Judith Williams, delves into the ancient clam terraces found in Waiatt Bay and Gorge Harbour on Cortes Island, British Columbia. Through extensive research and surveying, Williams was able to provide evidence for a

¹¹⁷ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹¹⁸ Jean Walton, *Mudflat Dreaming* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2018), https://www.newstarbooks.com/book.php?book_id=1554201497

¹¹⁹ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹²⁰ Theresa Kishkan, “Books,” accessed September 20, 2023, <https://theresakishkan.com/books>.

¹²¹ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

very important discovery: “the rock structures seen only at the lowest tides were used by native peoples for the purpose of cultivating butter clams.”¹²²

Finally, *Chiwid* (1995) by Sage Birchwater was a combination of the books that were not as per the original intent of Transmontanus: this book “was both about a place but also a person moving around in that landscape.”¹²³ More specifically, *Chiwid*, the titular character, is a Tsilhqot’in woman who was famed for her shamanistic powers and lived out of the hills in British Columbia.¹²⁴ Overall, Maurer notes that this amazing story “tells you [the reader] a lot about the community because of her interactions with the Indigenous community and the white settler community.”¹²⁵ Most interestingly, the reader gets dual cultural perspective about the same person. It is thus no surprise that the book has been reprinted and continues to sell as of September 2023.

3.3. Success of the Series and its Future

3.3.1. Early Success and Hiatus

The first few books in the Transmontanus imprint that New Star Books published in 1994–95 got a fair amount of attention, as Maurer notes.¹²⁶ For example, the first book in the series, *A Ghost in the Water* by Glavin was well reviewed in *The Globe and Mail* as well as the *Vancouver Sun* with Stan Persky referring to it as a “gem of a fishing

¹²² Judith Williams, *Clam Gardens* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2006), https://www.newstarbooks.com/book.php?book_id=1554200237.

¹²³ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹²⁴ Sage Birchwater, *Chiwid* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1995), https://www.newstarbooks.com/book.php?book_id=0921586396

¹²⁵ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

story.”^{127,128} Additionally, *All Possible Worlds* published in 1995 and was called “a sidesplitting analysis of the search of utopia in Canada's last frontier.”¹²⁹

However, while Glavin and Maurer were optimistic in terms of how many racks the books would be on—as they were selling in department stores, bookstores, and the BC Ferries—they did not account for the lack of interest in the smaller coastal regions of British Columbia. Maurer attributes this lack to the “egghead” nature of the books. Here, “egghead” can be defined as intellectual or pretentious.¹³⁰ Moreover, as noted above, Glavin and Maurer also considered doing two books a year for the series, but Maurer notes that that lasted around 18 months before they realized “this is not like cranking out an issue of a magazine.”¹³¹ Further, the books were not as lucrative as the two had hoped. Thus, there was a hiatus in the late 1990s, when Glavin also had other projects that he was focused on and the ferries became a difficult place to sell for small independent publishing houses. This was because BC Ferries ended their contract with Duthie Books—a seasoned bookseller in early 1998. They had successfully sold books to the tune of \$1 million dollars annually on 19 ferries. Despite their success, BC Ferries chose to replace them with a corporation, News Group, who many local publishers refused to work with, because they had no experience working with BC books and had previously given more attention to US-based publishing.¹³²

Overall, for the type of books being done in terms of their focus on place and BC specifically, the market seemed to have closed. As Maurer recalls, the early books in the series generally had print runs of 2000 and generally sold out, which led to multiple

¹²⁷ Stan Persky, “A Ghost in the Water, a Gem of a Fish Story, is Bucolic Relief,” *The Globe and Mail*, March 25, 1995, <https://www-proquest-com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/newspapers/medicine-mother-earth-state-world-1995-is/docview/385055155/se-2>.

¹²⁸ Scott Simpson, “Real Dilemma of the Fraser River's Mythical Giant,” *The Vancouver Sun*, March 11, 1995, <https://www-proquest-com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/newspapers/real-dilemma-fraser-rivers-mythical-giant/docview/243122334/se-2>.

¹²⁹ Judith Isabella, “A Concise, Sidesplitting Look at the Quest for Utopia in BC,” *Times Colonist*, September 29, 1996, <https://www-proquest-com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/newspapers/judith-isabella-book-marks-concise-sidesplitting/docview/345633985/se-2>.

¹³⁰ “Egghead,” Merriam Webster, accessed October 8, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/egghead>.

¹³¹ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹³² Jody Paterson, “Literati Fear Cash Grab will Sink Buoyant Book Sales,” *Times Colonist*, April 17, 1998, <https://www-proquest-com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/newspapers/jody-paterson-closer-look-b-c/docview/345690288/se-2>.

reprintings with smaller printings. However, as the years and the series progressed, New Star Books had to shorten these print runs with sales figures of less than 1,000 for the last few books of the series.¹³³ Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Transmontanus titles generally outsold the other regional non-fiction titles. Thus, overall, Maurer believes that from an editorial standpoint, the creation and publishing of this imprint was worth undertaking. One proof of this is that while interning at New Star Books, I helped send out books to at least one university bookstore where Transmontanus books are being used as course selections.

3.3.2. Future of the Series

As Maurer noted in his conversation with me, “for the most part ... this series succeeded but it seemed to run its course at some point.”¹³⁴ This can be seen by the fact that the last Transmontanus book published by New Star Books was in 2018 (*Mudflat Dreaming* by Jean Walton).¹³⁵ Regarding the future of this imprint, Maurer said, “I kind of feel that the initial run has happened and *Mudflat Dreaming* would be a nice high to go out on.”¹³⁶ However, Maurer thinks that it is possible that he or a future publisher at New Star Books will begin publishing books for the Transmontanus series again. If that happens, he believes that the 24 books already published should be called “the first series.”¹³⁷ Interestingly enough, the Raincoast Chronicles model—the imprint from Harbour Publishing that told local British Columbian stories—on which the series was based, had 26 books.¹³⁸ Understanding the reasons why the series ran its course requires an examination of the sales and distribution channels at New Star Books, which is discussed in the next chapter.

¹³³ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Jean Walton, *Mudflat Dreaming*.

¹³⁶ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Harbour Publishing, “Raincoast Chronicles.”

Chapter 4.

Sales and Distribution at New Star Books

This chapter will examine the various sales and distribution channels used by New Star Books from the time of its founding to the present. In doing so, I will provide an overview of the way the Canadian publishing industry has changed in the last few decades. In the journey from self-distribution to being represented by University of Toronto Press (UTP) and Ampersand Inc, New Star Books and Maurer are representative of the difficulties faced by independent publishers in a drastically evolving industry. It is important that these challenges are understood within their historical context, as discussed in detail below.

4.1. The Movement Away from Self-Distribution

For the most part, New Star Books self-distributed their titles from the time of the press' founding in 1970 until 1990–91.¹³⁹ Under Beckman, certain titles were distributed through smaller local distribution companies, and this was very successful as noted in the second chapter. However, there were roadblocks due to the political nature of some of the books being published by Beckman. For example, in 1986, *Mainland Magazine* reneged on a deal with New Star Books to distribute an “unflattering book” about their millionaire Expo chief, Jim Pattinson, much to Beckman’s disappointment.¹⁴⁰

In 1990 when Maurer took over the press, New Star Books was still self-distributing, but used Sandhill Book Marketing in Kelowna for wholesale titles. Around this time is when Maurer notes that the industry began to change, as bigger distributors began to establish themselves and the sales representatives did not want to deal with smaller companies. It was, as Maurer calls it, “the Modern Age.”¹⁴¹

To provide further context for the state of distribution in Canada for an independent publisher, here is an excerpt from Maurer’s 1995 interview with Jerome Gold:

¹³⁹ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹⁴⁰ Bolan, “Pattison-owned Firm Reverses Decision.”

¹⁴¹ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

Ironically, I think our distribution was much better ten years ago when we could still do our own fulfillment to bookstores. However, like a lot of publishers, there's been a lot of pressure on us in the last five or ten years to move away from that model of direct fulfillment and to move to a model of meeting the bookseller's needs through larger distribution networks.¹⁴²

4.2. Literary Press Group and General Distribution: Late 1990s to Early 2000s

The Literary Press Group (LPG) was founded in 1975 and represents and advocates for the interests of Canadian publishers across the country.¹⁴³ Before formally becoming a member of the LPG in ca. 1995, New Star Books joined a collective of publishers organised by LPG to negotiate a relationship with the University of Toronto Press (UTP) in ca. 1990.^{144,145} This was known as "The Distribution Project," which the LPG had been facilitating since 1987.¹⁴⁶ As noted above, like the sales representatives, distributors were still rather hesitant to work directly with smaller publishers. Thus, this agreement with LPG proved invaluable for independent publishers in Canada looking for formalized distribution agreements.¹⁴⁷

However, when the contract with the government in terms of funding for the project ran out, UTP demanded an exorbitant rise in fees that New Star Books could not afford. This is when the LPG, which New Star was now officially a part of, got a deal with General Distribution in the late 1990s.^{148,149} While their prices were similar to that of the old deal

¹⁴² Gold, *Publishing Lives*, 459.

¹⁴³ "About Us," Literary Press Group of Canada, accessed October 8, 2023, <https://www.lpg.ca/About-Us>.

¹⁴⁴ Melissa Swann, "Into the Hands of Readers: Book Distribution in Canada and Alternatives for Small Publishers (MPub Report, Simon Fraser University, 2021), <https://summit.sfu.ca/item/35189>.

¹⁴⁵ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹⁴⁶ "History and Timeline," Literary Press Group of Canada, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.lpg.ca/History-and-Timeline>.

¹⁴⁷ Swann, "Into the Hands of Readers," 23.

¹⁴⁸ "History and Timeline," Literary Press Group of Canada.

¹⁴⁹ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

with UTP, their services were much better—"Jack had a real dedication to the national literary vision."¹⁵⁰

However, this successful association would soon run its course as General Distribution was forced out of business by Indigo Chapters and its use of returns to pay their bills¹⁵¹—referred to by Maurer as “churning.”¹⁵² In essence, they began to pay their bills through returns and begin the cycle all over again. This caused a lot of financial distress for distributors who had their own bills to pay. For New Star Books, this meant an enormous rise in returned books, which Maurer soon realised was not feasible.

Here, the timing of Maurer’s decision to back away from General Distribution was serendipitous.¹⁵³ Maurer sent a letter around Christmas Eve to get New Star Books out of its agreement with General Distribution by midnight on June 30, 2002. A few months later, General Distribution was forced into receivership due to bankruptcy,¹⁵⁴ and the date from which it was applicable was July 1, 2002.¹⁵⁵ When the receivership was implemented, all of New Star’s books would have been put under the control of the receiver. However, the timing of Maurer’s decision to leave General Distribution speaks to his understanding of the industry and intuition.¹⁵⁶ “We were actually, in a way, lucky because our agreement with General ended on June 30th, so we were able to go to the court-appointed receiver and say that he had no jurisdiction over these things because there was no longer an agreement in place between New Star and General. He agreed and we got our books back.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Gordon Lockheed, “General Dies in Bed, or, Jack Stoddart’s Legacy,” *Dooney’s Café*, September 11, 2002, <https://dooneyscafe.com/general-dies-in-bed-or-jack-stoddarts-legacy>.

¹⁵² Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹⁵³ Swann, “Into the Hands of Readers,” 24.

¹⁵⁴ CBC News, “Book Giant Stoddart Files for Creditor Protection,” May 1, 2002, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/book-giant-stoddart-files-for-creditor-protection-1.343382>.

¹⁵⁵ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹⁵⁶ Swann, “Into the Hands of Readers,” 24.

¹⁵⁷ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

4.3. The “Plan A” Consignment Program and Return to Self-Distribution: 2002–2012

After the fall of General Distribution, New Star Books went back to self-distributing their titles from 2002 until 2012.¹⁵⁸ By this time, Maurer had organized an extensive consignment program called “Plan A” with 15 to 20 publishers and book sellers mostly in British Columbia. Despite the distribution issues being faced at the time, 20–30% of New Star Books sales were coming through the Plan A channel.¹⁵⁹ Regarding this unexpected turn of events, Maurer said the following:

[...] what's surprised me in the wake of what happened with General was our sales started increasing again, and they more or less increased throughout the 2000s. They peaked through in 2010–12 [...] contrary to my expectations, our sales actually went up without a distributor and that was largely due to the loyalty from independent booksellers.¹⁶⁰

Overall, the warnings that Maurer had been given that the bigger corporations, like Indigo Chapters, would not want to deal with a smaller publisher directly proved to be false.¹⁶¹ As noted in my conversation with Maurer, New Star’s business with Indigo Chapters went up, but it was excessively expensive due to extremely high distribution costs. More specifically, Indigo Chapters would order books based on need and the number of books they wanted in each store. This made sense from their perspective as a retailer, but in terms of distribution, it proved almost ruinous 20 years ago to have to spend “11 bucks to send a book out to Surrey”—which was more than the profit margin that New Star was making on the books.¹⁶² Thus, over the years, the publisher had to rethink this system as well as stop working with Indigo Chapters directly. However, it is worth noting that self-distribution had proven to be very effective in getting New Star Books titles to local audiences.

¹⁵⁸ Swann, “Into the Hands of Readers,” 24.

¹⁵⁹ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Swann, “Into the Hands of Readers,” 24.

¹⁶² Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

4.4. LitDistCo, Brunswick, and UTP: 2012–present

As noted in the previous section, New Star Books used self-distribution until 2012—except from the late 1990s to early 2000s, when they were part of The Distribution Project with LPG. However, two main factors affected Maurer’s decision to move on from this system. First, as previously mentioned, it was increasingly expensive to directly deal with Indigo Chapters. This was because of rising distribution costs, as they refused to pay for shipping. On the other hand, working with a distributor would mean that shipping costs would be handled, and the overall costs would be consolidated due to the distributor having to send out bundles of other publishers’ books as well. Second, arts-focused granting agencies did not agree with New Star Books having publishing staff who were also packing books, as Maurer recounts from a conversation with them. They believed that the publisher should hire other contract workers to do the job. Additionally, the high distribution costs mentioned above were also a cause for concern from these granting agencies.¹⁶³

An arson attack on the New Star Books office in March of 2012 was the final straw for Maurer.¹⁶⁴ No one has yet been charged in the case, in which a Molotov cocktail was thrown in through the window of the Vancouver office of New Star Books in the early hours of the morning of March 7, 2012. No one was injured, but there was minor fire and major water damage that destroyed the entire fifth printing of *Debbie: An Epic* by Lisa Robertson, as well as partial stock of other titles. In my conversation with him, Maurer noted that this incident made it easier for New Star Books to make the decision to find a distributor,¹⁶⁵ because they were not going to have access to their shipping facility at the time for a few months or more.

At this time, the Canada Council for the Arts had also advised New Star Books to bring in a consultant, Karl Siegler, to help move the functioning of the publishing house into the early 21st century—with regards to the rapidly changing market in terms of sales, distribution, digitization, and more. In particular, Maurer notes that Siegler recommended

¹⁶³ From conversations with Rolf Maurer and Sarah Vasu.

¹⁶⁴ Tracy Sherlock, “New Star Books Hit by Arson, will Carry On,” *The Vancouver Sun*, March 8, 2012, <https://vancouversun.com/news/staff-blogs/new-star-books-hit-by-arson-will-carry-on>.

¹⁶⁵ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

finding a distributor.¹⁶⁶ Thus, New Star Books began using LitDistCo—"a publisher-run distribution collective for literary books"¹⁶⁷—for distribution from 2012 to 2015. They had already been working with them for sales representation due to their membership with the LPG.¹⁶⁸ However, as sales began to go down, Maurer decided to move to a partnership with Brunswick.

Initially, Maurer notes that New Star sales stabilized, but they did not go back to what they were when the publisher was self-distributing.¹⁶⁹ However, Brunswick—which has since shut down as of 2022¹⁷⁰—soon started running into its own issues, which cost New Star a lot of money. Eventually, their failure to fulfill a big order had dire implications for New Star Books, as the publisher became ineligible for funding from the Department of Canadian Heritage. This incident pushed Maurer to sign with UTP in early 2020, and they have worked with New Star ever since. Despite logistical issues, Maurer notes that signing with UTP in combination with sales representation from Ampersand (as discussed below) "has allowed us to focus more on the editorial work and publishing and less on stuff that you should not have to think twice about—whether books are actually getting to people who want them."¹⁷¹

4.5. Sales Representation at New Star Books

As with distribution channels, sales representation at New Star Books in the first few decades were mostly informal or done using networks already formed by the publisher with independent bookstores. However, this changed with the digitization of the 1990s. As Maurer noted to Melissa Swann, an MPub student from the 2021 cohort who also interned at New Star Books:

¹⁶⁶ From conversations with Rolf Maurer and Sarah Vasu.

¹⁶⁷ "Home," LitDistCo, accessed September 20, 2023, <http://www.litdistco.ca>.

¹⁶⁸ Swann, "Into the Hands of Readers," 25.

¹⁶⁹ From conversations with Rolf Maurer and Sarah Vasu.

¹⁷⁰ Cassandra Drudi, "Brunswick Books to Close After More than 40 Years," *Quill & Quire*, April 25, 2022, <https://quillandquire.com/omni/brunswick-books-to-close-after-more-than-40-years>.

¹⁷¹ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

Gone were the days when a publisher simply ‘filled up the car with boxes of books, drove out to [bookstores], dropped in and said ‘Hey Martha’ or whoever the manager was, ‘new book out, do you want any?’¹⁷²

Thus, the house did not have any sales representation until the early 1990s when Nancy Wise from Sandhill Book Marketing handled limited representation for the few titles that she cared about.¹⁷³ Thus, the titles being represented were obviously subjective, potentially resulting in more marketable books not getting the necessary attention they deserved.

4.5.1. Literary Press Group: Late 1990s–2019

When New Star Books signed up with LPG in the late 1990s, the sales and the distribution were done separately. As Maurer notes, at the time LPG had a very effective sales force because their remit was to “distribute literary work by Canadian authors.”¹⁷⁴ The LPG continued to represent New Star Books when the publisher was handling its own distribution for 10 years from 2002 to 2012, as discussed in section 4.3. This sales agreement worked alongside the “Plan A” consignment deal. Later, as Swann notes, New Star Books was represented by LitDistCo—the distribution arm of the LPG¹⁷⁵—but this was separate from the distribution agreement discussed above.¹⁷⁶

Additionally, LPG’s sales efforts were also subsidized by the federal government. However, in the summer of 2012, LPG lost this funding and was forced to go back to a purely sales-commission-based model.¹⁷⁷ For New Star Books, this meant that 10% of sales was not enough to maintain a sales agreement, so the publisher was forced into a more commercial arrangement from 2012 to 2019, which proved to not be effective in the long run.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷² Swann, “Into the Hands of Readers,” 22.

¹⁷³ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ LitDistCo, “Home.”

¹⁷⁶ Swann, “Into the Hands of Readers,” 22–24.

¹⁷⁷ Literary Press Group, “History and Timeline.”

¹⁷⁸ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

4.5.2. Ampersand: 2020 Onwards

New Star Books signed up with Ampersand Inc in 2020 for sales representation across all Canadian territories. Considering the publisher's agreement with UTP, it made sense to make an agreement with Ampersand as the agency represents most of UTP's clients.¹⁷⁹ However, Maurer notes that the LPG focus on selling Canadian authors was better for New Star Books in terms of the publisher's intent and vision.¹⁸⁰ This is because Ampersand is focused on selling commercial work with some literary work on the side. However, despite the differing focus, the working relationship between Ampersand Inc and New Star Books has proven financially stabilizing.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Swann, "Into the Hands of Readers," 28.

¹⁸⁰ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹⁸¹ Swann, "Into the Hands of Readers," 28.

Chapter 5.

Current Challenges at New Star Books

Independent publishing houses in Canada face an uphill battle in terms of selling books, both digital and print, and gaining attention to their lists as well as staying up-to-date on the latest technologies required to function within the industry.^{182,183,184} The same is true for New Star Books, which has two full-time employees for most of the year. Through my conversations with New Star Books' publisher Rolf Maurer as well as newspaper interviews and articles involving other members of the publishing industry, this chapter will examine the structures and functionality of small Canadian publishing houses as well as those of software being used by New Star Books and Amazon's practices in the publishing of e-books. This will be used to understand the position of small publishing houses within the larger picture of Canadian publishing.

5.1. Structural Issues and Funding Bodies

To begin with, Maurer notes that it is very difficult to operate, even at a relatively modest size, in today's market conditions.¹⁸⁵ In *Merchants of Culture*, sociologist John B. Thompson uses four years of research to examine and elucidate upon the functioning of publishing as a trade industry against the underpinning of sociological theory from Bourdieu among others.^{186,187} In this context, Maurer highlights his most important takeaway from Thompson's work for New Star Books: "you either get really big or you stay small, but if you're in the middle, you're roadkill ... you're going to get flattened."¹⁸⁸ This has been true for many mid-sized houses, as the last two decades have seen

¹⁸² University of Minnesota, "The Influence of New Technology."

¹⁸³ Turner-Riggs, "Economic Profile of the Canadian Book Publishing Industry."

¹⁸⁴ Lawrence, "The Future of Canadian Publishing."

¹⁸⁵ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

¹⁸⁶ John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2012).

¹⁸⁷ C. Clayton Childress, "Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century," review of *Merchants of Culture*, by John B Thompson, *Journal of Business Anthropology*, Spring 2012, https://rauli.cbs.dk/public/journals/20/StaticPages/short_reviews/ThompsonReviewChildressFinal.pdf.

¹⁸⁸ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

many—such as Thomas Allen & Son, McArthur & Company, and D&M Publishers^{189,190,191}—go out of business.

In this context, Kate Edwards of the Association of Canadian Publishers said the following in an interview in 2022:

Independent Canadian publishers are facing the same issues that others around the world are grappling with: paper shortages and rising production costs, competition for press time, and ongoing supply chain disruptions. Though global in nature, these challenges are felt more acutely by the small- and medium-size companies represented by the Association of Canadian Publishers, which operate on slimmer margins than their large, multinational competitors.¹⁹²

The aforementioned issues are exacerbated by inconsistent support and standards by federal funding bodies in particular.¹⁹³ Additionally, smaller publishers can no longer completely rely on independent booksellers and have had to adapt to either consignments or larger distribution companies that may not always have their logistics in order.^{194,195} For New Star Books, this means difficult triage decisions on what problems should be solved first and where money should be spent.

¹⁸⁹ Ed Nawotka, “Canada’s Thomas Allen & Son to Close, Firefly Acquires Clients,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, December 7, 2022, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/international/international-book-news/article/91082-canada-s-thomas-allen-son-to-close-firefly-acquires-clients.html>.

¹⁹⁰ Tara Walton, “McArthur & Company Publishing House Closes After 15 Years,” *Toronto Star*, June 7, 2013, https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/mcarthur-company-publishing-house-closes-after-15-years/article_ae0c3e44-e1e8-5358-95d1-222232a9ac30.html.

¹⁹¹ Leigh Anne Williams, “What Went Wrong for Canada’s D&M Publishers,” March 23, 2013, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/56494-what-went-wrong-for-canada-s-d-m-publishers.html>.

¹⁹² Ed Nawotka, “Publishing in Canada 2022: How the Association of Canadian Publishers Supports a Vibrant Industry,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, September 23, 2022, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/international/international-book-news/article/90397-publishing-in-canada-2022-how-the-association-of-canadian-publishers-supports-a-vibrant-industry.html>.

¹⁹³ Low, “Federal Arts Policy 1957-2014.”

¹⁹⁴ Lawrence, “The Future of Canadian Publishing.”

¹⁹⁵ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

5.2. Software in Publishing in the 21st Century

Like the rest of the publishing industry, New Star Books has had to adapt to the growing use of digital technology. From the use of online databases to store and transfer information to the intensive work required to meet e-book accessibility standards, it has become very costly for small publishers to survive, let alone thrive, in the 21st century.^{196,197} Beyond the implementation of new technology, I was able to witness first-hand how labor-intensive it is for a smaller house to maintain the software required and to keep the publisher on the digital map. This ranges from the use of bibliographic databases like ONIX to the difficulties associated with royalties when working with the Kindle Publishing platform.

5.2.1. ONIX for Books

As defined by BookNet Canada, ONIX for Books is “the international standard for representing and communicating book industry product information in electronic form.”¹⁹⁸ In essence, it is a metadata database used to maintain and exchange important information about books such as ISBN, title, author, publishing date, etc. However, in its current usage, there are two versions—ONIX 2 and ONIX 3¹⁹⁹—with different functioning and input requirements. Since various players in the publishing industry are at different stages of updating their software, both versions of ONIX have to be maintained and updated. This proves to be time consuming, especially for small publishing houses like New Star Books that has a maximum of three and minimum of two employees at any given time. Additionally, it is worth noting that it is not enough to update information on ONIX, as some distributors and sales representatives do not use the platform.

5.2.2. The New Star Books Website

The New Star Books website (www.newstarbooks.com) is set up using FileMaker Pro, a database engine—which is rather old technology—and WinSCP, a file transfer

¹⁹⁶ Nawotka, “Publishing in Canada 2022.”

¹⁹⁷ Lawrence, “The Future of Canadian Publishing.”

¹⁹⁸ “ONIX Standards,” BookNet Canada, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.booknetcanada.ca/onix-standards>.

¹⁹⁹ “ONIX,” EDItEUR, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.editeur.org/8/ONIX/>.

protocol.²⁰⁰²⁰¹ While the website functions at the level necessary to provide information and sell books, it requires a revamp in terms of the online shopping cart as well as the ability to add styles such as italics to text. In its current and most basic form, the website does not allow for more than one book to be purchased at a time and the use of coding to set up the italics style caused the buy links to break. However, with funding already difficult to obtain, the website has had to be put on the back burner. This potentially results in a loss of sales when customers cannot buy books as easily as they could elsewhere.

5.2.3. Amazon, E-books, and Accessibility Standards

With Amazon dominating the e-book market, smaller publishers like New Star Books have no choice but to capitulate to their demands. In terms of pricing of e-books on the Kindle Direct Publishing platform, clients and customers can only pick from two types of royalty payments based on the marketplace: 35% or 70%²⁰². As New Star Books is based in Canada, they have to price e-books at CAD\$9.99 or below to qualify for the 70% plan. The alternative means too much of a loss on the selling of e-books.

Here, it is important to acknowledge the labour-intensive process of creating EPUBs that meet the necessary aesthetic in terms of typesetting and readability but most importantly, accessibility standards of today's marketplace such as the following:

- W3C's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines that require the content, coding, and interface components of EPUBs to be written in such a way as to ensure they are perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust;²⁰³
- EPUBs should include page navigation and synchronized media playback;²⁰⁴
- inclusion of specific metadata to ensure that the EPUB has enough self-reported information about the standards being met.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁰ "Filemaker Pro," Claris, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.claris.com/filemaker/>

²⁰¹ "WinSCP," accessed September 20, 2023, <https://winscp.net/eng/index.php>

²⁰² Kindle Direct Publishing, "Price Your Book," accessed September 20, 2023, https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/G200641280

²⁰³ DAISY, "WCAG," *Accessible Publishing Knowledge Base*, <https://kb.daisy.org/publishing/docs/conformance/wcag.html>.

²⁰⁴ DAISY, "EPUB Accessibility," *Accessible Publishing Knowledge Base*, <https://kb.daisy.org/publishing/docs/conformance/epub.html>

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

Thus, for a house like New Star Books, which can only afford a two-member team for most of the year, producing quality EPUBs is a difficult but necessary task.

Overall, the digital revolution has transformed the manner in which publishing as an industry functions.²⁰⁶ Larger houses that are part of multinational corporations are able to easily absorb the costs necessary to maintain the necessary technology. However, smaller houses like New Star Books struggle with the additional labour and monetary costs associated with technology including website maintenance and input of metadata. They also are forced to take on losses due to unfair deals with giants like Amazon. Thus, as expected, smaller Canadian publishing houses are completely reliant on federal funding.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ University of Minnesota, “The Influence of New Technology.”

²⁰⁷ Karen Hammond, “Culture vs. Commerce,” *Quill & Quire*, June 24, 2013, <https://quillandquire.com/omni/culture-vs-commerce/>

Chapter 6. Conclusion

From its founding in 1970 as a collective for like-minded artists, New Star Books has come a long way. Originating in the controversial newspaper *The Georgia Straight*, the house was originally called *The Georgia Straight Literary Supplement*. The supplement was created in 1969 and featured work by popular indie writers such as Straight editor/publisher Dan MacLeod, Stan Persky, Jack Spicer, George Stanley, Robin Blaser, etc.²⁰⁸ Within a year, the supplement became an organization that published prose and poetry books, both experimental and traditional.

There was no definition of ownership, as the group was a true collective. However, in the late 1970s, there were major disagreements among the writers as to whether the press should exist at all. At this time, Beckman took initiative to register the press, consolidate the writers who wanted to stay at the press, and most importantly, set the mandate “to publish books about politics and social issues, broadly speaking, from a left social democratic, left socialist, perspective.”²⁰⁹

When Maurer took over in 1990, New Star Books started doing more literary-focused publishing with experimental fiction and poetry being made part of the lists.²¹⁰ With Glavin as the editor, Maurer also introduced Transmontanus—a BC-focused imprint that published creative non-fiction books. Overall, the series was relatively commercially successful in the mid to late 1990s with print runs of 2000 copies, which eventually sold out, resulting in reprintings.²¹¹ Additionally, there were favourable reviews in newspapers such as *The Globe and Mail* and the *Vancouver Sun*.^{212,213,214}

The transition from the 1990s to the 2010s was difficult for New Star Books with various publishing-related activities—including typesetting, production, design, and distribution

²⁰⁸ New Star Books, “About.”

²⁰⁹ Gold, *Publishing Lives*, 456-70.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

²¹² Persky, “A Ghost in the Water.”

²¹³ Simpson, “Real Dilemma of the Fraser River's Mythical Giant.”

²¹⁴ Isabella, “A Concise, Sidesplitting Look at the Quest for Utopia in BC.”

for other institutions, individuals, and publishers—having to be taken on to keep the house running.²¹⁵ Further, obtaining and maintaining a successful relationship with sales and distribution companies has also proven onerous due to the upheavals in the industry and the needs of a small house.²¹⁶ Overall, New Star Books and Maurer are representative of the difficulties faced by independent publishers.²¹⁷

Today, New Star Books is an established independent publishing house, but is highly reliant on both federal and provincial funding. The demands of the industry in terms of technology have taken a toll on the house, which has at some points in time, been run single-handedly by Rolf Maurer.²¹⁸ In my conversation with Maurer, he noted that he believes “gentlemanly publishing” would be the future for New Star Books.²¹⁹ By this he means that with the dwindling of federal funding, a patron would be needed to keep the publishing house functional. While the future may be unclear, I can say with certainty that New Star Books has been a study in resilience under difficult market conditions. In the last 50 years, the press has published important works of Canadian and American fiction and non-fiction, including work by Noam Chomsky²²⁰ and Canada’s first Poet Laureate, George Bowering.²²¹ Whenever necessary, the press pivoted and used innovative methods to keep the business running—for example, providing typesetting, design, production, and printing brokering services as they did in the early 1990s up until the mid-to-late 2000s.²²² It has also maintained its original nature as a politically activist press, as both Beckman and Maurer have fought for the rights of independent publishers in Canada. With a focus on love (for books) and revolution (of the publishing industry), New Star Books remains an important part of local, regional, and national history of publishing.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Swann, “Into the Hands of Readers,” 22–24.

²¹⁷ Nawotka, “Publishing in Canada 2022.”

²¹⁸ BC BookWorld Archives, Rolf Maurer.

²¹⁹ Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

²²⁰ BC BookWorld Archives, Rolf Maurer.

²²¹ “George Bowering,” New Star Books, accessed September 20, 2023, https://www.newstarbooks.com/author.php?author_id=6530.

²²² Rolf Maurer, personal conversation with Sarah Vasu.

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