

Speech at the Annual McClelland & Stewart Book Launch

Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario

Avie Bennett has warned me that people are little interested in speeches at these affairs and he urged me to keep my remarks to 3 minutes, or even better to 2 minutes. Well, I have come 3000 miles during an air strike and warn you that I am going to detain you for the full 3 minutes.

Canadians have much to be grateful to Avie for in his support of *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. This is heartfelt for me, for this is my life's work. It is my privilege to be at the centre of a great community of people who have together made the encyclopedia over the past 18 years. In Edmonton a group of researchers beat the drums summoning the thousands of updates and additions and corrections that make the encyclopedia a living, changing thing. There are over 4000 contributors and consultants from every part of Canada, each believing in this great Canadian enterprise. Unknown to many of them, though I hope not to many of you, all this material finds its way in various states of disarray onto the desk of Trish Lyon, who not only processes it with aplomb but who maintains my sanity and belief that we can yet again meet impossible deadlines. We like to say that George Goodwin works in the background but there is no part of this enterprise that does not interest and inspire him either. We are grateful to Charles and Susan for their help in sorting out sense and accuracy of what the whirlwind brings.

Of all the thousands of people whom I have asked to write for us, or to give us advice or support, only a half dozen or so have said no in all these years. This is a national trust. We need to make this effort known. How can the Encartas or World Books compete with the devotion and care of so many Canadians in their own enterprise of knowledge? It is not just that Encarta might not have an article on It does not. But what if you look at the entries that they do have, those for example that are at the intellectual centre of our culture – federalism, human rights, aboriginal rights, liberalism, social security, education, art, music, poetry, publishing, what could they say about Canada? *The Canadian Encyclopedia* will not change the world, as Diderot's great *l'Encyclopédie* tried to do, but it can help define Canada's place in it.

We are living in dangerous times, amidst a revolution in how our children learn about the world. Much is said about the demise of the book, of print culture of the authority of the text. Most of us are spectators in the digital revolution, as the telcos, software companies, cable companies and so on dictate public policies. But there is a complete ignorance, amid the analyses of how print or

the computer screen affect the nature of knowledge itself, on what publishing contributes to culture. Publishers still provide a link between creative individuals and inquiring minds. They are interested in stimulating the power of thought, not as broadcasting is in selling Coca Cola or Pepsi or Nike shoes. We need to bring these skills and our concerns for content, creativity and multiplicity into the digital world. The Canadian Encyclopedia is in the forefront of that effort to provide content for this brave new world.