

Cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd: A book designer's unhappy years in Canadian publishing

By Devin Crawley

The study of book history has traditionally taken two forms – a statistical analysis of publishing throughputs or a sociological examination of the people in the trade. The reasons are practical: official documentation such as balance sheets and marketing plans convey an overarching sense of a firm's performance, but do little to vivify the day-to-day working conditions on the shop floor. Memoirs, on the other hand, communicate impressions of work, but tend to gloss over economic and operational details.

The papers of Allan Fleming, the University of Toronto Press's chief designer from 1968 to his death in 1977, lead one to a discernible link between account-book performance and morale at the firm. In particular, Fleming's documents relating to the Presidential Advisory Committee on University of Toronto Press convened in 1974-75 reflect his frustration over thwarted creative ambition and idealism when confronted with the harsh economic realities of scholarly publishing.

Fleming's status as a publishing employee who had developed a considerable prior reputation as a graphic designer also offers a valuable alternative to official history recorded in company files or recounted by publishing executives. In particular, Fleming's papers allow a point of entry to examine the day-to-day working lives for members of the editorial and design staff at University of Toronto Press from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s. Fleming's material, combined with corroborating evidence from the archives of University of Toronto, document an intriguing clash of values between Fleming and the press's director of the period, Marsh Jeanneret.

Jeanneret, director from 1951 to 1982, made his views on the challenges of the profession known in a 1989 memoir¹ and through his role as the chief author of the final report on the 1973 Ontario Royal Commission on Book Publishing.² In his recent history of Canadian publishing, *The Perilous Trade*, Roy MacSkimming names Jeanneret one of four key figures that helped establish modern Canadian publishing of the latter 20th century.³

Fleming entered publishing at the height of his career as one of the country's more prominent graphic designers. His work included a celebrated logo for Canadian National Railways in 1960, a redesign of *Maclean's* magazine in 1962, and a distinctive plug-shaped logo for Ontario Hydro in 1965.⁴ At the same time, he showed a long-standing interest in book design. In addition to his

¹ *God and Mammon: Universities as Publishers* (Toronto: Macmillan Canada, 1989).

² MacSkimming, Roy. *The Perilous Trade: Publishing Canada's Authors* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2003) 113.

³ MacSkimming 2.

⁴ "Allan Robb Fleming." *Contemporary Designers*, 3rd ed. St. James Press, 1997. *Biography Resource Centre*. 2004. The Gale Group. 19 Feb., 2004 <<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC>>.

association with two private presses beginning in the early 1950s,⁵ Fleming experienced a critical and commercial triumph just prior to joining University of Toronto Press with his design for *Canada, A Year of the Land*. Produced by the National Film Board of Canada, the lavish photography book sold 80,000 copies between 1967 and 1975.⁶

Fleming joined the press in March, 1968 after making overtures that he would like to design books full time, even if that meant a cut in pay.⁷ His debut was auspicious. One of his first projects, an alphabet book illustrated by aboriginal schoolchildren meant as a Christmas card for the press, was cited as one of the 50 books printed in North America in 1968 by the American Institute of Graphic Arts.⁸ Another early project in which Fleming acted as co-designer, the *Economic Atlas of Ontario*, won wider acclaim as “the most beautiful book in the world” at the 1969 Leipzig International Exhibition of Book Design.⁹ In designing scholarly works intended for sales over many years and multiple reprints, Fleming espoused a philosophy that suggests careful attention to detail and a balancing of design interests:

[T]he designer of books for a university press must steer carefully between classic and ultra-modern design.... [D]esigns which tend to become rapidly dated must be avoided, although at the same time the design must compete in originality with the output of other publishers who have less need for a basically conservative approach.¹⁰

Despite signs of initial success and satisfaction for both the press and Fleming,¹¹ it was precisely Fleming’s care and attention to design, and inattention to cost, that caused growing friction between him and Jeanneret. In his memoir the latter is curiously ambivalent on Fleming’s impact at the press, praising him for a “virtually unerring” design sense, but upbraiding him for not keeping a tighter lid on design expenses:

Allan did try valiantly to co-operate as we sought to achieve maximum production economies. But like many creative people he found it easier to rationalize costs incurred for

⁵ Massey College, Allan Fleming Papers, Box 11 (File 4).

⁶ MacSkimming, Roy “Our \$1-million Gift to the U.S.” *Toronto Star* 7 June 1975 (newspaper clipping from MC, AFP 11[7]). The article also mentions that a second volume designed by Fleming for the NFB, *Canada*, won the 1973 Leipzig medal for the world’s most beautiful book.

⁷Jeanneret 244. In a letter from Jeanneret formally offering Fleming the position of chief designer, Jeanneret offered an initial salary of \$15,000 a year, increasing to \$20,000 in two years, by July 1, 1970 (MC, AFP 12 [8]). In comparison, area editors at the Press earned a maximum of \$15,540 in 1973 (“Living and Partly Living,” p. 15; MC, AFP 12[1]).

⁸ Carson, Jo “What Little Indians Can Do With Letters” *Globe and Mail* 19 June 1969 (newspaper clipping from MC, AFP 12[5]).

⁹ Jeanneret 246.

¹⁰ Fleming, Alan “The Art of Book Designing,” *Press Notes* 16.3 (1974); University of Toronto Archives (UTA) *Press Notes*, Accession P78-0042 (folder 23).

¹¹ In a response dated May 1, 1968 to a letter congratulating him on his appointment from then university president Claude Bissell, Fleming writes, “I am delighted to be here. Indeed everyone at the Press is so pleasant that I wonder why I did not do this several years ago, instead of fiddling around with advertising agencies and national magazines,” (MC, AFP, 12[2]).

the sake of improved design than he did to control them in advance, and his understanding of cost accounting was wishful more than realistic....¹²

An examination of Fleming's records concerning the press shows that the frustration was mutual. It is also clear that Fleming was not the only disgruntled employee. In the records that survive from Fleming's nine years at the press¹³ one file opens a window onto the daily stresses and strains of working in the firm's editorial and design departments, circa 1974. Fleming includes in his papers several photocopies of component drafts¹⁴ and a final copy of a confidential brief submitted by the two departments to a presidential committee established in 1974 to investigate the press's financial and operational health.¹⁵ The brief, "Living and Partly Living," condemns Jeanneret's management of the press on five counts: for introducing mounting pressures on editors to reduce their time in appraising manuscripts, for placing an increased emphasis on trade books at the expense of scholarly titles, for restricting advancement opportunities, for taking on a management style that is "experienced by the staff as a dictatorship," and for stifling the creativity of the chief designer.¹⁶ On the latter point, the brief states: "Today the Designer is 'cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd' by the administration, which assumes responsibility for the whole book and does not trust the professional designer it hired presumably because of his abilities."¹⁷

From this initial glimpse through Fleming's papers of deteriorated morale at the press, it was necessary to consult the full record of the committee held at the University of Toronto Archives to determine the root and scope of the discontent. Before discussing the press's operating conditions at the time, it is worth noting that Fleming expressed additional dissatisfaction to the committee in person, recorded in the minutes of the committee's seventh meeting on April 3, 1974:

Mr. Fleming felt the administration regarded the design section as 'a necessary evil....' Until a year and a half ago the work of the section was not disturbed by the administration, but this has changed and there are pressures on their freedom of operation.... There were difficulties

¹² Jeanneret 245.

¹³ Massey College's Fleming archive totals 34 boxes of material, including artwork, drafts of Fleming's published articles on design and significant background material on, for example, Fleming's logo design for Canadian National Railways. In contrast, Fleming's records from University of Toronto Press occupy a single box of eight files, two of which concern administrative matters at the Press, and the remainder include congratulatory letters on his appointment, inter-office memos about typography and house style, a file of seven dust jackets, another thin file of seven press clippings, a sample of some of the Press's periodicals, and a file of information on disability coverage and Fleming's parking receipts.

¹⁴ The drafts are initialed, suggesting principal authorship of the report by "rd" and "jcj" – probably R.I.K. Davidson, social sciences editor, and Jean C. Jamieson, humanities editor. Fleming's initials do not appear.

¹⁵ The committee was convened by then-president John Evans and chaired by his predecessor, Claude Bissell (Jeanneret 319).

¹⁶ "Living and Partly Living," MC, AFP 12(1). While unsigned in Fleming's file, the brief submitted to the committee included a cover letter with 21 signatures: Margaret Bentley, Joan Bulger, R.I.K. Davidson, Allan Fleming, Jean Houston, Jean Jamieson, Yolanda Kawa, Patricia Lagacé, Laurie Lewis, Antje Lingner, Larry MacDonald, Robert MacDonald, Lorraine Ourom, William Reuter, Ron Schoeffel, Rosemary Shipton, Kieran Simpson, Gertrude Stevenson, Prudence Tracy, Marietta Weber, and Jean Wilson (UTA, University of Toronto. Presidential Advisory Committee on the University of Toronto Press, A1976-0027(1).

¹⁷ "Living," 7

with the director and decisions on publication followed a slow and tentative process which was complicated by the conflict between scholarly and trade publishing. Mr. Fleming said the Design Department was meeting increasing difficulties – the administration enforcing its own views – e.g. with jackets – problems of colour, typeface, and size of author’s name.¹⁸

The brief and Fleming’s comments suggest Jeanneret’s managerial style was becoming increasingly heavy-handed in the previous few years. Jeanneret himself suggested reasons for his behaviour in his own report to the committee, which is included in Fleming’s papers.¹⁹ The director blamed rising workplace stress on the press’s straitened finances caused by the one-year loss of the press’s printing contracts for several National Research Council journals and on interest-rate increases on the press’s loans from the university.²⁰ Jeanneret writes that the press’s problems “stem directly from financial stresses which have accentuated the need for careful administrative and budgetary review at all times.”²¹ A report submitted to the committee by the press’s financial administrator, H.C. Van Ierssel, suggests the press was severely hampered by the requirement of the Board of Governors that it provide a yearly subsidy of \$200,000 for scholarly publishing.²² Van Ierssel notes that the press had cancelled its scholarly publication subsidy in 1972/73, but was instructed to restore it in 1973/74. The press then recommended that subsidy be reduced to \$100,000 in 1974/75, but was ordered by the board of governors to keep it unchanged. After recommending that the subsidy be cancelled in 1975/76, Van Ierssel suggested that the university increase its loan to \$1.5-million, or the press would face a “severe restriction in the publication of scholarly works” and subsequent layoffs of editorial staff.²³

It is clear from “Living and Partly Living” and from Fleming’s own statements to the committee that the press’s stressful working atmosphere was largely a result of the management’s failure to share information about financial concerns and a lack of input by the press’s employees. (MacSkimming alludes to as much when he says the “austere” Jeanneret “practised the opposite of an open-door policy.”²⁴) In Fleming’s testimony to the committee, the designer “said he was not sure how real the financing problems were. He said the press had been given the chance of renegotiating

¹⁸ UTA, University of Toronto. Presidential Advisory Committee on the University of Toronto Press, A1976-0027(1).

¹⁹ MC, AFP 12(1).

²⁰ The Press had borrowed about half a million dollars from the university in the early 1960s to finance its move from Baldwin House to a site immediately north of Knox College (Jeanneret 137).

²¹ “Memorandum to the Review Committee from the Director of the University of Toronto Press” MC AFP 12(1).

²² UTA, Presidential Advisory Committee on University of Toronto Press, “U of T Press “10 Year Financial Forecast 1975 through 1984” / 1975, A76-0027(2).

²³ ²³ UTA, Presidential Advisory Committee on University of Toronto Press, “U of T Press “10 Year Financial Forecast 1975 through 1984” / 1975, A76-0027(2), p. 4.

²⁴ MacSkimming *Perilous Trade*, 111.

their loan with the University, but [associate director] Miss [Eleanor] Harman said the matter was closed and would not be reopened.”²⁵

Outsiders also noticed the decline in morale at the press. In a letter to the committee from Beatrice Corrigan and James McConica, editors of the Collected Works of Erasmus series, the pair note that

The most conspicuous problem appears to us to be a lack of communication between the editorial staff and that part of the press which is responsible for general policy and (as we assume) long-range planning. The good will and energy of the editorial staff are truly remarkable, and it is difficult to imagine that they could give of their time and energy more generously. It is apparent, however, that they do not feel secure about the policy decisions made at a higher level, for whatever reason, and this must cost them a great deal in time and in morale.²⁶

Is there evidence that workplace strain contributed to a decline in quality of the press’s books? Fleming suggests the possibility when he said that Jeanneret took an increasing say in his own designs. And the authors of “Living and Partly Living” claimed that decreasing time to evaluate manuscripts resulted in lower-quality output:

There is unrelenting pressure to cut down on the time spent in appraising manuscripts and in preparing accepted manuscripts for production. The Director has expressed astonishment and anger that sponsoring editors should feel it necessary to *read* the manuscripts that they are responsible for assessing; it is, he thinks, sufficient – and cheaper – to have them appraised by outside scholars only. . . . The natural concern for quality has been turned everywhere into a constant fight for time.²⁷ (Emphasis in original.)

There is no evidence from Fleming’s papers that working conditions at the press improved substantially after the committee issued its report in 1975. However, Jeanneret writes that he applauded the committee’s recommendations, which included the statement, *contra* Van Ierssel above, that “the publication of scholarly volumes is the only valid reason for the existence of the Press.”²⁸ Among its proposals, the committee called for the creation of a single board to improve contact between the press and the university, a fortified publications committee to have greater oversight over the press’s list, and revised salaries for, and increased administrative input by, the press’s professional staff. Jeanneret notes however, that while “‘non-monetary’ proposals were acted upon

²⁵ UTA, University of Toronto. Presidential Advisory Committee on the University of Toronto Press, Minutes of the Seventh Meeting, A1976-0027(1).

²⁶ UTA, University of Toronto. Presidential Advisory Committee on the University of Toronto Press, A1976-0027(1),

²⁷ “Living and Partly Living,” MC, AFP 12(1), p. 4.

²⁸ Quoted in Jeanneret 320.

quickly enough,” financial matters, including the committee’s major recommendation of an interest-free \$1-million investment by the university, were not.²⁹

Through the documents of Fleming’s tenure as chief designer at University of Toronto one glimpses an archetypal clash of priorities between Fleming, a creative artist, and Jeanneret, a pragmatic manager. One has to ask whether the initial occasion of Fleming’s employment at the press was not wishful thinking by both parties. Fleming expected artistic freedom in the design of scholarly books, while Jeanneret anticipated enhanced prestige for the press and a tight lid on costs. Not only did the arrangement prove less than satisfactory for both, the evidence suggests that overall workplace stresses took a toll on their health. Fleming died of heart disease in 1977,³⁰ while Jeanneret had taken a six-month leave of absence for his heart condition beginning in 1973, and had retired from full-time directorship of the press in the year of Fleming’s death.³¹

In one sense, reconstructing the working conditions for Fleming and his colleagues in the period leading up to the presidential review of the press says nothing new. It is a truism that book publishing is a labour of love fed by low pay, long hours and frayed nerves. Still, the record of Fleming and Jeanneret’s clash is an important one for book history for two reasons.

First, the larger record of the presidential committee in the University of Toronto archives suggests a clear link between the press’s cash flow and exceedingly stressful day-to-day conditions among the press’s management and staff, as recounted by the staff members themselves. Such a strong correlation between a firm’s balance-sheet performance and its social milieu is rarely extractable in detail from publishers’ records or the accounts of publishers taken in isolation. The two aspects of publishing history – statistics and anecdotes – are not often so clearly linked.

Second, while memoirs or other official histories tend to capture the views of company executives, owners or upper management, Fleming’s documents indicating employee unrest at the firm allow a rare glimpse into the working lives of front-line staff. Rarely does a book historian have a glimpse of the conditions of publishing in the workers’ own words.

²⁹ Jeanneret 323.

³⁰ Finding aid, MC, AFP.

³¹ Jeanneret 323.

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