

Strange Bedfellows: The State and the Arts in CanadaBy George Woodcock
Douglas and McIntyre, Vancouver, 1985

In the fall of 1985 the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council teetered on the brink of closure. At issue was the role of arms-length versus direct funding to the arts. The provincial government had decided to retain control over sustaining funds to publishers, dance, and theatre groups through the Department of Culture, Recreation and Youth. Several members of the Arts Council had resigned in protest, arguing that funding for the arts, and the right to decide who deserved it, belonged solely to the Council. Backed by those arts groups receiving the lion's share of the direct funding, the government attacked the council for its high administrative costs, and threatened to replace it with an advisory board. Payment on all funds to the Council was stopped. Staff waited for paycheques and artists waited for grants while the majority Conservative government launched an investigation into the internal administration of the Council. Finally, the decision was made to appoint new Council members, and the Council again opened for "business", with the issue of arms-length funding still unresolved.

This recent experience highlights the insecurity that besets the relationship between the State and the Arts in Canada, and underlines the need for understanding the past and present of that relationship. This is something that George Woodcock has aimed for in his book *Strange Bedfellows*. Whether he has hit the target is another question.

The book begins with a clarification of the terms "art" and "culture". According to Woodcock the term culture does not recognize the distinction between what is art (literature, ballet) and what is not (television, bowling). Thus, when we talk of culture instead of art, we play into the hands of bureaucrats and politicians, who are only too happy to use the confusion over what is truly under discussion to further centralize their control over the artistic process. This is exemplified by the growth of cultural industries as an instrument of government policy.

While I think there is some truth to this argument (as evidenced by recent suggestions that multicultural programs be administered by the Canada Council), it seems to me that Woodcock's position is presented in an either/or approach. Either we use the term culture, and therefore reject great art from the

past or outside Canadian borders; or we use the term art, by which we welcome into our society the universal appeal of art with its ability to transcend time and space. The cultural nationalist position has never been to shut out art from other cultures, but rather to encourage the development of Canadian art. I suspect that Woodcock's position can largely be attributed to his anarchist politics, and that his argument, as evidenced by his denunciation of Susan Crean, is more an attack on nationalist politics than it is a defence of elitism in the arts.

Woodcock relates the history of the various commissions investigating aspects of Canada's cultural life. He tends to describe these commissions in terms of their findings relating to writing and publishing, which is not surprising given that writing is Woodcock's *métier*. I found several times that his disgust over government intervention in arts funding petered out when that intervention benefited either writing or publishing. For example, in the mid-seventies, the Secretary of State gave the Council extra funds earmarked for publishing, and though not mentioned, and though not criticized, for film. Although many people have severely criticized Council for tarnishing the arms-length relationship by accepting money clearly designed to foster policy determined by the government, and not by the Council itself, Woodcock tends to gloss over this. He also makes light of the Ontario Arts Council's controversial Writer's Reserve program, through which a writer nominated by a publisher is given a grant towards the writing of a book. These inconsistencies weaken his purist position.

The best chapter is on tax and censorship laws in relation to the artist. It contains specific and engaging examples rather than the textbook prose that characterizes much of this book. When Woodcock is writing on subjects he feels strongly about, such as writing and publishing, or about the poverty of artists, the book comes to life. Having been active in Canadian (dare I say it?) cultural life for so many years, Woodcock brings a wealth of individual experience to his topic, and I wish he had included more of his own personal journey through the maze of arts funding.

The final chapter is disappointing. The suggestions for saving the arts from the peril of the state are neither new nor controversial. Woodcock critiques the jury system at the Canada Council, pointing out that while it is the best system available, a look at the scope and range of each discipline's jurors leads one to question just how "peer" they really are. He suggests more money to Council as a solution, although warning that artists who rely on the largesse of the state are liable to become servants of the state. I disagree. As long as arms-length funding remains in place, the individual artist is not likely to experience direct political control through Council, but simply the cutting off of funds, as happened in Newfoundland this fall.

Woodcock goes on to propose tax incentives for artists - even though he recognizes that most artists don't earn enough to be liable for taxes in the first place. He proposes to increase artists' income, (thus making them eligible for tax breaks?) through several programs. One proposal is to sell manuscripts and sketches as archival material. This would be done under the Cultural Property Export and Import Control Act, giving money to institutions to purchase works certified as being of national importance. This, a suggestion from a man who abhors bureaucracy?

Even though he admits that exemption from taxation will not help the majority of artists, in the biggest disappointment of the book, Woodcock suggests there is no way for "untested or apprentice" artists, (ie. all those who do not earn enough to benefit from tax breaks) to avoid the "long struggle" which offers a "rough and perhaps necessary process of natural selection". He then tosses off the notion of a minimum guaranteed income as the only thing that could really help artists.

Woodcock ends with a call for greater corporate investment and sponsorship of the arts. Some regard this as the height of politicization, an integration of the world of art with the world of free enterprise that inevitably leads to both political and ideological control of the ideas expressed, the plays commissioned, the dances, and exhibitions chosen. One wonders just how Woodcock feels about political art, about films or plays that take on contemporary social and political issues, about artists who engage in public and political debate on issues related or unrelated to arts funding. He certainly issues no call to arms - emphasis is placed on art for art's sake *alone*. The artists of the nation must be treated with care and respect, and kept out of the pigstrough of politics. Yet given his antipathy towards cultural bureaucrats and arts administrators, just how does he propose that the goal of improved funding for the arts be reached? Somebody has to write the brief, contact the press, the politicians, garner support for the issue. What does he understand by political?

While this book is a good introduction to funding of the arts in Canada, and is perhaps best suited as a reference text for university courses in related disciplines, it provides little to work with for artists or others interested in the (I dare say it) cultural life of this country. In this year's round of activities to save the Canada Council, the CBC, NFB, etc. it looks like the artists across the country will have to rely, as they always do, on their own inspiration.

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Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press

By Abe Peck
Pantheon, 1985

A Trumpet to Arms: Alternative Media in America

By David Armstrong
South End Press, 1981

What a Way to Run a Railroad: An Analysis of Radical Failure

By Charles Landry, Dave Morley, Russel Southwood, Patrick Wright
Comedia, 1985

Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication

By John Downing
South End Press, 1984

1986 looks like a kind of mirror-image of 1968, and that is how one version of the history of the last 18 years has been written. An important part of this is the story of the under ground press, made possible by the collective work of new social movements and cheap offset print technology. According to a deeply misleading version of this history we have now grown up, got sense, and the Underground Press Syndicate got renamed the Alternative Press Syndicate. Well its true that it got renamed; but in 1973, not in the 80's. The history is complex. Many of those underground papers now exist only in microfilm research collections. But many others have taken their place. We need history, not a mythology. The 1960's is not simply the decade when we "believed," any more than the 1980's is the decade in which we get sold things.

It is odd to read Abe Peck's *Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press*. The book is written in the short breathless paragraphs of popular journalism. But in a *book* there is, after all, no need to sell the reader anything. What had seemed a necessity to hold a newspaper reader who is tired, reading on the streetcar, or about to turn on the television, has then become a habit. Not just a habit: a form of writing which pushes an argument in certain directions and makes other questions difficult to address.

Abe Peck wrote (and edited) the *Chicago Seed*, an important underground paper of the 1960's. In the 1970's he worked for *Rolling Stone* and the *Chicago Sun-Times*. He now teaches journalism at Northwestern University. *Uncovering the Sixties* is fair and full of interesting detail. It's organized as a narrative from the 1950s to the 1980s. The assumption is that the Sixties was a unique period (what did you do in the Sixties?). An important part of the book is the discrete presence of the world-weary journalist. Because the book is in part the story of Abe Peck the narrative is one of growing up, growing sensible.

This mythology of "the 1960s" is politically very damaging. The problem is not just that the real interest is in the period 1966-72, or 1956-1979 (depending on the kind of questions you want to ask). The damage is that a version of "the Sixties" is used by neo-conservatives to prove the foolishness and danger of liberalism in the 1980s. The danger is that a version of the 1960s is used to divert attention from oppositional movements that exist strongly in the 1980s and are as lively and more rich in ideas than ever before.

In a wonderfully vitriolic review of Peck's book in *Alternative Media* (Winter 1986), Tom Ward argues that as a "decade" the 1960s are probably less interesting than the German 1840s or 1920s, the Spanish '30s, or the Britain of Morris and Wilde.

Ward also points out that there were more people at the 1982 Central Park anti-nuclear demonstration in New York than at any Sixties demo. It's only because we insist on holding to the mythical Sixties that we object and say that this 1982 demonstration is "not typical" or that the atmosphere couldn't have been the same. In 1982 the arguments are harder, better argued, more intelligent, and more urgent.

