

Paget: a country creation with continental ties

BY SUSAN WALKER

The Paget Press letterhead cites Santa Barbara, California and Sutton West, Ontario as the company's dual address. The order form of its sister firm and distributor, Brown & Company, lists titles as various as *Bring Me Your Love*, a raunchy collaboration between Charles Bukowski and Robert Crumb, and *The Face of Early Toronto*, an award-winning volume of architectural history by Lucy Booth Martyn. The tie that binds Santa Barbara, home of Black Sparrow Press (publishers of writers such as Bukowski, Fielding Dawson, Robert Creeley, and Charles Reznikoff), with the staunch Upper Canadian enclave of Sutton West, seat of the founding Sibbald family since 1835, is the publishing inventiveness of Peter Sibbald Brown.

Seven or eight years ago, when Brown was the buyer for Heinz Heinemann's Mansfield Book Mart in Montreal, he wrote to Black Sparrow publisher John Martin. "I had this incredible passion to get these signed limited editions, each one of 26 with the original art by the authors," says Brown. "And in a note to me John Martin said, 'The only way you are going to get these things is maybe if you become my agent.' I said fine." Brown & Company became the exclusive distributor of Black Sparrow books in Canada, stocking every single title the press had ever produced. The California underground gained a northern outpost.

Like Christmas

The graveyard adjoining St. George's Church, a neat stone edifice erected in Sutton West by the Sibbald family in 1841, is the site of two literary landmarks. They are the graves of Stephen Leacock and Mazo de la Roche. Both writers were friends of the family. Leacock, before his marriage and removal to Orillia across Lake Simcoe, occupied a log cabin on the Sibbald estate, now the Sibbald Point Provincial Park. Mazo de la Roche would spend her summers in the nearby Briars Inn, another family holding just down the road from Eildon Hall, the family home established by Brown's great great grandmother Susan Sibbald. Peter Sibbald Brown spent his childhood years in Eildon Hall, now the Sibbald Memorial Museum and sadly shorn of its Edwardian finery.

A few miles away in a farmhouse next to the former estate, the warm October sunlight streams into the living-room where Brown delightedly shows his visitors the latest volume to arrive from Santa Barbara. Bold orange, magenta, yellow, purple, and blue type rendered in the distinctive Black Sparrow design announces Charles Bukowski's *Hot Water Music*, a charged collection of the poet's low-life tales featuring a hero who bears a strong resemblance to Bukowski. The 8,000 copies of the cloth edition of *Hot Water Music* have sold out before publication, such is the demand for Black Sparrow's titles around the world.

"Every time a package comes from California it's just like Christmas," enthuses Brown, a boyish-looking 34, despite the well-tailored suit which is not for the benefit of his guests, but customary apparel, even on a Saturday. "It's like being a kid with his toys." It was Brown's love of fine books that launched him into publishing, first as a distributor of limited editions from houses such as Ireland's Ashling Press, and of fine-art catalogues from museums and galleries all over North America. But Black Sparrow



Peter Sibbald Brown and Marion Kilger, co-owners of Paget Press, operate from a farmhouse in Sutton West, Ont. close to the former Sibbald estate that's now a museum.

books held the ultimate appeal. "To my mind they are the most beautiful of what I call fine trade books — they are not just fine books and they are not just trade books. I admire books in which content and form meet so harmoniously," he explains.

The Bukowski/Purdy axis

Not surprisingly, Brown and Martin found an instant rapport when they finally met face to face five years ago. Brown became a partner in the Black Sparrow printing press presided over by master printer Graham Mackintosh, and Paget Press began to co-publish some titles with Black Sparrow. The latest co-publication is a project initiated by Brown: *The Bukowski/Purdy Letters 1964-1974*, a revealing literary record edited by Seamus Cooney, a writer and professor at Western Michigan University.

The relationship between Al Purdy and Charles Bukowski exemplifies the literary links between Paget Press and Black Sparrow. Al Purdy was one of Paget's first authors. "I met Al Purdy at Mansfield Book Mart. I was very impressed with him and I really like his work," Brown remembers. "And as it turned out he was a wonderful bibliophile as well. He would come in smoking his cigar and drinking and I loved that."

In 1977, after he had moved back to Sutton West to set up a book business with Marion Kilger (his companion and associate publisher), Brown established Paget Press and published his first book of Purdy poems, *At Marsport Drugstore*. It was followed by a poetic travelogue, *Moths in the Iron Curtain*, an account of Purdy's 1978 tour of the Soviet Union with Ralph Gustafson. In November 1982, Paget Press issued *Birdwatching at the Equator: The Galapagos Islands Poems* in an edition of 100 copies signed and numbered by Purdy, with colour prints of Eurithe Purdy's photographs tipped into each volume. Like Paget's other Purdy books, it sold around the world, explains Brown, opening an aérogramme from his British agent with a hefty order for *The Bukowski/Purdy Letters*.

Upstairs in the farmhouse, the immaculately kept offices of Paget Press and Brown & Company present a direct antithesis to the cluttered chaos in the old Mansfield Book Mart, but the evidence of projects past and future pays homage to a Heinemann-like love of fine books, exquisite type, and literary excellence. Lucy Booth Martyn, who will be 80 this year, is one of Paget's leading authors. Last

spring she was co-winner of the Toronto Book Award for *The Face of Early Toronto*. Distantly related by marriage to the Sibbald Browns, Martyn lives nearby, and after publishing several books with Toronto publishers, she approached Peter Sibbald Brown with the happy notion that she wouldn't have to leave the neighbourhood to visit her publisher. The relationship has worked out beautifully for both of them. "I've always been interested in Toronto history, city planning, and architecture. And Lucy is a wonderful, eccentric person who's a devoted archivist."

Late last fall, Paget published Martyn's *A View of Original Toronto*, once again featuring archival photos with a text by Martyn and Brown's own crisp, restrained design. (Brown, like his co-publisher's wife, Barbara Martin, is a self-taught book designer, and like Black Sparrow books, Paget Press titles bear a distinctive, high-quality look that is rare in the world of trade publishing.) In the same vein, Paget will soon publish *The Mapping of Victorian Toronto* — its attractive marbled dust-cover is on display in the room where production work is done. And in the fall of 1984, Brown will publish Martyn's *William James and His Circle*. James was a newspaper photographer whose work has been preserved in the City of Toronto Archives. His photographs, says Brown, are not only pleasing for their aesthetic qualities, but valued as a social documentary of late 19th, early 20th-century Toronto.

And then there are the Paris books. Given his own tastes and style of publishing, Brown's interest in the literary circles of Paris in the 20s seems only natural. In concert with editor Hugh Ford, an American scholar and specialist in the period, Paget Press will publish the letters of Nancy Cunard, the famous steamship heiress and owner of the Hours Press, which launched works by Samuel Beckett, Ezra Pound, and Richard Aldington. Ford will also edit *The Confessions of a Harvard Man*, a memoir by Harold Stearns, an American expatriate and intellectual who spent his youth in Paris and New York during the 20s and early 30s.

Other projects, such as a book featuring the work of Montreal photographer Michael Flomen, will follow the stunning precedent set by *Paul Outerbridge: A Singular Aesthetic*, a lavish, \$135 deluxe catalogue raisonné published under Martin's and Brown's joint imprint, Arabesque Books. Before the year is out, there will

also be another Purdy book from Paget Press, *At the Quinte Hotel*.

Wyndham Lewis revival

1984 will be a banner year for Black Sparrow and its distributors. Already the American literary press is hailing the forthcoming publication of *Blast 3*, a revival of the journal launched by Wyndham Lewis in 1914 encompassing the art-literary movement he named Vorticism. Its publication will be accompanied by the release of *Rude Assignment*, a Lewis autobiography first published in 1950. Black Sparrow's Wyndham Lewis catalogue pays tribute to the great modernist with no less than nine of his works in print or about to be published.

Neither Paget Press nor Black Sparrow take notice of the conventional publishing seasons. Black Sparrow releases new titles at the rate of about one every three weeks, and Paget Press puts its annual six or seven titles on the market as they come off the press. Yet Black Sparrow sells 300,000 books a year. Paget grosses about \$300,000 annually from its book sales, and additional revenues are generated through Brown's typesetting service, Eildon Graphica. "And we make money on our books," says Brown, as surprised as anyone else. "We don't mark up our books a lot. We're not out for the kill. But no large publisher could ever produce books like this at these prices and in low runs [about 2,000 copies]." And no large publisher would likely adopt Brown's costing methods. "When the book is finished I feel it and think, 'What price would I pay for that book and think that I'd got something nice?'"

A loyal clientele

It seems to work. Books from Brown & Company find their way, with the help of numerous catalogues and the sales acumen of representative Gord Garner, into outlets that range from Nicky Drumbolis's Toronto rare-book establishment, Letters, to the well-stocked Classic Bookshop on Ste. Catherine Street in Montreal, to Coles branches in Montreal and Toronto. According to Drumbolis, Paget fits into a category of its own, publishing books he'd often classify as indulgences, yet quietly producing a volume like *The Bukowski/Purdy Letters*, which he calls an exciting book. "It shows something about Canadian literature that people aren't aware of."

Long-time Black Sparrow customer Michel Lanteigne, manager of the Ste. Catherine's Street Classic shop, has a steady clientele for his Black Sparrow titles, particularly anything by Bukowski. He praises the Black Sparrow/Paget Press operation not only for the quality of the books — "they're gorgeous" — but for the promotional efforts that help sell them. "They produce beautiful catalogues and posters. I wish more publishers were like them. They set an example for any kind of business."

As for Peter Sibbald Brown, he's content to watch the continuous sales of the 400 titles he carries in however small numbers at a time. "We're looking for longevity. The books aren't published for a single whammo sale." Other publishers might envy him the independent means that allowed him to launch such a press. After all, without the constant need to apply to councils for funds, to watch bestseller lists, and to fight the distribution battle, they could afford to be as bouyant as Brown. "It's fun," he says. "It's great fun."