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Places of the heart

The life and lure of small towns • by Val Clery

"Mariposa is not a real town. On the contrary it is about seventy or eighty of them. You may find them all the way from Lake Superior to the sea, with the same square streets and the same maple trees and the same churches and hotels, and everywhere the sunshine of the land of hope."

Stephen Leacock: Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town

It was sitting that Leacock, in his time, considered the most Canadian of our writers, should also have been a chronicler of small-town life in Canada. In his heyday he probably reflected a taste for small-town life shared by most Canadians. Canada has changed greatly meanwhile, but if the dictates of communication and development have relocated most of us to cities, whether we like it or not, nostalgia for a real or imagined Mariposa can still haunt us.

Today there are far fewer of the typical small towns of which Leacock wrote, but those of us most oppressed by the overcast of big-city problems are tempted to believe that in those modest communities that have managed to survive, the sunshine of the land of hope still shines warmly. Ironically, at the periphery of all our burgeoning cities, that same nostalgia seems now to be accelerating the process that effaces such dreams. Many city dwellers, driven by rising civic property values and pressures, seek refuge by setting up house in small towns within commuting distance of their downtown jobs. Almost invariably they condemn their idyllic sanctuaries to metropolitan engulfment; there are no two ways about it — big cities have an insatiable appetite for small towns.

My own rather vagrant life as a writer inclines me to the belief that some of the pleasurable elements of small-town life may be found in the imagination if not in actual experience. An early childhood in a city neighborhood, an adolescence in a small town and a lifetime spent in cities, broken by short periods in rural communities, has not committed me to either setting. Yet I perceive my small-town adolescence to have been both a formative and impressive period of my life, one that has inclined me to scale down wherever I settle to dimensions that seem comfortable to me. Consequently, even the downtown city neighborhoods I've mostly lived in have held for me the imaginative ambience of small towns.

For Holley Rubinsky, small-town life must have reality. She serves on the editorial board of a Toronto literary magazine, Descant, and is married to the president of a computer software development company with concerns in Toronto and Vancouver. Despite the fact that she is obliged to live away from the small town of Kaslo, B.C., for much of the year, she still considers that gentle community her home.

Her parents owned a small property there, which she visited in the early years of adulthood. Then, in 1975, seeking a brief winter escape from the urban sprawl of Los Angeles, she returned and was once again captivated by the calm beauty of the valley in which the town of about 1,000 is set, beside a long, shimmering lake. So she stayed.

With no job, she voluntarily helped out at the local newspaper, joined the local Chamber of Commerce and tutored a learning-handicapped child. She immersed herself in the life of the town and found it rich and fulfilling. "Small towns engull you," she says, "You become an important part of the community's life."

During the nine years Rubinsky lived full-time in Kaslo, the town suffered from the closing of the lumber mill, which had been its major industry and source of jobs. The loss of the mill caused people to leave the town; many homes were left vacant. The families that remain are now, for the most part, employed in the forest and tourist industries. Fortunately, tourism has not ruined Kaslo's small-town ambience — British Columbia's wealth of scenic beauty and
Residents have fought for the survival of their communities. Those who live in small towns do so not out of necessity but choice.
The Oslo Factor

A new oil-sands project, now in the planning stages, holds the prospect of more jobs for Fort McMurray and more oil for Canada.

The Athabasca River loops through the city of Fort McMurray in Alberta’s northern bushland; the people who live there cross it on a convenient bridge in the heart of the community. But there is another bridge, 50 kilometres downstream. It is a handsome steel structure built by the Alberta government in the early 1980s at a cost of about $13 million. Most of the 36,000 people who live in Fort McMurray call it the “bridge to nowhere.” Fort McMurray is at the heart of one of the world’s richest oil deposits — but it is stubborn oil, mixed with sand. Its recovery is expensive; economic conditions have to be right to go after it. The “bridge to nowhere” was built to serve a giant oil-sands development project that was planned in the early eighties but fell victim to the economic woes of the time.

Today, once again, the bridge appears to have a future. Last September, Esso Resources Canada Limited, an
Imperial Oil subsidiary, and five other members of a consortium agreed to sell an average of $850 million in federal and provincial governments and the World Bank, which are major players in the oil industry. The consortium has committed to proceed with basic work and site preparation studies and outline incentives provided by governments that make it possible for the studies to go ahead despite the uncertainty of oil prices. The consortium, which meets every one or two weeks, will be monitored by a joint committee that examines its financial and economic criteria. The committee is expected to be the key to maintaining the project under financial pressure. The project would be managed by a five-member board of directors. The board would be responsible for the operation and management of the province and the project.

The Althabasa deposit is estimated to contain the equivalent of five times the proven reserves of Saudi Arabia. The recovery and upgrading of the bitumen is expensive, but, says Good Willmott, if oil prices are about $20 a barrel in 1991, a decision would have to be made about going ahead with the project. "At those prices," adds Willmott, "OSLO would earn about $9 billion in (U.S.) dollars over a 35-year operating period.

Although production techniques for OSLO are still being refined, it is likely that the methods selected will bear a close resemblance to the one used at Syncrude, where it is the largest, and the largest share of OSLO's production. The equipment will be designed to handle crude oil and bitumen. The project is expected to employ a large number of people for the construction phase of the project. At peak building times, the project will employ more than 6,000 permanent workers and 10,000 temporary workers. The project will also move the bitumen. The decision on OSLO will depend on economic factors (chiefly the price of oil and the stability of the environment) and engineering research by the Alberta government and the results of the engineering work and country studies. Most of the consortium members are expected to support the project, and the government of Canada has committed to support the project. The project is expected to create up to 12,000 jobs and generate $1 billion in provincial tax revenue. The project is expected to be completed by 1993. The OSLO project is expected to be the first of its kind in the world and is expected to be the largest project of its kind in the world. The project is expected to be completed by 1993. The OSLO project is expected to be the first of its kind in the world and is expected to be the largest project of its kind in the world. The project is expected to be completed by 1993. The OSLO project is expected to be the first of its kind in the world and is expected to be the largest project of its kind in the world. The project is expected to be completed by 1993. The OSLO project is expected to be the first of its kind in the world and is expected to be the largest project of its kind in the world. The project is expected to be completed by 1993.
Fragments of Yesterday

A FEW DAYS AGO, WHEN I was in a secondhand store, I came across an old Holiday magazine with an article by the French writer Colette, who wrote that when she moved to Paris, and throughout many moves within the city (she estimated 14), she “dragged about” with her things from her girlhood home in the countryside, including household objects that were “huge, useless, gaudily colored” but which, she said, were older than herself and had as many memories. It started me thinking of the things my wife and I have clung to through a married lifetime of moving from place to place—from flats to apartments, city to country village and through many moves we made to Florida and California and back to Canada. They were often worn, out-of-date and hard to pack, but they held a special meaning for us and, in a strange way, gave a sense of permanence and continuity to our lives.

We carried them around in the car, and when I’d pack them into the trunk, there was always an oddly reassuring feeling that they were a simplified life and reduced it a few important tokens of friendship and family ties and special periods of our lives. Usually, when we were preparing to leave Toronto, it was a nice somber cloudy morning with the first sugary grains of snow drifting through the bare branches of the elms and into the open car trunk, perhaps onto my wife’s wooden recipe box, which contained bits of poetry along with such favorite recipes as one from an old friend’s mother for oatmeal squares. It was a pleasant kind of domestic time out there alone, looking for the right spot to stow, say, the shoe box that I knew held my wife’s Skyline Miracle Potato Peeler and the vegetable slicer she bought one night 45 years ago at the Canadian National Exhibition, near the midway. My attention might get waylaid by my Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, which my wife had given me when we married, a worn, well-used, working companion that has a section at the back explaining those Greek and Latin expressions you never know the meaning of (like “pro facto”: “by the fact or act itself”) and a glossary of Scottish words and phrases. I’d stand there with the snow settling gently on my hair, perhaps reading the meaning of “doh-an-dorach”: “a stirrup cup—a cup of wine or the like taken by a rider about to depart.”

Often when we were leaving on trips from an apartment we lived in for many years in mid-Toronto, a man from our building—a tall, stooped, soft-spoken retired doctor I always liked, who wore fine heavy-soled brogues—would come over to say a quiet good-bye, pink-faced from the cold, leaning on his cane. There would be a nice little social moment there in the frosty morning, with a kind of homey feeling, as he compared, perhaps, his blackthorn cane with the one I was just going to put behind the spare tire, made for me from the shoot of an oak tree that grew down around Lakefield, Ont., by a friend one time when I was laid up. We would discuss things we treasured, and I’d show him the stubby wooden carpenter’s plane that had belonged to my grandfather, who came from Nottingham, England. And we’d look at the plaid wool motor robe that had been given to my wife and me years before as a going-away present by great neighbors of ours, a gentle, widowed CNR brakeman and his affectionate, brawling daughters. It was always the last thing to be put in our car.
spread over the load in the back seat to make things kook neat, and it was handy to have along when one of us felt chilly — a comforting old friend, made of pure Scottish wool and memories.

Some things that we held onto fondly were not only awkward to take with us but would have been out of place where we were going. We had a tea wagon from the early days of our marriage that we shipped to a pink concrete block house in the palmetto scrub near Fort Lauderdale. I stood in the shadows around a corner from a screened-in porch, within the low tide of the sea, something from my mother's world of smog, safe parrots and ladies sipping afternoon tea. Sometimes such things were into storage, and we'd have a pleasant reunion with them on a soggier waging house, just in from the boating dock. I'd stand in a patch of sunlight reading a paragraph from a book that used to be in my father's bookcase, like my gilded hard-cover copy of Vanity Fair, with an embossed downtown poplar making a soft rustling sound as I read again with delight of how Becky Sharp threw her graduation diagram at Miss Finkleton's Academy for Young Ladies. We'd bring out my wife's sewing basket and look inside and then close it again, putting a wooden peg through the staple, and maybe we'd renew acquaintance with our clock, a wedding gift from my wife's family. When we were first married, living in two rooms under the peak of a high house, in a house in the city, the clock stood on a desk between two brass candlesticks, sending its mellow chimes out over the tree tops. Through the years it chimed good-by to departing guests on Saturday night, out over the silvery countryside where we rented a farmhouse and out over my wife's balcony flower boxes when we lived 15 floors above the traffic of midtown Toronto. It chimed through the awful long sisses of quarters and with cheerful relief when we started taking it again.

It was always nice to see these things again when we came back from some unfamiliar place in a country that wasn't ours. It was like a welcome back to our native land to open, for instance, my McClelland and Stewart Boy Scout Handbook for Canada, which I've had for so long that its pages are brown at the edges. As I look through those familiar pages my spirits settle comfortably back in the bend of the Don Valley near the street where I grew up in Toronto; I smell the snow and cedars and the smoke of a winter campfire and taste the bits of cedar bark in the boiled tea. I went there every chance I got as a kid, every day if I could in the summer holidays, when the Don gurgled secretly past its muddy banks and the valley was an enchanted veil of green leaves and wild cucumber vines and you could stand spellbound listening to the summer sound of a flycatcher on a lazy July morning.

I've also treasured and kept repaired my 44th annual report of the Ontario department of mines, "The Pleinorome of the Toronto Region (Including the Toronto Interglacial Formation)" by A.P. Coleman, which has a large-scale map in a pocket at the back on which a tiny black square, smaller than a timer seed, marks a farmhouse I knew. I went there one year when I was a boy and watched in a state of rapture a herd of cows past the kitchen window as we ate supper. They were on their way back from pasture to be milked, scuffling through buttercups and Queen Anne's lace and spicy smelling yarrow. The report's description of the Great Lakes' geology gives me a feeling of the sweep of the land where I belong, the gentle glacial hills of southern Ontario, the wooded slope of the Don Valley near the lieutenant-governor's house, a wood that was the home territory (described by Ernest Thompson Seton in Wild Animals I Have Known) of Silverpaw the crow and his band. It's a report, in fact, of my psychological geography — my strait and moraines and emotional sedimentation — and it gives me more identity than those pronouncements on television by men with their fingertips pressed together and eyes half closed in profound thought who define a Canadian as if they were describing a new breakfast cereal.

This is an increasingly mobile world. Life isn't as stable as when family things stayed for a generation in china cabinets and on plate rails and in cedar chests. Yet I've noticed that other people cling to a few things for years as if to the idea of permanence. Whenever my wife and I visit one friend in a house in a small town or 24 floors up in a city high-rise, this house has moved almost as often as we have. It gives me a nice feeling to see, in a prominent place, a painting of familiar to me on our mantel clock, done by our father probably 40 years ago, of a cliff and fall leaves up near Beaver Valley, Ont. It brings back memories for me of great outings, wonderful warm shambles of kids and tent poles, everything running late, often ending with a fine, soothing summer rain falling on us like a benediction. And I've noticed that when we visit our daughter's I'll see something I'd completely forgotten, like the copy of Little Women our youngest daughter got when she was 13 and a Cypress knee (part of a cypress root that grows above Florida swamp water and is sold as a novelty in highway gift stands) our eldest daughter got around the same age and obviously prizes, although it must be nearly as hard to pack as our mantel clock.

Colette wrote in her article in Holiday magazine that when her desk lamp was lit to her place on the Champs-Elysees "its circle of light embraced" the familiar things she'd always kept with her. My bed light would do pretty much the same thing if it could shine through my clothes closet door, dresser drawer or around the corner of the living room. It would light up an old Donegal tweed jacket with a label showing an armored knight that I've had since the days when young fellows tried to dress in a way that suggested barrel-hall shoes and stryker for breakfast and which has had burns stuck to it on many frosty November mornings I've been out with my Taverner's Canadian Land Birds in the pocket. And it would shine off an umbrella with a bent rib that I should get rid of but don't because I still connect it with a tense period of my life when I went for long desperate walks at night in the rain. And if the light could shine through to the living-room bookcase it would fall on a Bible I bought for 50 cents one night at a sidewalk stall and with which, I discovered, there in the faint glow from some distant theatre lights, had been inscribed to one of my favorite editors — a white-haired woman I worked with for many years — on her 96th birthday. Besides the Bible my light would reveal a Schrör's Pronouncing Pocket-Manual of Musical Terms that I keep because I like the look and feel of it and because it reminds me of a time in my youth when I was going to be a concert pianist. "Parramilla," I read, "A dance of southern Italy." And I see a piece of music with a lively pink cover and hear the metronome ticking and feel the autumn leaves blowing past the living-room window. These aren't just things; they have another dimension back in time. They are reminders of the selves we once were and still are.

Margaret Norris [left], Cam Finley [centre] and Eric Wright: Founding Forces of Open College.

O N AN E ARLY SPRING EVENING, AN EVENING of threatening storm clouds and a chilling, unsympathetic wind, Wilma Montgomery-Doucet sits on her living-room floor in front of a homemade 21-year-old receiver, searching vainly for her school. School for the struggling 42-year-old single mother of two is Toronto radio station CJRT, 91.1 on the FM frequency. On a good day, a day when the sky is untroubled, the little Toronto radio station and its CN Tower-based signal finds its way clear to the shores of Lake Erie — and Montgomery-Doucet's unfinished cottage in Port Dover, Ont. This evening, however, radio static is all UNIVERSE OF THE AIR

Learning by radio has been around for more than half a century. Today, more and more Canadians are tuning in by Victor Paddy
she hears. After several rather frustrating minutes, she turns off her radio, turns quickly to her Afghan-covered corner chair and, in the dim light of the tiny living room, cracks open her study book. "Ethnic Relations in Canada" is Montgomery-Doucet's seventh course in an eight-semester diploma program in gerontology. The course is newly revised, and all new offerings on CJRT, it will be made available on cassette tape — but only after its 12-week radio run. Still, while Montgomery-Doucet may have missed this evening's program, it will be repeated later in the week. And she's hopeful that then CJRT's radio school — better known as Open College — will find it in its way clear to Port Dover. And her living-room radio.

CJRT is a determinedly eccentric, commercial-free radio station built on classical music, jazz and more imagination than money. Housed in an old five-storey building, from where E.P. Taylor once ran a beer company, CJRT sits on the campus of Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in downtown Toronto. Since 1971, the privately owned station has been favoring the Toronto area and ever-increasing pockets of Ontario with Open College, Canada's pioneering "university" of the airwaves.

In Open College's 18-year life, more than 5,000 people, some as young as 16, others well into their eighties, have successfully completed university-level credit courses on topics ranging from psychology in the workplace to nutrition. While it's not possible to get a university degree through Open College, more than a few of those 5,000 have found, through the nurturing privacy of radio and cassette education, the necessary confidence to go to university or community college.

Each Open College course takes up to a year to develop — a close collaboration between the individual instructor, an Open College producer and, at one point or another, most of Open College's 11 full-time staff members. Each lecture (there are usually 24 lectures in a one-semester course) includes more expert guests than most classroom courses ever see. Economist and broadcaster Diane Cobden, for example, has interspersed about 100 interviews, including those of food critics, with lectures on that semester economics course. That makes for stimulating instruction; it also makes for quite a few "I told you so" slips — while annual enrollment at Open College is less than 1,000, its courses attract 50,000 to 60,000 listeners.

For most of these casual listeners, the promise of CJRT's innovative programs prescribed in a simple but engaging radio format. For people like Montgomery-Doucet, however, CJRT is much more than that. A part-time dietary aide in a local nursing home, Montgomery-Doucet is convinced that Open College and its popular gerontology certificate program is her only hope of ever doing more for seniors than "banding out glasses of milk" — her only hope of ever doing more, finally, for herself.

Postsecondary evening classes are too far from her Port Dover home; a full-time return to school is financially impossible. So, two or three times a week, pen and notebook in hand, she strains to hear a voice broadcast knowledge — and hope — from a Toronto radio station 128 kilometres away.

CJRT may have been the first station in Canada to offer university-level credit courses over the airwaves (its courses are credited toward degrees by Ryerson and York University's Askill College; accreditation at other academic institutions is subject to individual negotiations), but radio has long been used to communicate ideas in a country blessed — and burdened — with a great deal of space and a sparse population. Informal radio-education experiments in Canada began in the mid-1920s. In 1956, the University of Alberta's private radio station even broadcast school lessons into Edmonton homes when a flu epidemic briefly closed the city's schools. And then there was the Farm Radio Forum, inaugurated nationally on CBC in 1959, which lasted well into the 1960s, examined a range of farming concerns each week and responded to written requests from its isolated listeners. "For its time, it was," says Chuck Shobe, a past director of formal learning for Alberta's Access Network, the province's educational media service, "an extraordinary distance-education experiment." Indeed, the Farm Radio Forum has been used as a model for similar programs in developing countries all over the world. In Canada, as in most countries, however, distance education played a minor, almost invisible role in education until relatively recently. In the 1960s, with the coming of age of the postwar baby boomers, it was the university, and, soon after, the community college that came to define higher education.

By the early 1970s, however, as the vanguard of the baby-boom generation embarked on careers, the workplace itself was undergoing a revolution, a transformation fired by technology and the acceleration of change in every facet of life. As knowledge quickly dated, life-long learning became the rallying cry. But even Canada's colleges seemed incapable of adapting fast enough to the spiraling demand for continuing education. Indeed, colleges, like universities, were based on the principle of face-to-face instruction. For those already in the work force or raising families or simply unable to meet the timetables or location demands of conventional postsecondary institutions, a more inventive form of education was desperately needed. Great Britain provided a model.

Britain's Open University, established in 1969, ushered in a new age of distance education. It showed Canada, and the world, that correspondence courses need not be the educational equivalent of solitary confinement.

Today, more than 80,000 students are enrolled in undergraduate and graduate-level courses at Open University. According to Elizabeth Burge, who heads the instructional resources development unit at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Toronto, "its impact, internationally has been enormous. Eric Wright isn't about to deny Open University's place in the development of CJRT's Open College program. After all, Wright lifted the word "open" from the British institution. He'd heard about the University's innovative use of radio, and, since Ryerson then still owned CJRT, Wright wondered if a similar program, albeit less ambitious than a national educational service, might be possible at Ryerson. "Back then, things were very much on the line," says Wright. Ryerson English professor and well-known mystery writer, "I was dead at the time, and I could get away with going ahead and doing things that now would take two years' study and 15 committee meetings before being approved." So Wright quietly canvassed the college for a prospective teacher, someone willing to pioneer Canada's first university credit course on radio. He found a reluctant sociology professor with a modest background in writing and producing for CBC radio and television. "I don't think Eric had any idea how little I knew," recalls Margaret Norquay from her home in Toronto's Beaches district. Norquay learned quickly, receiving considerable help from Cam Finlay, then a junior producer at CJRT and now the station's president and general manager. Finlay was no stranger to educational radio. A year earlier he had launched Radio Study, a regular series of informal educational radio programs. Together, the two tackled CJRT's first credit course, Norquay painstakingly preparing 48, one-hour lectures for the two-semester course, Finley producing them for radio. It took them almost a year, but in January 1971 they were, on the air, beaming introductory sociology into the homes of 83 formally enrolled students and a multitude of regular listeners.

"My God, we must have turned a lot of regular CJRT listeners off," says Finlay. As part of the twice-a-week lectures, Norquay insisted on a live phone-in segment so students could call in with ques-
prevailed. The provincial government finally stepped in, and with its support, a unique private non-profit corporation, CIRT Inc., was founded in 1974. With highly successful public-funding drives and annual contributions from the government, Canada's anomaly of the airwaves began to grow. CIRT's signal took on new strength, moving from the tiny downtown Toronto Ryerson antenna to the CBC Tower and then, in 1981, to the CN Tower. Since 1986, CIRT has also been available on cable, via satellite, to increasing numbers of communities throughout Ontario.

By then, its reach covered 70 percent of Ontario's population; by then, CIRT's Open College had become, as Elizabeth Burge says, "Canada's little distance-education gem."

If Open College had emerged from its shaky first decade as a "gem," it was a gem cut and polished by Margaret Norquay. For it was under the energetic spirit of Norquay—Open College's sole director until the finally retired in early 1987—that Open College took on the shine and sophistication it displays today. It was Norquay who brought in course tutors to encourage communication between Open College and its students. It was Norquay who introduced the valuable half-day orientation and weekend study sessions for those who could travel to Toronto. Ostensibly, the get-togethers are meant to acquaint students with the course program; more important, they provide reassurance to Open College's adult learners.

As course offerings expanded, it was Norquay, along with Open College's own producers (there are now four), who shed what was originally a dry, university-lecture format in favor of richly produced, documentary-style presentations—a format that has been further refined by Open College's current director, May Maskow. Norquay also struggled to teach teachers how to write—and speak—for radio. "Write as if it were spoken and speak as if it were written—that was Margaret's golden rule," says Finley.

Technology was also evolving, and at the 1980s dawned, Open College embraced the audio cassette. Cassette courses expanded Open College's reach well beyond its radio signal, to places like Englehart, Ont.—to people like Hoof trimmer Albert Cousineau.

"I am a one-kilogram leg hammer in the "black and white cow." Be a lot

Cousineau was convinced that if he gave up on his first test he'd never get the diploma he desperately wants

Cousineau was convinced that if he gave up on his first test he'd never get the diploma he desperately wants.

 hva of the large, distinctly iridescent Holstein towering above him. Faintly yellow, almost translucent chips scatter across the muddy, haylage-sharp air, falling amidst the sawdust and straw of an unventilated dairy barn.

"Lots of farmers tell me I'd make a good wood carver," says the short, bearded man wedged against the bulk of the black-and-white cow. "Be a lot
easier to carve a block of wood. Doesn't move as much." The 36-year-old Cousineau is a hoist trimmer. He makes what he says is a good living cutting back and filling down the hoves of cows through-out Northern Ontario's dairy districts. But Cousineau knows that one bad kick, from one of his 700-kilogram clients, one wrong move, and his career would be over. That possibility, and his own ambition, have made the happily married father of three young children determined to get out of the barn and into an office as soon as possible.

The last cow of the morning trimmed and manicured, Cousineau jumps into his pickup and heads north, following the Trans-Canada Highway home for lunch. On the next to him sits a portable cassette-player. Normally, Cousineau would slip in one of the tapes he keeps in his pocket and catch a few minutes of "Psychology in the Workplace," his first Open College course. With a passenger in the truck, however, Cousineau is content to talk about Open College, about how, when work takes him away for a few days at a time, he takes along son's photobook. "It has got earphones," says Cousineau. "So I can listen to the tapes when I'm staying in a farmer's house, without disturbing anyone.

The smell of the mushroom-and-beef-soup sauce fills the Cousineau's home. Cousineau's wife, Par, a part-time library assistant at a local school, stirs the soup pot, then joins her husband at the face-covered kitchen table. Together they recite "chat panicky time" a few weeks earlier when Cousineau confronted his first major assignment, a 1,500-word essay on the evolution of work. He hadn't done much essay-writing in his two years of agricultural college. And college was 15 years ago.

"It's not hard to listen to the tapes and take notes," Cousineau says. "But putting it together on paper meant I had to contribute; it had to come from me.

It didn't come easily. But then Cousineau was convinced that he gave up on his first test, he'd never get the public-administration diploma he desperately wants from Open College, never get the bachelor's degree he's convinced that diploma would lead to. "You remember those three o'clock?" Cousineau asks, setting down his spoon, and gesturing in the general direction, of the farm he'd just left. The silos rise about 20 metres into the clear, Northern Ontario air, directly in front of the dairy barn. "Well, that's how big that assignment seemed to me.

Cousineau completed his assignment, pressing on a 6.8 out of 40 for his efforts. "It was a great achievement for me," he says, a boyish, dimpled smile lighting his darkly handsome features. "I brought those silos down to nothing.

In the past 15 years, there has been, in Canada and around the world, a quiet explosion of growth in correspondence programs—or distance education, as it's generally known today. Canadian universities and colleges, once skeptical of private, off-campus education, now offer hundreds of innovative distance education courses and opportunities. University-level institutions dedicated purely to distance education have sprung up in British Columbia, Alberta, Quebec and Newfoundland. Like today's traditional postsecondary institutions, they're expanding and, in many cases, pioneering the use of television, audio and video teleconferencing, computers, facsimile machines and other electronic means to bring knowledge into the homes of hundreds of thousands of Canadians.

Next to this advancing tidal wave of growth and innovation is Open College. Open College may seem little more than a ripple. But ripples make waves too.
REBIRTH of a BUSINESS

BY D'ARCY JENISH

WITH A RECORD YEAR BEHIND HIM, BRIAN FISCHER IS both relaxed and candid as he discusses the upheavals and changes that have occurred at Esso Chemical Canada over the course of the 1980s. Fischer, president of Esso Chemical, notes that by the end of 1985 some senior executives were wondering whether their organization would survive as a division of Imperial Oil. Those doubts were created by four years of poor profits and outright losses. Says Fischer: “There were a lot of questions being raised at the upper-management levels of Imperial about whether it was really worthwhile for it to stay in the chemical business.”

The dark days of the early 1980s and the doubts they engendered have been laid to rest as a result of Esso Chemical’s performance over the past three years. Earnings soared from $17 million in 1986 to $34 million in 1987. And last year, Esso Chemical smashed its previous profit record of $81 million, achieved in 1980, by earning $104 million. Now there is even talk within the organization of participating in a large joint venture with an outside partner to take advantage of the opportunities presented by free trade with the United States. “For certain products, free trade really opens up the United States to us,” says Fischer. “Within one day’s drive of Sarnia there’s more than half the U.S. manufacturing industry and 100 million people.”

Esso Chemical makes plastics for all manner of goods from toys to telephones. It makes additives that help cars run better and longer. It makes fertilizer to assist farmers in growing food. It makes for good business.
To a large extent, Esso Chemical's comeback can be attributed to the recovery of the North American economy from the recession of the early 1980s. But rather than merely riding an economic wave, management and workers alike have embarked on a sweeping exercise in self-examination and self-improvement. The net result is a broadly based conviction among Esso Chemical employees that the organization will be in a better position to withstand future economic downturns.

The emphasis on internal improvement has permeated the entire Imperial organization. Essentially, senior managers are trying to change people's attitudes and approaches to work. They are encouraging employees at all levels to take more responsibility, to make more decisions and to look constantly for more efficient ways of doing their jobs. "It was necessary for us to change the way we were doing things, to become a leaner, more motivated, more productive organization," says Bob Peterson, president and chief operating officer of Imperial. "The students of organization today say that we need more employee involvement in the day-to-day management of the business."

Changing an organization, particularly a large one, takes time and patience. By almost any measure, Esso Chemical is a large and diverse enterprise. It employs 1,150 people, manufactures hundreds of products and last year had sales of almost $1 billion. The organization comprises two divisions: one produces agricultural chemicals, namely fertilizer; the other petrochemicals, such as plastic resins, additives for gasoline and engine oils, and the raw materials to make these products.

Esso Chemical's primary petrochemical facility is located in Sarnia, Ont., adjacent to a refinery run by Esso Petro-Canada, Imperial's refining and marketing division. The proximity of the refining and petrochemical complexes is no coincidence. In the process of refining oil to make petroleum products (such as gasoline and diesel fuel), various by-products are formed that can be used as raw materials for the manufacture of chemical products, such as plastic resins and liquid additives for gasoline.

Research and development (R&D) plays a major role in all areas of Esso Chemical's business. Employees (below) test one of the many grades of polyethylene resins manufactured at the Sarnia plant.

The agricultural chemicals division, the largest supplier of fertilizer to farmers in Western Canada, has its administrative centre in Edmonton. As its sprawling manufacturing complex, which covers 372 hectares, is located at Redwater, 75 kilometres south of Alberta's capital. On a busy day in spring, when western grain growers are preparing to sow, a fleet of 900 trucks pass through the complex grounds. In an average year, 11,000 rail cars are loaded with fertilizer from the Redwater plant.

To the average Canadian consumer, the chemical industry is often seen as distant and sometimes even frightening. The very word "chemical" conjures up thoughts of dangerous substances. But at Esso Chemical the word stands for such things as fertilizer that is used to help grow food crops, running better and plastics used in a vast array of products from children's car seats to toys and garbage bags. "The great virtue of plastics," says Don McGregor, vice-president of Esso Chemical's polymers group, "is the ease with which they can be modified, strength and flexibility allow it to be tailored to serve consumers' needs."

And those needs are increasing. The use of plastics, says Faris Shamma, manager of economic affairs for the Toronto-based Petro-Canada, one of the major divisions of Imperial, has grown twice as fast as Canada's economy over the past 20 years. If current trends continue, adds plastics will be more widely used in manufacturing than any other material, including metals, by the turn of the century.

Despite the immense growth in the use of plastics over the past two decades, manufacturers like Esso Chemical have periodically encountered financial turbulence. Brian Fischer explains that the recession of the early 1980s led to a decline in the demand for plastics just as the industry's manufacturing capacity reached new peaks. With excess supplies available, prices fell and most manufacturers were forced to operate below capacity.

For Esso Chemical that meant black operating. During the last downturn the Sarnia plant operated at capacity until a stockpile of plastic resin built up. The equipment was then placed in storage, waiting for the inventory to be sold. Overall, the plant was operating at only 60 to 70 percent capacity.

But with the recovery of the Canadian economy in the mid-1980s and new growth in the demand for plastics, the fortunes of the Sarnia plant changed. "For the past two years," says Don McGregor, "we've continually improved our capacity to enable us to meet customer demand." Last year, Esso Chemical produced 235,000 tonnes of plastic resin, compared with only 190,000 tonnes a year in the mid-1980s—and more than 90 percent of that output was sold to customers in Canada. With supply tight prices, even rise to record levels. Those circumstances have helped the polymer group make a major contribution to Esso Chemical's improved profits.

In the television commercial for Esso No Trouble Gasoline for Winter, two prisoners make a break for freedom. Using their bed frames, they clamber over a 12-metre wall of what appears to be a super-maximum-security prison. Both reach the ground at the same time and dash to identical cars. One prisoner hops into his vehicle, turns over the ignition and second to freedom. The other tries to start his car but it merely creeps, stutters and dies. As the commercial ends, he is about to be arrested.

The message is that Esso No Trouble Gasoline for Winter helps cars run better in colder weather. In fact, the product does not help prevent gas-line freezing and car-borer icing. What is in the gasoline that allows it to fight those winter demons? An additive manufactured by Esso Chemical's petrochemical division. Just what is in the additive is a trade secret, says Bill Levy, vice-president of the petrochemical division's performance products group. But it is typical of the hundreds of products developed and produced by his group.

Those products are almost always added to other products to help improve their performance or used to make a customer's process work better. The energy chemicals business, a section of Levy's group, for example, produces and sells dozens of products that aid in the production of oil and gas.

The performance-products business—unlike the cyclical plastics business—tends to be stable. "We don't have the tremendous swings in this business that some others do," says Levy, whose group serves about 500 customers across the country. "It doesn't get dramatically good or bad." This, while performance products made a smaller contribution to the improved profits of the past three years than the fertilizer or plastics groups, it provided a stable source of earnings during the last downturn in the overall chemical business.

As John Berger plans the spring seeding on his 800-hectare farm near Nanton, Alta., 70 kilometres south of Calgary, he invariably juggles a variety of factors. The 38-year-old Berger must decide how much land he will devote to wheat and barley and, on occasion, canola. He looks at fluctuations in grain prices over the previous six months or so and the strength of export sales through the Canadian Wheat Board. He also watches carefully to price forecasts for the coming year.

Regardless of his crop mix, Berger applies fertilizer to his land each spring, because he needs every ounce rather than leaving some of it fallow. He began farming in 1971 and since then has relied largely on Esso fertilizer because he likes the combination of "price, reliable service and performance."

Esso Chemical's fertilizer sales depend on the decisions made every year by thousands of western grain growers like John Berger. Prairie farmers have to assess what impacts—droughts and falling wheat prices—will have before deciding whether to buy fertilizer. If, for example, the weather is dry, fertilizer will not be particularly effective because, without moisture, it cannot penetrate the earth properly. If, on the other hand, precipitation is expected to be plentiful, fertilizer will make a big difference to the crop yield, and, especially if grain prices are expected to be high, the farmer will want to grow as much high-quality grain as possible and will likely buy fertilizer. Unfortunately, over the past five years Prairie farmers have been faced with droughts and falling wheat prices. Despite all the adversities, however, Esso Chemical has maintained fertilizer sales volumes. Revenues, however, dropped between 1984 and 1987 because prices were weak. But in the past year, says Morley Hansford, senior vice-president of agricultural chemicals, there has been a significant turnaround at the agricultural chemical division.

"Probably one of the most successful steps we've taken to improve earnings has been to secure two major sales contracts for phosphate fertilizer," says Hansford. "Those contracts effectively mean that our plant is running at full capacity — it had been running at half capacity for several years."

Hansford expects that 1989 will be an
even better year. The drought that wreaked havoc on much of the Prairies and the U.S. Midwest last summer has reduced the inventories of grain in both Canada and the United States, pushing prices up. “The Canadian Wheat Board will likely export only about 15 million tonnes of grain in the crop year that ends July 31, 1989,” says Handford, “compared with the normal 30 million.” Similarly, U.S. corn production fell to about 100 million tonnes last summer from the normal 180 million tonnes. At the same time, government support programs have helped maintain farm incomes in both countries. “Farmers are buying a lot of fertilizer right now,” adds Handford. “When they see good grain prices and lots of demand, they want to grow all they can. It’s that simple.”

WHILE ESSO CHEMICAL TODAY IS A large diverse and ever-changing enterprise, it was launched in August 1955 with just three employees. The late Clay Beemer was the first general manager. Rounding out the department were Dr. Wes Stewart and Tom Doherty. Stewart and Doherty still recall waiting to board a flight one day in mid-1955 when they were approached by Ken Jamieson, then a vice-president and director of Imperial. “Ken said, ‘Wes, we’ve decided to go into the chemical business, and we’d like you to take marketing and sales.’” recalls Stewart. “Tom took on the technical side of the operation. We didn’t have any assignments outside the hangar of an airport.”

By 1970, the organization had become so large that Imperial’s management decided to make it a separate corporate division, Esso Chemical Canada, with responsibility for its own operations. Since the division’s birth, the chemical industry has passed through several market cycles, and Esso Chemical, along with its competitors, has reaped the economic benefits and endured the losses that those cycles have brought. “Two things cause downturns in the chemical business,” says Brian Fischer, “recessions and the tendency of the world economy to overbuild.” Between 1982 and 1985, those factors came together, and both the fertilizer and petrochemical divisions of Esso Chemical suffered periods of losses and depressed earnings. But the difficulties were not limited to Esso Chemical; Imperial in general - indeed the entire country - was suffering the effects of the recession. But the University came a determination at Imperial to run a more efficient and productive organization, one that was geared not just to take advantage of surges in the economy but to withstand the blows of economic downturns.

At Esso Chemical this determination has resulted in employees at all levels taking much more responsibility and making many more decisions — in short, employees are becoming their own managers. Take Bill Hunter, for example. Prior to 1986, Hunter, an engineer, worked as a project supervisor with a group that provided engineering and technical services to all areas of the petrochemical division in Sarnia. His sole task was to supervise engineering projects. Under a reorganization that occurred in 1986, the group was disbanded and its members assigned permanently to specific operating teams. Hunter now works with the Puramins team in the performance products group. “Now, instead of performing just one function for a lot of different areas,” says Hunter, “I do many jobs but in just one area. That means I can get involved with projects right from the beginning — I can contribute ideas rather than simply being given a task to do. I am much more involved and am putting more of my abilities to work. That makes my job more satisfying and, I believe, means I’m making a more valuable contribution.”

The involvement of employees in planning and problem-solving is a key element of the improvement strategy. It has been used to that, for the most part, management made decisions and employees carried them out. Today, employees are encouraged to work in teams to solve problems and look for better ways to run the business.

The team approach is producing tangible results. The performance products group, for example, has, for years had a problem with water getting into storage tanks containing solvents. Deliveries to customers were frequently delayed because of the problem, says Bill Levy: “If water got into a storage tank on a truck,” he says, “we’d have to leave the truck, let the water settle out of the solvent and then drain it.” As a result, trucks would be held up and customers would be kept waiting.

In the first half of 1987, a team was set up to solve the problem. The major culprit proved to be the floating roofs on the tanks, says Levy. By installing specially designed fixed roofs, the problem was eliminated. “It cost us nearly $1 million to solve the problem,” he adds, “but there will be a payoff in improved efficiency and customer service.”

Within the fertilizer division, the commitment to developing new products probably best reflects the attitudinal changes that have occurred. Morty Handford says his division now spends $3 million annually on product development, compared with almost nothing three years ago, and the results have been startling. Three new products are now contributing close to 25 percent of annual earnings.

With one of those products, ammonium sulphate fertilizer, the division has gone from being just a bit player on the market leader. Handford says that for 15 years Esso Chemical bought the product from two competitors, who usually parted with as little as possible. As a result, Esso Chemical could never capture more than 20 percent of the market. Two years ago, Handford says, the division bought the technology to produce ammonium sulphate fertilizer. Now Esso Chemical holds 30 percent of the market, and the two competitors are buying its products. Says Handford: “I think that’s called a win.”

While the internal overhaul will not doubt continue, a major new opportunity should develop for the entire petrochemical industry as the U.S. market is poised open under free trade. The U.S. petrochemical industry alone the coast of the Gulf of Mexico now serves a huge portion of the U.S. market that’s within a day’s trucking from Sarnia, primarily because tariffs make it less attractive for Canadian producers to serve it, says Fischer. With the elimination of the tariffs, Esso Chemical will be able to make use of its transportation advantage.

Within Esso Chemical and Imperial, there is a recognition that the strong market and economic conditions of the past three years will not last forever. When conditions decline, the demand for many Esso Chemical products will likely drop. Yet there is also a recognition that consumption of its products will overall be much higher in the future. “The demand for most of the commodities we’re involved in will be substantially greater even 10 years hence,” says Bob Petterson. “So there’s going to be room for expansion.” The challenge facing Esso Chemical is to avoid the turmoil of another downturn in order to take advantage of the opportunities further down the road.

“Nothing can change the fact that the chemical business is cyclical,” says Petterson. What Esso Chemical has done is make itself an extremely flexible, efficient organization, one that is fluid enough to find and take advantage of opportunities in good times as well as bad. “That,” Petterson adds, “is the key to its success.”

On a lazy day in spring, as many as 200 trucks pass through the agricultural chemicals complex daily in Beaverton, Alta. At the complex, quality control, tight is one of many factors that make Esso Chemical the largest supplier of fertilizer to farmers in Western Canada.
One evening in the early 1940s, in an isolated outpost in northern Saskatchewan, residents gathered in a local hall for one of the most exciting events their community had witnessed in years. A man from a new government agency had arrived, armed with films and a projector. Planks were laid on wooden stamps for seating. A rustle of excitement rippled through the hall as the lights were turned out. Part way through the film, a train appeared on screen and seemed to be heading straight for the audience. The viewers, many of whom had never seen a train before, leaned farther and farther back. Finally, the planks collapsed and the entire group toppled backward.

Across the country, similar scenes were taking place. Hungry for entertainment and information during the dark days of the war, Canadians packed their community halls, schools and churches. Some were seeing their first films; almost all were seeing their first Canadian films.

The agency responsible for all the excitement was the National Film Board (NFB), established in 1939 by a government that was worried about the pervasive influence of American movies and magazines and anxious to rally public sentiment for the imminent war. The creation of the NFB was a deliberately nationalistic act, said John Grierson, the eminent British filmmaker who founded the NFB, “to bring Canada alive to itself and the rest of the world.”

Over its 50-year life, the NFB — the oldest active government agency of its kind in the world — has certainly done that. Indeed for many people who attended primary school in Canada during the last 50 years, the NFB provided their first image of the country. “I’ve been watching NFB films for about 40 years,” says author and film critic Robert Fulford. “To me the film board is an incredible museum of memories. I can’t imagine Canada without it.”

Nor, perhaps, can the rest of the world. Over the years, NFB productions have been translated into 60 languages and distributed to 80 countries; its headquarters in Montreal are listened with nearly 3,000 certificates and strangely shaped statuettes — awards from film festivals all over the globe. Indeed, the NFB has an international reputation as one of the world’s top film producers. When a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York was asked why the museum had mounted a major show on the NFB, he replied simply that it was as natural for the museum to do a retrospective on the film board as it was for it to run a Picasso exhibit.

The NFB owes much of its success to John Grierson. It was he who wrote the agency’s blueprint and, as its first commissioner, guided its early development. He had experience, talent and a formidable personality that allowed him to reorganize and train a diverse band of talented young Canadians and inspire them to filmmaking feats under extremely difficult wartime conditions.

A young Lorne Greene got a sampling of Grierson’s fierce commitment when he agreed to narrate some NFB documentaries. One day he was rehearsing a script when, all at once he heard a “rattling roar” outside the studio. “I thought somebody had tipped over something and hurt their leg,” he later wrote. “It kept on going and suddenly the door to this little booth was flung open, torn off its hinges practically, and a short man with glasses, whose hair seemed to be standing on end, burst in...”

Grierson was one of the few trained professionals to work for the NFB in those early years. Grierson hired a few experienced filmmakers from other countries (there were few in Canada but for the most part he hired in teachers, journalists, botanists, students...). What Grierson was searching for were young men and women with dedication, imagination and stamina, “but most of all,” he said, “with the common bug of being very Canadian and very aware of it and not willing to put up with any more nonsense from the Englishmen.”

The young filmmakers had not only their own inexperience but wartime
shortages to overcome. Equipment and parts were almost impossible to get. Even footage of the war was at a premium. Criticized trained cameramen who would eventually cover the action on the front—six of them lost their lives—but, in the meantime, wartime documentaries were pieced together from films captured from the enemy or begged, borrowed or stolen from allies. Despite the difficulties, the NFB was soon producing competent and even exciting films. Canadian audiences began to cheer when the NFB logo appeared on the screen, the agency won its first Oscar for a war film, Churchill’s Island, and from across the sea came word that the infamous Joseph Goebbels had somehow managed to get his hands on two NFB films and pronounced them “not bad.” Said the producer of those films, Stuart Legg: “Then we knew we were in the big time.”

Impressed by the popularity of the NFB’s war films, theatre chains agreed to show them regularly. Those Canadians who didn’t have a local movie house—about half the population—were shown the films by NFB projectionists who traveled the country to ensure that as many people as possible had the opportunity to view the films.

The aim of the films was to inform Canadians about the war effort and to inspire them to make a contribution. They accomplished that and more. In his history of the NFB’s distribution networks, Movies for the People, C.W. Gray, a former NFB projectionist, pointed out that the Canada at the time was far from being a united nation. Only 11.5 million people lived in a huge landscape, separated by weather, distance and cultural differences. “People did not really know their own country,” Gray wrote. “Albertans vaguely knew of Cape Breton as a source of coal and fish; Ontario visualized British Columbia as something behind the mountains. War changed all this. The NFB films showed Canadians of one part of the country what their fellow Canadians were like and how they lived.”

In the cafeteria of the mammoth grey building that is the NFB’s headquarters in Montreal, Colin Low is talking about 10-dimensional mathematics. Advanced physics is only the latest enthusiasm in a career that has produced more than 100 documentaries, including Labyrinth, shown at Expo ’67, and Universe, which became required viewing for U.S. astronauts. Although his name is virtually unknown outside the film industry, this energetic man—who has won more than 100 international awards—is arguably Canada’s most distinguished documentary filmmaker.

At 62, Low is one of the last filmmakers from a period of extraordinary creative activity still practicing his art. The only limits put on our imaginations, he says, were financial. “Those early days were tremendously exciting,” he adds. “We were taking part in the birth of Canadian film—we were helping to interpret Canada to Canadians.” In the film the NFB made about itself, The Image Makers, another producer from those years, the late Guy Glover, explained that the major aim of the young amateurs was to convey their own sense of Canada as a unified nation. “I don’t know whether we can be said to have invented the country, but I think we were trying to discover what it was about Canada that would really attract the loyalty of its citizens.”

There are no statistics to show how successful Low, Glover and their colleagues were, but certainly in its first 25 years, the NFB became as much a part of the Canadian cultural landscape as the Canadian flag.

CBC or Hockey Night in Canada. “It seems as if Canada and the NFB were ideally suited to each other,” says Robert Fulford. “Here was a country waiting to be pictured, and the film board came into being at exactly the right time.”

The influence of the NFB is often underestimated, says Gerald Pratley, head of the Ontario Film Institute and a longtime observer of the film board, because many of its best films have been so specialized. “There are good films that have had a major influence on the lives of Canadians but that most of us have never heard of because they cater to a specialized audience.” Some of the NFB films produced for government departments, for example, were partially responsible for important changes in Canada. Health workers relied on NFB films about tuberculosis and X-rays to persuade Canadians in remote areas to accept treatment, and a film about the cattle disease mastitis is credited with saving many dairy companies and cooperatives from bankruptcy.

Meanwhile, NFB films on less exotic subjects entertained Canadians at community get-togethers, brought welcome relief to schoolchildren, filled in the open holes in television schedules, and rounded out the program at the local Roxie. Norman McLaren, whose work alone among critics would justify the existence of the NFB, conducted radical experiments in sound and animation and won the NFB a second Oscar with his antirwar parable Neighbours. Other artists brought a wry wit to such cartoons as The Romance of Transportation in Canada and My Financial Career. Royal Journey (a record of the 1951 visit to Canada of the then Princess Elizabeth shot on experimental color stock) set box-office records both in Canada and abroad, while Drylanders (the saga of a family that moved from Eastern Canada to the Prairies in 1907) became the NFB’s first feature film.

But despite the popularity of its films and the constant praise from abroad, the NFB always seemed to be at the centre of controversy. Politicians who worried about overspending, civil servants miffed by the film board’s lack of bureaucratic method, independent producers who complained that it was spoiling their opportunities and the ever-possessive Hollywood studios all have their own complaints about the NFB, some fair, some less so. The film board also got in trouble because of its mandate to interpret Canada’—not everyone agreed with the interpretation.

One part of Canada could legitimately complain that the NFB wasn’t doing a good job of interpreting it—Quebec. In the early years, the NFB produced few French films; most of its French-language productions were simply translations of its English films. The situation began to change in 1956, when the NFB moved to Montreal. What really made the difference, however, was the birth of television.

Across the country, newly created television stations were desperate for good material and turned to the NFB to fill the gaps in their schedule—the demand was especially large in Quebec. The people of Quebec were eager for material in their language, about their province, told from their point of view; the NFB tried to meet that demand. By 1963 the volume of French productions had increased so much that a separate French branch was set up.

Not everyone wanted to work on television productions, however. At the same time, television work often meant lengthy series, which demanded long time commitments from filmmakers, preventing them from working on individual films. Jacques Bobet, an executive producer at the NFB, remembers the day a memo landed on his desk announcing that four
filmmakers were going to be dismissed because they refused to do any television work. Bobet quickly pointed out that Gilles Carle, Claude Jutra, Dany Laferrière, and Michel Brault were among the most promising directors at the NFB. "A few hours later those four directors came dancing into my office," recall Bobet. Instead of being fired, they had been reassigned to his unit.

Three days later Bobet and his four new protégés went to the Montreal Forum to shoot Wrestling, a gritty documentary about professional wrestling in Canada. Wrestling was set in the cinéma vérité style, a truthful and very gripping approach to documentary-making developed by the NFB and imitated around the world. "Those four played an integral role," says Bobet, "in garnering the NFB a reputation as one of the world's best documentary makers."

The advent of the Quiet Revolution and the growth of French-Canadian nationalism would provide more fuel for the creative fires of the French branch. In the years to come, it would train many more of the French Canadian film makers — Denys Arcand, Francis Mankiewicz, Annie Claire Poitier,Jacques Couthouy — and produce the films that many people feel is the best Canadian movie ever made, the late Claude Jutra's Mon Oncle Antoine.

ON APRIL 11, 1963, A SIMPLY DRESSED young woman emerged from a high-voltage crowd dressed in tuxedos and flashing lights; evening gowns, climbed a podium and accepted a small golden statue. "You really know how to show a foreign agent a good time," joked Tovi Nash as she accepted the Oscar for documentary short subject.

In 1961, Tovi Nash and coproducer Edouard Le Lorrain won an Oscar for another NFB production, the controversial film You Love This Planet. In 1963, Tovi Nash and coproducer Edward Le Lorrain won another Oscar for the controversial anti-semitic film If You Love This Planet. Following the success of previous films like The Life of a Gentleman, and The Blackberry Season, Nash's film You Love This Planet was nominated for an Academy Award. Nash's film was one of several that dealt with the issues of nuclear war (The Red Star), child neglect (Every Child), and sex and romance among senior citizens (George and Rosemary). Such feature films as The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, The Moscow Zoo, and The Night Zoo — coproduced by the NFB — received critical acclaim around the world.

The world of "alternative dramas" was exhaustively involved in making films about the world around us. Many of the NFB's most controversial films came from Studio 1, the women's unit. Just as the NFB had created a separate French branch to present a fairer picture of Canada, it responded in 1974 to pressures from women, who felt underrepresented at the NFB and in the film industry in general by setting up Studio D.

"We never set out to make a "controversial" film," insists Kathleen Shannon, the founder and former head of Studio D. "But because we've felt passionate about the issues and because we have a different perspective, some of our films, such as Not a Love Story and If You Love this Planet, have been labeled controversial."

Studio D is simply the later incarnation of Grinstein's original ideal of inserting Canada to Canadians, says Shannon. The difference is that now the people making and appearing in the films include women, the disabled and visible minorities — the wide variety of people who are Canadians.

But in the midst of the creativity, there was also criticism. A series of government reports and policy statements suggested that the board had served its purpose and should be turned into a training school, a research centre or perhaps disbanded altogether. Independent filmmakers accused the NFB of being a closed shop of privileged civil servants who were stunting the growth of a competitive film industry in Canada. To its critics, the NFB was a dinosaur that didn't know how to die gracefully, as James de B. Domville, a former NFB commissioner, complained. At the same time, government cutbacks were severely limiting the NFB's ability to produce new films and hire and train a new generation of filmmakers.

But perhaps the NFB's greatest problem was distribution: it didn't matter how good the films were if Canadians weren't seeing them. The world of film distribution had changed, and the NFB hadn't kept pace. Budget cuts had forced the NFB to close down many of its regional offices. Theatre owners were reluctant to show NFB shorts, believing they interfered with lucrative popcorn sales. The film board's surveys showed that while the public had a generally positive attitude to the NFB, its members had only the vaguest idea what it actually did or what films it had produced. The communication between the NFB and the country had broken down. Colin Neale, an executive producer at the NFB, says the intense criticism was "like getting woke up one morning by a bucket of cold water." But add his, "We needed that shock." The crisis forced the board to find new ways of reaching Canadians. Films were transferred to videocassette, which could be rented from libraries, some video stores and the remaining NFB offices. The NFB tried to solve the problem of not being able to get access to television by applying for its own cable channels. Those applications were unsuccessful, but it has since negotiated deals with other specialty channels — such as Vision TV — to carry NFB films. "We no longer wait to be asked," says Janis Ponsbach, a distribution expert at the NFB and the acting commissioner. Meanwhile, the deaths of Norman McLaren and Claude Jutra and the 30th anniversary have brought greater exposure of NFB films on television, in theatres and at film festivals.

Although a trace has been called during its 50th birthday celebrations, it's likely that, by its very nature, the NFB will continue to be at the centre of controversy it has been for 50 years.

"There will always be people who attack the film board in the same way that people attack the CBC," says Gerald Pattrie. "They are the sort of people who believe that if it's Canadian then it must be no good, and if it's paid for by the government then it must be even worse."

Pattrie points out that the NFB's position as a government agency, rather than a commercial organization, makes it less independent and more vulnerable to attack. But Robert Fullington suggests there may also be advantages in the NFB's peculiar position. Perhaps the constant hostility directed at it has stimulated it to greater creativity. "If people hate you, they surround you again and again," says Fullington. "People are constantly announcing its death. But a month later they'll come out with something wonderful on which nobody had ever thought of. The film board is much more a creative place, anything that one else could have made."

Because the NFB is a government agency and therefore not obliged to show a profit, continues Fullington, it can afford to make movies that would be consid- ered by commercial producers — films such as The Decline of the American Empire, Nice Love Story and 90 Days. Even the civil-service atmosphere may have its benefits, producing "a creative climate between the bureaucracy and the individual spirit."

But in the end, all explanations of the board's back to the original mandate given to John Grierson and his young filmmakers, "to interpret Canada to Cana- dians and to other nations" — and to do it in spite of war shortages, vast distances, cultural differences, budget cuts, competition from other media, govern- ment inquiries and its own failings. "It's quite amazing that the creative people at the board were able to make the quality of films they did," says Gerald Pattrie. "I think that's because most of them were avant-gardists. They wanted to make films about Canada, and that's what they kept going."
In Closing

"It's amazing," a woman wrote in a letter to me a few weeks ago, "what one discovers when packaging up before moving. At the bottom of a box of papers I felt worth hoarding for more than 20 years, I discovered a column you'd written long ago. I kept it because it reminded me of special places and special friends." Needless to say, the places and friends were all in the Maritimes, the part of the country where I grew up, left when still young but which—as a few weary readers might be tempted to point out—I have never really left at all.

I mention the fact now for a rather special reason, not just to say that there will be no further In Closing columns by me in The Review. I am—of my own free will, being arguably of sound mind and with boundless goodwill toward my colleagues and my publisher—stepping back stage for a moment to bring down the curtain on my term as editor of The Review. I am moving on, taking what modern business refers to as early retirement, which to me offers the promise of being able to do what writers dream of doing—looking out of the study window, watching the grass grow, the leaves stir, the snow fall, the wind blow and writing while doing so.

At first, I felt I should simply take my leave in a couple of sentences placed at the bottom of the opposite page. But a combination of second thoughts, friends' advice and most of all certain feelings I have for The Review suggested that really I could not walk away in a sentence or two. I would be forgiven, a friend insisted, the indulgence of some final paragraphs. After all, I have been editor of The Review for 15 years, a fairly long time in the volatile magazine field, and I feel an attachment, which in my case makes my leave-taking something akin to leaving home. I came when barely 40, I leave heading toward 60. More than anything else, I do so grateful that so much of my adult life has been spent among people whose goodwill has made the world of work what it too often is not, a source of daily pleasure and renewal.

As in the case of any editor and columnist, I have been on the receiving end of a river of mail, one that, in my own view, has revealed something of the relationship between The Review and its readers. It has been, perhaps because of the nature of the magazine, a relationship that is civil and courteous. Many people have felt moved to write two or three times, telling me of their families and work, and unlike my mail in an earlier incarnation years ago as a columnist on The Globe and Mail there has been no shouting, no shaking of fists, and my only letters from lawyers have been ones inviting me to speak at Rotary meetings or asking if I might send a copy of The Review to their mothers in Saskatchewan. I looked over many of those letters recently—each one of them remains stored in our files—and noted that so many of the people who read The Review do so because they believe it to have a personality that sets it apart from many magazines. One man a few years ago wrote: "To find so many subjects dealt with in a calm and quiet voice is a surprise and a pleasure." I was pleased, just as I was when a journalist told me he often looked, always in vain, for an explanation mark in The Review. The magazine, for a number of reasons, has chosen a more understated tone. It has been that way for a long time. Once, years ago, when I was invited to speak to the heads of the corporation about the magazine, I expressed a few of our thoughts, among them my deep sense—partly born of personal preference, partly of a strong professional conviction—that we should not adopt an aggressive, brassy style in prose or design. "The Review," I said, "should not shout."

It seems inevitable that the editor of a magazine receives far more credit than he merits and less blame than he deserves. But The Review has drawn its life from the talents of hundreds of people, perhaps thousands. It has been fashioned by history, which decreed its general nature when it was created in the early years of this century—it first appeared in 1917. And in more current times its character has been refined and refined again by large numbers of people—writers, editors, artists and photographers—who seemed anxious to contribute to it and in doing so, helped in our daily search for the elusive balance between tradition and innovation.

When a man comes to a job in his early forties and stays until he enters his late fifties, he has become a different person, changed, as we are all changed, by circumstances, colleagues and the simple fact of passing from one period of life to another. He hopes these changes are for the better. Yesterday, I found again a passage on that idea from Adlai Stevenson, whose words I've read many times over the years for their wisdom and grace but mostly because they are free from the proudfull cynicism of our age. Back in 1954, Stevenson spoke at a class reunion at Princeton University and, in doing so, touched on what a man learns simply through moving from one stage of life to another: "What he knows at 50 that he did not know at 40 boils down to something like this: the knowledge he has acquired with age is not the knowledge of formulas or forms of words but of people, places, actions—a knowledge not gained by words but by touch, sight, sound, victories, failures, sleeplessness, devotion, love—the human experiences of this earth and of oneself and other men...."

There is, I am happy for my own sake to say, one sense in which I am not leaving at all. I will be spending much of my time in the room where for so many years, I have written In Closing, the study of my home in which, with children now grown and gone, there is a silence that the sounds of the morning, the low concerti from the radio or the hum of a distant car cannot puncture, only underline. I will, I am sure, on certain mornings of my chosen future open the study door, some phrases in my head and notes on my desk, half expecting In Closing to be the task at hand. That it will no longer be means that I enter a circle of new experience, where, like many before me, I feel the cool touch of life's passing, accepting it all willingly but glancing back just once as I go, as if to make sure that no detail is lost to the scrapbook of memory.