**CONTACT PRESS**

Contact Press was an independent Canadian small press founded by Louis Dudek (1918-2001), Irving Layton (1912-2006), and Raymond Souster (1921-2012) that operated from 1952 to 1967. *Cerberus* (1952),Contact Press’s debut title, included poems and a preface from the three founding editors, establishing an editorial position defined by the will to control the means of publication, to support experimental modernist work, and to oppose dominant post-Second World War forces of capitalist industry and commerce in the content and production of their books. As Layton explained in his preface, “What brings us together […] is the belief that to write poetry is to say a loud nix to the forces high-pressuring us into conformity or atomic dispersion” (Dudek and Gnarowski 1967, 145). The name “Contact” was derived from Souster’s little magazine *Contact* (1952-1954), which derived its name from American magazine *Contact*, edited by William Carlos Williams and Robert McAlmon (1920-23, 1932). The name was also used for Souster’s Toronto-based Contact Poetry Reading Series (1957-1962). Contact Press published significant books by many of Canada’s important modernist poets and established a viable precedent for Canadian small presses that has persisted in its influence into the twenty-first century.

Contact Press had Canadian precedents. Earlier literary and cultural magazines including *Canadian Forum* (1920-2000), *The McGill Fortnightly Review* (1925-1927), *The Canadian Mercury* (1928-1929), *Masses* (1932-1934), and *New Frontier* (1936-1937) protested against existing literary and social standards and championed modernism to varying degrees. John Sutherland’s *First Statement* (1942-1945) and its New Writer’s Series (1946-1951) provided a contemporary model, publishing first collections by Irving Layton, Raymond Souster, Miriam Waddington, and Anne Wilkinson, as well as the anthology *Other Canadians* (1946). *Contemporary Verse* (1941-1952), *Preview* (1942-1945), *Northern Review* (1949-1956), and *CIV/n* (1953-1955)must also be counted as peers and influences. These magazines shared a belief that Canadian modernists faced a dearth of publishing opportunities, and that founding new magazines or presses independent of financial, aesthetic, and moral restrictions was necessary to seeing modernist work into print. Dudek, writing to Souster in February 1952, articulated this feeling: “Yes, goddamit, let’s get ourselves out a book of our own, the three of us, and piss on the presses.” (Gnarowski 1971, n.p.).

Contact Press had two distinct editorial periods. The first began in 1952 with *Cerberus* and ended with Layton’s departure in 1958. In this period, the editors pursued their interests more or less independently, primarily publishing their own work. Among the most important publications of this period are Layton’s *The Bull Calf and Other Poems* (1956), Eli Mandel, Gael Turnbull, and Phyllis Webb’s *Trio* (1954), and W.W.E. Ross’s *Experiment 1923-1929* (1956), the first book by Ross, often considered Canada’s first modernist poet, to bear a publisher’s imprint. The second period begins with Peter Miller joining editors Dudek and Souster in 1959. Miller’s contributions are generally subordinated to those of the founding editors; however, he provided renewed editorial vigor, contributed time and financial resources, and translated work by Octavio Paz, Alain Grandbois, and Anne Hébert for publication. Following Miller’s arrival, Contact Press published significant early collections by Al Purdy, Alden Nowlan, Milton Acorn, Gwendolyn MacEwen, George Bowering, John Newlove, and Frank Davey among others, as well as Margaret Atwood’s *The Circle Game* (1966), winner of the Governor General’s Award for Poetry.

Contact Press published three important anthologies. *Canadian Poems: 1850-1952* (1952), edited by Dudek and Layton, audaciously positioned work by the editors and their peers (including P.K. Page, Waddington, James Reaney, and Phyllis Webb) as the culmination of Canada’s poetic history and as signposts for worthwhile future directions. In this, Contact Press worked to provide an answer to Dudek’s query, “Où sont les jeunes?” in his essay published in *Contact* one (January 1952). This work continued in *Poets 56: Ten Younger English Canadians* (1956), an anthology including early work by Daryl Hine, D.G. Jones, and Jay Macpherson. *New Wave Canada: The New Explosion in Canadian Poetry* (1966), edited by Souster, signaled the spiritual end of Contact Press. *New Wave Canada* was the first significant publication by many of Canada’s emerging postmodernists, including Daphne Marlatt, Victor Coleman, David McFadden, bpNichol, Michael Ondaatje, and Fred Wah. While *New Wave Canada* was in keeping with the mandate of Contact Press to provide the young with publishing opportunities, it also introduced those that would establish small presses of their own and displace Contact Press as the destination for experimental writers.

The bibliography of Contact Press varies depending on which initiatives are included. Michael Gnarowski includes 49 titles in his checklist, whereas Peter Miller credits Contact Press with 61 titles (this total is most commonly cited). One dispute centres on the McGill Poetry Series (1956-1966). Although edited independently by Dudek, the books stated that Contact Press published them on behalf of the McGill Poetry Series. If these are included, Contact Press can be credited with publishing Leonard Cohen’s first book, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956). Titles appeared in different formats, ranging from mimeographed efforts to paperback and hardcover editions. Print runs ranged from 25 (Souster’s *Walking Death* [1954]) to 1500 (*Canadian Poems 1850-1952*). Artist Betty Sutherland designed many of Contact Press’s book covers between 1952 and 1960.

Contact Press was an essential link between the earliest expressions of Canadian modernist poetry and publishing in the 1920s and the widespread appearance of little magazines and small presses in the 1960s and 1970s. By general critical consensus, it is considered to have been the most influential modernist small press in Canada’s literary history.

**References and Further Reading**

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