
Reviewed by: Earle Beattie, Editor Emeritus.

Dick MacDonald, a freelance journalist-writer, teacher at Humber College, research editor for the Royal Commission on Newspapers, and the founder of *Content* magazine, has assembled what turns out to be more than just a collection of columns by the late Borden Spears. It is indeed a book on Spears, the late in-house ombudsman of the *Toronto Star* and a consultant both to the Davey Commission and the Kent Commission. It is also a biography and a book that presents two of Spears' seminal speeches on the role and responsibility of the press.

Were it not for the latter, the book titled simply "Borden Spears" and sub-titled, "Reporter, Editor, Critic" might be simply a miss out on Spears most trenchant criticisms of concentration and monopoly in the newspaper field. None of his columns, as excellent as they were, went for the jugular of the system. It was MacDonald's inspiration to include the speeches.

One of them given to that august body, the International Press Institute, castigated the press for its hysterical opposition by owners and publishers to the Kent proposals using the tocsin "freedom of the press." The London Free
Press cried out "government spies in the newsroom," and the Globe and Mail stigmatized them as "an idiot's delight." In his calm, rational way, Spears said those proprietors had simply misunderstood the proposals. Freedom of the press is a smokescreen for high-profit making, he pointed out.

In another speech -- this one to the Couchiching Conference -- free expression through diversity of media, access to the media, and the right to privacy were intelligent and increasingly dealt with.

In the editorial columns, Spears seemed rather mild in comparison to the hard-hitting speech that went for the evils of journalism and tried to rescue it for the journalists. These columns are more like snapping at the heels of the craft than hard critique. But the exacting task of the writer for a daily paper was recognized. And a sense of humour as an undercurrent was there many times. The hard-to-define quality of news, he quipped, was "whatever somebody doesn't want printed." His predecessor in office, Mark Harrison, writing a review of the book in the Sunday Star of 1 April 1984 said, "In the Star newsroom, Spears seemed something of a paradox, a gentle classic scholar who found himself directing an unruly, irreverent gang of reporters..." but in his career as reporter, city editor and managing editor, "influencing two generations of young reporters who remember him with admiration and affection as a splendid editor and kindly friend." [The dates were 1913 - 1983].

I remember speaking to him once about our slum empire series that Max Rosenfeld and myself
were writing, but the Star was too disorganized at the time, in my opinion, to print it. (It went to the Telegram which scored a scoop.) I liked Spears himself and wish I had got to know him better. Our first meeting was when I took a journalism class up to the Star to watch operations and staff the beats with experienced reporters; the second time was at the University of Western Ontario during his "out" period at the Star, and the last time on the Davey Committee when I got him to schedule a Brief directed in part at the London Free Press and Bill Heine, as editor, since retired. The Davey Report devoted a small part to an unusual qualitative research project done by one of my students.

Spears published much on the role of the press, on headline-writing, news values, distortion, ethics, professionalism, up to the omission of commas in Star heads.

Finally, it must be mentioned that Spears was a classical Greek scholar and that at one time he earned his living as a commercial fisherman on the Great Lakes. Indeed a man of many parts, the likes of which we will not see again for many a day, if ever.

The book includes one hundred of Spears' "Your Man At The Star" columns plus his speeches "In the Eye of the Storm" and "Arguments for Limits to the Unrestricted Power of Ownership" plus a long fact-filled introduction by MacDonald, and an Editor's Note on the progress, or lack of it, of proposed newspaper legislation. It is a commendable compilation of 220 pages, a smallish book about an important man who tried and tried repeatedly to upgrade the quality of the press. We should have more books like this
on the media, ranging from McLuhaneseque tomes to observation on the comic strips. The Star, which I have elsewhere called "the newspaper with a heart," yet a very unpredictable paper, is at the centre of this story. There should be more on the influential men and women who report and interpret the daily scene for millions of people.

Communications Studies at Brock University

Communication ... the vital link

Communication, its development, role and impact on the individual, his society and his world - such is the heady stuff on which students in the Communications Studies program at Brock University cut their teeth.

This exciting program is a series of communications courses supplemented by two streams reflecting the twofold structure of the field: Communications-Social Policy and Communications-Culture and Language. Interesting? Fascinating.

For more information please contact Professor W.H.N. Hull, Co-ordinator, Communications Studies, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, L2S 3A1, (416) 688-5550, ext. 3483.