

Margaret Atwood, Eugene Benson & Graeme Gibson
remember the early days of PEN Canada

Eugene Benson: There was a small group operating in Montreal in the 1970's but it wasn't functioning on the international scene. I think mostly the people involved met and discussed their writing - read each other works in progress - things like that. **Hugh MacLennan was involved at the time.** There was one woman, a French writer I think, who did go to International PEN meetings. Her husband worked for Air Canada and could get her tickets for free.

Graeme Gibson: A number of us had been approached to join in the seventies but we were organizing the Writers' Union and at that point we didn't feel we had the energy. There was so much going on with the Union and the Writer's Development Trust and we didn't want to be passive members of PEN so we wrote back and said we would love to join but it would have to wait for some future date. What precipitated the next request was the decision of the Montreal group to split into a Quebec centre and a Canadian one.

Margaret Atwood: We were in Europe and Constance Beresford-Howe wrote to me and said PEN was dividing into English and French and if the English section stayed in Montreal it would die so they were moving it to Toronto. Connie was in charge of the move and she wrote and asked if I would head it up.

GG: It wasn't an acrimonious split. It was, for all the obvious reasons, a natural development. PEN has it in its charter that you can have a number of centres in one country depending on language and geography.

MA: I thought I was about to head up an organization that was already functioning. But it wasn't really. It was in some disarray. There was no money and hardly any members. I thought, I can't do this by myself. So I called on Eugene and he agreed to be co-chair.

EB: I knew about PEN from when I was a young man growing up in Ireland. I knew it as the great international writers' organization. And I had followed it through my reading of the *Times Literary Supplement*. I was aware of the writers in prison work and PEN's stand on censorship and freedom of expression.

MA: We had the first meetings at our house. That was when we were living on Sullivan Street. It must have been late 1984. We used to have the meetings in the dining room.

EB: We used to meet once a month.

GG: At first we had enough chairs. And then we didn't.

MA: So Tif Findley lent us his bridge chairs.

EB: We met in the evening. I used to drive into Toronto from Guelph. There would be coffee and maybe cookies and then we would get right down to work. Within fifteen minutes we would be around the table with a proper agenda and everything.

GG: Margaret always thinks *any* meeting goes on too long.

EB: We were determined that we were going to play a major role. But we were amateurs. We had to learn everything. If anyone came to town we would invite them to talk to us. Alexandre Blokh, the International secretary of PEN came along once. And Michael Scammell who had written about dissident writers. They would come to Peggy's and tell us what they did.

GG: One of the things that I remember, and I remember a lot of us expressed this, was that for the first time we were working for an organization that was not going to benefit us. All the other things we had done, like the Writers' Union and the Writers' Development Trust had been necessary and effective but they were designed to protect ourselves, or people like ourselves, the Canadian writing community. We were ready, on some level, to have a less selfish interest at heart. PEN is intriguing for many reasons — none the least of which is that you are there to do stuff for someone else.

EB: One of the big questions was where to get money to go to conferences.

MA: Part of the original money was raised through the CanLit Cookbook. That's how we got the initial money. We originated the idea. And Nancy Colbert, who was an agent at the time, said she

would represent it for nothing. She ran an auction and I think HarperCollins was the high bid. The initial sum was \$27,000 which was enough to increase the membership and hire a real executive.

EB: I remember soon after that we were able to send money to International PEN in London. And I remember how surprised they were at this sudden appearance of Canada. And then we were able to go to conferences. One of the first was the conference in New York that Norman Mailer ran. I remember one night Greg Gatenby and I sat in the pub at the hotel where we were staying and watched Roberston Davies and Alice Munro exchange hilarious stories. They were laughing their heads off. Davies was a great comic when he got going.

GG: My first international congress was in Seoul, Korea. We had a great battle with the Americans, led by Susan Sontag. She came in like a gunboat firing off in the harbour saying they were going to show the Koreans — they were going to boycott this and boycott that and we just didn't want any part of it, figuring that that's not going to get any prisoners out of jail. We had a real battle over this and the interesting thing was that the people who lined up with us had all been colonies in their time, and the people who were opposed to us had all been imperial powers. This is one of the big discoveries that I made, and I think it has been confirmed by others, that we tend to have more in common with third world countries than we do with the imperial centres. In many cases our instincts and responses to things are closer to the Australians or the Caribbean countries or Puerto Rico than to the English or the Americans. And when I look back on it, one of the

things that delights me is that, to my knowledge, we were the only centre that went to Seoul who had a prisoner released after the congress was over. And I believe it was partly because we didn't join into the American thing and that we spent our time lobbying people in the Ministry of the Interior on behalf of our man saying, essentially, that this guy is going to be more trouble to you in jail than he will be out of jail.

MA: I feel very proud of the things that we have done and the people who have been involved over the years.

EB: I am astounded that it has grown so large so quickly. And as to the work it is doing, I am as pleased as hell.

GG: It is an ideal organization for a country like Canada. People can adopt a prisoner and work on his or her behalf from anywhere in the country.

MA: I am also amazed at the way it has turned over. Somebody comes in and they do their volunteer stint and you think that this person is irreplaceable and then along comes somebody else who does an equally good job. It says something about our country that there are so many people who are so able and so dedicated that you can keep refilling these positions.

GG: I think the most important thing we do is contact writers in prison — even if it doesn't get them out. If we contact them and let them know that there are voices out here working on their behalf and they are not forgotten, and later if you can send them things. Just on that level it is profoundly important. I think one of the smart things that PEN Canada has done is to remain focused on that work. □

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