

Accidental empire

How the Heritage Group grew from one imprint to four

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Quill & Quire

By Cheri Hanson

Building a small publishing empire wasn't what Pat and Rodger Touchie had in mind when they moved from Vancouver to Nanoose Bay back in 1996. At the time, Pat was the marketing director for Self-Counsel Press and Rodger was a writer and business consultant. The year before, the couple had purchased Heritage House, a small publishing firm, after looking for a business that Rodger could operate remotely – and a more tranquil lifestyle. “The master plan was to come to Vancouver Island and quietly publish a few books,” says Rodger.

That plan didn't quite work out. Today, Heritage House is just one imprint under an umbrella dubbed the Heritage Group, which also includes Rocky Mountain Books, TouchWood Editions, and the most recent addition, Brindle & Glass. The group's annual sales hover around \$2.5-million and grew nearly 20% in the last financial year; this year, Rodger is expecting a 40% sales jump. In March, the Heritage Group won the Association of Book Publishers of B.C.'s Jim Douglas Publisher of the Year Award.

Clearly, the Touchies have been busy. But their next challenge may be their biggest: can they take a firm that's been mainly known as a grassroots regional press and transform it into a national and international player? And can they do it without alienating the small B.C. communities and readers who have supported the business for nearly 40 years?

Founded in 1969 by Art Downs, Heritage House spent its first few decades publishing four to six titles per year on western Canadian history and culture, as well as outdoor exploration. When the Touchies came calling, they were impressed by the customer base Downs had built up, placing books in small, underserved communities throughout B.C. “I thought it was a unique distribution structure that was not nearly as vulnerable to some of the larger big-box accounts,” says Rodger. “It just had a broader base on which to build a business.”

So they set about building on it. In 1997, Pat left Self-Counsel and joined Rodger in running Heritage House. The pair worked to expand and refine the distribution system while further developing the editorial side. And they started picking up other firms. Heritage became the distributor for

Horsdal & Schubart, another small B.C. press, which they eventually acquired and renamed TouchWood Editions with Pat at the helm as publisher. In 2002, Heritage House bought a half-stake in Rocky Mountain Books, buying the other half two years later.

The group expanded further last July, when Ruth Linka sold Brindle & Glass to Heritage; Linka also moved from Edmonton to Victoria to continue running B&G, which is now a subsidiary of TouchWood. And early this year, Heritage House and James Lorimer & Company joined forces to buy titles and assets – including the complete Amazing Stories series – from the now-defunct Altitude Publishing. Heritage got virtually all the regional titles focused on Western Canada, while Lorimer got the ones that cover Ontario and points east. That means about 160 new titles for Heritage – and accounts for much of the expected 2008 growth.

The Touchies say they never planned on Heritage getting this big. But they've always reinvested their profits back into the company, which has allowed them to take advantage of opportunities as they come up. "It's hard not to want to grow," says Rodger. "I yield to temptation."

While the various acquisitions, imprints, and names suggest structural complexity, the Heritage Group's key players describe the company's organization as surprisingly straightforward. Rodger serves as president of the Heritage Group and Pat as vice-president of marketing, but each press directs its own publishing program. Don Gorman leads Rocky Mountain Books and Rodger guides Heritage House. Linka continues to steer Brindle & Glass and has taken on the (unofficial) role of assistant publisher for Pat's TouchWood Editions, although B&G and TouchWood may eventually be integrated.

"I don't even know what Don's publishing," says Rodger, emphasizing each imprint's independence. The various publishers aim to meet every quarter, however, to talk about trends, gather feedback, and refine their lists, and between these meetings the doors and phone lines are always open. "In terms of editorial, acquisition, design, and overall philosophy, the four companies are independent," agrees Don Gorman. "We'll take and respect each other's advice and observations at every opportunity. But what we do with it is another thing altogether."

And ironically, given that they've been buying companies outright, the Touchies are also looking ahead to succession. (Pat is 71 and Rodger 64.) Although they note that there is no firm timeline, right now the thinking is that Linka will eventually take Pat's place at the head of TouchWood Editions and maintain B&G. Gorman, meanwhile, is poised to head up the Heritage House program, although he himself stresses the loose nature

of this arrangement. “At the moment, we’re really just trying to solidify the four houses and get them set up to succeed,” says Gorman. He himself has been with Heritage for only three years; a veteran sales rep with the Literary Press Group, he joined Rocky Mountain as a rep and later became associate publisher. Gorman moved up to publisher last year, after Fraser Seely left for Broadview Press.

Excluding the four publishers, the group employs about 19 full- and part-time staff, working from four separate locations. Rocky Mountain Books has a three-person team in Calgary; Rodger runs Heritage House from his Nanoose Bay office; and all TouchWood and Brindle & Glass staff work from the Victoria office, which also houses design, publicity, and other editorial departments that serve all four imprints. A Surrey warehouse and head office employs staff in sales, customer service, and distribution – all of which are managed by the Touchies’ son, Patrick Helme, who joined the firm six years ago.

Heritage has always operated as a publisher/distributor, but the company now plans to move its distribution services into a separate entity, called Heritage Group Distribution, by September. It’s an “architectural” change that will not affect the scope or nature of the distribution, says Rodger. Only B&G will maintain its Canadian distribution through LitDistCo, with Heritage handling the U.S. and U.K. (Heritage already has several third-party clients; current priorities will be integrating the Amazing Stories inventory and two former Altitude sales reps, who have been hired on for three-month contracts and may be offered permanent jobs thereafter.)

The centralization of services offers economies of scale that would otherwise be unavailable to small presses like Brindle & Glass or Rocky Mountain Books. “When you’re focusing on your own administration or distribution or sales and marketing, you’re losing focus from publishing,” says Gorman. “By pooling those things, we’re able to focus on publishing some really strong books and creating some really dynamic lists. It’s a fantastic environment to be in.”

Linka says the Heritage model influenced her decision to move B&G to B.C., freeing her from juggling the diverse responsibilities that come with being a sole publisher. “It’s a struggle,” she explains. “There were times when I felt a certain amount of isolation, both as a small company and in Edmonton, so this seemed like a great opportunity where I would be able to continue doing what I loved doing, and be involved with a bigger group of people.”

Linka founded B&G with Lee Shedden in 2000; she bought Shedden out in 2006. The press is known for publishing Alberta authors, but Linka says

this focus was based more on access than a clear mandate. “I was motivated to publish Alberta stories because there weren’t many people doing that,” she says. Whether Alberta authors continue to approach her in Victoria remains to be seen, but B&G has now brought literary fiction, poetry, and drama to the Heritage fold – genres that Linka says surmount regional boundaries. Indeed, one B&G title, Claire Mulligan’s *The Reckoning of Boston Jim*, made last year’s Scotiabank Giller Prize longlist. Heritage House proper has also been mixing local subjects with national (and international) interest. The imprint recently published a biography of Victoria-raised NBA star Steve Nash and has signed a memoir by Manjit Virk, whose 14-year-old daughter, Reena, was murdered by a group of Victoria teenagers in 1997.

Surprisingly, though, it’s Heritage’s most solidly regional imprint that’s been making recent headway south of the border. In 2007, Rocky Mountain Books published a collection of personal stories from 120 international outdoor explorers. Collected and edited by Jason Schoonover, *Adventurous Dreams, Adventurous Lives* has been RMB’s top seller this year, moving close to 3,000 copies to date. (Most of the press’s titles sell 600 to 800 copies annually.) About a third of *Adventurous Dreams*’ sales have come from the U.S., says Gorman; a March launch party for the book attracted 22 of those international explorers to McNally Robinson in New York City.

Gorman says that book’s success, plus strong sales and attention for *Water, Weather and the Mountain West* by Robert William Sandford, gives him confidence that Rocky Mountain can transcend its name. With a full-time editor, Joe Wilderson, and full-time designer, Chyla Cardinal, Gorman is working aggressively to rebrand Rocky Mountain beyond the Bow Valley corridor. “The plan is to make sure that these books don’t look like small, regional guidebooks,” says Gorman. “They need to be books that can go on the shelf in Toronto or Montreal – or New York, for that matter.”