

The National Newspaper Awards: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The National Newspaper Awards are the premier awards for newspaper journalism in Canada and have been for more than a half-century, but they had a shaky start. Conceived as Canada's equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize, the awards were the brainchild of the Toronto Men's Press Club, which sought to duplicate the famous Pulitzer award program established in the United States in 1917. Members of the Toronto Men's Press Club wanted the awards "to reward achievement and encourage excellence in the newspaper work in this country,"¹ but they struggled to find a benefactor to underwrite the awards. Finally, George McCullagh, publisher of the *Globe & Mail*, stepped forward. Six awards were bestowed in 1949, the inaugural year of the program. They were for editorial writing, spot news reporting, feature writing, staff corresponding, spot news photography and editorial cartooning. Today, despite internal struggles, the award program has grown and flourished. Categories have expanded from six to twenty, and judges consider more than 1,300 entries a year. This paper traces the history of the National Newspaper Awards and their connection to the Pulitzer Prize, and looks briefly at one of the original six winners: the first female to win a National Newspaper Award.

Those who've had a lengthy career in newspaper journalism have likely been nominated for an award or two along the way -- and perhaps won a plaque, a trophy or even a cash reward. The National Newspaper Awards, first bestowed in 1949, are the most prestigious prize in newspaper journalism in Canada. It's taken as a given by those in the field. But how did the awards come to be so celebrated? How did they start? Who started them? Even recipients of an NNA are unlikely to know the answers.

Referred to simply as "the NNAs" by those in the business, the awards were conceived as Canada's equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize which was first awarded in 1917. Joseph Pulitzer wanted his prizes to serve as an incentive to excellence in journalism, in letters, and in drama. Members of the Toronto Men's Press Club had the same goal in mind when they conceived the National Newspaper Awards in 1947. They set out to

“reward achievement and encourage excellence.” They sought to emulate the Pulitzers in other ways as well.

In his will, Joseph Pulitzer specified that four awards be made in newspaper journalism, but also stated that those governing the awards could expand the number as they saw fit.² They did. The prize for cartoons was added in 1922. The category of correspondence (later to become international reporting) was added in 1929 and the prize for photography was established in 1942. In 1943, telegraphic reporting was added, later to become national reporting. By 1949, the year when Canada’s first National Newspaper Awards were presented, the Pulitzers were awarded in seven categories.

Initially, the Toronto Men’s Press Club didn’t stray far from the Pulitzer formula of the time, bestowing the inaugural awards in six categories: editorial writing, spot news reporting, feature writing, staff corresponding, spot news photography and editorial cartooning – very similar to the Pulitzer roster of that era. But the NNAs were prescient in making feature writing a prize-winning category at that time. The Pulitzers did not add feature writing until 1980 – meaning the NNAs were 31 years ahead of the Pulitzers when it came to awarding recognition to feature stories.

From the moment they conceived of Canada’s answer to the Pulitzer Prize, members of the Toronto Men’s Press Club dealt with obstacles that were never encountered by those who oversaw the Pulitzers. Provisions for the Pulitzers were precisely detailed in the will of Joseph Pulitzer; the awards were part of a \$2 million gift Pulitzer made to establish a School of Journalism at Columbia University.³ Members of the Toronto Men’s Press Club, while they may have had a noble idea for an awards program, had no cash for the awards. They had no benefactor, and for months, could find

nary a patron willing to back the awards. Members struggled in vain to drum up interest in the awards among the journalism hierarchy in Canada. They were actually ready to abandon the quest and jettison the idea,⁴ but hearing that the plan might go down the tubes, George McCullagh, then publisher of the *Globe and Mail*, was finally persuaded to donate \$3,000 a year, for five years, to get the NNAs started. McCullagh, a former financial writer for the *Globe*, had purchased the paper in 1936 and then bought the *Mail and Empire* shortly thereafter, consolidating the two papers under a new name, the *Globe and Mail*.

With McCullagh's moral and financial support, the first awards were bestowed in 1949. Winners received \$400. It was a large sum of money at the time, given that minimum wage for editorial employees at the *Toronto Star* in 1949 was \$55 a week.⁵ Interestingly, one of the initial six winners of a National Newspaper Award was a woman, quite a feat considering that, first, the Toronto Men's Press Club, the force behind the award, was a male bastion that barred women from membership until the 1970s; that second, women played a relatively unheralded role in reporting in those years, outside of the women's pages;⁶ and that third, when viewed in retrospect, another woman would not win an NNA for seventeen years after the initial victory.

Dorothy Howarth, a reporter for the *Toronto Telegram*, won that first NNA in feature writing for her story on Newfoundland entering the Confederation of Canada. Howarth, who is 93 today, hard of hearing, but otherwise still sharp, as a fellow NNA winner expressed it, was born in Saskatchewan. Like many female journalists in the first half of the twentieth century, Howarth was a refugee from the teaching profession who'd taught in a one-room schoolhouse in the Prairies during the Depression Era before

breaking into newspapers by taking a job in classified ads with the *Regina Leader Post*. When the editor of the women's department offered her a chance to cover concerts and meetings at night, she jumped at it. Three years later, she was offered a job as a reporter on the *Saskatchewan Farmer*, the *Leader-Post's* weekly farm paper, where among her duties, she wrote an advice column for the love-lorn. She later joined the women's department at the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*.⁷

Canada's entry into World War II in 1939 opened the gates for women in journalism, as men left to serve in the armed forces, and women took their place at typewriters and radio microphones. According to the 1931 Canadian census, 464 Canadian women were classified as earning a living as "authors, editors and journalists" at that time. But by 1941, two years after Canada entered the war, 714 women were listed in that category in the census, a number that would more than double by the next census in 1951. With men vacating newspaper positions to serve in World War II, Howarth saw an opportunity to further her career and took a train east from Saskatchewan, destination Montreal. At that time, Montreal was Canada's largest city, still growing and prospering, booming in the war years as its factories produced munitions. It stood out in Canada as a bountiful city in the midst of rationing.⁸ But instead of continuing through to Montreal, Howarth hopped off the train in Toronto, on a whim, and began to test the journalism job market. It proved relatively unfriendly, and rejections abounded. The *Toronto Telegram* was the sole newspaper or magazine she approached willing to take a chance on her. The paper offered her a post in the city room.⁹

This proved fortuitous in many ways. While women were entering the profession in larger numbers at the start of World War II, they were still a rarity in the city rooms of Canadian newspapers at the time, mostly confined, even then, to the women's pages where a handful were hired as fulltime employees in the last two decades of 1800s. But *The Telegram* made certain female reporters stars, a philosophy propounded by editor J.D. MacFarlane. The newspaper was flamboyant and innovative, maintained bureaus around the world, and fought madly to be Canada's top circulating paper, a goal it never achieved although it peaked at number two. MacFarlane treated Howarth exactly as he did the men in the newsroom, calling her by her last name and bellowing loudly when he wanted her attention.¹⁰ A self-described "sob sister" at the *Telegram*, Howarth understood that many of her stories were designed to wring tears. That's another reason why her success in the first National Newspaper Awards contest was such a surprise – even to her. Her prize-winning story was unlike the stories Howarth usually covered.

She'd never covered a political event, so a piece on Newfoundland's vote to enter into Confederation was a stretch. But she stuck with her strengths as a journalist. *Toronto Sun* columnist Peter Worthington, who would also win an NNA later in his career, worked with Howarth at the *Telegram* as a journalism rookie and described her as "quite a unique reporter" whose skill set was highly valued.¹¹ Worthington recalled that she approached her human subjects always seeking a deeper understanding of their rationale or motivations. She carried that approach to Newfoundland, where she focused on the human angle of the story. While other reporters stayed put in St. John's, covering the story from the city and focusing on the vote itself, Howarth went to far-flung corners of the new province and interviewed people in the outlying areas. The story she crafted for

the paper on March 30th, 1949 was award-winning material, although, in retrospect, the fact she actually won is quite remarkable given she was a woman in a field heavily dominated by men. The 1951 census lists 1,621 women “authors, editors and journalists” compared with 5,596 men in the same category; and, as previously mentioned, the awarding body, the Toronto Men’s Press Club, while occasionally inviting women into their club premises, did not allow them to become members. On the other hand, reviewing the stories that Dorothy Howarth wrote in 1949, it is clear that as a journalistic force, she was hard to ignore.

Her story on Newfoundland not only won a National Newspaper Award that year, but also won the 1948-1949 Memorial Award from the Canadian Women’s Press Club, established in 1935 to honor a presswoman for “the best handling of a news event or public issue of significance.” Howarth’s work was so exceptional that year in fact, Ross Munro, a renowned war correspondent for *Canadian Press* and a judge for the Canadian Women’s Press Club’s contest, said that had Howarth not been selected for the CWPC award for the story on Newfoundland, she would have been selected for her coverage of the knitting mill strike in Paris, Ont. “(B)eautiful reporting and graphic all the way,” Munro said about Howarth’s strike story. ¹²

According to Dorothy Howarth, the inaugural winners of the NNA did not view the award as a particularly momentous. It was brand new, it was not established and it was basically unheralded. Howarth can’t remember any detail of how the award was bestowed and guesses it might have been during an informal ceremony at the press club. But that informality changed in the 1950s. Members of the Toronto Men’s Press Club wanted to give the NNAs the prominence they felt the awards deserved. Unlike the

Pulitzers, which are announced with a flourish but which leave it up to individual news organizations to plan their own celebrations if they wish, the Toronto Men's Press Club wanted to bring all the award winners together for a party.

Members of the club shared the honor and duty of chairing the awards gala. The general manager at the *Canadian Press*, Gil Purcell, who ran *CP* from 1945 to 1969, was a big backer of the NNAs and would routinely designate one of his deputies to chair the NAAs for a five-year stint. It was almost accepted that if you were in the editorial hierarchy at *Canadian Press*, you'd be chairing the awards at one point in your career.¹³ Mel Sufrin, executive director of the Ontario Press Council and a retired *CP* executive, served his time in the late 1960s.

Your job as chair, according to Sufrin, was basically to coordinate the flow of submitted material to the judges, who were drawn, as were the Pulitzer judges, from the ranks of academia and from the countrywide corps of ex-editors and former reporters. The awards chair would also oversee plans for the gala dinner, at which prominent personalities such as former CBC newscaster Lorne Greene, who later gained fame as a Hollywood actor, would act as emcee.

With only a few award categories in the early days, the number of judges was small and decisions were dispatched with minimal fuss. Winners were announced prior to the dinner, so the result was known in advance of the evening's festivities. As well, the public never got to learn who finished behind the winner, in the second and third positions. For 37 years, the process continued unchanged. But in 1986, flagging attendance at the dinner caused the organizers to reexamine the lack of suspense around the proceedings and to adopt an Oscar-like format for the evening. Under the new format,

the judging panels in each category selected three finalists, and these finalists were announced in advance. But the winner was kept secret until the night of the dinner.

In retrospect, having the Toronto Men's Press Club control the awards was both a blessing and a curse. In the beginning, the central locale enabled members to promote their labor of love efficiently on a shoestring budget. Decisions could literally be made over a drink at the Press Club. But the central locale also worked against the awards. The founders of the NNAs hoped to reward the best work around the country and make the NNAs the Pulitzer Prize of Canada. Even though the Press Club was attempting to be inclusive, its firm base in Toronto, and the fact that many early awards dinners were held in the city at the Royal York Hotel, made the program appear Toronto-centric, an image that dogged the NNAs well into the 1990s. Many people in journalism circles believed that the fix was in – that the papers in Toronto would be favored when it came to the prizes because their members were those overseeing the awards.

Rumbles turned into anger by the mid-1980s as publishers and editors in other parts of the country grew increasingly unhappy with the administration of the NNAs. There followed a prolonged internal struggle (as one insider said, very similar to the negotiations in the United Nations Security Council a few years ago over the war in Iraq), until ultimately the control of the program was wrested from the Toronto Press Club amid threats from editors and publishers vowing to form their own competing awards program and call it the Canadian News Awards. Cooler heads at last prevailed and in 1989, an independent board of governors for the awards was formed, made up of former and current newspaper editors, academics, and two members of the Toronto Press Club, which still owns the name of the awards program, but no longer has the license to run it.

The board is passionate about the program and works to make it better every year, according to Bryan Cantley, vice president, member services, for Canadian Newspaper Association, and secretary for the awards program since 1982. ¹⁴

The decision to sever from the Toronto Press Club breathed new life into the program and paved the way for change. Today there are 20 National Newspaper Awards given – compared with 14 Pulitzers for excellence in newspaper work. The number of total entries in the contest reached a peak in 2002 at 1,457, up 340 from 2001; more than 1,300 entries were received for the 2005 version. The awards are now presented at a gala dinner that moves around the country and is tied in with the annual meeting of the Canadian News Super Conference, which includes a meeting of the Canadian Association of Newspaper Editors and the annual *Canadian Press* dinner. The multi-pronged nature of the event, which takes place over a weekend at the end of May or beginning of June, ensures that attendance is high. Over 400 people attended the NNAs in 2004 in Vancouver, where Premier Gordon Campbell and Can West CEO Leonard Asper addressed the Super Conference, as did David K. Foot, author of *Boom, Bust and Echo*. At the 2005 NNA gala, the 56th annual, held in Ottawa, the emcee was *Globe and Mail* columnist Roy MacGregor, and each finalist, as is now customary practice, was introduced in video format before the name of the winner was announced. Winners of an NNA now receive a cheque for \$1,500; the two finalists each get \$250.

Asked if the NNAs had reached its stated goal of becoming Canada's equivalent of the Pulitzers, former and present organizers reluctantly admit it never did. The reasons are varied. With over 1,500 daily newspapers in the United States compared to just 100 daily newspapers in Canada, the awards could never expect to achieve the eminence of

the Pulitzers, said one. Another felt the rather pedestrian name of the program – the National Newspaper Awards -- never captured the public imagination and does not even fire up other media professional outside the newspaper field. “You won’t even find a TV camera covering the NNAs,” this insider said. “We get no recognition that these awards reflect the best journalism in the country.” Some blame the lack of notoriety on the lack of firm financial footing, a problem that has dogged the awards since the very beginning.

Today, newspapers themselves keep the awards afloat with donations. The NAAs are funded today from several sources: through an annual fundraising program to which almost 65 percent of Canadian daily newspapers contribute; through entry fees from those who submit a piece for consideration; through newspaper corporate donations to assist in the awards gala, and through ticket sales to the gala. So, in some ways, 56 years after the awards were first bestowed, the program is still seeking what the Toronto Men’s Press Club lacked at the outset: a benefactor to endow the awards in perpetuity – a Canadian Joseph Pulitzer.

ENDNOTES

¹ English, Kathy and Nick Russell. Page 1: 50 Years of Great Canadian Journalism. Toronto: Canadian News Association, 1999.

² Topping, Seymour. Joseph Pulitzer and the Pulitzer Prizes: History of the Prizes. 2 March 2005. <<http://www.Pulitzer.org/history.html>>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ English, et al.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Lang, Margery. *Women Who Made the News*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1999.

⁷ “Dorothy Howarth wins Women Writers’ Award,” *The Telegram*, June 24, 1949

⁸ Weintraub, William. *City Unique: Montreal Days & Nights in the 1940s and 1950s*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1996.

⁹ Dorothy Howarth, interviews with author, 3 May 2003 and 3 April 2004.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Peter Worthington, interview with author, 12 April 2004.

¹² “Dorothy Howarth wins Women Writers’ Award,” *The Telegram*, June 24, 1949

¹³ Mel Sufrin, interview with author, 22 February 2003.

¹⁴ Bryan Cantley, interview with author, 21 January 2003