

TRUTH, JUSTICE, AND THE CANADIAN WAY: THE WAR-TIME COMICS OF BELL FEATURES PUBLICATIONS

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148 What might be called the “First Age of Canadian Comics”¹ began on a consummately Canadian political and historical foundation. Canada had entered the Second World War on September 10, 1939, nine days after Hitler invaded the Sudetenland and a week after England declared war on Germany. Just over a year after this, on December 6, 1940, William Lyon MacKenzie King led parliament in declaring the War Exchange Conservation Act (WECA) as a protectionist measure to bolster the Canadian dollar and the war economy in general. Among the paper products now labeled as restricted imports were pulp magazines and comic books.²

Those precious, four-colour, ten-cent treasure chests of American culture that had widened the eyes of youngsters from Prince Edward to Vancouver Islands immediately disappeared from the corner newsstands. Within three months—indicia dates give March 1941, but these books were probably on the stands by mid-January—Anglo-American Publications in Toronto and Maple Leaf Publications in Vancouver opportunistically filled this vacuum by putting out the first issues of *Robin Hood Comics* and *Better Comics*, respectively. Of these two, the latter is widely considered by collectors to be the first true Canadian comic book because *Robin Hood Comics* Vol. 1 No. 1 seems to have been a tabloid-sized collection of reprints of daily strips from the *Toronto Telegram* written by Ted McCall and drawn by Charles Snelgrove. Still in Toronto, Adrian Dingle and the Kulbach twins combined forces to release the first issue of *Triumph-Adventure Comics* six months later (August 1941), and then publisher Cyril Bell and his artist employee Edmund T. Legault used Bell’s existing Commercial Signs of Canada company, just a month after that, to produce the initial issue of *Wow Comics*. The final major comic book publisher of the WECA period, Educational Projects in Montreal, entered the fray just over a year later.

Cy Bell changed the name of his publishing company from Commercial Signs

of Canada to Bell Feature Publications in May 1942. At the same time he absorbed Adrian Dingle's *Triumph-Adventure Comics* after its initial six-issue run, along with Mr. Dingle himself, who became Art Director for Bell's company, changing the name of the book to *Triumph Comics*.

I intend this preamble first to establish that, as an entrepreneurial venture built from Canada's war-time economic situation and its political response to that situation, the origins of the Canadian comic book industry are demonstrably and innately Canadian. The fact of being born and bred during the Canadian experience of the Second World War would infuse ensuing books with its themes and tropes almost to the very end of their runs. The War Exchange Conservation Act (WECA) itself measures out the lifespan of this "First Age of Canadian Comics" since it was born out of it and its titles inexorably lost their momentum to the point of capitulation once the relevant portions of the Act were repealed after the war was over and the American books began to flood the newsstands again. Secondly, this essay considers Hillborough Studios, Commercial Signs of Canada, and Bell Features as a single entity so that the first six issues of *Triumph-Adventure Comics* can be taken as contiguous with the rest of its run as *Triumph Comics* with Bell Features.

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1. ADRIAN DINGLE AND THE COMING OF NELVANA OF THE NORTH

Maple Leaf's *Better Comics* Vol. 1 No. 1 provided history with a template and the first answer to the question: "What is a Canadian comic book?" On page 17, Vernon Miller makes the premise of the magazine clear to his audience when, in the third paragraph of a one-page, blue-text message with coloured borders, entitled "Hello Boys, Hello Girls," he says: "This magazine, boys and girls, is drawn entirely by Canadian artists and published by a Canadian firm. Don't you think that is something to be proud of? We do." He signs off as "Uncle Verne."

Six months later, Adrian Dingle echoed this sentiment on the inside front cover of *Triumph-Adventure Comics* Vol. 1 No. 1 by stating the following:

The Editors have planned this new magazine to appeal to all ages and we have selected for this important work the best artists in Canada. The stories are clean and wholesome, and all have a Canadian background which will delight you not only in this edition, but in many issues to follow. TRIUMPH-ADVENTURE COMICS guarantees you chuckles, thrills and amazing adventure stories.

Here we have voiced three additional "markers" of what makes these WECA books "Canadian," to add to the historical and political context of their origins already mentioned.

Dingle proudly announces that *Triumph-Adventure* is drawing on the "best artists in Canada," which is ironic because among most comic book purists these WECA

books (or “Canadian Whites”) are generally regarded to have primitive artwork, inferior to the gloss and full-colour *shazam* of American books from this period. Mordecai Richler seems to default to a common but unwarranted opinion when he states:

The last time we were asked to make do with Canadian comics was during the war years when in order to protect our balance of payments the government stopped the import of American comic books. The Canadian comic books hastily published to fill the gap were simply awful. We wouldn't have them. (51)

Margaret Atwood (*Financial Post* Dec. 11, 1971) picks *The Great Canadian Comic Books* (Hirsh & Loubert, 1971) collection of artwork from Bell Features as one of her favourite books of 1971. In fact, many of the illustrators (who were actually complete creators because they wrote the stories as well) went on to successful careers in fine arts once the end of the war led to the demise of these WECA books.³

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The next point that Dingle makes is that the stories contained in *Triumph-Adventure Comics* will be “clean and wholesome,” and this promise and conviction carry on the “proper” tradition of British Boys and Girls Annuals and retreats from the lurid violent and dark side that sometimes reared its head in American comics of the period—early Superman and early Batman, and especially the Spectre were often remorseless in dispatching criminals. In general, costumed superheroes seemed to have a less prominent role in the development and presentation of WECA books than they did in their American counterparts; nevertheless, whenever they did appear in Canadian comics, they seemed to become the most popular features. In its six-year span, the WECA period never did produce a superhero team or squad in the manner of the Justice Society of America. Not surprisingly, the standard uniform of issue for many Canadian comic heroes from this period seems to have been jodhpurs, riding boots, and a simple shirt. They were essentially hatless Mounties out of their scarlet tunics, such as Johnny Canuck, Capt. Red Thorton, Jeff Waring, Rex Baxer, Ace Barton, Freelance, Terry Kane and Cosmo—not to forget Educational Projects’ Canada Jack, who chose to do his “heroing” in a gymnastics uniform—rather than tights in complementary colours, insignia, and a cape.

Lastly, Dingle draws attention to the fact that the stories in *Triumph-Adventure Comics* will “all have a Canadian background.” It is hard to understand what he means by this. Three of the four features, the RAF adventure “Spanner Preston,” the detective-mystery “Clue Catchers,” and the western adventure “Tang,” have no indication or assumption of anything “Canadian” in their stories.

The remaining offer, however, is a very significant one indeed. Here is the first Nelvana of the Northern Lights story by her creator, Adrian Dingle.⁴ In Nelvana we encounter one of the very earliest featured female superheroes in comics. She pre-dates the appearance of Wonder Woman (*All Star Comics* 8, December 1941) by four cover-date months. She is also the first superhero directly and identifiably tied to Canadian cultural identity. Nelvana was born in the vast Canadian North as the

semi-divine offspring of Koliak, King of the Northern Lights, and a mortal mother who is not named. She can travel on the beams of the Aurora Borealis (which is really the spirit of her father placed in the sky as a result of an ancient curse) and call upon it for help. She also has a magical cloak that transforms her brother, Tanero, who can never be seen by a white man, into the shape of a Great Dane. Her first adventure takes place in the Great North of Canada above the Arctic Circle and involves her solving the crisis of a local tribe of Eskimos—then not the pejorative term it is now—who are no longer able to feed themselves from the natural resources around them because an evil foreign power called the Kablunets are systematically depleting those resources—conservation of natural resources has become a national motif in recent times—for their own benefits.

Nelvana's auroral trail across our fictional northern skies has left the most enduring legacy of all the WECA comic book creations. Her soaring image on a red field from her eponymous 1945 Bell Features compilation comic stands as one of the most iconic designs of the WECA period and has made that book one of the most sought after individual issues in the roughly 700-book output from the years 1941-46. Fifty years later. In 1995, this same image was issued as a six-million-print-run postage stamp—in a set with four others featuring different Canadian superheroes—by the Canada Post Corporation. Before this, in 1971, Michael Hirsh and Patrick Loubert, along with Clive A. Smith, founded Canada's best-known animation studio and paid tribute to the WECA period in Canadian comics by naming the enterprise Nelvana Studios. In November of the same year, they issued a well-received collection of reprinted pages from the Bell Features books (Hirsch & Loubert, *Great*).

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The second issue of *Triumph-Adventure Comics* again contained an editorial from Adrian Dingle, this time on the back of the very first front cover image of Nelvana. Dingle's inside-front-cover editorials reached out to the reader and continued throughout all six of the Hillborough Studio issues of *Triumph-Adventure Comics*, echoing the sentiment begun by Vernon Miller in the first issue of *Better Comics*. These editorial call-outs were typical of the consistent effort by WECA-era editors and creators to engage their Canadian readers by soliciting readers' opinions on features in the books. This second issue also made a clear effort toward more Canadian content with the introduction of a new feature called "Derek, Bras d'Or," based on the real life exploits of nineteenth-century Cape Breton giant Andrew McAskill. The splash page of the Spanner Preston story also made it clear that Spanner was indeed "a Canadian youth in the Royal Air Force." Finally, Nelvana, along with her brother, Tanero, in the form of a Great Dane, were moved to the prominent place or lead story, where it stayed for the rest of the run.

Adrian Dingle, therefore, has given us three more "markers," in addition to the historical and political situations in which these books arose, to point to the "Canadian-ness" of these first Canadian comics. They were brought to life by Canadian creators,⁵ their content was pointedly "wholesome," and most of their characters and stories had Canadian backgrounds and connections.

2. COMMERCIAL SIGNS OF CANADA AND BELL FEATURES

A month after the appearance of *Triumph-Adventure Comics* Vol. 1 No. 1, Cyril Vaughan Bell began his then Commercial Signs of Canada company's foray into the comic book publishing industry with *Wow Comics* No. 1, published in Toronto. Alexander Ross, in his interview-based article from 1964, shares the following:

Bell happened to have a small color press in his sign-painting shop which was used occasionally for printing billboards and banners for used-car lots.

When one of his sign-painters, Edmund Legault, revealed that his secret ambition was to become a newspaper cartoonist and that in his spare time he'd created a comic strip called *Dart Daring* and drawn several months of episodes. Bell decided to put his idle press to work and ran off fifty-two thousand copies of a *Dart Daring* comic book [*Wow Comics* No. 1]. [...] the edition sold out within a week and Bell began to realize the vast extent of the market he'd discovered. (29)

- 152** *Wow Comics* No. 1 was the first cover-to-cover full-colour Canadian comic, but it was a full-colour process that was sapped of its energy, with an almost sun-faded or watercolour appearance when compared to the flourish of American comics of the time. Issue No. 1 was the only one to have this treatment; issues 2-8 regressed to a two-colour process, and after that to the standard black-and-white line drawings of the era.

There was nothing especially "Canadian" about this issue other than its origin. It had two main features, "Dart Daring," about an eighteenth-century swashbuckler; and "Whiz Wallace," who was a sort of Buck Rogers/Flash Gordon science fiction adventurer. Both, created and illustrated by teenager Edmund T. Legault, were long features for the time (26 and 27 pages, respectively), but *Wow Comics* did continue the tradition of trying to connect with its readership and asked for their feedback and input, this time in the form of a letter-writing contest announced on the inside back cover asking readers what they would like to see in future issues of *Wow Comics*.

Reader contests such as these ran the length and breadth of the WECA comics starting with five simultaneous contests announced to readers on the final two pages of the first issue of *Better Comics*. They added immensely to the "Canadian-ness" of the books, not only in that they allowed young Canadian readership a purchase in the direction and development of these comics, but also, when contest winners were announced in subsequent issues, these same readers could find their own names among the names of their Canadian neighbours in their own towns and in towns right across the country. Today in looking at these manifests, it is compelling to wonder what became of these young travelers through that world of WECA comics in the decades after the comics themselves disappeared.

There is an answer to this for at least a couple of these young explorers. *Wow Comics* No. 2 (October 1940) announces a drawing contest on its inside back cover and continues on to the back cover to show that the prize for the top ten entries will be a pair of roller skates each. The task presented is the completion of a six-panel page

on which the first panel is already drawn (a sea captain being washed overboard by a large wave) and the others are blank but with captions. The winners were announced three issues later on page 33 of *Wow Comics* No. 5 (February 1942), and 15-year-old Jack Tremblay of Drake St., Montreal received special mention at the top of the list because of the exceptional quality of his submission. Three issues after that, in *Wow Comics* 8 (May? 1942), Jack Tremblay, still only 15 years old, had his first comic book work published: his own creation, "Crash Carson," who also earned central cover billing. After studying drawing and painting at L'Ecole des Beaux Arts with Stanley Cosgrove and Alfred Pellan, after serving for Canada in the Second World War, Jack Tremblay went on to have a successful career in graphic arts and, as Jean-Jacques Tremblay,⁶ in fine arts acrylic painting in Canada. Similarly, a young Albert Cooper in Toronto decided to enter a drawing contest announced in *Better Comics* No. 1 and we find his submission, a prototype few panels about an Air Ace called "Scotty," among the winners displayed in *Better Comics* No. 3 (May 1941) a full nine months before his signature professional feature "Scotty MacDonald" would start in the first issue of *Dime Comics*.

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HEY GANG! HERE'S A CHANCE TO WIN ONE OF THESE 50 FREE PRIZES AND SEE YOUR ADVENTURE PORTRAYED IN TED STEELE'S GREAT STRIP SPEED SAVAGE

HERE'S ALL YOU HAVE TO DO... SIT RIGHT DOWN AND WRITE A LETTER TO TED STEELE... TELL HIM WHETHER YOU LIKE SPEED SAVAGE IN HIS NEW UNIFORM OR WHETHER YOU'D RATHER HAVE HIM AS HE USED TO BE... NOW IF THERE IS SOME PARTICULAR TYPE OF ADVENTURE YOU'D LIKE TO SEE SPEED SAVAGE IN, WHY MENTION IT AND YOU MAY SEE IT IN A FUTURE ISSUE, YOU DON'T HAVE TO WRITE THE STORY OR DRAW ANY PICTURES... JUST SAY 'I'D LIKE TO SEE SPEED IN A FOOTBALL GAME, OR MIXED UP IN A BANK ROBBERY... OR WHATEVER YOU THINK WOULD MAKE A GOOD ADVENTURE... DON'T WASTE A MINUTE. MAIL YOUR LETTER TO

FIRST PRIZE AN ORIGINAL FULL-COLOUR PAINTING OF SPEED SAVAGE WITH AN INSET PHOTO OF HIS CREATOR... IN ADDITION THE WINNER WILL RECEIVE TITLE PAGE CREDIT FOR HIS STORY SUGGESTION

FIFTEEN LUCKY BOYS WILL RECEIVE "BURD" FLYING MODEL WAR PLANE KITS THESE ARE THE BIG DOLLAR KITS... EASY TO BUILD, EASY TO FLY. AUTHENTIC MODELS.

TEN LUCKY GIRLS WILL RECEIVE BEAUTIFUL ILLUSTRATED STORY BOOKS FOR GIRLS.

AND TWENTY-FIVE ADDITIONAL BOYS AND GIRLS WILL RECEIVE CONSOLATION PRIZES.

TED STEELE TRIUMPH COMICS 165 YORK STREET TORONTO ONTARIO. WINNERS ANNOUNCED NEXT ISSUE

Figure 1. Contest Announcement, from *Triumph Comics* Vol. 15 (23-24).

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The occasional solicited input of Canadian readers did come to influence stories themselves so that at about the same time that Jack Tremblay was in the process of becoming a professional comic book creator for Bell Features, Adrian Dingle, in his inside front cover reader communiqué for *Triumph-Adventure Comics* Vol. 1

No. 4 (November 1941) announced that 13-year-old Fred Bullard of Fredericton had submitted a plot outline that merited use in that issue's "Clue Catchers" story. The published story was titled "Murder Rides the Rails." In a similar fashion, almost three years later, in *Triumph Comics* Vol. 1 No. 18 (February/March? 1944), Ted Steele, creator of Speed Savage/The White Mask, announced in the preamble to this hero's story that the "Speed Savage Adventure Request Contest," which, three issues prior, had solicited Speed Savage stories readers would like to see, had produced thousands of entries and that the one selected as the best was from Raymond Roy of Moncton. It produced that issue's story, "Speed Savage Meets Capt. Wonder,"⁷ a story made possible, as Ted Steele further notes in his preamble to it, by "special arrangement with Ross K. Saakel, the creator of Capt. Wonder and Spike and Mike, etc." This conscious effort to engage readers was consistent throughout the WECA run of Bell Features Comics.

- 154 By *Wow Comics* No. 5 (February 1942), after the success of the earlier issues, Cyril Bell and Commercial Signs of Canada had decided it was time to expand beyond their single title and issued *Active Comics* No. 1 and *Dime Comics* No. 1 that same month. In *Active Comics* No. 1 Corporal Wayne Dixon of the RCMP, created and drawn by E.T. Legault, was, by default, Canadian. The star of the final feature in that book, Leo Bachle's psychically empowered superhero The Brain, was, as the son of a Canadian World War One hero, distinctly Canadian. In *Dime Comics* No. 1, we have only one expressly Canadian feature character, but what an iconic one he was. This was Johnny Canuck, who seemed to be an independent (government?) operative, a commando type of no military affiliation or known rank. He seemed to be well-known to his Nazi enemies and was praised by Churchill and decried by Hitler in the last few panels of this initial story.

Johnny Canuck, like Nelvana, has become a central icon of the comics of this era and has established himself as a firm fixture in Canadian cultural heritage. In November of 1974 a lighthearted play, written and directed by Ken Gass, entitled *Hurray for Johnny Canuck*, opened at the Factory Theatre Lab on Adelaide Street in Toronto. It starred Wally Michaels as Johnny, Jim Henshaw as Corporal Dixon, Maury Chaykin as Derek Bras d'Or, and Jank Zajfman as Major Domo—all Canadian comic book heroes.⁸ Johnny Canuck also earned a 1995 postage stamp from the Canada Post Corporation alongside the one given to Nelvana. He also probably shared more than a surname with Richard Comely's seventies creation Captain Canuck.

In the next month, Bell Features added another new title with the appearance of *Joke Comics* No. 1 (March 1942) and, for the most part, the book was a collection of joke pages and gags, but it did introduce a team of three average young Canadian male teens called "The Three Ts" because each of "their names began with the letter 'T.'" This series was created by Frank Mann Harris and drawn by Mel Crawford, who became a prolific illustrator of comics and *Little Golden Books* once he moved his career south of the border following the war. Sadly, this series about Canadian boys battling homeland espionage lasted only for the first three issues of this title. Also

introduced in the form of a two-page filler in this issue was Ted Steele's zany army character Private Stuff, who was identified as Canadian in issue No. 6, and who continued in the title until the end of the war.

The first three issues of both *Active Comics* and *Dime Comics* and the first two of *Joke Comics* were still published by Commercial Signs of Canada, but in May 1942, Cy Bell changed the name of the publishing company to Bell Features and Publishing Company Ltd. Issues 4 and onward of these titles appeared with Bell Features in the indicia and the new "Bell" logo on the cover. At this same time Bell Features absorbed Adrian Dingle's (Hillborough Studios') *Triumph-Adventure Comics*, reducing the name to simply *Triumph Comics* with issue No. 7 and taking it in a slightly different direction.

Bell Features kept Nelvana and Tang from Hillborough Studios and introduced two new heroes, Speed Savage (and his alter ego, The White Mask), created and drawn by Ted Steele, and Captain Wonder, created and drawn by Ross Saakel. The fact that Speed Savage is Canadian is not revealed until the Speed Savage splash page in *Triumph Comics* No. 9, in which Ted Steele makes it clear that Speed Savage is a "famous Canadian athlete and ace detective," and that the adventure will take place at a regatta in Northern Ontario.⁹ Capt. Wonder is also made out to be a young Canadian who, in a "Shazam-esque" origin by way of an encounter with an old yogi and three rather dubious deities in a Himalayan monastery, is endowed with "the strength of a hundreded [*sic*] men, great wisdom and speed, the power to fly like a bird and swim like a fish." Captain Wonder becomes the closest thing to a Superman-type in the WECA universe, apart from the Anglo-American redraws of Captain Marvel. With three solid Canadian feature heroes (Nelvana, Speed Savage, and Captain Wonder), *Triumph Comics* became the Bell Features book with the most declared Canadian heroes on its roster.

At the beginning of the summer of 1942, Bell Features released its penultimate title: *The Funny Comics* No. 1. This issue was made up almost entirely of a series of disconnected one-page gags that featured Dizzy Don, a Harry Lloyd type in a bow tie and boater, with a madcap sense of humour. It was different from other Bell Features titles in that it was the work of one creator, Manny Easson, from beginning to end. With the second issue, Manny Easson had the foresight to make Dizzy Don an amateur detective who begins to take on and solve a mystery in one long story taking up at least the first half of each book. These long stories, ranging from twenty to over forty pages, provided each subsequent issue of the run with its main content, and the "Dizzy Don" banner became larger on the front cover than the actual title of the book itself. The rest of each issue was still made up of single page disconnected Dizzy Don gags.

The final of Bell Features' seven main titles appeared in October 1942, and was called *Commando Comics*. This was a purely war-themed title and introduced three explicitly Canadian features.¹⁰ The first of these was Adrian Dingle's "The Sign of



Figure 2. Captain Wonder, from *Triumph Comics* Vol. 8 (59).
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Freedom” about an RCAF pilot, Jimmy Clarkson, who is forced to bail out over Berlin and has an interaction with Otto von Berger, who has been operating as a resistance fighter called “The Sign of Freedom.” Otto is killed by the Gestapo but, as he is dying, hands over the mantle and vocation to Jimmy. Leo Bachle, creator of Johnny Canuck in *Dime Comics*, here brings us another Canadian hero with the introduction of his “Invisible Commando,” who is also RCAF officer Lee Pierce. Pierce, who is also a scientific wizard, has invented a chemical capsule that, when swallowed, will render him invisible for a period of three hours. With this special power he fights the Nazis in occupied France. The last specifically Canadian feature in the book was “Ace Bradley” of the 14th RCAF squadron, and the only information we have on its creator are the initials “E.B.C.”

This completed the septet of Bell Feature titles that arguably formed the cornerstone of the WECA comic industry. They were read eagerly by the adolescents and pre-adolescents of Second World War Canada. The comics provided that young audience, which did not read newspapers (except perhaps for the Sunday Funnies) and had no television to watch, with probably their only source of information on the war (aside from weekly newsreels at the cinema and the occasional radio news

broadcast).¹¹ Their stories and characters, which were set in far-away theatres of war or dealt with homeland intrigue and plots of sabotage, that captivated these young minds, were often doled out by teenage creators only a little older than themselves. The value of these books to Canadian culture is evidenced by the inclusion of John Bell's comprehensive collection of WECA Bell Features Publishing materials (including 380 copies of Bell WECA comics, original artwork, correspondence, contracts, copyright files, and photographs) in the Collections of the Library and Archives of Canada in Ottawa.¹²



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Figure 3. The Sign of Freedom, from *Commando Comics* Vol. 1 (16).
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3. THE PANTHERS AND THE ACTIVE CLUB

I have tried to show that a great part of the “Canadian-ness” of Bell Features’ war-time comics came from their successful efforts to engage their readers and not just the content (characters, stories, and art) of these books itself. These comics solicited readers’ opinions about what was and should be inside them and offered up contests for those same readers to participate in with almost every issue. There were two other specific efforts at engagement of readers which need to be mentioned for their contribution to the “Canadian-ness” of these books.

In the fall of 1944, Cy Bell started a midget hockey team in Toronto called the Panthers, and on page 16 of *Active Comics* No. 19 (October-November 1944), he

makes an announcement about it, asking for readers under 16 to consider trying out for the team. On top of this, the five pages preceding this announcement comprise a story by Tedd Steele (now spelling his name with two “ds”) called “Artists on Ice,” which features Tedd himself, along with fellow artists Ross Saakel and Leo Bachle, trying out for the Panthers hockey team under the watchful eye of Cy Bell himself. He had drawn himself and fellow artists Bachle and Saakel into a story before in his Pvt. Stuff feature for *Joke Comics* No. 16. Steele’s notable knack for the eccentric produced this creative turn and helped erode the line between a faceless creator and his or her audience. This added sense of intimacy between the reader and the creator of the comics he or she was reading could not help but engage that reader more.


By the next issue, *Active Comics* No. 20, there is a complete two-page 15-player line up for the Panthers in the book, with individual sketch portraits and a two-page report on games played at Toronto’s Royal Rink, and another story featuring the three hapless comic creators and the hockey team. This issue also gives the front
158 cover to the Panthers, making it one of the few, and perhaps earliest, hockey covers in comics. The short Panthers arc finishes in *Active Comics* No. 21, but it helped bolt the imagination of young Canadian readers onto a real-world Canadian experience that was apart from world of war that surrounded them.

The final Bell initiative to which I want to draw attention began as early as *Active Comics* No. 2 (March 1942). On the centerspread of that issue, sandwiched between the “Dixon of the Mounted” story and the “Red Thortan” story, is the first announced opportunity to become a member of the Active Club. Its motto was “Strength and Fair Play,” whether in school, sports, work, or play, and “any boy or girl in Canada” could become a member. For 15 cents a reader would receive:

an official Club Emblem, a beautiful cloth crest for your sweater, coat, cap, or sports-wear to distinguish club members [...] Membership Certificate, together with the Club’s Secret Code which can be used in deciphering the Club’s secret messages and can be used among your fellow members [...]

The “Active Club News and Views” now becomes a regular feature in the title, and on the inside front cover of the next issue, *Active Comics* No. 3 (April 1942), the names and locations, across Canada, of a hundred active members are listed. Also, on pages 12-13 of *Active Comics* No. 3, we are introduced to Active Jim, an athletic and clean-cut young man who serves as the spokesman and figurehead of the Club and who, from this issue on, merits a regular story in *Active Comics* until issue 24.¹³

The Active Club quickly took on the task of becoming a pen pal club while offering conservation tips for the war effort, and safety tips and contests for its members. Every issue listed scores of new members in cities and towns across the nation. They formed local branches, built clubhouses, held fundraisers and bond drives, and stayed vigilant for fifth-column activities or sabotage in their home towns. By *Active Comics* No. 7 (October/November? 1942) it was announced that The Club membership had surpassed the 5,000 mark (31) and the names of British members start to appear in



ACTIVE JIM'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

STRENGTH · FAIR PLAY · STRENGTH · FAIR PLAY

HELLO AGAIN MEMBERS — THIS IS THE STORY OF *TOM BROWN* 16, OF TORONTO, THE SCHOOLBOY HERO OF DIEPPE, WHO IS NOW BACK AT CLASSES IN CENTRAL TECH WITH PUPILS WHO READ ABOUT THE BATTLE HE ACTUALLY TOOK PART IN. THE *TOM BROWN* OF FICTION NEVER CAME CLOSE TO MATCHING THIS ONE.

"I WAS THERE," SAID TOM. "WE WENT ABOARD INVASION BARGES AT 9 O'CLOCK ONE DARK, CALM NIGHT, AND SET OUT FOR DIEPPE. AT 5 A.M. WE WERE OFF THE BEACHES OF THE TOWN. WE WERE MET WITH HEAVY GUNFIRE. THE MEN WAITING DOWN ON THE BEACH—WAITING FOR SPEAR-HEADS TO TAKE GUN EMPLACEMENTS—LAID BETS WITH EACH OTHER AS TO WHOM AMONG THEM WOULD LIVE 15 SECONDS."

"OUR GROUP OF EIGHT WERE SET TO MOP UP ONE STREET. WE PLACED BREN GUNS AT EACH END OF THE STREET, TO MOW ANY NAZI DOWN WHO MIGHT RUN FROM ONE HOUSE TO ANOTHER. TWO MEN WERE POSTED AT THE REAR DOOR OF EACH HOUSE, WITH FIXED BAYONETS, TO SEE THAT NO GERMAN COULD GET OUT THAT WAY."

"IT WAS MY JOB TO ENTER EACH HOUSE BY THE REAR DOOR, AND GO FROM ROOM TO ROOM THROWING IN HAND GRENADES TO SILENCE ENEMY SNIPERS. I SAW ONE GERMAN KILLED. HE SEEMED EVEN YOUNGER THAN I AM. WHEN WE GOT BACK TO ENGLAND THE AUTHORITIES FOUND OUT I WAS JUST 16, AND THEY DISCHARGED ME AND SENT ME BACK TO CANADA."

A YEAR AGO *TOM BROWN* PLAYED IN THE JUNIOR RUGBY TEAM FOR HIS SCHOOL, AND APPEARED ON THE CITY ALL-STAR TEAM. AN ATHLETE, HE WAS RATED ONE OF THE FASTEST RUNNERS IN HIGH SCHOOL RUGBY. BORN IN KINGSTON, EDUCATED IN TORONTO, HE RETURNED TO HIS HOME CITY TO ENLIST WITH THE *STORMONT-DUNDAS-GLENGARRY REGIMENT*. LAST FEBRUARY, I TOLD THEM I WAS 18," HE SAID.

FROM KINGSTON, HE WENT TO TAKE BASIC TRAINING AT PETERBORO, AND FROM THERE WAS SENT TO CAMP BORDEN, PROCEEDING OVERSEAS, HE WAS IN SCOTLAND FOR A WHILE, THEN WAS CHOSEN TO TAKE A COMMANDO COURSE IN THE SOUTH OF ENGLAND.

TOM, WHOSE FATHER IS A CITY FIREMAN AT HONLAND AVE. STATION, IS GOING TO JOIN THE NAVY OR THE AIR FORCE AS SOON AS HE IS OLD ENOUGH. "IT'S QUIET TO BE BACK AT SCHOOL, BUT IT'S NICE," HE ADDED.

Active Jim

MEMBERS SECRET MESSAGE
USE CODE WHEEL

B PBLA XOXXQ
FXFXK T OXKQ
ATIIIR TGW
IKHLIXKHNL GXP
RXTK

JOIN TO-DAY
JUST FILL IN THE COUPON
AND MAIL WITH 15 CENTS

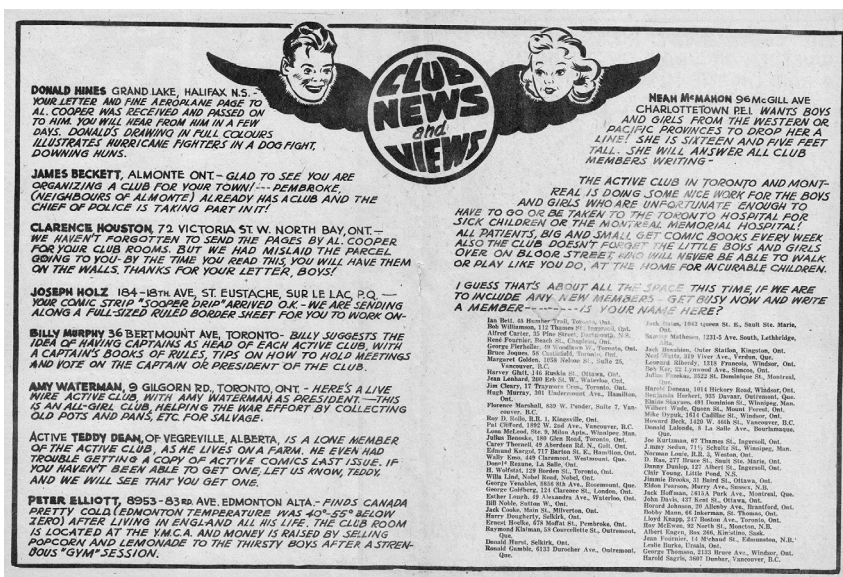
The ACTIVE CLUB ----- 1942
165 YORK ST TORONTO ONT.

Please enroll me as a member of
The ACTIVE CLUB. I enclose 15 cents
to cover cost of mailing. I will
receive my Membership Certificate,
Emblem & Secret Code by return mail.

NAME ----- AGE -----
STREET ADDRESS -----
CITY ----- PROVINCE -----

Figure 4. Active Jim, from *Active Comics* Vol. 8 (18).

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(Bottom) Figure 6. Active Club News and Views, from *Active Comics* Vol. 9 (32-33).

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the lists.¹⁴ Occasionally, as in *Active Comics* No. 8 and No. 9, Active Jim informed the readers of significant developments in the war effort, such as the raid on Dieppe or the meeting between Churchill and Roosevelt in Casablanca.¹⁵

In a country whose population at that time numbered a dozen million, almost entirely scattered on its southern flank, and for the small fraction of these who were youngsters who read comics, creative initiatives such as these helped cement a sense of cohesiveness and shared experience. Everything concerning numbers, readership, and print runs¹⁶ in Canadian war-time comics must have been on a scale of, at the most, one-tenth of what was happening in the United States and the publishers of these comics had to come to grips with the greater distances and perhaps comparative lack of infrastructure across our country at the time. The evidence shows that initiatives by Bell Features such as soliciting readers input, offering contests and competitions, and formation of the Active Club, all within the context of the Second World War and the absence of American comics, seemed to work in giving life and durability to these Canadian comic books and, looking back at them, they were a significant piece in the puzzle of our “Canadian-ness.”

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Regrettably, as the war ran its course and reached its inevitable conclusion, the need to keep American imports such as comic books out of the country diminished and, after the war’s end, the government gradually repealed the War Exchange Conservation Act, including the portions relating to print materials. Some companies,¹⁷ such as Bell Features, attempted to colourize their contents and pumped up production values in a futile effort to compete with the returning American books. By the end of 1946 this great run¹⁸ of original Bell Features war-time comic books, and the comic books of all the Canadian publishers, had ended.

For a brief six-year window, and for the first time, we had comics that we could call our own. These Bell Features books, along with the other WECA books (from Anglo-American Publications, Maple Leaf Publishers, and Educational Projects) were as Canadian as comic books ever get, and they laid the foundation for any future comic book that wanted to earn the designation “Canadian.”

NOTES

1. The Canadian comic books from this period (March 1941 to the end of 1946) are affectionately and nostalgically referred to by many collectors as the “Canadian Whites” because, though their covers may have been in colour, the interiors were almost invariably colourless black-and-white line drawings. I prefer to call these books “WECA” books because they were born out of the War Exchange Conservation Act and ran their course just over a year after the relevant portions of the Act were repealed at the end of World War II. The WECA books can be neatly “bookended” within the run of *Robin Hood Comics* from Vol. 1 No. 1 in March 1941 to its last issue, *Robin Hood and Company Comics* Vol. 3 No. 34, with a cover date of December 1946-January 1947 (See Kocmarek, *WECA Comics* (2014) for a detailed account of the run of Canadian war-time comic books).
2. See Bell, *Invaders* Ch. 3 for a more detailed account of the start of the Canadian comic publishing industry.

3. Adrian Dingle himself went on to a distinguished career as a fine artist, as did other Bell illustrators such as Gerald Lazare, Oscar Shieler, Jack Tremblay, Mel Crawford, and Avrom Yanovsky. The same can be said of George M. Rae (creator of Canada Jack) and Sid Barron from Educational Projects in Montreal; and we cannot forget that Harold Town, as a young artist, had a stint with Anglo-American Publishers doing redraws of licensed Fawcett characters such as Captain Marvel Jr.
 4. Dingle attributes the inspiration for Triumph's Nelvana to the recounting of a legend brought back by Group of Seven artist Franz Johnson from an Arctic trip (Sim, *Fantasy* 30).
 5. The WECA era is full of ironies, and among them is the fact that many of the creators of these first Canadian comics were not born in Canada, including Adrian Dingle (Wales), Jon St. Ables (England), George M. Rae, Edmond Good, Jack Tremblay, John Hilkert (all born in the United States), Avrom Yanovsky (Ukraine), the Kulbach brothers (Estonia), and Oscar Schlienger (Switzerland).
 6. This is based on information from a short interview I conducted with Jack Tremblay in March 2013.
 7. This is only one of two known "crossovers" (two or more superheroes meeting in one of the others' features) in the WECA era. The other appeared a year after the Speed Savage story, as The Wing feature by Jerry Lazare entitled "The Wing Meets Nitro," in another Bell Features title, *Joke Comics* 17 (January/February? 1945), and was not the result of any reader's suggestion.
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8. Information on this play comes from the flyer and one-sheet programme that was distributed at original performances. Major Domo, an armless Canadian secret agent for the fictional United Nations Police force, first appeared in *Joke Comics* 21 (September/October? 1941) and was created and drawn by political cartoonist and activist Avrom Yanovsky.
 9. I consider Speed Savage, especially after, as The White Mask, he was given a new costume in *Triumph Comics* No. 15 (August/September? 1943), to rank just below Nelvana and Johnny Canuck in terms of popularity and iconic presence in the WECA and in the character's legacy to Canadian comics. His popularity earned him one of the 1945 Bell Features 15-cent compendium comics, in the company of those for Nelvana, Tang, and Spike and Mike; even Johnny Canuck did not receive one of these. He should have merited a postage stamp of his own alongside the others issued by Canada Post Corporation in 1995, as Anglo-American's Freelance, Educational Projects' Canada Jack and Maple Leaf Publications' Brok Windsor should have as well.
 10. The other features in this issue are Mel Crawford's "Young Commandos," Jack Tremblay's "Wings over the Atlantic," and Al Cooper's "Clift Steele."
 11. See Ross.
 12. Descriptions of this collection are online at <http://collectionscanada.gc.ca> and listed under Bell Features Fonds [Textual Records] (1998-00563-1).
 13. In Montreal, Educational Projects' analogous Canada Jack Club was formed about a year later, after the creation of Canada Jack by George M. Rae in *Canadian Heroes Comics* No. 5 (March, 1943). It must be noted that the order between figurehead and club for Canada Jack was the reverse of the Active Jim Club and Active Jim at Bell Features. At Educational Projects, Canada Jack came first, and then the club was formed. The Canada Jack Club went a little beyond the Active Club in offering drawn renditions of featured members on its pages. This was all from Anglophone Quebec; comic books as we have come to know them were a post-war phenomenon in that province (Pomerleau 1986). For more information on Educational Projects, see Kocmarek, *WECA Comics* 1169-70.
 14. This shows that some of these issues must have been available to British readers, perhaps through Canadian Army PX's and the Canadian soldiers themselves. Bell Features readers were often exhorted to send their old comics to soldiers they knew in Europe. Also see Active Club News and Views on p. 8 of *Active Comics* No. 18 (August/September? 1944), p. 41 of No. 20 (December/January 1944-45), and a full page of British members listed on p. 27 of *Active Comics* No. 25 (October/November? 1945).
 15. The account Active Jim offers in his "Monthly Message" for *Active Comics* No. 8 describes the exploits

of Tom Brown of Kingston, Ontario, who lied about his age when enlisting and participated in the raid on Dieppe as a sixteen-year-old boy. He lived through this and, when he was found out, was sent back home to Kingston to finish high school.

16. Hirsh and Loubert, in *The Great Canadian Comic Books* (1971), point out that, according to Cy Bell, the print run of *Wow Comics* No. 1, the first “Bell Features” book, was 52,000 copies (10).
17. Anglo-American Publishers, having gained access to the *Globe and Mail* presses, began issuing colour comics by July 1945 (see MacMillan 98-99). Maple Leaf Publishing and Bell Features Publishing waited until the spring of 1946.
18. Alex Ross has Cy Bell looking back at this period and saying, “After it was all over and we’d wound up the company, [...] I sat down one night and added up all the press runs and figured it out. It came to a billion comic books. Think of it. We turned out a billion comic books” (Ross 30).

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