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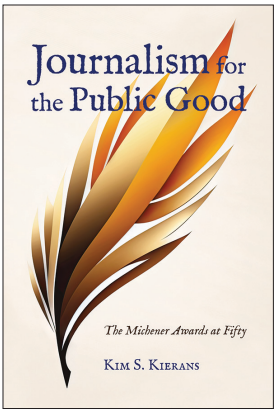


# JOURNALISM FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD: THE MICHENER AWARDS AT FIFTY

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# The Foundation Sets Its Course

By 1987 the Michener Awards Foundation was on a roll. In five years, it had achieved a modicum of financial stability to endow the Michener Awards and fund the creation of new fellowships. Journalists and media executives coveted the award. Industry respected the Michener judging panels for their impartiality and independence in adjudicating both the awards and the inevitable disputes. All this arose from an understanding of the place of the Michener Awards in Canadian journalism.[1] It was a vision shared and promoted by industry volunteers, inspired leaders and successive governors general. But these developments did not necessarily guarantee success for the organization or the award, given the flux in the industry.

The predictions of the Kent and Davey commissions were being realized. Media organizations had ramped up buying, selling, mergers and closures. Readership was in freefall. Advertising had shrunk following the 1987 stock market crash, known as Black Monday. The poor economy, limited fundraising and the formation of a new, well-funded rival — the Canadian Journalism Foundation — were all reminders to the Michener Award Foundation volunteer board members that they could not take the claims to be Canada's premier journalism award for granted.

As the Michener Foundation approached its twentieth anniversary, the directors were presented with an interesting proposition — an offer to be part of the new journalism organization. The proposal would create an existential moment for the Michener Foundation and everything the award represented.

In 1986, the journalism community in central Canada was abuzz with news that the country's top business leaders, politicians, journalism executives and educators were forming a new journalism organization — the Canadian Journalism Foundation. The CJF, as it's now known, had connections, money and ambitions to bring the National Newspaper Awards and the Michener Awards under its umbrella.[2] Toronto businessman Eric Jackman, the driving force behind the CJF's creation, wanted "to have the same kind

of distinction and style the Pulitzer Prize does in the U.S." Jackman's vision was "to create an award which would be so prestigious — money and recognition-wise — that journalists receiving it would say, 'I don't have to feel bad about myself because of my profession, I'm not really an ink-stained wretch.' And young journalists would say, 'What did that person do to get that award, how can I emulate him — what judgement, sensitivity and responsibility did he bring to his writing'."[3]

A CJF partnership proposal in 1989 forced the Michener board to take a hard look at who it was, what it wanted and how much it was prepared to give up. It raised tough questions about how the Foundation would negotiate its independence: resisting Jackman's overture would have consequences. It would mean giving up substantial grants from Jackman's foundation and forgoing other well-placed donors who would have provided ongoing financial security for the Michener Awards Foundation. Ultimately, however, the Michener founders would take no step to jeopardize the Foundation's relationship with Rideau Hall or its reputation for independent adjudication. In a sense, this decision sacrificed one form of independence for another, as the Foundation gave up potential financial stability to maintain its ethical and professional autonomy — an important stand, but one that would require ongoing negotiation and grit in the face of economic and legal challenges.

### *Judging: Preserving the Reputation*

From day one, the reputation of the Michener Award had rested on the quality of its journalistic judgement. The administrators of the Michener Award understood the quality of the judging was crucial for the success and credibility of the award. If it was going to be the best, then the award and those judging it would have to be above reproach — independent of the industry, funders, Rideau Hall and even the Federation of Press Clubs. It would not be an award judged by peers, as with other industry awards. Its judges would be arm's-length and experienced former reporters, editors, publishers and journalism educators.

It had taken some time for Bill MacPherson to assemble the first panel to judge the 1970 entries. But the roster sent a clear message that the Michener Award was above partisan self-interest. It would not be beholden to any media outlet or other interests. The all-white male panel looked like an old boys' club — a common sight in the senior echelons of journalism back then — but each member had heft. They came to the judging table with years of journalism

experience but were no longer affiliated with or involved in the day-to-day operations of a news organization.

The first chair, Davidson Dunton, was president of Carleton University. He had started as a reporter at the *Montreal Star* and went on to become editor of the *Montreal Standard*, a national pictorial weekly newspaper. At the age of thirty-three, he became the first full-time chair of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Dunton oversaw the creation of a national CBC network before taking the top job at Carleton in 1958 and serving as the co-chair of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in 1963.

Dunton was joined on the judging panel by George Ferguson, editor emeritus of the *Montreal Star* and a former Rhodes scholar, Yves Gagnon, director of Communications at Laval University, and Sam Ross, a journalism lecturer at Vancouver's Langara College and retired Parliamentary Bureau Chief for the All-Canada Mutually Operated radio group. Together they assessed the 1970 Michener submissions for their impact and contribution to the public interest. Over the years, judges would come and go — some would sit on the judging panel for a year or two, most for longer. Dunton left after two years, but Ross sat as a judge for five years and Gagnon for seven.

There's a rhythm to the judging process. At the start of each year, anticipation builds as the chief judge waits to see how many applications from the previous calendar year will arrive by the February deadline. A lot depends on the media outlets. Their financial health often dictates the investment in investigative journalism and submissions to the Michener Award. The 1987 stock market crash saw entries fall to thirty-nine after an all-time high of seventy-four the year before. The pandemic of 2020-21 from the COVID-19 virus created a firestorm of breaking news and updates unsuited to a Michener-worthy investigation and resulted in the number of Michener entries bottoming out at sixteen. The churning of the world's powerful forces combined with the internal storms in each media organization made predicting the number of applicants each year akin to trying to forecast the weather in Nova Scotia, where conditions change by the hour.

It was an analog world for the first forty years of the Micheners. The chief judge and a board member would meet at the *Ottawa Citizen*, the collection point for the entries. Then the sorting would begin, hours spent ripping open envelopes and boxes, checking to make sure each outlet sent five copies of the submission, with supporting material and then divvying up the submissions

destined for the judges. Five boxes, each stuffed with tear sheets from newspapers and audio and video tapes are then shipped to the judges.

With that, the judges could begin the real work of the Michener Awards Foundation. Whether there are seventy-four or sixteen entries, singling out the top six finalists and then the award-winner is a daunting task. Judges spend hours and hours over many weeks in the privacy of their homes watching, listening and reading each entry. They're looking for professional, unbiased, arm's-length reporting. But that's not enough. Judges seek evidence of outcomes — stories that have had an impact on the public or helped to change public policy or practices. The effects can be local, provincial, national or a community of people or interests. The judges are sensitive to an organization's resources and staffing. That makes it possible for small media outlets such as the *Prince George Citizen* in B.C., the *Nunatsiaq News* in Nunavut and Cogeco's Montréal radio station 98.5 FM to compete with well-resourced national media such as the *Globe and Mail*, CBC or *Toronto Star.* In short, the Michener Awards Foundation's criteria and judging system were developed not just to honour the industry's biggest and most powerful media actors, but also to nurture the values of public service in all media outlets across the country.

In year three of the award, Fraser MacDougall, the executive secretary of the Ontario Press Council, took over as chief judge, a position he held for eighteen years. With the precision of the Canadian Press wire service editor he had been, MacDougall set out criteria in a memo to guide his fellow judges in selecting a Michener winner. Number one was the importance of public service intended. MacDougall explained the process: "Theoretically this might range from a design to save mankind — physically or spiritually or both — to local promotion of a remedy for dandruff in cats. Practically, in the Canadian context, the goal of an equitable federal tax system, or elimination of partisan influence from a province's administration of justice, or by securing of a safe water supply for a village, might reasonably be given high scores."[4]

Next on MacDougall's checklist was the "validity of factual material" presented in a clear, forceful and persuasive manner. "Measurable, probable or potential impact" of the entry was also significant, as was the "sweat quotient" involved in the piece of journalism. He gave this example of how to rank effort. "A low benchmark here might be the simple reprinting of material prepared by others. The high might be a brilliant analysis of a constitutional issue or a high-powered piece of journalistic advocacy." The last criterion on

MacDougall's list was disinterestedness, defined as "above and beyond what the medium should normally be doing in the way of public service." For a group establishing its reputation, the criteria provided a valuable framework to guide the judges in determining the best journalism with impact.

By the early to mid-2000s, the formal weighted judging system would disappear. Somewhere along the way, it had morphed from a formal set of guidelines to an informal ethos. Carleton University journalism professor Chris Waddell sat at the judging table for nine years, until 2017. He brought to the judging table seventeen years of experience in print and broadcast, as well as academic rigour. "I don't recall there being any sort of rubric at all." But he said the judging mandate was clear. "It was always stories that had an impact and had some demonstrated results" that would lead to action to remedy the situation so it wouldn't happen again. In most years, four or five entries would stand out from the rest. Waddell explained, "Of the five judges, about six [entries] would be the same by all of them. Then each of them would have a couple of others that they like, maybe because they were from that region of the country or they knew a bit more about that issue or something else. So even if there wasn't a rubric, people seemed to agree on what story should be important."[5]

Until the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, the Michener judging panel met in person to select the finalists and the winner. The process could be compared to picking a pope. Go into a room, close the door, pitch, listen, discuss and eventually reach a consensus. Daily and weekly newspapers, television and radio broadcasters, online publications and magazines from all corners of the country. English, French. There was even an Italian entry in the days before Google Translate. When the judges leave the room, they have a winner and finalists. When the news release goes out a few weeks later, most publishers, editors and reporters nod with approval at the finalists, especially when they see their organization on the list. In the beginning, the judges would announce the winner months before the ceremony, but since 1978, the winner remains a tightly guarded secret until the night of the award ceremony.

The integrity of the Michener Award rests on the work of the judging panel. The Foundation does everything to ensure it is separate and independent from the board and its membership. The only job of the panel is judging. The chief judge is the one who reports to the board. The firewall is respected so much so that, in 1996, the judging process was a revelation to newly

elected president Clark Davey when he helped chief judge Arch MacKenzie sort and catalogue fifty-seven entries. Davey was captivated by an entry from the *Telegraph Journal* in Saint John, New Brunswick, all thirty-one pages about the plight of Canada's salmon streams. It "gave me an insight into the daunting tasks the judges face each year, but I was gratified to hear when I had lunch with them . . . that they had a remarkable convergence of opinion on which were the top entries," Davey reported. "Arch's organization and direction of the judging process for both the award and the fellowships is a major job of work which we should all appreciate."[6] The president and directors of the Foundation might appreciate the work of the judges — and they might help with administrative tasks, like sorting the entries — but they had no role or say in deciding which entries were the best.

It has been the practice to select judges with extensive journalism experience, who are no longer in the news business and have stellar reputations. "The Michener Award was considered then as it is now to be the top journalism award in Canada. It has preserved that reputation with the quality of people. People looked behind the screen and see the names associated [with judging] are good people," explained Russ Mills, chief judge 2004-2009.[7]

The judges have spent their lives immersed in the practice, management and, in some cases, teaching journalism. They're no longer affiliated with a journalism outlet, which gives them an independence not found in industry-run awards in print, magazine and broadcast. Four-time Michener Award winner Victor Malarek says that makes all the difference. "These are people from the outside who look at a whole body of work and determine whether your investigation merits public service journalism. And that to me means more than a bunch of people from the journalism community voting or not voting with you because they like you or dislike you."[8]

The independence of the judging process is a point of pride for the Michener Foundation — one that the board has protected at all costs. This principle, and how far the Michener Foundation was willing to protect it, came to the forefront when the backers of the Canadian Journalism Foundation came calling.

## *Merger or Independence: An Existential Crisis*

The rumblings of a new journalism foundation had been on the Michener radar for some time. Three years earlier, in January 1986, an exploratory overture had been made when Paul Deacon was on the hunt for money to

fund Michener study fellowships for working journalists. Deacon and Roland Michener thought the Jackman (family) Foundation, with its focus on education, would be a good fit for funding. They met for lunch with Dr. Frederic L. R. (Eric) Jackman, the Foundation's chair, on January 29, 1986. In the discussion, Deacon found Eric Jackman to be "super confident that he understands what's needed."[9] But it quickly became clear to Deacon that Jackman had something else in mind when it came to supporting journalism. His vision made Deacon bristle.

The next day Deacon wrote his concerns to Michener. "Our discussion with Eric Jackman on Wednesday continues to bother me a bit. My interpretation of his approach is that he's selling a 'be kind to politicians' education program." Deacon recognized that Jackman's vision would find a sympathetic audience, especially among those with money. "There'll be lots of bruised businessmen as well as bruised politicians who would love to find some way of making journalists more compliant." Deacon was concerned that he had come on too strong at the meeting with Jackman. "I found it hard to contain my horror," he wrote, and then asked Michener if he was overreacting, before concluding, "I suspect we should keep our distance and not get tied in with him in any way."[10] Michener gave Deacon his full support. "I concur in the suggestion you made about keeping distance. He [Eric Jackman] and I are good friends. I enjoyed his company at lunch recently. He pursues his program on his own and we may hear from him again. He is not getting much encouragement from the media."[11]

But three years later, in 1989, as word spread about the creation of the Canadian Journalism Foundation, some journalism educators and reporters shared Deacon's earlier skepticism about the motivations of this new alliance of elite industry, government and media managers. That's because its genesis was a research project about Canada's media — initiated by the Niagara Institute for International Studies, a business-focused think-tank, and funded by the Jackman Foundation. The Institute's director, W. C. Wilton, had conducted more than seventy confidential in-camera interviews with executives from media, business and government. There was an emphasis on the latter two sectors "that are generally suspicious of the media," according to Alberta newspaper executive J. Patrick O'Callaghan, who represented the Southam newspaper chain at the early planning meetings.[12]

O'Callaghan wrote in his memoir, *Maverick Publisher*, that the Niagara report "Canada's Media," released in July 1988, raised "concerns about the

media's balance, accuracy, professionalism, ethics, agenda-setting, scarce resources and accountability." From O'Callaghan's point of view, the undertone of the Niagara report was that "these cynical critics wanted a tamed and subservient media."[13] The report's findings had a similar ring to Deacon's conversation with Jackman in 1986.

O'Callaghan, never shy with his words, butted heads with other members of the tony Canadian Journalism Foundation's media advisory committee.[14] "From the start I was not on the same wavelength because I believe a free press should steer clear of all those who want to bring it under the Establishment's heel," O'Callaghan wrote.[15] Once he divined the group's direction, O'Callaghan left the committee in the spring of 1989 to devote his energies to the Michener Awards Foundation, where he had been a director since 1984. O'Callaghan brought an insider perspective of the CJF media advisory committee to the Michener table. His presence on the Michener board proved crucial when the CJF made a second overture.

In 1989, Bill Dimma, president and CEO of major realtor Royal LePage and former Torstar executive and York University dean of business, reached out on behalf of the CJF to broker an association with the Michener Awards Foundation. It was easy to see how the Michener Awards — a well-established and respected organization — would be a huge boost to the nascent CJF. For almost twenty years, the Micheners had honoured Canada's best journalism in the public interest. While not monied, the award had the prestige of the Michener name, continued vice-regal patronage, and an annual gala ceremony at Rideau Hall. But the CJF was also well aware of the Foundation's financial ups and downs.

This time, Paul Deacon didn't bristle. He responded with cautious enthusiasm. While he didn't necessarily agree with the CJF's philosophy and approach, he was pragmatic. There was value in the financial stability that the CJF could offer, as he explained in a memo to the Michener board of directors in October 1989. "It's hard to tell at this stage whether the Journalism Foundation will get the funding it will need to do all the things it plans, and whether, if we joined forces in some way, they could help our problems of continuity, permanence and money. But I believe it's worth pursuing."[16] Deacon then wrote to Dimma, who was working with Trevor Eyton, president and CEO of Brascan, a resource-based holding company, and Eric Jackman to set up the new organization. The group already had start-up funding of $100,000.[17] This kind of money was inaccessible to the Michener Foundation.

John Miller, chair of Ryerson's School of Journalism and a judge for the Michener study fellowships, shared O'Callaghan's concerns about the agenda of the new Foundation. After meeting for lunch with Eric Jackman, Miller came away with the impression that Jackman "had a very low opinion of journalists and that's what set off the alarm bells for me." As Miller recalled, "He wasn't interested in public service at all. He was interested in hardworking businesspeople who got bad press."[18] Miller was alarmed when he caught wind of a possible partnership between the CJF and the Micheners and wrote to Deacon, advising caution. "Meritorious public service in journalism often is not compatible with what businessmen see as good journalism, and for that reason, I think you should be wary."[19] Deacon replied, "Unless they can assure us that the independence and objectivity of the Michener Foundation can be continued, I'm afraid there may not be much point in pursuing the matter."[20] Still, Deacon left the door open.

During a discussion of the Michener Foundation's future at the annual meeting of November 1989, Deacon raised the idea of a possible affiliation. "The CJF's final organization pattern isn't settled, but its discussions to date have visualized it being an umbrella organization that would try to heighten public awareness of existing awards and programs and possibly help fund them,"[21] Deacon explained. Some board members could see benefits to sharing administrative costs and fundraising. Not O'Callaghan, a self-described "token dissident."[22] At the board meeting, he actively opposed any "take-over by the CJF" and argued strongly to maintain "our independence."[23] His view prevailed. Deacon delivered the message to Bill Dimma at a dinner meeting the following week. "I told him that the Foundation board feels the Michener program should maintain its name and its independence."[24] Deacon did offer to explore ways to cooperate with the CJF to raise the profile of the program and to promote good journalism, but for the most part, the two organizations went their own ways for the next 29 years.[25]

In the 1990s, the Canadian Journalism Foundation attracted corporate donors that had eluded the Michener Foundation — donors such as Senator Trevor Eyton, Bill Dimma, Eric Jackman and Mickey Cohen (Molson Brewery). The Jackman Foundation donated $100,000 in 1990 for the CJF's first interim budget on the condition that the CJF could raise another $500,000. It seems that the CJF had no problem gaining funding. By 1994, it was sponsoring a series of seminars on how to improve Canadian journalism and raising serious money.

Clark Davey reported to the annual meeting of the Michener Awards Foundation that the CJF had established an office and raised $250,000. The knock-on effect was that the Micheners and the National Newspaper Awards were having trouble signing on new donors. With prospects for new donors looking grim, Davey, now president of the Michener Foundation, expressed concern about an exodus of longtime donors.[26] Davey had written to "45 major suppliers of electronic and printing equipment" and received only one positive reply.

The Michener board must have been aghast when Governor General Roméo LeBlanc opened the doors of Rideau Hall to the Canadian Journalism Foundation. On May 31, 1996, the CJF held its first awards ceremony with co-chairs Knowlton Nash of the CBC's *The National* and Roger Landry of *La Presse*. The first CJF lifetime achievement award honoured Toronto journalist and author Robert Fulford. Neil Reynolds of the Irving-owned Saint John *Telegraph Journal* and *Evening Times Globe* in New Brunswick received the Excellence in Journalism award. After the ceremony, LeBlanc hosted a stand-up reception.

There was good reason for the Michener Awards Foundation to be a wee bit territorial. For twenty-six years, Rideau Hall had hosted the Michener Awards, upon the initiative of former Governor General Roland Michener. The Foundation was not keen to share the venue and the prestige that went with it. By rejecting the CJF's partnership proposal, it put the two organizations in an unstated competition. For the Micheners, the stakes were high.

The concerns were amplified when the CJF awards ceremony was back at Rideau Hall the following year. It appeared to the Michener board that the CJF was "building it in as a permanent part of their program."[27] The board could not quell the fear that the CJF wanted to swallow up the Michener Awards, and they seemed to have support from Rideau Hall. In 1997, when the Canadian Journalism Foundation approached Government House about its Rideau Hall ceremony, "the initial response was a strong suggestion that the CJF and Michener Awards should be handed out at the same occasion," Davey reported. "I have also been told that I will get an invite to lunch with the Governor General [LeBlanc] to discuss the Michener Award, so I expect the pressure to continue," Davey wrote in a letter.[28]

To nip the CJF initiative in the bud, Davey proposed that Rideau Hall support an umbrella organization or event such as the Governor General's Journalism Awards modelled on the awards for literature and the arts. But

His Excellency Roméo LeBlanc showed no interest.[29] His attention was focused on his newly founded Governor General's Caring Canadian Awards which celebrated ordinary people doing extraordinary things. The Michener board must have breathed a sigh of relief in 1998 when the CJF decided to move its awards ceremony to Toronto, the centre of its funding base.

After that close brush with the CJF and partnership, the Michener executive kept a close eye on what was going on in Toronto. A tinge of resentment could be seen in the minutes over the CJF's financial success "with its annual budget of $280,000 from the corporate world."[30] In a letter to a board member, Clark Davey remarked that the CFJ "pays its part-time director $90,000!!!"[31] This was in contrast to the Michener Awards Foundation with its operating budget of less than $30,000, volunteer labour and no paid staff. Davey did not miss an opportunity to gloat when the CJF's competition for the second annual award for newsroom excellence had attracted only a single entry several weeks after its deadline. "We had 44," wrote Davey.[32] The robust number of entries seemed to affirm the board's decision eight years earlier to say no to the CJF to guard the independence of the awards, even if the move shut out new sources of funding and stunted opportunities for growing the Foundation. Relations with the CJF over the next thirty years remained polite but cautious.

Over the years, the Michener Awards Foundation's independence gave judges the freedom to break from the pack and make bold decisions. For example, in 2013 the Michener judges paid no regard when the National Newspaper Awards (NNA) failed to nominate the *Toronto Star*'s entry for its extensive coverage in 2013 of Rob Ford's disgraceful behaviour as Mayor of Toronto. Maybe NNA judges dismissed the municipal series as "just the traditional Toronto media blowing a Toronto story out of proportion," mused Chris Waddell, a former judge for the Michener Award and the Canadian Journalism Foundation's Excellence in Journalism Award.[33] Others suggested the series was overshadowed by more important newspaper stories. It had been a banner year for hard-hitting stories.

So, when the *Toronto Star* entry made the list of six finalists for the Michener Award, there were raised eyebrows. The Ford series was competing with CTV for its exposé of the Senate scandal, the *Canadian Press* for its coverage of Ottawa's shabby treatment of veterans, the *Globe and Mail*'s investigation into the Lac-Mégantic rail disaster, the *Edmonton Journal* and *Calgary Herald*'s examination of the deaths of Indigenous children in foster

care and the *Windsor Star* for issues with Cancer Care Ontario and thoracic surgery procedures. The ballroom at Rideau Hall crackled with tension on that June evening.

The judges' citation got to the heart of why the series was Michener-worthy — the *Star*'s tenacity and courage that led to measurable change in Canada's largest city.

"Despite intimidation and an organized campaign trying to undermine the credibility of the reporting, the *Toronto Star* exposed Ford's public drunkenness, boorish behaviour, abuses of his office and existence of a video of him smoking crack cocaine accompanied by members of a drug gang. *The Star* did not waiver [*sic*] as the mayor countered every story with vehement denials and attacks. Behind the scenes the Toronto police launched an investigation that proved all the *Star*'s allegations to be true. Going to court to win the release of details about the police investigation, the *Star*'s work led the council of Canada's largest city to remove all powers from the mayor, leaving him just a figurehead."[34]

When Russ Mills announced the *Toronto Star* as the winner of the 2013 Michener Award, the newspaper's publisher, John Honderich, shot up out of his seat, threw his arms up in victory and, with an ear-to-ear smile, bellowed, "Yes!" It was vindication. Later, Honderich would say that the Rob Ford story "was probably one of the greatest threats to the paper because they [supporters of Rob Ford, the Ford Nation] wanted to launch a full boycott of advertisers and readers. But the moral corruption and behaviour was so egregious that to let it sit there unchallenged would have been awful."[35] The *Star*'s coverage helped defeat Rob Ford and elect a new council in Toronto.

"Rob Ford was the right decision to make. Absolutely," said Waddell who sat on the judging panel that year. "In retrospect, it was even a better decision to make than it looked like at the time. *The Star* pursued Ford very aggressively. Everything they said about Ford turned out to be true. . . . And what more can you ask for in an era of misinformation, disinformation."[36] The collective experience of the judges, combined with their distance from the industry, gave the Michener judges a unique perspective on entries. Moreover, it allowed them to be guided by the Michener values of public service and impact — enabling them to nominate, and reward, stories that other organizations overlooked.

## *Judging: Complaints and Intimidation*

Experienced judges need the distance and experience to deal with thin-skinned publishers, editors and reporters — and to maintain their independence. Many a judge over the years has found warm, chummy encounters before the awards ceremony turn rather frosty at the reception and dinner that follow. It is not unusual for a bruised publisher, editor or reporter to corner the chief judge to pronounce how the panel got it all wrong, while eyes are fixed on their rivals celebrating across the room. Complaints and calls to rescind nominations, and even awards, have come from business and community leaders stinging from the bad publicity. They have also come from other journalism outlets suffering from a case of self-righteous sour grapes. Over the years, media outlets with grievances have tried to sway the independent judging panel's decisions.

For example, in April 2001, *the fifth estate* was on the list of Michener finalists for its six-part series on "how police and justice officials approach their jobs, the techniques they use and the way they respond to mistakes."[37] Within days, chief judge David Humphreys received a fax, as did the *Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star* and the *National Post*, complaining that the same story about the Saskatchewan justice system had appeared in the Saskatoon *Star Phoenix* a year earlier. This was not, of course, the first time a publication had claimed to have broken a story that another entry would pick up, develop in much greater detail, and then submit as a Michener entry. The *Globe, Star* and *Post* likely saw the complaint as groundless because none of their papers published the complaint. As Humphreys reported at the May annual meeting, "Since the issue did not become public, no action was taken." At the awards ceremony that night, a beaming David Studer, executive producer of *the fifth estate,* stood beside Her Excellency Adrienne Clarkson to receive the Michener Award.

Any journalistic awards organization can expect whinging, complaints and threats; some deserve more than a shrug. As head of the Michener Awards judging panels, a respectful reply was appropriate for a complaint in 2016. Société Radio-Canada's *Enquête* received the 2015 Michener Awards for its coverage of allegations from Indigenous women of ongoing physical and sexual abuse by Quebec's provincial police (SQ) in the northern community of Val d'Or. "And together, with one voice, they denounced for the first time publicly the abusive behavior of Val d'Or police officers. Sexual assault, abuse

of power, intimidation, 'geographic cures' (a police tactic which consists of punishing an individual by transporting him several kilometers from home and forcing him to return on foot), from police officers who should normally protect them," wrote Jean Pelletier, editor-in-chief of *Enquête*.[38]

After an investigation announced no charges would be laid against the accused officers, a competitor emailed to ask if the Michener Foundation would be rescinding the award. After consulting the panel, as chief judge, I responded that the decision of the judging panel stood because *Enquête*'s broadcast had resulted in important outcomes — including an investigation and a $6 million assistance program for Indigenous women in the community — and was not contingent on subsequent legal decisions.[39] The complaint deserved a response, but ultimately the board felt that the judges had done their job — and supported their independent decision.

Sometimes complaints come from Michener board members who are not at arm's length and who have a direct interest in the outcome of the Michener Award. In one case, it was John Honderich, a long-serving Michener director and editor of Canada's largest newspaper, the *Toronto Star.* Honderich challenged the judges' decision to give the 1993 award to the *Ottawa Citizen.* The story involved the Mulroney government's plan to privatize the Toronto Pearson airport.

In a three-page letter to the Michener Awards Foundation, Honderich called for a decision review. Simply put, his letter argued that the *Citizen* did not "break this story" as was stated in the Foundation's press release and repeated several times during the awards ceremony. He could "only assume that the judging panel made its decision on a false premise." That's something no chief judge wants to hear. While *The Star* did not enter its coverage, Honderich included a folder of clippings that showed the *Star* was at least two weeks ahead of the *Citizen* on this story. His letter requested action "for the prestige of the awards."[40]

Honderich also sent his letter to the *Ottawa Citizen*. Its editor, James Travers, took the initiative and wrote a stiff letter to chief judge Arch MacKenzie demanding "to put the record straight."[41] He stated that the *Citizen* did not claim to have broken the story. Travers wrote its only claim was that by revealing confidential cabinet information, it "turned an existing story into a national scandal" that prevented the privatization of the airport. With no love lost, the *Citizen* then made the *Star*'s complaint public. An article by Chris Cobb, the *Citizen*'s media writer, quoted liberally from both

letters. Soon, the story was on the national wire service Canadian Press, and newspapers across the country ran the story of the *Toronto Star* taking on the *Ottawa Citizen*. When reminded of the brouhaha in a 2019 interview, Honderich responded with a big grin, "I loved that, you know."

With all this material in hand, Chief Judge Arch MacKenzie wrote a confidential memo to the judging panel. First off, "we are agreed that who got what first isn't really relevant, especially when the complainant didn't enter." Then MacKenzie fell on his sword. "I think we may agree that I as writer of the news release erred in saying that *The Citizen* 'broke' the story. . . . I should have said something like 'break open' and I will carry the can on that one."[42]

Two days later, the Michener Awards Foundation issued a news release confirming the *Ottawa Citizen*'s win. It stated that the *Citizen* stories, "based on internal documents from the Conservative government, broke the Toronto airport story wide open in the middle of an election campaign" and were "key to exposing secretive developments adversely affecting the flying public, the taxpayer, the air industry and Pearson as a hub of the Canadian airline system."[43] *The Star* ran a story based on the news release and Arch MacKenzie wrote to John Honderich saying that he assumed the matter was closed. It was for the Foundation, but not for Honderich, who for years remained willing to defend his reporters and argue the *Star*'s case.

Complaints of a different order arrive in white envelopes, with no signature, no return address, just a typed note, news article and an affidavit to remind the Michener judges that the publisher, editors and reporters of a certain entry could be facing a lawsuit. The correspondence is intended to influence the judging process, and maybe even convince the judges to withdraw a nomination. One case involved the *Daily Herald* in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, a finalist in 1994 for its "tenacious enquiry into spending practices by municipal politicians and officials . . . All but one of the incumbent city councillors seeking re-election lost his job."[44]

The City Commissioner, who also lost his job, had filed an intention to sue the *Daily Herald*, its publisher and editors.[45] Threats of a libel and slander lawsuit against the *Daily Herald* did not deter the Michener judging panel or the newspaper, which proudly published the announcement of its Michener nomination on the front page.

Investigative journalism, by its very nature, can spark threats of legal action, some serious, some nuisance, some to intimidate. For example, the *Toronto Star* faced a $2.7 billion libel lawsuit by the Toronto police union

when it won the 2002 Michener Award for its series on racial profiling. The *Star* was vindicated in January 2005 when the Supreme Court denied the Police Association leave to appeal an earlier court ruling.

Far more controversial among the Michener finalists at the 1995 awards ceremony, however, was CKNW/98, New Westminster, and its incandescent program host Rafe Mair. The nomination of Mair's year-long on-air campaign against the massive Kemano hydroelectric project in northern British Columbia raised all the vexing questions about the role of advocacy in public interest journalism. At issue was the proposal by the Alcan corporation to redirect 20 per cent of the flow of the Nechako River to provide more power for aluminum production in Kitimat. Mair, a devoted fly fisherman and environmentalist, was having none of that.

He was a well-known figure in B.C. Whether as a lawyer, municipal councillor, provincial politician or broadcaster, Mair was a self-professed "noisy one."[46] In the 1980s and 1990s, he ascended to become the grand inquisitor of private broadcasting. The airwaves were his pulpit, British Columbians his faithful congregation. More than 100,000 people tuned in each day to hear Mair dissect guests with caustic and razor-edged questions. "I have been a contrarian all my life. From childhood on, I never liked being told what to do and challenged authority at every turn. I would argue any politically correct proposition from the opposite side at the drop of a hat," he wrote in his memoir, *Rafe*.[47] The Kemano fight was no exercise in rhetoric.

In his attack, Mair released secret government research that showed the project threatened the environment, including salmon and other fish stocks. Then he opened the airwaves. As he later wrote, "native bands, labour unions, fish biologists, professionals, environmentalists and people from every other walk of life joined in the fray."[48] Alcan fought back with a letter-writing campaign throughout 1994 to CKNW and other media outlets such as the *Georgia Straight*, *Equity* and the *Financial Post*.[49] With the heat rising, NDP Premier Mike Harcourt decided in January 1995 to cancel the Kemano dam project. Within weeks, former Conservative federal fisheries minister Tom Siddon slapped CKNW and Mair with a defamation and libel lawsuit for making allegations of dishonesty and corruption in the "fever pitch" of the on-air battle.[50]

The announcement on March 25 that CKNW/98 was a finalist for the 1994 Michener Award inflamed the counter-attack by opponents in British Columbia. Suddenly, Chief Judge Arch MacKenzie was flooded with letters

from Alcan, former employees, supporters, and even the District of Kitimat demanding the Foundation withdraw the nomination.[51] Alcan's director of Corporate Information and Public Affairs, Les Holroyd, wrote that he was "appalled to hear of this nomination."[52]

With hundreds of potential jobs down the drain, Kitimat town council passed a motion strenuously objecting to Mair's nomination. The motion claimed Mair was "an unsuitable candidate for such a prestigious award" because he had failed to provide "listeners with a balanced reporting of all sides."[53] One Alcan employee, C. H. Whicher, complained that the show represented "everything sensational, sleazy and dishonest in journalism" and was appalled that it "could even be mentioned in the same breath as a gentleman such as the late Mr. Michener." In a subsequent letter to Clark Davey, Michener president, Whicher further suggested the award be renamed "The Joseph Goebbels Award, particularly appropriate on the 50th anniversary of VE Day!"[54] Passions ran high, and the gloves were off.

The Michener board could not ignore the furor. Chief Judge Arch MacKenzie raised the issue at the annual general meeting on the morning of the awards ceremony in May 1995. Clark Davey read some of the letters and said he had responded to the complaints. His message was clear. "Advocacy journalism as practised by Mr. Mair was not excluded from the competition and that obviously the judging panel had been impressed by Mr. Mair's ability to influence public opinion."[55] In other words, the complaint that Mair had failed to provide balanced reporting did not mean CKNW had not conducted public service journalism worthy of a nomination. At that point, only the judges knew that CKNW/98 Westminster would receive the 1994 award later that night.

That year's awards ceremony was the first for Governor General Roméo LeBlanc, but if he knew about the buzz around the nomination, he gave no sign. LeBlanc knew the media business. He had travelled the world as a political correspondent for Radio-Canada and reported from bureaus in Ottawa, London and Washington between 1959 and 1967. He left journalism to take on the job of press secretary to Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, and later, Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, but LeBlanc never forgot his time in the journalism trenches. His welcoming speech praised media organizations for investing in public service journalism. "We celebrate our good fortune of living in a country where investigative reporting is not only tolerated, but positively encouraged."[56]

Looking across the ballroom, LeBlanc picked out two of his contemporaries, Chief Judge Fraser MacDougall and Bill MacPherson, as "role models" and "front page legends."[57] The tribute had particular poignancy for long-hauler MacPherson, sitting in his black suit with his battery-powered electronic larynx at his side. He had been with the Micheners from the beginning and was not going to miss the twenty-fifth anniversary. He had survived surgery to remove his larynx and esophagus, and, with typical grit, he was fighting leukemia caused by earlier throat cancer treatments. It would be MacPherson's final trip to Rideau Hall.[58]

At the front of the room, the next act of a more contentious drama began to unfold with LeBlanc's presentation of the 1994 Michener Award trophy to a beaming Shirley Stocker, executive producer of CKNW's public affairs programming. The judges' citation recognized the coverage of the Kemano Completion project as a "potent force in the British Columbia government's decision to kill the billion-dollar completion of the Alcan power project."[59] The impact was measurable, but for some, it stung.

The Foundation received another downpour of letters from Alcan and such groups as the Kitimat Community Coalition, the District of Kitimat, former Alcan employees and individuals who questioned the judgement of the judges.[60] "Alcan tried to get this award taken away from me because they said that I had libelled fisheries minister Tom Siddon,"[61] Mair wrote.

Siddon's Writ of Summons and Statement of Claim pointed to Mair's on-air comments made eight years earlier about the Kemano 1987 settlement with Alcan. "He hit us with a long list of one-liners to which he had taken offence."[62] Siddon's lawyer, Eric Rice, even tried to drag the Michener Awards Foundation into legal action.

In August 1995, Rice requested details of what information the judging panel had used in February to base its decision.[63] Ever-cautious Clark Davey was in no rush to reply. Davey sat on the documents for two months before seeking legal advice from Ottawa lawyer Anthony P. McGlynn at Perley-Robertson, Panet Hill & MacDougall. As Davey's letter to McGlynn revealed, "Earlier this summer Senator Findlay McDonald approached Arch MacKenzie, chairman of the judging panel and a member of our board and executive, seeking a copy of the CKNW/Mair submission. When asked, he said he was acting on behalf of Tom Siddon who was suing Mr. Mair for defamation, Mr. MacKenzie and I agreed that we should not give up this submission, at least in this way."[64]

Davey's response to Rice in October 1995 was clear. "As a third party to the Siddon/Mair dispute, we have no wish to become involved particularly when the documents we hold, or copies of them, would be available to you from the other party to the litigation."[65] However, in December 1995, the Foundation succumbed and handed over "The Rafe Mair Program Michener Submission," including three audio cassettes, to Siddon's lawyer.

A key issue became what the Michener judges knew, and when they knew it. Based on what Davey reported, McGlynn's legal letter a week later assured Siddon's lawyer that "Mr. MacKenzie and the other members of the judging panel had no idea at the time they considered the submissions and made their decisions that the defamation action was pending or had been commenced against CKNW, its owners or its on air personalities."[66] He noted the practice of the judges is to consider submissions based on the material submitted by the applicants. With a possible jury trial, Davey even swore an affidavit "affirming that our judges did not know at the time of their selection of CKNW for the award that a libel action had been started" at the time of judging.[67] Later CKNW would take issue with Davey's account, noting that the award submission "specifically referred to [the lawsuit] in at least one of the documents submitted by *CKNW*."[68] A look through the CKNW's original submission to the judges shows not one, but three references to a lawsuit. Siddon's legal team did not pursue the alleged oversight.

Supporters of Alcan and Siddon refused to let the issue drop and pressured the Michener Awards Foundation to rescind CKNW's award even after Mair settled out of court with Siddon in March 1977 for a reported sum of almost $300,000.[69] When the board met two months later, directors supported the executive's decision to resist pressure. Davey issued a press release affirming the decision of the judges and "emphasizing that while the board recognized the seriousness of the libel complaint, the material giving rise to the complaint was not crucial to the CKNW/Mair campaign against the second phase of the Kemano project."[70] Davey went on to explain that, "In any event, a suit for defamation should not, of itself, be grounds for barring an entry from competition."[71]

## *The Price of Independence*

Typically — as in the battle over Mair's Kemano campaign — legal threats from outraged parties are usually directed to the media outlet that produced the story. Not so in 2018, when a legal challenge in Alberta threatened both

the Michener Awards Foundation and the judging panel. The case involved a series of broadcasts and online stories produced in 2017 by reporters Charles Rusnell and Jennie Russell of CBC Edmonton. "Private Health, Public Risk" examined the actions of Alberta politicians concerning a private health foundation funded by a wealthy Calgary philanthropist. CBC Edmonton had disclosed in its submission that it was facing legal action, but, given the public interest and significance of the outcome, the judges selected the series as one of the eight finalists. Days after the announcement, as chief judge at the time, I received a registered legal-sized brown envelope. When I looked at the first page I took a deep breath, sat down, and read the 33-page document. The title on the first page read "Journalistic errors must disqualify CBC nomination."

Lawyer Michael Flatters, the secretary of the board of Pure North S'Energy Foundation, had a list of allegedly "factual" objections to the 133-word *précis* of the CBC story in the Michener Awards news release.[72] He included supporting documents: a terse letter from a public health official qualifying his comments to CBC, and a defamation lawsuit against the Dieticians [*sic*] of Canada, another source in the CBC story. There was also a twenty-page complaint Pure North had sent to CBC Ombudsman Esther Enkin a year earlier. I had barely acknowledged receipt of the first letter when a second one arrived four days later. This one, from lawyer Grant Stapon of Bennett Jones Ltd. representing Pure North S'Energy. His letter gave notice of additional defamation charges against CBC, including the *précis* published on the Michener Awards website and made a formal request: "Take down or rewrite the summary."[73] The letter threatened legal action against the Michener Awards Foundation. A first.

The first reaction among the judges was that this was a nuisance suit. Even so, a few inquiries showed the complainant, Allan Markin — businessman, philanthropist and the founder of Pure North S'Energy Foundation — had a reputation for being litigious, and he had deep pockets. The Michener Awards Foundation was in a bind. If the Foundation refused the request to change the write up, it could expect a prolonged and expensive legal proceeding, most likely in an Alberta court. The directors had no appetite for a fight and the cash-strapped Foundation had no war chest to bankroll a prolonged lawsuit. The Micheners had maintained their independence over the years, but it left them vulnerable to financial threats such as this lawsuit. Furthermore, the Foundation did not have liability insurance, so the volunteer judges and board members could find themselves bankrolling a costly legal battle.

A chill descended, as Pure North had hoped. The CBC nomination stood but rewrites of the *précis* vetted by Halifax *pro-bono* media lawyer David Coles flew back and forth across the country. Pure North's legal team kept requesting more "appropriate factual corrections" with the promise that "If that was done Pure North will regard the matter as resolved in so far as the content of the summary of the CBC story published by your organization is concerned."[74] It galled to have to pare the write up and then pare some more. With Pure North's stamp of approval, the news release and citation for the awards ceremony in June 2018 became a mere two sentences that said nothing and everything: "*Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Edmonton: Private Health, Public Risk?* The CBC Edmonton is being recognized for its investigative series focusing on Pure North, an alternative health foundation of a Calgary businessman. They have continued to publish stories while facing a defamation lawsuit."[75]

On June 8, the letter from Stapon arrived "absolving the Michener Awards Foundation."[76] A letter from Pure North S'Energy Foundation's lawyer Michael Flatters followed. It was to "affirm our appreciation for the rewrite of the summary of CBC Edmonton publications."[77] The threat was over for the Michener Awards Foundation, but if Pure North's goal was to threaten the Michener Awards Foundation into submission, it worked. Even the national Cable Public Affairs Channel (CPAC) got cold feet. Its president, Catherine Cano, sat on the Michener board and was party to the Pure North deliberations. The broadcaster taped the awards ceremony, but CPAC decided not to broadcast it after CBC reporter Charles Rusnell's speech. Another sad first. The Michener board bought liability insurance that autumn to protect the directors and judges. This was an unhappy example of how independence has to be negotiated in the face of financial pressures and powerful forces.

As anticipated, four years later, in May 2022, Pure North discontinued its claim against CBC Edmonton and released the two reporters from all liability. CBC retracted nothing and paid nothing to the claimants. It re-published the series "Private Health Public Risk?" in May 2022 with this update: "While CBC Edmonton stands behind the accuracy of its reporting, the CBC has agreed with Pure North to provide a link to a statement where Pure North provides an additional response to the article below and related coverage."[78] "We don't regret doing the stories because they were clearly in the public interest. But we do regret losing weeks of time that could have been devoted to investigative reporting,"[79] Rusnell wrote later. He and Jennie Russell left

CBC in December 2021 to start their own freelance unit and hope one day to finish the investigation.[80] The question for the Michener Awards Foundation's future panels will be how to deal with hard-hitting investigative stories facing libel lawsuits.

In its fifty years, there has been only one instance where the Michener board was compelled to update a decision of the judging panel — seven years after making the award. In April 1998, a blond, fresh-faced David Rodenhiser stood on the podium before 140 guests in the ballroom at Rideau Hall. He gave the camera a big grin as one hand gripped the heavy trophy, and the other clasped the hand of Chief Justice Antonio Lamer of the Supreme Court, who was standing in for an ailing Roméo LeBlanc.

The reporting team from the *Daily News* in Halifax had won the Michener Award for its three-month investigation into its exposé of abuse at a reform school for boys in Shelburne, Nova Scotia. Reporters had dug up and used information from a sealed government archive, unknown even to senior civil servants. As a result of the dogged coverage, the provincial government introduced an alternative dispute resolution to compensate former victims. More than 1500 former residents came forward, accusing some 400 current or former employees of physical and mental abuse.

The page three headline of April 29, 1998 "The *Daily News* wins national award" trumpeted its Michener win for public service journalism.[81] The news was met with "dismay, disbelief and resentment" by Cameron S. McKinnon, a lawyer from Truro, Nova Scotia. Steaming with fury, he sat down and typed a letter and faxed it to the editor of the *Daily News* and Arch MacKenzie, chief judge of the Michener Awards. From McKinnon's point of view, the series "System of Abuse" series was "one-sided reporting." He complained that the *Daily News* had never contacted employees or former employees he represented for the other side of the story. The coverage, he wrote, "overlooked the very thing that we as Canadians are guaranteed: the presumption of innocence." His letter claimed his clients had been denied the right to due process because the *Daily News* coverage was "judge, jury and executioner of all employees."[82] MacKenzie responded the next day to say he had distributed the fax to all the judges and promised that "Your concerns are being given the consideration they deserve."[83] There is no record of how MacKenzie responded to McKinnon's concerns.

Seven years later, Halifax lawyer Dale Dunlop — who had represented 180 employees and former employees at Shelburne — wrote to the Michener

Awards Foundation as a citizen "who is troubled that many years after the fact, your website continues to publish false and potentially defamatory information on what went on in Shelburne."[84] He was referring to the citation on the Michener Awards website that read:

> The Michener judges praised the *Daily News* for taking reporter David Rodenhiser out of daily news reporting in 1997 to spend three months investigating allegations of abuse in Nova Scotia's reform schools. "Grim details of beatings, molestations and rapes emerged," especially after Rodenhiser discovered a "massive, sealed archive" of government documents. Senior civil servants and even the RCMP, who had been investigating some 1500 allegations, did not know existed. As a result, "approximately 400 suspects are under investigation. The RCMP subsequently began investigating allegations of fraud against some complainants seeking provincial compensation, the Michener citation read."[85]

Then, in a lawyerly fashion, Dunlop started making an argument for amendments. He noted that an RCMP investigation and the Nova Scotia government had exonerated many of the accused. He pointed to the CBC's 1999 *fifth estate* documentary and a 2001 feature story in the *Ryerson Review of Journalism* which raised issues with the coverage. "It is troublesome enough that the Michener Foundation has not seen fit to review its 1997 recipient, but even more so that the lies propagated by the *Daily News* still find a place on your website,"[86] Dunlop concluded.

The executive consulted chief judge David Humphreys as it mulled over what to do. At its June 14, 2006, meeting, with consent from the judges, the executive decided the Michener Award to Halifax *Daily News* would stand as is. But on the website, at the end of the citation, they would add an "update" that read: "Two years after the *Daily News* reports were published, the Nova Scotia government appointed Mr. Justice Fred Kaufmann to conduct an inquiry into the government's handling of allegations of abuse. In his report, published in 2002, Mr. Justice Kaufmann said: "The plight of innocent employees, as well as the distress of true survivors, was greatly exacerbated by frequent stories in the press. I have no doubt that there were claimants who were truly subjected to physical and sexual abuse. Similarly, I have no doubt that there was a significant number of employees who were falsely

implicated."[87] That clarification remained on the Michener Awards website until 2021 when the site was taken down as part of a website remake.

The mention of Shelburne can still polarize journalists, educators and media pundits. Stephen Kimber had a front-row seat for the Shelburne story. He was director of the School of Journalism at the University of King's College and wrote a column for the *Daily News*. He said the story of abuse at the Youth Centre would not have been told without the *Daily News*. "You had a very small news organization tackling a subject that was incredibly difficult," said Kimber.[88] He said if the *Daily News* was the mouthpiece for the youth confined there, the competing daily newspaper in Halifax, the *Chronicle Herald,* was the spokesperson for those in authority. Between the two newspapers, people got a pretty good sense of what was happening. Kimber said the problem was not the *Daily News* crusade, it was the government's decision to compensate the victims on an honour system that undermined the whole process. "So I think the *Daily News* did a public service by bringing this to the attention of the public."[89]

Judging public interest journalism is not a science. Perceptions change, new issues emerge, old definitions are challenged, and controversy is never very far offstage. From time to time, as the examples above show, various aggrieved parties have challenged the decisions of the Michener judging panel. Whatever their grounds, none has ever shown that industry pressure, political favouritism or private concerns affected the outcome of the selection process. In choosing from among the annual competitors for the award, the decisive question has always been "who has served best the public interest?"

This claim to integrity came with a cost, one that was fixed in the 1989 debate among the directors of the Michener Awards Foundation over a proposed partnership with the Canadian Journalism Foundation. What emerged on that snowy afternoon in Ottawa was a certainty among the directors that what they had created was special. Their collective determination was that the Michener Award would remain independent from any business or industry pressures to preserve its public service mission, its precious connection to Rideau Hall, and the independence of its judging panel. The decision also meant for its first fifty years the Michener Awards would be perpetually underfunded and operate with a volunteer board and no staff. Its ability to move with the times would be limited, especially when it came to outreach and social media. It would be obliged to rely on Rideau Hall to assist

in organizing the annual awards ceremony and struggle to find funders to support its fellowships.

In contrast, the CJF would go forward to tap into big donors and form partnerships with corporate and media organizations. With substantial funding, the CJF established an office with full-time staff that allows it to offer events throughout the year, including an annual journalism awards gala in Toronto and a speakers' series that focuses on issues in the industry. Over the years, concern about the role of special interests in the CJF has abated with its active presence on social media and partnerships to fund education, training and research opportunities for emerging and working journalists. John Miller, an early critic, has come to change his views and sees the CJF as a valuable organization, different from the way it was set up in 1990. "I think there's a number of strong industry voices there that have probably swung it back towards a journalism focus."[90] While the early suspicions and concerns about corporate influence on the journalism recognized by the CJF have evaporated, wariness about the CJF lingered among some long-serving Michener directors and influenced potential collaborative ventures.

As for now, however, the Michener Award remains unique: the prize that reporters, editors, broadcasters and publishers want most of all. "The Micheners stand for something singular. It is the one," said David Walmsley, editor-in-chief of the *Globe and Mail* and a former chair of the Canadian Journalism Foundation. "It's the only award where you're up against everyone in broadcast, local print, both languages, and you've got a very clear set of criteria that you have to achieve: a public policy difference in a calendar year. . . . What I love about that is that the Micheners are clear as to what you have to do. And if everyone's rowing in the same direction, for public policy difference, it means it doesn't matter if you won or not because you get nominated. That's pretty special. It means everyone has achieved a certain standard already.[91]

For Walmsley, the other aspect that elevates the Michener Awards is the "pivotal role" the governor general plays. "There is nothing more humbling than to be allowed into Rideau Hall to see the head of state who takes a personal interest and commitment to understanding why journalism, as a central part of democracy, also represents the best of what Canada represents," said Walmsley[92]

It's not the prestige, not the ceremony at Rideau Hall, not viceregal status that gives the Michener Award its status. That comes from the independent

stand and work of the judging panels. It stands apart from the board directors, many of whose news organizations regularly submit their work for a Michener Award, "So it's absolutely integral that the jury be impartial, unbiased and independent, and they have been all these years," said chief judge Margo Goodhand.[93] She pointed to the 2020 nomination of CBC News as a Michener finalist for its series, "Inside Rideau Hall" — "an investigation that truly precipitated or tore the veil off the culture in Rideau Hall and presumably precipitated Julie Payette's resignation." Goodhand said that, when she went to present the list of finalists at Rideau Hall, nobody questioned the fact that the series did not deserve to be on the list or that it should not be honoured. "So we [the judging panel] are unbiased, we are independent, and we curry no favours."[94]

That independence is a point of pride, and it is fiercely guarded in the decision-making process and in how the judging panels navigate the controversies and complaints of bruised reporters, editors and publishers. It would be the baton handed to a new generation of leaders who, in turn, would face no shortage of new tests of judgement and independence.