

Editorial

IN THE STYLE OF MY distant predecessor, J.A. Stevenson, I continue with the “Topics of the Day” approach to writing editorials for *The Dalhousie Review*. Lately, I have found it difficult not to reflect upon how fame and, more importantly, infamy are gained and transmitted within our culture. A lot of this transmission, of course, comes into Canada through the popular culture that originates in the United States, and that relationship, along with the nature of fame itself, is another symptom of the times in which we are living. There are now more ways to become famous or infamous than ever before. With conventional instruments like movies, radio and television being supplemented by YouTube, and, perhaps most perniciously, the supermarket tabloid, the industry of fame thrives in ways that would have caused Marilyn Monroe and Clark Gable to die all over again from sheer envy of their lost opportunities for self-promotion. Infamy is an especially unsettling phenomenon because of its ability to allow otherwise completely unremarkable people to become historical figures as a result of one act of mayhem. Paul Bernardo, Seung-Hui Cho, Eric Harris, Karla Homolka, Dylan Klebold, and Marc Lépine, join Lee Harvey Oswald, Sirhan Sirhan, and James Earl Ray in a roster of infamy that argues in favour of the historical notice that can be gained from being merely hateful or destructive. (And, yes, I am aware of what appears to be an irony in putting forward their names yet again here. But their names would live on with or without my citing them, which is, to some degree, the point.) Just as December 7, 1941; November 22, 1963; April 4, 1968; December 6, 1989, and September 11, 2001 stand together as days we would rather forget because of the terrible events that took place on them, so we continue to pay a strange homage to destructiveness as a short-cut to fame.

This week brought another such moment of the attention that infamy can bring as Bernard Madoff, the Wall Street financier responsible for the single largest stock fraud in history—a fraud worth an estimated US\$50 billion—was sentenced to 150 years in jail. Mr. Madoff perpetrated a Ponzi Scheme, a pyramid scheme in which the few people at the top of the structure are paid lavish sums of money by the capital investments of the many unwitting dupes at the bottom instead of by returns on invest-

ment as might be the case with a legitimate investment plan. The scheme requires a constant influx of new investors at the bottom to keep money flowing at the top. Of course, the people at the bottom are out of luck (and money) when the structure finally—inevitably—collapses. This type of scheme is named after another man, Charles Ponzi, who seems first to have had this idea, swindling innocent people in the months immediately following the end of World War I. But for this scheme, and Mr. Madoff's epic application of it, there is little doubt that I would never have heard of Charles Ponzi. And who knows, eighty years from now, perhaps these will be known as Madoff Schemes, in the moment of justice where one swindler relegates his predecessor to the ashcan of history.

This is not to say, of course, that only the evil or ignominious become famous. It's just that deserved fame does not seem either as widely interesting nor as enthusiastically covered by journalists as is infamy. That roster of superlative writers, artists, public servants, physicians, not to mention fire fighters, police officers, and teachers who are rendered anonymous by the glare of those who do less but are attended to more says something unflattering about the times in which we live. And, yes, this lack of priorities has long existed. Babe Ruth, when asked if he thought it fair that he was paid more than the President of the United States, is reputed to have quipped, "But I had a better year than he did." So this is not a new problem. However, because of increased access to attention through official and unofficial channels, this relationship between the trivial and the truly significant, between the constructive and the destructive, and our ability to distinguish between them, does seem to have gotten worse. What I do know is that we can choose, at the very least, what parts of our lives we will see as important or trivial. With any luck, we will choose wisely.