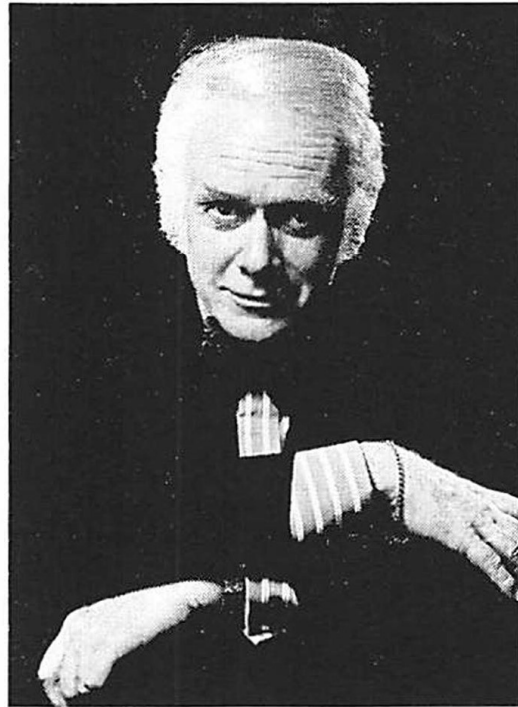


Pierre Berton

1920 – 2004

What can one say of Pierre Berton in a mere 400 words?

A prodigious and captivating writer, at his height he could write 15,000 words a day. In a half-century he wrote 33 adult non-fiction books, winning the Governor-General's Award for three of them, eight picture books and in five years (1991-5) 22 adventures for young adolescents. Let alone starring on radio and television (37 years on *Front Page Challenge*). He was an iconoclast (in Rick Salutin's word, a "shit-disturber") with *The Comfortable Pew* (1965) and shortly before his death showed Rick Mercer on television how he had rolled marijuana joints for 40 years.



We have broken his prime rule as a reporter: "I was taught you told people what was going on in the first paragraph." OK, here it comes. His greatest fame rests on his Railway books (*The National Dream* and *The Last Spike*) as well as *Vimy* and the two-volume *Invasion of Canada 1812-4*. Film-maker Mark Starowicz has said: "He single-handedly transformed our vision of Canada. He sensed our national yearning long before anyone else and

unearthed our overriding dramatic arcs.” Starowicz in his *People’s History of Canada* made enormous use of the research Berton had done over decades. In turn, Berton relied on “the best copy editor in Canada”, Janet Craig, and good researchers.

Supreme in his patriotism, he avoided jingoism. A later book, *Marching as to War*, denounced Canada’s bad wars (the Boer War, for a start) and the arrogance of the British Empire; he championed underdogs (notably in *The Great Depression*) and was passionate about human rights. In his eighties his horizons were still broad: he wrote about Arctic explorers as well as his love of cats – and he signed a petition against the war in Iraq.

Born in Whitehorse, where his parents moved after the Gold

Rush, he was a history major at UBC, started as a reporter on the *Vancouver Sun*, became managing editor of *Macleans* at 31, and later a columnist for the *Toronto Star*. At 25, he had married Janet Walker, another westerner, and they brought up eight children adventurously (canoeing in the Yukon). They lived for five decades in Kleinberg, Ontario, and the \$12.6 million Pierre Berton Resource Library is in nearby Vaughan. He bought back his Whitehorse childhood home and presented it to the Yukon Arts Council, with scholarships for writers. He wrote his own flippant obituary: “He died after a long struggle with life.”