

Westword Column

As a brand-new book author – after several years of magazine journalism – I was thrilled to be able to join the newly-fledged Writers Union of Canada in 1978. One of its attractions was the close-up view one had of literary icons who were also members, and this must have been how I “met” Pierre Berton the first time – watching and listening to him hold forth at TWUC’s AGM and eventually being introduced to him possibly at the post-AGM lunch he and wife Janet hosted at their country home in Kleinburg outside Toronto. (I was repeatedly introduced to him; he never remembered me from one introduction to the other.)

Several things impressed me about his presence at the AGMs over the years. For one thing, he did not need to be there, as I needed to be: his career was already stratospheric, he had no issues with publishers, he was rich. But he was always there, usually in the front row, engaged by the agenda, in full throat with his points of view, even after others of his stature (Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Peter Newman) came for awhile and then moved on. For another, his faithfulness to TWUC, even when early in its development members still seriously debated whether nonfiction writers had a right to belong (I was there for some of this; it was humiliating), was a model not just of loyalty but also of writerly self-esteem. Here was a die-hard nonfiction writer who was nationally admired and, more to the point, read, and who assumed he had a place in the evolution of something we called Can Lit. (He won Governor-General literary awards!) I remain deeply grateful for this.

But I had come to his work fairly recently. In 1971, after two years in Europe, I returned to Toronto, with the American Sixties experience working its way out of my system, to find the intellectual and artistic milieu in the full throes of what would be called Canadian cultural nationalism. (TWUC itself was a product of this ferment.) I put myself on a crash course of reading Canadian literature, catching up with what had been written while I was abroad and in fact doing the first sustained reading of Canlit in my life.

This is how I read Sinclair Ross for the first time (scandalizing my first editor, Robert Fulford at *Saturday Night* magazine, who was appalled my generation had never heard of *As For Me and My House*, and who promptly sent me off to Barcelona to interview its author – those were the golden days of freelancing, clearly). And Hugh McLennan and Martha Ostenso and Shiela Watson and Margaret Laurence. And journalistic exposes about Canada’s subservience to American capitalism, Canadian capitalism’s exploitation of the working class of Quebec, the emergence of Red Power, the American stranglehold on Canadian universities, and so on.

And I also read the works of Canadian nonfiction writers who were not academics or politicians but story-tellers. I confess to an all-too familiar literary snobbery that had kept me from these books until then: if they were so popular,

they couldn't be interesting to someone as sophisticated and intellectually demanding as me! But they were a revelation, and I'm thinking here of Farley Mowat's books about the North and Berton's trilogy about the CPR – especially of Berton's books which I read with the same unalloyed pleasure of being propelled along the page by *story* as I had had in my childhood reading. That these were Canadian stories that had previously held no interest for me (railway construction? cariboo on the tundra? yawn) made the pleasure even more piquant: not everything in the English language belonged to the American or British imagination. His research was formidable, his characterizations vivid, his language accessible, his narrative pace sure-footed. Admirable. His subjects were big and broad and he had found a voice to match that capaciousness.

But – and here's what is curious – for all the power of his texts in my life as a nonfiction writer at a critical moment, I did not want to write like Pierre Berton.

I may have been a proud nonfiction writer in 1970s Canada but I was a nonfiction writer of a particular kind: a New Journalist. I'm not sure when I first called myself a practitioner of that brand but I certainly recognized myself in it when I read Tom Wolfe's various essays in defence of it. My ardent Canadian nationalism did not prevent me from wildly admiring Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, Hunter Thompson, and other writers in *Rolling Stone* magazine, all Americans, all probing the dark fastnesses of the American psyche while Canadian nonfiction embarked on the recuperative mission of celebrating national mythologies. When the new journalism morphed into what is now usually called creative nonfiction, and I wrote in that vein too, I couldn't have been further from writing like Pierre Berton who likely snorted in disdain of creative nonfiction's anxieties about its literary credentials and its exhibitionism of the author's ego.

But it was more than just a stylistic divide between Berton's nonfiction and mine; there was also the political divide between us as Canadians on the liberal left. When I returned to Canada in 1971, I also returned to a full-blown women's liberation movement and a soon-to-be flourishing multicultural politics, not to mention a society still licking its wounds from the October Crisis in Quebec. Eventually there would be a name for this too, this politics of deconstructing what had been simply assumed by earlier generations of Canadian patriots as "the Canadian story." It would popularly be called postmodernism; it was experienced as the frontal assault of new intellectuals and artists on the too-comfortable accounts of Canadian history and society as seamless narratives belonging to all of "us" and told through the lens of remarkable white men (with a few plucky white women and a couple of noble Indians thrown in the mix).

It is by now a familiar critique and has spawned its own counter-critique, but at the time of its ascendancy among Canadian writers it was exhilarating stuff, and our literature is the richer and more mature for it. But one of my painful memories of Pierre Berton is from the *annus horribilis* of TWUC, when the project of the Writing Thru Race conference was pitted against members who feared for the

cultural coherence of Canada, when Pierre Berton, present and stentorian as always, was publicly humiliated by a couple of well-aimed sneers by the “multiculturalists.”

Another generation of writers has arrived since then and surprising us all with the vigour of their Canadian identity, now post-post-modern, I suppose. Once the deconstruction is finished, the reconstruction gets underway. In this renewed confidence of Canadian identity as a *collective* achievement, Pierre Berton may yet have the last word after all.

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