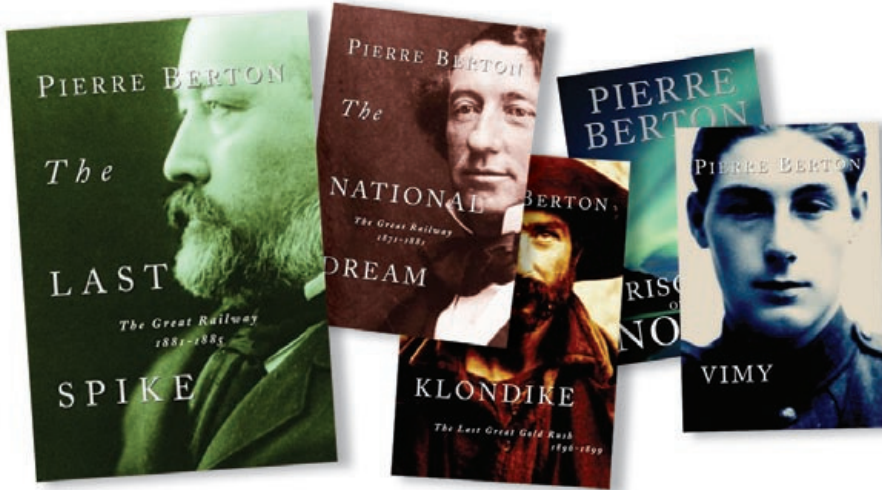


A Tribute to Pierre Berton



Cover images © Random House of Canada Ltd.

Canadian civil engineers, along with the rest of the country, regret the passing of Pierre Berton on November 30th, 2004.

My first recollection of Pierre Berton is a Christmas broadcast of “Front Page Challenge” on CBC television in the early seventies. The choir boys from Grace Church on-the-Hill in Toronto, under the direction of Derek Holman, had been invited to appear. The choir boys, led in by our son who was in the choir at the time, sounded an appropriate note to open the show. Pierre Berton applauded along with the other panelists and the audience. I cannot remember the mystery guest but would suggest that it was probably Santa Claus.

Television was the medium by which Pierre Berton became nationally known. “Front Page Challenge”, with fellow panelists Betty Kennedy, Allan Fotheringham, Gordon Sinclair, Alex Barris and others, was a very popular television program drawing 3 million viewers. Pierre Berton was on the show for 38 years, starting in 1957, a record that probably will never be surpassed as the media changes ever more rapidly in the modern world.

Pierre Berton was the son of a civil engineer and grew up in Dawson City in the Yukon. He went to UBC in the late 1930s so that he could work on the university newspaper, *The Ubysey*. University news-

papers perform a significant role in our society as they have launched many careers in the media, including that of another great Canadian, the late Peter Gzowski. After the Second World War, Pierre Berton continued his career in journalism. He worked at the *Vancouver Sun*, *Maclean's* and the *Toronto Star*. Although involved with newspapers and television, he continued to write whenever his busy schedule allowed him to do so. In his later life Pierre Berton concentrated his efforts on writing books while still appearing on television. He wrote about Canadian events and people. He is credited with 50 books, an output that only an experienced journalist could possibly achieve. The quality of his writing was recognized by three Governor-General's awards.

Pierre Berton's most significant books, as far as a civil engineer is concerned, were *The National Dream*, published in 1970, followed by *The Last Spike* in 1971. These two books described the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the tie that bound this fledgling country together in the latter part of the 19th century. It would seem that his father's influence, as a civil engineer, had left a lasting impression.

There is no doubt that Pierre Berton was a skilled story-teller. The Canadian Pacific Survey story is an example. This survey to find a route for the railway through the Rocky Mountains had taken nine years,

starting in 1971. *The National Dream* describes this effort. “Every pass had been checked with transit, level and aneroid, again and again; every pass had been argued over, reported on, discarded or, sometimes resurveyed.”

And then follows the proverbial punch line of the journalist.

“Every pass, that is, except the Kicking Horse, which lay to the south, neglected and unsurveyed, waiting to be chosen.”

Pierre Berton always presented a formidable presence. He felt that Canadians should learn to be arrogant when the occasion demanded, as we have made significant contribution to the world in which we live. He possessed the relatively rare characteristic which we term charisma, which was also attributed to another great Canadian Pierre.

When Canada's National History Society wanted a well known name to represent them in their objective to popularize Canadian history, they asked Pierre Berton if they could use his name. He not only agreed to have his name used but spoke at all the award ceremonies until 2004, when he was too ill to do so.

Ralph Crysler and Peter Smith of the CSCE National History Committee prepared an excellent submission about the CSCE's significant contribution to the recognition of Canadian history. As a result, the CSCE was given the Pierre Berton Award in 2002. The award was presented in Toronto to Denis Beaulieu, the president of the CSCE that year.

Pierre Berton was a master of narrative history and wrote about the many colourful details of the people who made history in this country. His touch of arrogant nationalism reminds us that we are a separate people with our own identity, wherever we may have come from. Pierre Berton was a writer who took the stories that he found in Canada's past and wrote about them as his stories.

The CSCE is proud to have been chosen by Canada's National History Society to be a part of this heritage. ■