

Heroes

*Canadian Champions,
Dark Horses and Icons*



PETER C. NEWMAN



HARPER COLLINS E-BOOKS

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*With adoration and profound gratitude for my parents, Oscar and Wanda Neumann, the shining
lode stars who guided me on my journey*

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INTRODUCTION

We'd Rather Be Clark Kent

HEROES REFLECT THE NATIONS that anoint them—and Canada is no exception. Latin American countries tend to pick dictators who spend most of their time on palace balconies, hectoring befuddled mobs. The British have been reduced to worshipping bedevilled rock stars who eat live bats, and to chasing un-hung derivative traders. To Americans, contemporary heroes tend more toward androgynous constructs like Madonna, drug-chewing baseball batters like Marlon McGwire or any number of upwardly nubile beauties with kneel-and-duck love lives temporarily out on rehab passes. Historically, the Yanks have benefited no end from the hero factory run by Walt Disney, who made demigods out of such frontier reprobates as Davy Crockett and Francis Marion, better known as “the Swamp Fox.”

Most Canadian heroes—the few who have historically attained and managed to retain that state of grace—share one tragic qualification: they died in brave circumstances.

There are exceptions, of course, like most of my personal choices, cited in the pages that follow. This breaks the mould of unassuming Canadians, who by habit and temperament do not recognize heroes because that might hint of boasting. Most Canadians regard heroes—at least the celebration of heroism—as an emotional extravagance, reserved for American and other RAH! RAH! species. Those heroic few who can claim that category find themselves in an existential state with a shorter shelf life than boysenberry yogourt. We have little tolerance for excesses of any kind and little patience for anyone who believes that heroism is worth achieving—except by inadvertence. There exists a vague link between heroes and weather, which remains Canada's most essential reality. Our frigid climate reflects the selectivity of how we pick our heroes: many are cold, but few are frozen.

We're the only country on earth whose citizens dream of being Clark Kent instead of Superman.

One example: Ottawa has struck our own versions of the Victoria Cross, the ultimate badge that recognizes exceptional military valour. But none have been awarded. This despite the fact that our troops have been engaged in a brutal war for most of eight years and our soldiers have been as brave as, or braver than, American GIs, who inevitably return home in uniforms aglow with Technicolor ribbons, signifying a bouquet of medals. “The true heroes,” wrote the late political pundit Murray Kempton, “are those who die for causes they cannot take quite seriously.” What our brave troops lack in evidence, they make up for by conviction.

CANADA'S MOST COURAGEOUS historical epics—the magnificent journeys of the *voyageurs*; the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway; the *St. Roch's* pioneering traverse of the Northwest Passage; the taking of Vimy Ridge in the First World War; the manning of the fighting corvettes that won the Battle of the Atlantic in the Second World War—these and similar events share a common thread. They exemplified the anonymous bravery and collective endurance of their participants, rather than being remembered for the many individual acts of heroism involved.

Even the few historical heroes we do recognize have not travelled an easy road to glory.

They have been mainly lost explorers, slyly hoping they would discover a shortcut to Cathay's treasured spices around each river bend. And then there were the stubborn Arctic pioneers who went against nature's barriers of rock-solid ice, attempting to discover a then impassable Northwest Passage. Butting pack-ice was not considered to be a truly heroic pastime.

There have been some curious lapses in our choices. The St. Malo navigator Jacques Cartier, for example, is credited with Canada's "discovery" and thus widely hailed, but the Genoa merchant-adventurer John Cabot made his landfall in Newfoundland and Cape Breton thirty-seven years earlier. Until the relatively recent celebration of the anniversary of his voyage, the only memorials to Cabot were the scenic trail looping around northern Cap Breton Island and the plaque on a drafty baronial tower on Signal Hill in St. John's, better known as the location of Guglielmo Marconi's earliest trans-Atlantic signal transmission. If Cabot had only landed in what is now the United States, he would have been more famous than Christopher Columbus. (The Americans celebrate the Spanish navigator as the discoverer, though he didn't get close enough to sight North America's coastline and mistook Cuba for Japan.)

There is additional irony in the Marconi connection. In 1902 the Laurier government awarded \$80,000 to the Italian inventor for his wireless radio station, turning its back on Reginald Aubrey Fessenden from the Eastern Townships of Quebec, who had earlier developed a system of voice transmissions as compared to Marconi's primitive Morse code messages. Fessenden was hired away by the U.S. Weather Bureau, where he broadcast daily reports from his laboratory at Cobb Island on the Potomac to a receiving station at Arlington, Virginia. He was never recognized during his lifetime in his home country.

Generals James Wolfe, Louis-Joseph de Montcalm and Isaac Brock were more appropriate Canadian heroes, since they died in battles without knowing their outcomes, but the memory of our most daring privateer, Antoine Laumet dit de Lamothe Cadillac, perpetuated only by General Motors.

There is little consensus on the nature of Canadian heroes except that they're usually not politicians. Even Pierre Trudeau, the magnetic Liberal leader who inspired a generation, lost his crown in 1979, to—guess who? That's right—Joe Clark, the nerd who never set the world on fire except by accident. It was because the High River politician couldn't master the addition tables that he was defeated in a Commons budget vote nine months later—and the guy with the red rose in his lapel retrieved high office by default. Most of our public figures are equivocating politicians who promise they'll take care of us from election to resurrection. Then dump us between election campaigns, spending their time in office appointing friends to high places and playing footsie with whatever American bigwig happens to be occupying the White House.

WE DO NOT officially mark the anniversary of our founding father's birth, Sir John A. Macdonald, but celebrate Queen Victoria's birthday instead—long after that routine occasion has been forgotten in her mother country. A rare exception to our antihero worship is the Group of Seven, who glorified Ontario cottage country by turning it into stunning landscape. They certainly took on heroic dimensions. Though most Canadians assumed that Tom Thomson fronted the big Seven, it was formed two years after he died. (That didn't stop his

from gaining heroic status, since he drowned under mysterious circumstances at the height of his fame.)

Our antihero attitude extends even to entertainers. If they're successful, they can't be real. Anne Murray, one of our first world-class pop singing stars, saluted by *People* magazine as the Madonna of Sunnybrook Farm, received this back-handed tribute from the music critic Larry LeBlanc: "If you close your eyes and think of a naked Anne Murray, parts of her always come up airbrushed."

The most conspicuously heroic Canadian of recent times was, of course, Terry Fox, the young British Columbia athlete, ravaged by cancer, who in 1980 hobbled halfway between our coasts. His heroic stature was confirmed when he was pinned with the Order of Canada just before he died the following year. (What's-his-name, who followed Fox's path while suffering from precisely the same affliction, actually completed his trek and raised \$1 million for cancer research. But Steve Fonyo, who didn't look or behave heroically, has since been relegated to obscurity so chilling that he has remained visible only as a result of a series of petty crimes and misdemeanours.)

Similarly, no one made much fuss about Dr. Norman Bethune until he was sanctified as his heroic status by dying while on military duty; in 1939, as a member of Mao Tse Tung's Communist forces, he neglected a cut finger after operating on an infected soldier. Becoming a Canadian hero is a tough gig. Heroes can't be manufactured. They materialize unbidden, like cats appearing on laps.

Recognizing heroics is twice as problematic in the Age of Internet, a medium that has more bytes than bite, and has so far cast up only one *fin-de-siècle* antihero: the pathetic Mark Drudge. Within the new Internet culture, anarchy is always the flavour-of-the-month, with no one in charge of anything and every hacker capable of bringing the www.com world crashing into chaos. Heroism is not a function of Internet, unless you count fighting your way past all those RAMs of Viagra ads that pollute the digital universe.

Even when Canadians are placed in such potentially instant heroic circumstances as sports competitions, they tend to excuse themselves for winning and hope that with any luck it would never happen again. In few other countries would a rising tennis star like Marjorie Blackwood set her long-term sights on being "among the top forty tennis players"—instead of going for gold. Quebec's Olympic champion speed skater Gaétan Boucher once explained why he competed in the American, instead of our, way: "Canadians come to me and say, 'So, you came in tenth, eh? Well, that's not too bad.' But it is. Compare that with the Americans. They do everything to win, not to finish tenth."

Heroes require contexts. The bounce and bravado that characterize most countries' national will prompts their citizens to focus on inordinately courageous, charismatic and resolute figures who fit the heroic mould. These larger-than-life totems become touchstones to live by and maintain a society's vibrancy. By its example, heroism is a tonic that heals and recharges. The urgency of time on the march has been my taskmaster; the hunt for personal heroes, my self-defeating quest. I picked my personal candidates for this book based on admiring their courage, dedication to country and loyalty to their craft or personal crusade. They remained true to themselves and loved Canada, as I do. They were patriots with balls—a rare combination.

I consider myself politically neutral; I attack everybody, though I maintain some strong preferences among individuals. I have found that the measure of commitment and integrity a man or woman brings to the political wars is far more significant than the banner under which they travel. Above all, heroes must be doers, go-getters who can turn destiny into history. Garibaldi, de Gaulle, Lincoln, Churchill and Mother Teresa come to mind. (Sir John A. Macdonald's inclusion is suspect, since he founded this country while he was often falling down drunk and it's not clear whether he was following some grand vision or AA's Twelve Steps.)

Faced by a massive loss of faith (in politics but not in democracy), Canadians have begun to fashion their own belief systems. In a sub-Arctic update of Pirandello, we've become thirty-four million characters in search of an author. Who can maintain heroic status in an age when we are assaulted by such phenomena as round-the-clock rap music, psychic hotlines, "Viagra-Light" for codgers who just want to cuddle, and Lady Gaga?

Our national trait of modesty has long been explained as the levelling influence on a country whose inhabitants have often been forced to cooperate for survival. But with mainly the uninspiring imperative of outlasting a cold climate to spur us on, and a prime minister whose idea of manifest destiny is to perpetuate his hold on power by not allowing cabinet ministers to sneeze without his permission, we have a long way to go before we can claim heroism as our national characteristic.

Given the debased nature of our public discourse, Canadians continue to huddle under the polar moon, satisfied with their freedoms-from instead of exploiting their freedoms-to. Becoming

Canadian requires no conversion to a new faith or allegiance to anything more profound than knowing on your citizenship test that Mackenzie King was not a royal.

Founded on social compact instead of the U.S. ethic of individual allegiance, Canadian nationhood seems threatened less by the Americans taking over every profitable activity except selling hand-carved Inuit chess sets than by our lack of self-confidence. This country remains fallow ground for heroism. Risk takers—and every hero must be one—cannot play to a public that ranks our pledge to preserve peace, order and good government above the Yanks' pursuit of hedonism and happiness.

Chances are that we will fumble past the next millennium by pretending that survival is a glorious option—and talk ourselves into the twenty-second century. That's hardly a heroic formula. But it helps to make it through the night.

PART 1

The Arts

BECOMING A METAPHOR is never easy, and Margaret Atwood, with her wintry eyes and corrugated hair, tries hard to conceal herself in her books, leaking information in careful bits and smaller morsels, salting literary instinct with mundane detail and publishing the results.

Her novel *Life Before Man* is populated with heroines and antiheroes driven by the conviction that they ought to become pivotal characters in their own lives. There are women like Lesje Green (half Lithuanian and three-quarters Jewish), who discovers that risking your life is less important than risking your soul. And men such as Nate Schoenhof, who has given up his law practice to carve toy rocking horses but never quite realizes that the forces that drove his ambitions didn't come out of the same faucet as those that control his emotions. In typical Atwood fashion, her cast of characters meets its come-uppance, torturing one another with ancestry and recriminations, ultimately drowning in the existential quicksand that is an Atwood specialty.

It is in the architecture of her prose that Atwood's novels achieve their power. She can build an entire page around the difference between a pause and silence, call down revelation as disturbing as thunderclaps, yet seldom pauses to deliver a tangential thought or phrase. Her art is rooted in an ability to step back from herself, calibrate her characters' emotions, acknowledge the absurdity of life—then create comedy out of hurt or vice versa. She understands that love, however tempting, inevitably casts its partners back into the loneliness that first disposed them to one another—until their isolation becomes intolerable and they are driven back together, more needy than before. "Dreams are not bargains," she reminds us. "They settle nothing."

Even when Atwood occasionally slips into girlish chatter or tries too hard to turn her scenes into symbolic crossword puzzles, her literary lapses become her signature, like uneven threads in a handmade wall hanging. Her writing has always been an exploration of the reality in which we live. In the process, she provides us with a sense of place. "I don't think Canada is 'better' than any other place," she once told me, "any more than I think Canadian literature is 'better'; I live in one and read the other for a simple reason—they are mine, with all the sense of territory that implies. Refusing to acknowledge where you come from is an act of amputation. By discovering your place you discover yourself."

Life Before Man may not be *the* great Canadian novel, but it is a significant book which proves, yet again, that Peggy Atwood is one of those rare writers with the natural pitch of street-corner minstrel and the agitating talent of a born truth teller. All Hail, Atwood.

—1979

The Tempestuous Vision of Irving Layton

ACCORDING TO KEITH SPICER, the essayist and *bon savant* chosen in the mid-1980s to head the Citizens' Forum on Canada's Future, our destiny ought to be articulated by poets, not the professors, politicians or hectoring new-wave singers who brought this country to the brink of disintegration. So I found it entirely appropriate to seek out the wit and wisdom of the man Northrop Frye described as "the best English-language poet in Canada"—the self-styled literary colossus, Montreal's Rabelaisian superman of letters, Irving Layton.

The author of fifty-four books translated into seven languages, twice nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature, Layton lists his favourite recreation as "polemicizing," a search for ways to perpetuate his inelastic faith in himself as a *bon vivant*, freethinker and Olympian grade lover. His seventy-eight years have not slowed him down exactly, but instead of being a freelance firecracker attempting to explode every social shibboleth within range, he has become a verbal cannon, aiming big salvos at big targets.

We meet at the Hostaria Romana, a downtown Montreal pasta joint he describes as having "exquisite food, served as if the guests were royalty." The spaghetti Bolognese turns out to be mediocre, but the conversation is wonderful. "Civilization has never been in greater danger," Layton begins, characteristically ignoring the dubious comforts of understatement. "But I don't regard that danger as a menace or a bad thing. On the contrary, with danger, you have the possibility of change and hope, an opportunity to do something different. Everything becomes negotiable, because there's the possibility of doing things in a fundamentally new way. Too often in the past we've drawn back and resisted the opportunity for genuine improvement."

Unlike most Canadians, who tend to blame everything from the Maple Leafs hockey team's perpetual losing streak to the clouds of locusts chomping on Alberta's barley fields on the lousy politicians in charge of our destinies, Layton shrugs them off as being irrelevant. He puts down Jean Chrétien as never having had the character, stamina or personality required by Canada's precarious situation. "You've got to have not only the right man but the right moment," he explains. "This is the right moment, but we don't have the right man." Quebec premier Robert Bourassa he praises as a "cool-headed economist who understands that the most important thing is to feed and clothe people, so you can't go wild with your nationalism."

Only Pierre Trudeau earns the poet's broiling wrath. "He thinks he's a visionary," Layton begins winding himself up. "But a certified visionary must understand the elements he's working with, and Trudeau ignores the French-Canadian fact. He always struck me as being very opinionated, highly dogmatic and, above all, arrogant. His pit-bull attitudes are based on his inability to listen; he feels so superior to everybody because of his training as a Jesuit and his observance of the catechism of Angry Anglohood. In short, his temper and his rooster masculinity militate against his ability to govern."

Partly because he has travelled and read so widely, Layton views Canada's perpetual constitutional crisis from a worldwide perspective. "I see the quest for independence whether it's in Quebec or Eastern Europe, springing out of the alienation of the individual from a world he never made. I see modern man as being alienated from God, from nature,

and, finally, in this last stage, from himself. We feel afraid, forlorn and comfortless, seeking touch of warmth, like lost sheep plunging back into a flock that follows no direction.” Amen

That’s a mild rant for a rainy Tuesday noon hour, but Layton is just getting started and turns less forgiving with every slurp of pasta. “I can’t help feeling,” he glooms, “that we’re now in a situation analogous to the fourth or fifth centuries, during the fall of the Roman Empire, when the barbarian hordes were knocking on the gates. Those barbarians were external. Ours are internal, in the sense that they’re our own citizens who have shaken off the restraints of civilization. It’s even true of the arts. Will we ever see another Milton, Shakespeare, Racine or T.S. Eliot? Forget it. That kind of greatness is gone forever, destroyed by technology and the forces of so-called education. If you want great poetry today, don’t go to the poets who are all busy writing their sweet little lyrics, God bless them. If you want great poetry today, go to films and music.”

Curiously, Layton’s pessimism excludes the future of Quebec, because he feels its society is firmly rooted in a distinct history, religion, language, literature and memory. That’s where the grievances and the difficulties come in, he believes, because English Canada lacks such unifying anchors. This doesn’t only mean English Canada would have a tough time facing the determined collective will of French Canada, but that those of us outside Quebec are much more open to the destructive forces of the modern world. “Menaced by the Anglos, the French Canadians pull in,” he explains, “because they feel they’re protecting something valuable against the onset of mediocratization and homogenization. English Canadians don’t have much intellectual baggage whatsoever. None at all, really. So they have very little to protect and not much will to fight back.”

The third glass of Pinot Grigio has turned lukewarm between us, and Layton grows silent for a few precious nanoseconds as his audience—the bevy of gathered waiters, who stare around like cashiered hedge fund managers—agree with him.

But the poet ends on an up note. “I have two deities,” he confides. “My main deity is chance; the other is love. I’m a great believer in chance. I was born circumcised, which gave me the vanity and egotism of a saviour, and made my mother favour me. I was the only one in her brood of seven who attended high school, because our family couldn’t afford the fees. She felt that if I turned out to be the Messiah, I should know the English language, history and so on. I’ve been a great believer in chance ever since.” Layton hints that Canada may be salvaged by just such a confluence of good fortune.

I can’t resist. “Surely,” I plead with him, “as a putative Messiah, you can save the country.” His eyebrows shoot up, not sure whether I’m joshing. “I don’t think I can save it,” he replies, sadly shaking his great mane of grey curls.

Then he quickly recovers his customary triple-A chutzpah. “I shouldn’t be overcome by such modesty all of a sudden,” he snorts. “Maybe after I’ve had another drink ...”

“ALL MORTALS ARE REPLACEABLE” runs the modern mantra, betraying the ethic of programmed obsolescence that has come to dominate North American culture. There are exceptions, and one of them, Robertson Davies, died recently, leaving a gap in the Canadian ethos that cannot be filled.

A society can afford to lose only so many voices of wisdom and civility before it feels cut loose from its spiritual moorings. In the past decade, that list of departed Canadian beacons of enlightenment has included Morley Callaghan, Marian Engel, Barbara Frum, Northrop Frye, Margaret Laurence, Bruce Hutchison, Roger Lemelin, Arthur Lower, Hugh MacLennan, and Sandy Ross. The greatest of them was Robertson Davies. A writer of serious mien with a bespoke twinkle in his eyes, he left open the natural speculation by anyone he met: whether he resembled God or did the Supreme Deity sport a bearded countenance like his?

No matter. “Rob,” as he was known to his friends, championed mid-nineteenth-century thought and sentiment, describing himself as the most reluctant of patriots, finding Canada hard to endure yet impossible to flee. “God, how I tried to love this country,” exclaims a character in his play *Fortune My Foe*. “I have given all I have to Canada—my love, then my hate, and now my bitter indifference. But this raw, frost-bitten country has worn me out, and its raw, frost-bitten people have numbed my heart.”

In less lofty language, he once explained to me in private that while he had many chances to live elsewhere, he just couldn’t bring himself to leave. “I belong here,” he told me with a pained expression. “To divorce yourself from your roots is spiritual suicide. I just am Canadian. It’s not a thing you can escape from. It’s like having blue eyes.”

Well, not quite. The life Davies chose for himself hardly qualified him as one of your McKenzie-Brother, run-of-the-brew, prototypical Canadian hosers. After graduating from Upper Canada College and Oxford’s Balliol College, he created an intellectual haven for himself as founding Master of the University of Toronto’s Massey College. Inside its elegant, very un-Canadian walls, he moved among his Fellows in their gowned splendour, looking extraordinarily magnificent in his necromancer’s beard, living in the Master’s Lodge, the BMW in his private driveway, presiding at High Table, sniffing snuff out of an ivory horn, sipping claret and responding with supreme indifference to charges that the institution he headed was snobbish, sexist, anachronistic and perhaps even a little absurd. The place reflected perfectly his view of life and his genius for civilized eccentricity that he so brilliantly captured in his novels. They felt so authentic because they were, in spirit if not in detail, autobiographical with never a touch of plea bargaining.

All the while that he presided over Massey, stressing tradition over practicality, the Master was playing a splendid joke on his detractors. In 1970, after writing a stack of novels, plays and works of theatrical criticism that brought him mild approval at home and virtual no notice abroad, Davies published *Fifth Business* to universal international acclaim. Saul Bellow and John Fowles, then the English-speaking world’s leading fiction writers, were loud in their praises, as was the *New York Times* and just about every other reviewer except *Mother Jones*. Davies had finally found his place at the pinnacle of literary acclaim, which was only proper, since that was where he had always meant to be. That success was repeated with *The*

I spent much of an afternoon chatting with the illustrious author at his cozy Masse College digs, later attending one of his High Table dinners. He sat there at the head of the tableaux, theatrical in appearance, almost ostentatiously dated in his manner. You expected him to wear a Cromwellian collar while debating whether Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of Henry VIII, was a fanatical heretic or a saint. “I am very interested in the condition of sainthood,” he confided, presumably including his own. “It is just as interesting as evil.”

Unexpectedly, we moved to the subject of pornography. “It is a cheat,” he declared. “It is an attempt to provide a sexual experience by second-hand means—rather like trying to find out about a Beethoven symphony by having somebody hum a few bars. It’s not the same thing. Sex is primarily a question of relationships; pornography—a twenty-second best. Davies hated nothing worse than what he called “young fogies”—those pretenders who everlastingly harped on the fact that they *were* young but thought and acted with a degree of caution that would be excessive in their grandfathers. “They are the curse of the world,” he thundered. “They don’t even know what they are conserving. “

While he had great respect for his craft, Davies categorized himself as a simple storyteller. “I think of an author as somebody who goes into the marketplace and puts down his rug and says, ‘I will tell you a story,’ and then passes the hat. When he’s taken up the collection, he tells his story, and just before the denouement, passes the hat again. If it’s worth anything, fine. If not, he ceases to be an author.”

Our conversation kept coming back to why he felt so alienated from and yet obsessed with being—and remaining—Canadian. “Canada demands a great deal from people,” he said, emphasizing each syllable like a preacher mouthing a benediction. “It is not, as some countries are, quick to offer in return a pleasant atmosphere or easy kind of life. I mean France demands an awful lot from her people too, but France also offers gifts in the way of a genial, pleasant sort of life and many amenities.” “Canada is not really a place where you are encouraged to have large spiritual adventures,” he lamented.

“A lot of people complain that my novels aren’t about Canada. I think they are, because I see Canada as a country torn between a very northern, rather extraordinary, mystical spirit which it fears, and its desire to present itself to the world as a Scotch banker. This makes for tension, and tension is the very stuff of art, plays, novels—the whole lot.”

Like his books, Davies’ conversation was peppered with the supernatural, and he ended the evening by returning to sainthood, almost as if he felt he should claim its halo. “Most saints have been unbearable nuisances in life. Some were reformers, some were sages, some were visionaries, but all were intensely alive, and thus a rebuke to people who were not. So many got martyred because nobody could stand them. Society hates exceptional people because such people make them feel inferior.”

Robertson Davies was, if not a saint, certainly a genius. It was to his credit and to our gain that he was such a magnificent storyteller—and that he was ours.

The “Fillum” Moguls Who Made Me

JOAN DIDION, who chronicled the psychic extravagances of the California lifestyle, once observed that the oral history of Los Angeles was written in piano bars: “People tell each other about their first wives and last husbands. ‘Stay funny,’ they say, while listening to ‘Moon River,’ ‘Love for Sale’ and ‘Send in the Clowns.’”

“ In the Toronto of the 1970s, the bar was Club 22 and the clowns were the hucksters who breach-birthed the Canadian movie industry on the premises, tucked into a corner of the Courtyard Café, at St. Thomas and Bloor. The bar was part of the Windsor Arms Hotel, purchased in 1963 by George Minden, a U of T philosophy and English graduate who picked up his friends by whether or not they knew when to laugh at the bassoon joke in Brahms’ *Academic Festival Overture*. His watering hole became the epicentre of the city’s—and the country’s—cultural renaissance. If Toronto was downtown Canada, the Courtyard was uptown Toronto.

A combination of Beverly Hills’ Polo Lounge, Elaine’s and Sardi’s in New York (where the stars went to be private in public), Blakes in London and the Gaslight in Paris, it was my hangout. During his fourteen-year gig, Paul Drake, the resident pianist who later married into Belgian royalty, became Club 22’s chief animator and musical host. Among the many visitors was an aging Debbie Reynolds, who arrived with eighty suitcases. (Asked about her love life she confided: “I haven’t forgotten how, I just don’t remember *why*.”) One of the highlights Drake recalled was the night Christopher Plummer, celebrating the premiere of his film *Murder by Decree*, rose unsteadily in his seat to proclaim with Shakespearean cadence and customary dignity: “We live in a world where celebrities hold the proxies for our identities...” Only to be drowned out by the drunken cheers of the pseudo-celebs.

It was the kind of place where macho males were judged by the angles of their cigars. Except for the odd Hollywood agent temporarily slumming in the Great White North, Club 22’s clientele was Canadian. Well, un-Canadian, really—much too ballsy to qualify for citizenship, except retroactively. (One exception was a Hamilton-born visiting Hollywood director of horror movies who never removed his sunglasses—with mirrors on the inside—and kept muttering: “Gonna lie doggo in ma’ Tuscanny shack” while snorting cocaine off his Porsche key.)

They were self-proclaimed geniuses who lived off each other by pitching movie ideas. Walking into Club 22 was like visiting a zoo at feeding time. The restless titter of macho *machers* making deals to make deals kept the place buzzing, and the buzz was always about future films, or “fillums,” as the patrons described their art form.

The Toronto movie boom of the 1970s was uncannily like the Leduc oil strike of the 1940s: everybody pretended to be what they claimed they were, holding on to their precious piece of the action. The movies they made have long been forgotten, but they portrayed—occasionally brilliantly but mostly middling—truths that were large and small, yet essential to Canadian.

What the big screen demanded was alchemy, and that was in short supply. “We’re going straight to cult,” a frustrated Cabbagetown movie mogul announced, then jauntily began lining up his next blockbuster. The movie people felt most alive as they tested their nerves

digging their tax shelters, waiting out the offers, swinging on a bankable star who had to them she “would kill” to be in their movie but hadn’t shown up yet. The trick was to stay the game.

The extras were mostly CBC types, showbiz hangers-on, camp followers of more than two sexes, not to mention the whiskey priests flaunting their self-appointed authority as they toyed with the pine nuts floating in their chilled cucumber soup.

Scattered among the plush-brown banquettes were the real *machers*: Bill Marshall (the only one with a private phone at his table), Bob Cooper, Robert Cohen, Jon Slan, Gary Drabinsky, David Perlmutter, George Mendeluk, and Fil Fraser from Calgary, whose *Whistle* *Shoot the Teacher* was a Canadian breakthrough film. The entertainment lawyer Michael Levine was everywhere, acting as executive producer to more movies than he later claimed.

The star of the circus was Mike McCabe, my political pal from Ottawa days, then head of the Canadian Film Development Corporation, which provided the industry’s momentum and seed money. Brash, confident, done up in bushy beard and safari jacket, he turned Canada into the world’s third-largest film production centre, with \$150 million invested in new movies during its top year.

The self-described starlets who nightly sat around Club 22 waiting to be discovered were convinced that to be an actress you only had to look like one. The sexual thermostat was always set on high. Late one night, I noticed a Club 22 regular posing as a producer (muscle haircut, peasant body shirt, Riviera jeans) leaning over a stunning brunette and conversationally asking her what she liked doing best. “Balling,” she replied, assuming there was an appointment for her screen test. The confused would-be seducer backed away, and the jilted bride started to cry, her perfectly formed tears refracted by the ceiling spotlight glittering like a spill of diamonds.

At the bottom of the movie industry’s pecking order were the writers, of course, charged with the unglamorous job of turning the wild, late-night Club 22 fantasies, jotted down on table napkins, into filmable shooting scripts. “Our position,” declared Frank Pierson, the visiting head of the Screen Writers Guild, “is that hopefully, someday, the industry can forget the old joke about the Polish starlet who thought she could get ahead by fucking the writer.”

Not being Polish, I can’t pretend that I was part of the scene, but I was there, and what I caught, like a galloping fever, was the kinetic energy and unbridled optimism afloat in the Courtyard and its piano bar. If these guys could make movies out of cigar smoke and chutzpah, I could transform the comatose monthly *Maclean’s*, whose editorship I had recently inherited, into a profitable weekly newsmagazine.

It was here in Club 22 that Canada’s weekly news magazine was conceived, and those optimistic improvisers of Canada’s cult fillums were its godfathers.

FEW CANADIAN BUSINESSES have more richly earned a shoddy reputation than our indigenous film industry. Touted as the mirror of our identity and the high road to fortune for talented shelter-happy dentists, it wiped out its investors, did little to define the nation and spawned a motley crew of deal makers who, if there were any justice, should have been circus barkers for freak shows.

In the mid-1980s, into this artistic abattoir arrived *The Terry Fox Story*, about the cancer-stricken amputee determined to cross Canada. The movie, much like Fox himself, overcame many seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Yet it may well have been the most artistically coherent, and certainly the most authentically Canadian, of the many weak attempts to make a film worthy of its subject.

Eric Fryer, who brilliantly portrayed Fox, was so believable, it hurt. At first, Fryer as Fox (in the movie, as in real life) ran alone, with no fanfare or support systems. The journey started with the simple ceremony of sticking his artificial foot into the Atlantic Ocean at Cap Spear in eastern Newfoundland. Doggedly, he began to hobble the eight thousand clicks home. In the harsh morning light, huddles of well wishers in tiny Newfie outposts, as luminous as figures in Renoir canvasses, coalesced to wish him luck. There was a landmark Patrick Watson, in a brilliant cameo, hobbling out to deliver an obscene but heartfelt benediction.

Inexorably and almost imperceptibly, Fox's pilgrimage developed its own field of force. The kid started to draw crowds and media groupies. The movie's pace took off when Fox was joined by Bill Vigars, a Canadian Cancer Society official (played by Robert Duvall). A noble-looking but uncompromising mentor with a devilish countenance, Vigars turned the lonely trek into a "Marathon of Hope."

The film had serious flaws. The music, by Bill Conti, was bubbly elevator-style fluff more suitable for afternoon TV soaps. What the film needed was some hard-edged, earthy Lightfoot or the evocative chants of Stan Rogers. The indoor lighting was poor throughout and the first thirty minutes threatened to turn the film (literally) into a sleeper.

The Terry Fox of this movie was just an athletic kid given only six short months to live, wanting to make the best of it. The undeniable courage was there, but at first he couldn't work up the nerve to break the news to his father that he intended to run across Canada. When his mother told her husband for him, the response was a flat and very Canadian "When?"

What raised the film beyond its pedestrian potential was the camera work of Richard Ciupka and the direction of Ralph Thomas. Ciupka captured subtle shifts in landscape and the differences of shadings of light as plot and character moved across the landscape, from Newfoundland in spring to Ontario in deep summer. The wispy mists of dawn over a Quebec cornfield, the mauve shadings of twilight in the lush farmlands of the St. Lawrence Valley were less a backdrop than the movie's dominant theme.

The country was playing itself, and it was a star. Every town was a landmark; the road became the movie's narrative arc. There was an austere chill in the land across which Fox struggled—a parallel but very different texture from Ingmar Bergman's tidy Sweden of

Richard Attenborough's teeming India. This was Canada, with its isolation and haunting potential, its dominant reality: an empty land filled with wonders.

By the time Fox approached Thunder Bay in what turned out to be the tragic end of his run, he was alone again, lost to the destinies that dominated his brief life. But alone or not, he became what he wanted to be, and in the last week of his trek, he pronounced his own epitaph: "... Life is about reaching out to people—and having them touch you back."

Terry Fox was determined to cross Canada "from telephone pole to telephone pole." His interrupted ordeal is commemorated by this jewel of a film, which managed to suspend disbelief without romanticizing his odyssey.

— 1980

AT THE HEIGHT of the 1981 publishing season, when bookstores in western Canada started running out of *The Acquisitors*, the second volume of my series on *The Canadian Establishment*, my publisher, Jack McClelland, reacted in typical style. Instead of loading boxes of books aboard trains or planes, he hired half a dozen trailer trucks and dressed their drivers in rented tuxedos. I was never quite certain what the ultimate purpose of this exercise was meant to be, since no one except McClelland and me—who waved off the brave convoy with appropriate formality and exaggerated bravura gestures—paid the slightest attention to the strange caravan snaking its way across country.

But it was vintage McClelland, and I was reminded of this small incident when it was announced that, after twenty-nine years at the operating helm of his publishing house, McClelland was assuming less onerous duties as chairman of the board. He was my mentor and advocate, who launched and nurtured my writing career. He almost single-handedly endowed the country with its indigenous popular literature, publishing authors, instead of printing books. Until then, domestic volumes had been sold in obscure corners of our few bookstores, in modest sections self-consciously labelled CANADIANA. Jack willed us into the mainstream.

His publicity ploys and promotional gimmicks gilded the McClelland legend, such as his annual skating appearance on the rink in front of Toronto City Hall, where he handed out free Canadian paperbacks to anyone who confessed that reading was their pleasure. Or his hiring a tough-looking professional wrestler to page me throughout a Conservative convention, following publication of my controversial biography of John Diefenbaker. (It was during that convention that several western Tories threatened to “tear off my writing arm”—which was a slightly dated sanction, since by then, I had moved from my poison pen to typewriter; but their intent was unmistakable.)

To those of us who were fortunate enough to be his authors, Jack McClelland was very much more than a good promoter and a great publisher. He was, above all, a sensitive and shrewd editor, spotting the weaknesses in a sentence, paragraph, page or book, writing casual fix notes that magically resolved literary blocks. More than that, he was what all authors need when facing the terror of blank pages and blanker minds: an understanding friend who appreciated the essential loneliness of our craft. He would do anything for his authors, not excluding the arrangement of bail or abortions.

A surprisingly modest individual (and closet war hero as commanding officer of a motor torpedo boat in the Mediterranean during the worst days of the Second World War), McClelland was an irreplaceable and irrepressible force of nature. But at times his sense of the ridiculous ran away with him. A certain Rosedale society lady, whose chauffeur's uniform I had described in my first Establishment book as having specifically been ordered to match the bottom of her swimming pool, took my words to the Supreme Court of Ontario, accusing me of having made fun of her. McClelland did not take kindly to the lawsuit. It was only with great difficulty that Julian Porter, our ubiquitous lawyer, convinced him not to appear in the judge's august chambers dressed in a white toga, prepared to bear witness that its color matched the bottom of his bathtub. Now, *that's* a loyal publisher.

IF CANADA EVER had a spiritual town crier—the James Boswell of our aspirations and afflictions—it was Hugh MacLennan, the Montreal novelist and humanitarian who has died at eighty-three. The author of seven major works of fiction, the best of which, *The Watch That Ends the Night*, ranked as one of the great Canadian novels, and six magnificent essay collections, he was an ardent Canadian, as much in his life as in his writing. To toughen himself to the local climate, he spent ten years of his youth living in a tent at the back of his parents' Halifax house. And despite international honours that included a Rhodes Scholarship, a Guggenheim Fellowship and a PhD from Princeton, he never considered living or teaching anywhere but Canada. His five Governor General's Literary Awards notwithstanding, the favour was never returned. His best-known work, *Two Solitudes*, which became the fountainhead for defining the shared loneliness that is at the heart of the Canadian experience, brought him initial royalty cheques of only \$4,500. Worse, although he had taught English literature with distinction at McGill University for more than three decades and inspired generations of young writers, in 1985 he was unceremoniously evicted from his modest office and left to drift.

None of this soured his writing or his outlook. His prose was saturated with wisdom, humour and tenderness, the passionate cry of a writer determined to assert the unfashionable view that existence is more than a meaningless accident. He was at his best chronicling slow lives, examining men's and women's feelings, portraying their self-imposed distances and their subconscious protection of one another. The truth that he revealed was not in the least sensational. Just truth.

A friend and mentor, MacLennan wrote the introduction to one of my books and became a prolific contributor to *Maclean's* when I was its editor, publishing thirty-three major articles in the magazine. When I asked him how he picked his themes, he replied, in that melancholy Calvinistic burr of his, that they picked him. "You get things through the pores," he explained and left it at that. Released from the novelist's bonds of plot and characterization, his essays succeeded in portraying what U.S. literary critic Edmund Wilson called "a point of view surprisingly and agreeably different from anything else I knew in English: a Canadian way of looking at things." In one of his essays, he warned against our absorption by the American and advised Canadians to act "in the spirit of a girl in the backseat of a taxi, with one eye on the meter and the other on the profile of the determined man who took her out that night."

Equally scornful of anything British or American, MacLennan jealously guarded his Celtic heritage. Born in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, in 1907 to surgeon Samuel J. MacLennan and his wife, Katherine, he credited his Highland roots for the sensitivity of his perceptions. "A Celt," he once confided, "hears a dog-whistle sound that an Anglo-Saxon simply doesn't get." Contemptuous of academic aesthetes, whose books he dismissed as "poetry of the menopause," he believed that a writer must be engaged with the issues of his time, echoing D.H. Lawrence's dictum that "the novel treats the point at which the soul meets history."

He was obsessed with Pierre Trudeau. "The light in his eyes has a subtle and curious Gioconda-like intensity. I doubt if even the painter of Mona Lisa herself could capture it," he wrote me, and then blasted Trudeau for being a cheapskate. "He once invited Peggy Atwood

and me to 24 Sussex for lunch, at the end of which he departed in his limousine, and it took us an hour to get a taxi to the airport.”

MacLennan's last years were filled with suffering. After he was expelled from his McGill office (he never complained; I only found out about it through a change-of-address card), his second wife, Frances Aline (first wife, Dorothy Duncan, had died in 1957), was struck by lightning and suffered brain damage, while he was afflicted with a rare form of MSG food poisoning. “The symptoms are preposterous,” he wrote. “One wakes up and believes one is dead.”

None of that diluted his passion for life or for his country. “I have really enjoyed my existence,” he noted in the last letter I received from him. He complained that Canadian politics were running at least forty years behind the times and that Quebec had gone crazy never before. He felt not at all certain that Canada would, at last, amount to anything: “Some fibre went out of us.”

No fibre ever went out of Hugh MacLennan. He was a fine man and a great writer, and we were lucky to have lived in a time and place that had him for its town crier.

—1978

Remembering Pierre Berton, the Big Foot of CanLit

WHEN I HEARD the news of Pierre Berton's passing, I reacted with grief, disbelief and dismay. Grief because he had been such a loyal friend; disbelief because he had been the essential curator of the Canadian Dream; and dismay because he was quite simply irreplaceable.

He was the first to take a shot at defining the poignant mystique of our national identity. "The country is still an unknown quantity," he wrote, "as elusive as the wolf, howling just beyond the rim of the hills. Perhaps that is why it holds its fascination." (I never accepted Berton's more popular definition that "a Canadian is somebody who knows how to make love in a canoe." All you had to do was to scan his six-foot-plus frame to know that was a non-starter. Besides, I tried it. No way, José.)

Berton's books, TV series, sermons and other public utterances celebrated his country so convincingly that he almost single-handedly made patriotism an acceptable form of behavior in polite circles of Canadian society, instead of the semi-subversive emotion it had once been. He did this by recreating Canadian history as a heroic pageant worthy of a significant nation instead of a self-governing colony, as we were so dismissively labelled.

Berton's approach to history had a knack for the unexpected. In one of his later volumes *Marching as to War*, he argued that counter to their image of themselves, Canadians have never been citizens of a peaceable kingdom. He made a convincing case that in the four wars we fought between 1899 and 1953—in South Africa, twice in Europe and in Korea—Canadians became involved because they wanted to be. The politicians declared war in order to follow the will of the people, not the other way around.

He gained equal fame as a TV panelist and interviewer, managing editor of *Maclean's*, raconteur, army-of-one and frequent accessory-before-the-fact of countless worthy causes. In his political heyday, there were few public petitions championing liberal or left-wing causes that didn't lead off with his name and financial support. He brought to his writing the bias of a social democratic activist. He hesitated not a moment before pledging his loyalty and dollars to the most obscure of humanitarian crusades—bellowing over his portable telephone while lounging poolside at his country estate in Kleinburg, Ontario.

That was where he found his greatest solace, among his extended family and especially with his wife, Janet, who was his anchor. The bluster that marked his daily passage through a crowded lifetime was just that: bluster. His body language could be deafening. He was a tough hombre when it came to writing or editing but treated nearly everyone who came in contact with him kindly and generously—unless they were public relations flacks. He banned these self-inflated messengers from the *Maclean's* editorial floor.

Before his energy was gutted by the heart failure from which he suffered in his final years, his strident physique lent force to his habit of emphasizing his convictions in a voice that must have frightened every stray moose for miles around and left little room for argument. He was a large man with large appetites, the Big Foot of CanLit. Passionate and opinionated, he was unmarked by the gloomy introspection of his calling. His Yukon heritage not only produced some of his best books (*Klondike*, *The Mysterious North*, *Drifting Home* and *Prisoners of the North*), but also kept him from becoming a full-fledged member of the Toronto literati with their self-indulgent chatter and habits. That was what kept his focus so clear and

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