

# Pierre Berton, Celebrity, and the Economics of Authenticity

In the subterranean reading room of the William Ready Division of Archives and Research at McMaster University stands the upper torso of a headless mannequin. From its sloped shoulders hangs the ecru suit jacket of Jack McClelland, a suit that is cut, quite literally, from the cloth of Canadian literature. Emblazoned across the buttoned chest, the flatly ironed sleeves, and the broad-shouldered back are authors' names and titles that signify McClelland & Stewart's central role in Canadian literary history (see King). In white capital letters, "MOWAT" stands out boldly from within two black squares on either shoulder, while "Leonard Cohen: Beautiful Losers" angles provocatively along the right arm. Down the front, right breast step three names of Canada's literary giants: "Richler," "Laurence," "Atwood," with "The Edible Woman" hovering delectably above the large front pocket. This pocket's material, cut separately from the rest, disturbs the angular pattern by proclaiming in straight, black lettering, "Pierre Berton: The Last Spike."

To a younger generation of critics, Berton's inclusion in this "who's who" of CanLit authors seems something of an anomaly. Unlike the others, Berton's name and many of his texts are now dated, grown dusty on the cottage bookshelves of the nation; he is now, for all intents and purposes, a dead, white, male historian. The silence surrounding his name and his work, however, stands at odds with the remarkable purchase Berton's celebrity and writings had in Canadian popular culture from his first syndicated dispatches from the fabled "Headless Valley" (Nahinni Valley, BC) in 1946 straight through to his death in 2004. This silence is especially thick in academic circles. A thorough review of various social science and humanities databases reveals



that where Berton gains mention it is either in a review or as an introductory hook, a way of gesturing to a popular Canadian perspective before delving into other analyses. One of the more “recent” literary treatments of Berton’s work reveals the dramatic shifts Canadian cultural criticism has undergone since 1985 when E.D. Blodgett, writing in *Essays on Canadian Writing*, sought to locate a distinctively Canadian literature by asking as his title, “After Pierre

Berton What?” Twenty-five years ago in this journal, Lorna Irvine usefully analyzed Berton’s interest in and thematization of “the low art of selling,” citing the ambivalence Berton exhibits between his own “confidence man” tactics and his castigation of American salesmanship (69). In hindsight, Irvine appears to have hit upon the very thing that has made Berton anathema to literary critics: economics.

Berton was always unapologetically “middlebrow” in his self-promotion and in his appeal to a Canadian readership—an appeal that simultaneously garnered him his best-seller status and set him at odds with the academic community. Although the concept of the cultural middlebrow carries pejorative connotations, the term can be productively employed as a method of framing both Berton’s appeal and his influential, though critically neglected, function within Canadian cultural history.<sup>1</sup> The biographical focus of this paper thus functions in two ways. The first is to argue that Canadian cultural critics should (re)consider Berton by parsing the construction of his celebrity and mapping out the intersections between his “total star text” and the broader cultural field in which that text signified so successfully.<sup>2</sup> Since Berton’s celebrity was, in fact, built as much on the controversies elicited by his daily columns and his broadcast opinions as it was on the public’s interest in his books of history, critical interrogation of Berton’s legacy can function as a means of locating and re-exploring those issues and topics that resonated with (and, sometimes, outraged) a broad spectrum of Canadians at mid-century. The second track I explore is the suggestive ties between Berton’s own self-construction and the literary nation-building project for which he is most famous. Given the resonance of Berton’s nationalist vision and his consummate skills of self-promotion, it is not entirely surprising, albeit somewhat unnerving, that the myth surrounding his celebrity looked increasingly like the national myths he wrote about. In her study on Canadian literary celebrities, Lorraine York closes with a discussion of Canada’s Walk of Fame; she notes Berton’s logical inclusion because his works, “which are markedly middlebrow in their populist retellings of Canadian history, constitute a classic exercise in national myth-making” (169). As I will demonstrate here, the authority with which Berton spoke—and the influence his voice carried—was built squarely upon his remarkable celebrity status. Understanding this alliance of myth and celebrity offers a way of analyzing the coalescence of economics and national appeal within the formative myths and narratives that continue to resonate in Canadian public space.

So what enabled Berton in the first place? What generated his appeal and a market for his books? At the root of his popular allure, I argue, is a strategic emphasis on his frontier heritage, which positioned Berton as an ideal Canadian everyman moving from the outskirts of the nation to prevail over its urban core by sheer force of will. In its obituary for Berton, for example, the *Toronto Star* editorial board attempted to fuse his outsider myth with his lived reality: “born and raised in the Yukon, Berton never lost his love for the remote parts of Canada although he spent most of his life in the Toronto area” (“Pierre Berton, 1920-’04.”). Similarly, in page headings throughout Elspeth Cameron’s 1987 *Saturday Night* profile, Berton’s biography is crafted into a fairy-tale romance between him and the nation:

Once upon a time . . . / Pierre Berton was a Boy Scout in Victoria who wanted to impress Canada so he / . . . made himself the best journalist in Toronto but that wasn’t enough so he / . . . mastered television and conquered the airwaves of the nation but that wasn’t enough so he / turned to writing sagas of Canadian history and became a national icon and / . . . lived happily ever after. (19-30)

Cameron’s rendition crowns Berton as “the official storyteller of the nation” and also works to soften his zealous drive to succeed (21); his heroic trajectory, spanning western Canada, bridging every public medium, is only endearing when coupled with his outsider status and his boyish determination. These constant references to Berton’s northern, outsider origins, even while maintaining his centrality within the Toronto-based national media, find their source in much of his own material; that is, the coverage of Berton over the course of his life tended to mirror his own self-mythologizing.

In one of his last books, *The Joy of Writing: A Guide for Writers, Disguised as a Literary Memoir*, Berton lays out thirty pieces of advice for new writers. For rule number eight, “salvage everything,” Berton gleefully recounts that “for the Klondike experience, I have recycled my own memories and chunks from the book itself at least a dozen times in various works. . . . It helps, of course, to have been born in a fascinating town, but any writer can make his town fascinating” (121). Berton lays claim, here, to his own distinctiveness while also emphasizing a formula for success that is seemingly reproducible for any and all with panache and the necessary work ethic. By virtue of this career-long fusion of his self-made status and the larger cultural memory of the Klondike Gold Rush, Berton in effect forged his own myth as the damn lucky gold panner who simply struck it rich. And for the media, such a blending of the individual and the collective was an especially useful handle for making sense of Berton and what he seemed to mean for the country.

But more than simply crafting his own celebrity, Berton was consciously re-working the popular mythic space of the North; *The Mysterious North* won the Governor General's Award in 1956. A.B. McKillop, whose biography of Berton appeared in 2008, notes that Berton's focus on the North had "tapped into one of his country's most deeply felt myths of identity" (300). Berton acknowledged as much when he noted that at mid-century "the North . . . was as unknown a quantity as the mysterious East, hence my title" (*Joy* 83). Berton, then, plied the trade of Canada's mythic North, much like Sir Richard Francis Burton traversing and translating "the Orient" to his English readership. McKillop goes on to state that, following this publication, Berton's national presence and much of his subsequent work

became increasingly linked to Canadians' collective anxieties and desires and their need to hear stories about themselves as a means of self-understanding and expression. This was the first step toward the creation of what would make Berton not only a bestselling author but also a cultural brand and, following upon it, an iconic figure in Canadian life. (300)

Historical narratives of the mythic North may well have turned Berton into a bestselling author; however, what sold "Pierre Berton," the literary celebrity, was the way he inserted himself into that northern space, asserting the authenticity of his experience and, therefore, the authority of his opinions; "after all," he remarked on his fascination with the Klondike, "it was in my blood" (*Joy* 94).

Berton's outsider positioning was a fundamental element in two of his most significant books of cultural commentary: *The Comfortable Pew* (1965) and *The Smug Minority* (1968). Berton wrote the first at the behest of the Anglican Church of Canada, which sought to generate a national dialogue on religion by finding, in his own words, "a 'name' writer of stature [who] might produce something both stimulating and critical . . . in plain, easily understood language" ("Preface" viii-ix). To everyone's surprise, the Anglican Church and Berton included, *The Comfortable Pew* ended up shattering publishing records in Canada, selling well over 150,000 copies—more copies than anything else that Berton would ever write (McKillop 430).

This book, like a number of his other titles, encapsulates a defining cultural moment—in this case, the mid-1960s centennial shift from British colonial and religious values to an embrace of Canadian cultural nationalism and increased secularization. Berton's plainspoken treatise against the hypocrisy of Christian institutions representing or defending "the forces of conservatism in Canada" meant that his moniker became the name to either protest loudly

or champion staunchly (“Preface” ix). And as the country collectively turned to the first page, they encountered Berton’s romantic glance back at the “blue Yukon hills” surrounding his old Anglican parish; reading forward, they followed Berton through his own disillusionment with the church.

Three years later, at the request of the New Democratic Party, Berton penned *The Smug Minority*, a biting critique of the political and economic establishment in Canada. This book, according to McKillop, “marked the zenith of Berton’s career as a crusading journalist, [for its] . . . fierce polemical attack on class and social inequality in Canada” (465). In speaking forcefully to the Canadian public, Berton angered religious conservatives (again) and infuriated the economic elite, but established himself, in the process, as a trenchant advocate for liberal humanism. In the *Toronto Star*, Jack Hutchinson noted that “it’s hard to tell which the reviewers hate more: Pierre or his book” (qtd. in McKillop 318). One anonymous reviewer, whom McKillop suspects to be Conrad Black, called Berton “the Mother Gerber of the literary world” and condemned the way “he masticates McLuhanistic thought-thumbs into the platitudinous pabulum precious to the plebeian palate” (qtd. in McKillop 477, n63). The polarizing controversy, like all book controversies, fueled sales. But more significantly, the controversy sold ideas. McKillop even suggests that *The Smug Minority* enabled a truly national dialogue that precipitated Pierre Trudeau’s “just society” platform, for the book’s “success in mid-sized cities and small towns ensured that Berton became a household name everywhere, . . . a name now fully associated with national aspirations for social equality and justice” (479).

Meanwhile, Berton’s increased public visibility signalled his centrality within mainstream cultural life. In a *Macleans* review, Jon Ruddy took issue with Berton for his hypocritical membership in what he called “The Comfortable Few” of the nation’s top media personalities (qtd. in McKillop 464). Elmer Sopha, a Liberal MPP, signalled Berton’s “phoniness” because of the disjunction between his growing wealth and his left-leaning values; Sopha declared that while Berton was writing the book, “he was [also] on television bemoaning the fact that Toronto restaurants serve only half-a-dozen hors d’oeuvres . . . [and] was pictured sitting in his Kleinburg home sitting (sic) in his Oriental robe and drinking mulled wines” (qtd. in Berton, *My Times* 318).<sup>3</sup> Such criticisms may have undermined his authenticity for some, as reviewers and readers sensed a seeming disconnect between Berton the author and Berton the man, yet Berton utilized his own mythology—his cultural capital—as a way of blurring any such distinction.

*The Smug Minority* is indeed fascinating for the way Berton marshals his own mining camp experiences not only in the service of his argument but also as a way of re-connecting his authorial persona to his Klondike roots. Reflecting on his “jack-of-all-toil” labour during the Depression at age seventeen, he writes, “this ‘job,’ which everybody had congratulated me upon getting, which was supposed to be so ennobling, which was to make a man of me, was actually degrading, destructive, and above all useless” (46-51). Berton condemned the “gospel of work” for the way in which Canada’s upper class encouraged and profited from the dehumanizing physical labour of the lower classes. In a comment on the construction of his own celebrity, however, Berton acknowledges that the one thing such mining experiences has earned him is status:

[This] line in my official biography . . . I notice is seized upon joyfully by those who have to introduce me when I make after-dinner speeches: “During the thirties, he worked in Yukon mining camps to help put himself through university.” When that line is uttered the audience is prepared to forgive me almost anything: outlandishly radical opinions, dangerous views on matters sexual, alarming attitudes toward religion. I am pronounced worthy because in that one sentence is summed up the great Canadian myth: that work—*any* work—is the most important thing in life, and that anybody who is willing to work hard enough can by his own initiative get as far as he wants. (“Dirtiest Job” 244-45)

The irony, of course, is that Berton’s own autobiographical writings assert the philosophy he was critiquing. In disclosing his formulas for success, whether in the techniques of writing or the salesmanship of publicity, Berton emphasized the possibility that what he did others could do also. Berton thus translated the myth of the hardworking, northern miner into the myth of the hardworking, crusading writer. These various iterations garnered him the authority of public speech and the assurance of a listening audience, especially as he aligned himself with the ardent nationalism and leftist politics of the 1960s.

In his study, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*, P. David Marshall theorizes that “the interactions of celebrities as reported on television and radio and in magazines and newspapers establish a code of individuality that is central to the meaning of any celebrity” (264). Berton’s “code of individuality” was certainly configured through these diverse media; it is where he made his name as “working-class” outsider, as iconoclastic provocateur, as national storyteller. What is especially remarkable in Berton’s case, in contrast to other manifestations of literary celebrity, is the way he appeared to fully disclose the economics and machinations behind his own

celebrity-construction. In his writings on the business of writing, he fully acknowledges the economic self-interest and salesmanship involved. "To stay alive in this country," he advises, "a freelance writer [must] be a salesman with all the chutzpah of a used-car dealer" (*Joy* 120). This is, emphatically, not the Romantic myth of the impassioned or reclusive artist; in Berton's self-construction, an aesthetic front is effectively sidelined by the need to, in his words, "earn . . . bread" (296). This insistent foregrounding of the labour of writing and the economic necessity that structures his writings and his salesmanship allowed Berton to successfully maintain his authenticity as a plain-spoken and hardworking everyman, even as his celebrity shifted to "best-seller" status.

Regardless of how well your published book might be selling, Berton argued, the hidden benefit is that people now refer to you not as a "writer" but as an "author." The advantage to this hierarchy is that "it gives a broadcaster a reason to put you on the air. You're somebody. You've got a handle and without a handle they don't know how to identify you" (*Joy* 93). With his emergence as a best-selling author, Berton had two very good handles that, he happily concedes, served him well in constructing his credibility as a qualified Canadian commentator. Berton acknowledges that only after the publication of *The Mysterious North* was he solicited for interviews on matters far beyond the subject matter of his book:

*They want my opinion. And they're paying me a fee. I've written a book and that qualifies me to comment on any subject under the sun! I'm no longer plain old P.B., I'm Pierre Berton, best-selling author. I get to appear on panels and express my views with other best-selling authors who also have instant opinions. (Joy 94)*

Here, Berton links his status as a best-selling author to his increasing multimedia presence, demonstrating how his success in one medium certifies his appearance in another. Marshall attributes this fluidity to "patterns of consumption" whereby a celebrity represents "flags, markers, or buoys for the clustering of cultural significance" (245). This is to say that as Berton's visibility multiplied exponentially, his celebrity accumulated an ever-increasing measure of significance, which in turn generated greater sales, which in turn garnered more media coverage.

Of pivotal importance to Berton's marketed celebrity-authorship was Jack McClelland's repeated assertion that he "publishes authors, not books" (qtd. in McKillop 415). In so doing, McClelland offered up Canadian writers for public consumption, insisting not simply on the importance of their published words but on the cultural significance of the celebrities themselves.



The gambit worked. Through the '60s and '70s, Berton's celebrity amassed such a "cluster of cultural significance" that, McKillop argues, "Canadians bought his books not necessarily because they wanted to read what he wrote, but because they wanted a part of him" (547). In her obituary for Berton in the *Toronto Star*, Sandra Martin points to the partnership between the two men, saying, "Mr. McClelland was the perfect marketer for Mr. Berton's colourful narratives. . . . Together they rode the roller-coaster of cultural nationalism with Mr. Berton providing the content and Mr. McClelland supplying the razzmatazz." By 1971, on the strength of his backlist along with his bestselling nationalist histories, *The National Dream* and *The Last Spike*, Berton's titles accounted for twenty per cent of McClelland & Stewart's revenue (McKillop 525); for a publishing house almost constantly on the brink of receivership, Berton was the crucial factor in maintaining the solvency of Canada's principal Canadian-content publisher.

To be sure, Berton's celebrity and his authenticity with the Canadian public were not created solely by his writings; equally significant was the medium of television in establishing his voice, presence, and authority with a national public. On 5 September 1952, four days after the arrival of television in Toronto, Berton appeared on a live opinion panel. Finding his first experience frustrating, he resolved never to do it again, yet his single appearance had made him immediately recognizable throughout the city, which led to his about-face. Of the new medium, he later said, "it was the greatest marketing tool yet devised, and since I was now determined to write best-selling books, I would have to make use of it. Television was not an end in itself, but it would be the means to publicize my real work" (*My Times* 91). In Berton's retrospective view, every personal, televised appearance was a strategic attempt at greater public visibility.

In his explicit attempt to augment the cultural capital of his name via the broadcasted image of his personality, Berton's bow tie became his iconic marker. At one point, he suggested to Elsa Franklin, his producer, that he lose the unfashionable collar, to which she responded, "keep your bow tie; it gives you a vaguely academic look and has become part of your image. . . . Don't try to change that image: it's what people are comfortable with" (*My Times* 272). Berton's bow tie thus functioned as a marker of familiarity as well as a distinguishing, authoritative feature. Moreover, Berton frequently re-told the story behind the bow tie, connecting himself to an old-time, hard-drinking newspaper editor in Vancouver who double parked in traffic in order to buy one on credit for Berton (*My Times* 131). The story re-asserts

Berton's beat-journalism roots and turns the bow tie into a performative act of self-deprecating confidence.

As her influence in maintaining the bow tie makes clear, Franklin was an astute television producer on whom Berton relied heavily upon in his transition from "crumpled newspaperman" to socially relevant cultural authority (Cameron 25). According to Cameron, with Franklin's arrival in 1964, "Berton emerged as a new creature . . . at once mod and distinguished," and yet he "never turned into a slick, plastic performer" (25). Style aside, Franklin "took charge of Berton's sprawling professional life" and created new television programs, such as "My Country" and "The Great Debate," on top of the already-popular "Front Page Challenge" and "The Pierre Berton Show" (25). In his review of McKillop's biography in the *Globe and Mail*, Ken McGoogan summarizes the "formidable" Franklin as Berton's "business mastermind, organizer, negotiator, promoter par excellence and psychological protector." Contrary to Berton's public image, he was not entirely a "one man show." Though he does disclose his reliance on various individuals in his later autobiographical writings, it was a reality that "Berton tended to gloss over . . . in his heyday" (McGoogan). What worked so well in his favour was that his extremely capable ensemble worked tirelessly in producing, publishing, and sustaining the celebrity that was Pierre Berton.

In Berton's recounting, every instance of media involvement, every posture broadcast live, was a further opportunity to promote his name, his brand, and, ultimately, his books. This is to say that Berton crafted his literary celebrity by publicizing it via his media celebrity, and his authenticity as a literary celebrity depended, to a significant degree, on his status as a bestselling author. That such disclosure did not work against his authenticity suggests the degree of resonance he maintained with his popular reader-and-viewership in Canada. This resonance was further solidified by Berton's public debates with academic historians; his impassioned defenses against their smug criticism assisted him in bolstering his popular appeal through his last three decades as a writer of Canadian history.

It is difficult, admittedly, to maintain a distinction between Berton's mid-career celebrity and the self-interpreting voice of Berton's autobiographical texts. In these later works, Berton articulates a seemingly career-long distinction between his technique as a popular historian and the academic task of historical analysis. Initially, however, Berton engaged forcefully with academics, insisting on the equivalent worth of his historical narration and their academic history. While Berton denied ever intending to be "a crusader

intent on bringing history to the masses,” he admitted, “I had entered a barren literary field waiting to be ploughed, [so] I decided to seize the territory for myself” (*My Times* 330). In seizing this imaginative territory, he opened himself to stringent criticism from the academic community.

When *The National Dream* was published in 1970 and *The Last Spike* in the following year, Berton underwent a transition from simply being, in his own words, “a personality” to being “a distinguished author, hoisted into the pantheon of Canadian icons by the tidal wave of nationalism that had swept the country following the Centennial Year” (*My Times* 327). His newsprint reviewers almost unanimously praised the book; a number of historians, on the other hand, begged to differ. H.V. Nelles, for instance, scorned the populist sell and laudatory dust jacket praise of Berton’s books. Despite acknowledging “in fairness” that *The National Dream* was better than “us Gradgrind academics expected” but not “quite so good as the newspapers would have us believe,” Nelles was unequivocal in the necessity for Canadian historians to now leave *narrative* history safely “in the hands of journalists” (“Ties” 270). In a 1974 CBC radio debate, Carl Berger disputed Berton’s interpretation of the railway’s significance to Canada, noting that “professional historians ask harder questions of enterprises like the CPR than it is possible to answer in a work which is essentially narrative, dramatic, and addressed above all to recreating this experience as a great nationalist thing” (qtd. in Cameron 28). For what it’s worth, these critiques hinged on Berton’s allegiance to the Laurentian thesis, most fully developed by 1940 in the work of Donald Creighton, who saw national development projects such as the railway as powered by commercial interests in eastern cities. By the 1960s, academic historians were paying more attention to regional, working-class, feminist, and ethnic histories (McKillop 529-33). Such criticism provoked Berton into passionate self-defense, and in a popular medium such as CBC radio, he was sure to win in terms of public opinion.

According to Cameron, Berton “retaliated . . . by accusing professional historians of being a ‘snobbish in-group’ who didn’t care about communicating with the masses”; his work, he argued, is “social history, as well as political history, and it’s been neglected by many historians in this country” (28). Berton objected to their critique that there was no original analysis in his story of the railroad, for he “saw the building of the railway as the great epic story in our history,” not a bloody revolution, but a “seminal epic . . . of man against nature” (*My Times* 323). Responding sharply to the criticisms of Canada’s foremost historians, while simultaneously engaging

the listening ear of a national radio audience, Berton secured not only the defense of his books, but also his authenticity as national spokesman, as champion of the masses. In *My Times*, Berton clearly relishes the triumph of his railroad books, for “the story of the country had been left largely in the hands of the history professors. Now people were saying, in effect, ‘My God, we do have a history, after all!’ My mail proved it” (331).

The irony of J.L. Granatstein’s trajectory as an academic historian is especially suggestive of the salience of Berton’s celebrity. Like Nelles, Granatstein was suspicious of Berton’s best-seller status, asking, “how is it that this man, single-handedly propping up McClelland & Stewart, can produce a book for each fall season?” (“Quint” 12). Granatstein rightly discerned that Berton’s success was due largely to the fact that “he is omnipresent in the media, that he is tough, shrewd, and combative, and that he has the contacts and connections to get the maximum publicity” (12). Unfortunately for his polemic, however, Granatstein’s invective turned not into a critique of Berton’s narratives, but into a denigration of Berton’s reading public, since “every non-reader in Canada has a shelf of Bertonia right alongside the *Reader’s Digest* condensed books” (12). By attacking middlebrow literary taste, Granatstein reinforced the very “ivory tower” myth he was trying to assail in arguing for traditional narrative history; his larger point that “Berton fills a national need” was not a tribute to Berton, but a call for increasingly specialized academic historians to return to writing history for the general reader. In 1977, Granatstein published a *Globe and Mail* op-ed article under the rather pompous title “A professor finds that pop history is trivial, hasty, sloppy, and demeaning.” Granatstein castigated popular historians who “in their efforts to make history marketable and interesting . . . have somehow trivialized the past.” “Pierre Berton,” he admits, “is a good researcher. . . . But he consciously makes his work ‘interesting.’” In a scathing reply, Berton stated derisively, “well, professor, I sure as hell don’t consciously make it dull” (*Joy* 277). Berton challenged Granatstein’s assertion that he was an amateur historian, proclaiming himself, instead, “a professional” owing to his three major books of history, his two Governor General’s Awards, and the praise he received from some other professors. Lest his boasting appear more immodest than mocking, Berton closed with a biting rejoinder:

With one sweep of his hand, the professor dismisses all but the cosy coterie of university historians as shoddy amateurs who write popular history. . . . He gives us precious little evidence for such a statement. . . . A man who can’t get the title

of Walter Stewart's last book right, and who has forgotten his own research on the alleged Arthur Meighen trust fund, has a lot of gall referring to other works as "trivial, hasty, sloppy and demeaning." Those adjectives surely apply to his . . . piece, which wouldn't get a C-minus in a high school English course. If he is going to attack us non-academics for being lousy historians, I think we can make a pretty good case that this particular historian is no great shakes as a writer. (*Joy* 277-78)

With such apt responses, it is not difficult to imagine how such "highbrow" criticism helped consolidate Berton's authenticity as "the official storyteller of the nation." That there was no love lost between the two men suggests the inherent instability in the nationalistic project of producing a single, cohesive story for a country. The irony, too, is that Granatstein has spent the rest his career in the service of this nationalistic goal, while the rapid eclipse of Berton's cultural currency following his death is explained, at least in part, by the growing disconnect between the history he told and the multiple histories Canadians began to identify with.

Eventually, Berton chose to differentiate between a "scholarly historian" who is interested in analysis and exposition and his own role as a popular writer who is interested in narrative, in "a beginning, a middle, and an end" (qtd. in Wilson 4). That the academic establishment stopped paying any sustained attention to Berton certainly helped lessen their acrimonious relationship. Granatstein also changed tack, turning his critique entirely on the academic establishment for deconstructing national history. When Granatstein won the \$10,000 Pierre Berton Award in 2004 for "outstanding achievement in popularizing Canadian history," he stated tersely, even while carrying a bow-tie in his pocket, that "Canadian history is too important to be left to only Pierre Berton" (qtd. in McKillop 669).

That even Berton's most dogged critic would eventually offer him some grudging respect is indicative of the near-reverential status Berton had acquired by the end of his life. In fact, McKillop tracks a growing appreciation for Berton *after* his lengthy and provocative time in the spotlight. Just as his "heyday" had passed, so too had "much of the Canada he had known and written about. But the more it receded, the more venerable he became to the Canadian public" (626). His later writings infuriated fewer people and also matched the nostalgia of his (now) older readership for a bygone Canada. Berton's brand was firmly connected to a "sense of history and collectively held national values and traditions," so as that version of Canada came increasingly under threat, his books and his celebrity maintained a significant generational appeal (644).

In his last years, however, Berton repeatedly foregrounded his earlier controversial self over and against his increasing iconicity. In the *Toronto Star* obituary, Warren Gerard notes that Berton remained “edgy” right to the end of his life and quotes him in a 2002 interview:

I was hated, you know. I made no secret of the fact that I was an atheist. . . . My TV show enraged people. I had prostitutes on, and I treated them like real people . . . I was fired from *Maclean's* after I wrote a piece called ‘Let's Stop Hoaxing The Kids About Sex.’ Now I'm the ‘beloved author,’ the ‘beloved historian of Canada,’ an icon. . . . [But] I never set out to be a patriot or a popular historian. I just liked storytelling.

Berton's comments are as much a matter of “setting the record straight” as they are an attempt at replaying the controversy he once provoked—controversy that had generated the very iconicity he was now, apparently, trying to deny. Berton took one last crack at controversy when he offered a televised “celebrity tip” on how to roll a marijuana joint; as his final point on Rick Mercer's *The Monday Report*, Berton counsels, “and remember Canada, it's the loose joints that tend to fall apart, leaving unsightly toke burns on your chairs or on your bow tie” (YouTube). In this, his last television appearance, Berton re-asserts his old, controversial self and thumbs his nose at his own iconicity, while also plugging the branded marker that made an image of his name—his bow tie. His “celebrity tip” was acknowledged, of course, in nearly every obituary six weeks later.

Despite all this, however, Berton was unable to ensure the resonance of his brand past his own death. Alternative conceptions of what makes “Canadian history” aside, Berton's rapid decline is also explained by reference to the nature of his writing. Characterizing Berton as a uniquely Canadian “journalist-as-generalist,” Geoff Pevere suggests that Berton “always wrote for his time and never with any pretensions to posterity” (xv). Indeed, twenty years before his death, Berton conceded, quite candidly, that “I think [my books will] all probably—a lot of them will go out of date” (qtd. in Wilson 10). The matter of the country's dated “shelf of Bertonia” connects to another possible answer; perhaps the Canadian media and the reading and viewing public had so much Berton for so long that the current cultural silence can be interpreted as fatigue.

I say “fatigue,” though, to indicate what I take to be the temporariness of our waning interest in the man. Canadian popular culture and its governing national mythology continue to reflect too much of his influence to ignore him completely. His emphatic remark, “I just liked storytelling,” reflects his

stated fascination with historical evocation, epic narrative, and social and individual characterization—all of which place him firmly within a literary camp that is reluctant to touch him. So much so that to say that Berton is perhaps one of the most significant and culturally important Canadian literary storytellers is both an indisputable fact and, simultaneously, a disquieting and objectionable statement to make within literary circles; this rejection is partly explained by a lingering denigration of middlebrow writings, despite all statements to the contrary. Another decisive element is that Berton's celebrity and writings continue to rankle; his admitted "seizure" of barren literary territory and his mythologizing of an exoticized and nostalgic northern frontier rubs against contemporary critical understandings of Canada's own ongoing legacy of colonization in the North. Canadian literary and cultural critics need to account for, explicate, and critique the many ways his writings and his celebrity have contributed to an imagined Canada. Berton's Canada might not be the Canada of the twenty-first century, but that's all the more reason to trace out the interconnections and disjunctions between his time and ours.

Writing in this journal after the 2008 national election that saw "culture" become a central campaign issue (when Steven Harper's negative comments about culture may have lost him any chance at winning in Quebec), Laura Moss appealed for Canadian critics to be "especially attuned to the realities of newly invigorated cultural nationalisms"; without entirely dismissing Diana Brydon's call for upending "the myth of *the national dream*" in favor of "seeing Canada in a planetary context," Moss cautions that "the nation isn't going to go away" (11, emphasis mine). "Nationalism," she points out "is irrevocably part of the practice of everyday life in Canada" (10). Indeed, patriotic nationalism isn't going to go away either; if anything, it is a renewed and invigorated force in Canada, coming from both the political right and the political left. If critics and commentators are to understand the force and appeal of this nationalism, to see how it intersects with or reacts against the range of emergent nationalisms from the past forty years, it is crucial that we historicize those affective narratives that structure our own and other citizens' responses to this nation. As for Berton's place in it all, our uneasiness, our contemporary glance away, is the best indication of a need to further analyze, for it is truly impossible to stare at mid-to-late twentieth-century popular culture and nationalism in Canada without getting a bow-tie full in the face.

NOTES

- 1 For a critical re-appropriation of the term “middlebrow,” see Hammill.
- 2 The term “total star text” refers to a celebrity’s public and private text “as read across all her/his different media manifestations” (Dyer 136).
- 3 Elmer Sopa’s opinion piece is also reprinted in a newsprint collage on the inside, rear cover of Berton’s *My Times*. Efforts to locate the source of this article proved fruitless.

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