

# THE REAL MR. CANADA

*Lorna Irvine*

**E**ARLY IN JULY OF 1985, Pierre Berton staged a game of “To Tell the Truth” at an apparently typical press party. The mystery guests were three women in masks; the panelists, Canadian historian William Kilbourn, Dinah Christie, and Berton himself. The object of the game was to discover which of the three women was Lisa Kroniuk, the author of *Masquerade: Fifteen Variations On A Theme of Sexual Fantasy*. The novel bears on the back cover a description of the author: “Lisa Kroniuk emigrated to Canada several years ago and now lives in the West. A single mother, she has one daughter, Lara. This is her second novel; an earlier work was published in Eastern Europe, on the theme of sexual ambiguity. She writes: ‘I am myself part of the masquerade’.”<sup>1</sup>

When the “To Tell the Truth” game arrived at its famous question, “Will the real Lisa Kroniuk please stand up?”, to people’s astonishment, Pierre Berton rose. He, it turns out, is the novel’s author. He had kept his secret well. Jack McClelland, *Masquerade*’s publisher as well as Berton’s long-time publisher, friend, and business partner, claims to have been kept in the dark during the two years of the project’s maturing. So does Janet Berton, the author’s wife. Berton described the experience for Sandy Naiman of *The Toronto Sun*: “I got the idea during a period of jet lag in London. . . . It had never occurred to me to write a novel. I’m not a novelist. But I got the idea of a bordello that ran fantasies and I started fiddling with it when I was on vacation in the Caribbean.”<sup>2</sup> The book received little attention. For Pierre Berton, author of thirty books (other than *Masquerade*), three-time winner of the Governor General’s Award for Non-Fiction, possessor of ten honorary degrees and fifteen other awards, an author who has topped the Canadian best-sellers list with books like *The Comfortable Pew*, and *The Smug Minority*, a well-known television personality, the man who has made the Yukon famous and who has, some think single-handedly, created Canadian history, writing an ignored novel about sexual fantasies is an unusual experience.

Considering his prolific publishing record, is it appropriate to begin a discussion of Pierre Berton's work with an apparent aberration like *Masquerade*? His publishers and his agent insist that the book is completely different from anything Berton has written heretofore. However, apart from the fact that it is listed as a novel, and Berton is essentially a writer of non-fiction, *Masquerade* is a most revealing piece of writing, tying in neatly with what is perhaps Berton's most significant popular role: the establishing, elucidating, and developing of a specifically Canadian approach to the confidence game tradition that so dominates the folklore and culture of the United States. This is not a popular argument to make. Canadians have long prided themselves on their superiority to American selling techniques, and among anglophones at least, the stereotypical British dislike of self-promotion — indeed of any kind of promotion at all — has encouraged the belief in Canadian reserve. This fiction has among other misconceptions worked against the accepting of any specifically Canadian popular culture; the tendency has been, until very recently, to denounce all forms of popular or mass manipulative culture as American.

To suggest that the thoroughly Canadian Pierre Berton has developed, in content, but more important, in his style of writing and the method of selling, a pattern that can be connected with cultural conning, implies that Canada has its own game mentality, and that erasing it by calling it American is inaccurate. Nonetheless, such erasure has a long history. Thomas Haliburton's Sam Slick was a Yankee; about him, Robert McDougall writes: "Sam's democratic brashness, his 'calculatin' shrewdness, his colossal assurance and resourcefulness in argument, his readiness with homespun comments, with anecdotes and tall tales — all these traits were already connected with popular conceptions of the Yankee character."<sup>3</sup> Susanna Moodie employs the stereotype: "No thin, weasel-faced Yankee was he, looking as if he had lived upon 'cute ideas and speculations all his life,"<sup>4</sup> while her sister, Catherine Parr Traill, comments disparagingly on "annoying Yankee manners."<sup>5</sup> The disease "spreading up from the south"<sup>6</sup> that creeps through Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* is none other than American commercialism. Denial and projection seem, then, conventionally to characterize Canadian approaches to the low art of selling.

Obviously, *Masquerade* is a con, and as such, tells us something about Pierre Berton's own use of the tradition of tricksters and gamesmen. The title is the first hint that trickery is occurring. Indeed, the fantasies stress, one after the other, the counterfeiting of fiction. They are not particularly erotic. The connecting link is a business operation, a bordello, run by a "Momma" who has been financially, and imaginatively, backed by a Magician who might come from the work of Robertson Davies. The business is designed to cater to people's sexual fantasies while keeping, as one of the concluding stories states, "within the bounds of good taste," within the normal, rather than the abnormal, one is tempted to say, the

Canadian rather than the American. To carry out the fantasies are Erika, the perennial schoolgirl, Candace, the nurse, beautiful male Julio, loved by men, Lara, the Bitch of Berlin, Raven, whose specialty is necrophilia, Andrea, the jungle girl, the three nuns, Flame, Lola and Bibi, Alix, the schoolmarm, and finally Turk, the simple-minded truck driver who has to be locked into his truck to keep him from wandering off. With this cast, Berton creates fifteen fantasies that begin and end with the same client, Marcus, who, we are told in the first fantasy, “*was* in a rut. He longed to get away, perhaps to some South Sea island where the wind was warm and the women willing. He longed for an adventure — any adventure — even if it meant flirting with death.”

ALTHOUGH I AM not interested in describing the specific fantasies, I want to investigate several of Berton’s themes, his narrative technique and, what I think is of most interest, his role as a representative of Canada, a role only obliquely realized in *Masquerade*. Several of the stories of *Masquerade*, like many individual stories in *Klondike*, *The National Dream*, *The Last Spike*, *The Invasion of Canada*, *Flames Across the Border* and, *The Promised Land*, focus on and demonstrate, not just trickery or illusion (the whole book does that), but the setting up of actual confidence games. In “Momma’s Reverie,” Momma describes the game: “In a seduction, or a confidence game (is there really any difference? Momma asks herself), both players take on roles, the seduced as well as the seducer, the mark as well as the trickster. Bolstered by the flattery of one, the other sees herself with new eyes, gains confidence, falls in love with the image that has been constructed for her.” It is a theme that has earlier received Berton’s attention. In a book published in the 1960’s, *The Big Sell* — a collection of his newspaper columns — Berton discusses classic confidence games: “Any student of the classic confidence games must be struck by the several parallels they present with some modern big-sell techniques. The confidence man sells nothing but himself, of course, while the salesman peddles more tangible merchandise; but the psychological techniques each employs are remarkably similar.” Con artists, as Berton is well aware, need to be masters of detail. A friend of his, an accomplished con artist, tells Berton that con artists expend the most energy establishing the credibility of a story. Apart from the fact that trickery inevitably connects with any writer’s job — to create illusion — an author who attracts a mass audience has necessarily developed particularly sophisticated selling techniques. As Berton said in one interview (apparently in reference to all his books): “I wouldn’t be writing this stuff if there weren’t the market for it.”

Anecdotes dominate the selling techniques of good confidence men, anecdotes that frequently debunk or make accessible characters and events in fact quite

COMING SOON



Jenkins

distant. This aspect of Berton's work leads a reviewer of *The Promised Land* to state: "there's an overemphasis on scandal and corruption, and not enough about farming the land, getting the crop to market, early frost, loneliness. One might have hoped for a little less debunking."<sup>8</sup> This reviewer is asking for factual, rather than anecdotal, material. But Berton has made his name precisely by telling tall tales, by creating vivid, if unworthy, characters, by reporting, in various guises and from different perspectives, all the ways in which Canadians have manipulated themselves into the present. Melville's confidence man has Canadian brothers.

The psychology of conning fascinates Berton. In *Klondike*, he investigates people who, in the role of either yeggs or con artists, are consumed by greed. At its height, the gold rush disproved any Horatio Alger myth of success (that is, hard work as superior to luck). People aimed to get rich as quickly as possible. Incredible devices were invented — and sold. Dawson's entertainments, Berton tells us, were established to "extract as much gold as possible from the audience." People worked under false names; some fortunes were exhausted in a few weeks; others were made overnight. Soapy Smith, the dictator of Skagway, built up a career from nothing; he was a "man of considerable imagination and dry humour" who contrived to appear on the side of law and order but who, in fact, made his fortune from taking money away from others. And he had the down-home personality of an effective confidence man; people liked him. The whole of *Klondike* elaborates on stories about this kind of person. Indeed, the book itself, perhaps an example of what it is about, continues to make its author considerable money.

*Klondike* concentrates on the gold rush, a particularly symbolic example of greed. But from different perspectives, each of the other three books of the tetralogy (*The National Dream*, *The Last Spike*, and *The Promised Land*) reveals the author's interest in bargaining, if not in downright cheating among the principal makers of Canada's past. *The National Dream* elucidates, with anecdotal delight, proliferating land deals, alcoholic but immensely personable Prime Ministers, and a public growing fat on materialistic fantasies, while *The Last Spike* illustrates in detail a short-sighted but greedy Canadian west. No longer interested in growing crops, when land can be marketed much more profitably, Canadians are shown cheating the Indians, while the company stores develop increasingly fast methods of making a buck. *The Promised Land*, published last year, concentrates its whole attention, as its title announces, on land: not solid earth, the kind farmers plough, but ephemeral fantasies.

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N *The Confidence Man in American Literature*, a fascinating psychological and cultural analysis of the meaning of conning in American

life, Gary Lindberg argues that, at least in the settling of the American West, "Nation building . . . turns out to be a massive game of confidence."<sup>9</sup> He continues: "in speculation, as in confidence games more generally, all belongings and winnings became mere parts of the game. The reality was drained out of domestic life, material objects and labor."<sup>10</sup> This phenomenon is precisely what Berton investigates in *The Promised Land*. In the Prologue, he tells us that "This is a book about dreams and illusions, escape and survival, triumph and despair," and goes on to describe various searches for utopia in the continuous flow of people from the old world to the new, all too easily promised, land.

Newspapers became major agents in the game of selling people land and populating the west (and Berton, a newspaperman himself, understands newspaper games). Suppression of information was customary, as it inevitably is in any kind of manipulation. The nightmares of journeys in extremely cold weather were hushed up; for example, attempts were made to ban the publication of Manitoba's winter temperatures. Berton makes clear too that self-interest was the motivating force behind settlement: the word "ethnic" was not in use in the nineteenth century; "there were no discussions about 'roots,' no talk of 'multi-culturalism,' little pandering to national cultures, and certainly no reference to a Canadian mosaic." According to Berton, assimilation was the key word. Indeed, many of the Europeans who peopled the west of Canada were themselves in the grip of dreams that all too often were formed because of trickery. The Doukhobors followed a peculiarly destructive path, and evangelical groups from Scotland were sold on Canada by preachers — themselves masters of the art of conning — like the Rev. Issac Barr:

Barr, Barr, wily old Barr  
 He'll do you as much as he can.  
 You bet he will collar  
 Your very last dollar  
 In the valley of Sask-atchewan.

Great Britain continued to advertise Canada as the land of opportunity, while in fact using Canada as a dumping ground for her own undesirables.

The politics of the west frequently exacerbated (or perhaps reflected) the problem; politicians like Clifford Sifton, Minister of the Interior under Prime Minister Laurier, a character of apparent fascination to Berton, who makes him the central character of *The Promised Land*, demonstrate the connections between political corruption and confidence trickery. Sifton, like any manipulator, wanted to get rich, and used political power to do so. In a review of this book, William French extends the example: "Sifton's methods of attracting settlers provide a forceful examination of modern marketing techniques. He was selling an idea — the idea that the Canadian West was the promised land, that free homesteads and hard work would bring undreamed-of material success."<sup>11</sup>

An example from more recent history is Berton's less well-known book about the Dionne quintuplets, *The Dionne Years*. The book is certainly cultural history and points to the use made of the Quints in the battle between the French and the English. But Berton's real interest is in the ways successful marketing techniques can move an unknown product (the backwoods, northern Ontario Dionne family) into the international limelight. Again, too, Berton spends considerable time elucidating the psychology of the doctor who delivered the quints and who made himself a substantial fortune as a result. Although initially an apparently simple country doctor, he became adept at selling his personality and, of course, his story. What emerges from the book, too, is what begins to seem standard Canadian response to marketing: while complaining about "cheap American publicity," and attempting a neutral Canadian stance, the Canadians involved with Quintland were raking in fortunes, by selling the Quints' pictures to advertising firms, tourists, and other Canadians — hardly a neutral undertaking.

Many such examples occur in Berton's books. Nonetheless, the confidence mentality plays an ambivalent role in the Canadian consciousness. The economically powerful United States makes Canada's differences about money particularly problematic. Economic metaphors are frequently used (Canadians sell out to the United States; Americans buy Canadians). Enraged by American economic dominance, Canadian nationalist Robin Mathews lashes out at susceptible Canadians: "Colonies are places that are *done* to rather than doing or doing to. . . . The people are under perpetual pressure to adopt the beliefs and ideology of the powerful country that manipulates them."<sup>12</sup> Mathews later claims: "The human product of the liberal ideology is the Robber Baron of free enterprise and the cop-out hippie/yippie of the so-called 'counter-culture.' . . . It teaches the Canadian to scorn history, to reject communal values."<sup>13</sup> One can certainly detect a long history of British snobbery here. But in a somewhat less hysterical way, a good number of Canadians want to believe that Canada is a less gullible, less outrageously vulgar, less materialistic, less self-advertising country than the United States. Berton is no exception. He seems, then, an interesting example of the ambivalence that permeates Canada's effort to differentiate itself from American business. He is interested in the confidence mentality, in the selling of his own books as well as in their content and style; he emphasizes anecdotes and tall tales, uses the present tense, which makes the reader participate more fully in the action, and loudly sells ideas.

But Berton also openly castigates American techniques. In *Why We Act Like Canadians*, a book structured as a dialogue between Berton and Uncle Sam, he describes Canadians as virtually immune to manipulation of the confidence kind. Institutions like the Hudson's Bay Company he paints as paternal protectors rather than exploiters of the population, and argues that Canadians have always been more interested in public good than in private property. Important extensions of

these ideas occur in *Hollywood's Canada*, where Berton casts the Americans as manipulators and con artists, translating Canadian characters such as the Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman, the French Canadian, the Metis, the Canadian Indian into items saleable to an American public. According to Berton, it "didn't occur to Hollywood and it didn't occur to Canadian audiences either, that the Canadian concept of order imposed from above clashed with the American idea of rough frontier justice." In the American Preface to *Flames Across the Border*, Berton hammers away at the same differences ("America's heritage is revolutionary; Canada's is colonial"), and summarizes the differences in national qualities: "American ebullience, Canadian reserve. The Americans went wild over minor triumphs, the Canadians remained phlegmatic over major ones." Like many other Canadians, Berton insists on dividing Americans and Canadians specifically in terms of their ability to promote themselves and others.

**B**ERTON IS FASCINATED by slick talking and by selling, and associates characteristics related to confidence trickery with Canadian development. Rhetorically, he uses confidence tricks that have worked to make him one of the best-selling writers in Canada. He understands the psychology of his largely Canadian audiences, who enjoy both the anecdotal (his work seems more oral than literary) style and the quantity of factual information he offers. As one Canadian to whom I recently spoke said: "Nobody would know anything about Canadian history if Berton were not around to popularize it." The assumptions he makes are various; he does not always assume his audience's gullibility — he is in fact a much more committed Canadian than that — but he is in the business of selling ideas and, often, of persuading others to change their minds. In a book like *Why We Act Like Canadians*, he adopts the voice of a manipulator, addressing a naive audience, in this case, a pretended American one (the book in fact is meant for the educating of a Canadian audience; Americans find it most offensive). He frequently assumes a helpful, comradely persona, employing considerable repetition and assiduously establishing his own honesty. *The Wild Frontier* begins inclusively: "We are all the creatures of the wilderness, the children of frontiers"; the author's Note at the end of *Klondike* announces that "My whole life has been conditioned by the Klondike"; all of *Drifting Home* is an establishing of familial and cultural roots, and, in an epigraph to the first chapter of the cookbook he co-edited with his wife (*The Centennial Food Guide*), he assures the reader that "The male editor of this book unconditionally guarantees this soup. In twenty years of marriage he has drunk bathtubfuls of it."

Berton consistently plays as well, on the human desire for variety, shifting his persona as he shifts his game strategies. His dramatic shift into the role of a



female Polish novelist draws particular attention to this facility. But his performance ranges over an extremely wide area, from the children's story, *The World of Og* (based on episodes and characters in his own family); to the cookbook; to numerous, snappy newspaper columns (collected in *Just Add Water and Stir, Fast, Fast, Fast Relief*, and *Adventures of a Columnist*); to the promotion of tourism (for example, *The New City: A Prejudiced View of Toronto, Drifting Home*); to exposés of public corruption or hypocrisy (*The Big Sell, My War With the Twentieth Century, The Comfortable Pew, The Smug Minority*); to popular Canadian histories (the western tetralogy, the books on the War of 1812); and to commentaries on popular culture (*The Dionne Years, The Cool Crazy Committed World of the Sixties, Hollywood's Canada*). Part of the appeal of these books is nostalgic: they encourage Canadian longings for past glories and, what is more important, satisfy some of these desires with historical and cultural information and dramatic anecdotes. The popular style that Berton uses — parabolic, anecdotal, a traditional selling style — simplifies the oblique lessons of history and gives narrative coherence to disparate facts. The popular histories particularly elicit our confidence.

On the other hand, Berton's ambivalence about the merchant mentality persists. Like other Canadians, he attempts to project the more unpleasant effects of mercantile persuasion on to the Americans. This inclination is, I believe, characteristically Canadian and, while reflected in the artifacts of Canada's popular culture, is most noticeable in their reception. In Berton's work, the Canadian confidence game simultaneously demonstrates and repels trickery, while Canada and various Canadians appear confusingly as both active and passive, as both persuaders and gulls, as both perpetrators and victims. This ambivalent stance is peculiarly paralyzing, at least when one is talking about Canadian popular culture. Yet, like the United States, Canada's is a new world culture. Gary Lindberg believes that confidence games tell us something about the psychology of societies newly forming and in flux. He argues that repeated moving has

made many Americans restless, unstable, thirsty for novelty. It has loosened family and community bonds and has encouraged people to dwell imaginatively in the future. Institutions that depend on stable residence, like primogeniture and apprenticeship, have lost their power, and personal facility has been given a correspondingly wider field. In social relations this ceaseless movement has weakened the familiar patterns of identification. Instead of relying on family background, class habits, inherited manners, many Americans have had to confront each other as mere claimants.<sup>14</sup>

Canadians cannot avoid these phenomena.

At the same time, Canada, at least hypothetically, seems particularly sensitive to communal demands, quite likely for geographical and economic reasons. The themes Berton most emphasizes in Canadian development (the importance of

authority in Canada and the preference for arbitration over revolution), are themes that create tension between individual and group undertakings. Berton seems torn between the two. His own family matters to him; and he is certainly concerned about his country. According to most analysts of it, the confidence tradition in American culture emphasizes distinctive individualism. In certain ways, Berton delineates for Canada a more group-oriented conning, games that pertain to broad segments of Canadian culture.

He also undertakes to give Canada a frontier past that seems to contradict Canadian denials about its existence: he shows, in books like *The Mysterious North*, *Klondike*, and *The Wild Frontier*, how Canadians, like other people, are attracted to the mystery and danger of frontiers where they can test their courage. This largely masculine undertaking — Berton does describe women on the frontier, but mostly he is concerned with male adventure — often, as Lindberg also demonstrates,<sup>15</sup> goes hand in hand with confidence trickery, with the susceptibilities of changing cultures. Yet here too, Berton's ambivalence persists. Although he seems to be constructing a less passive, rough and tumble, carousing, bad-boy image of Canada — some Canadian historians stereotypically reflect Canada in female metaphors — he also preserves Canada's difference from the United States in passive-active dichotomies. In *Why We Act Like Canadians* he writes: "We were never a community of rebels, escaping from the clutches of a foreign monarch. . . . Basking in the security and paternalism that our constitutional phraseology suggests, we sought gradually and through a minimum of bloodshed to achieve our own form of independence." Berton's ambivalence does not, of course, lessen the significance of frontier conning. In fact, the paternalistic, authoritarian culture that Berton posits as Canada's seems particularly amenable to manipulation. As soon as someone establishes authority, victims appear to play the game. Even the dislike of physical violence that accompanies particular kinds of authoritarianism encourages the mental rather than physical struggles characteristic of confidence games.

Finally, ambivalent Canadian attitudes to rigid class systems give further room for confidence trickery. Confidence men seem classless, eliminating cultural differences by conning rich and poor alike. Furthermore, like many Canadians, the confidence man is not interested in abrupt or radical changes in society. Lindberg emphasizes that he "does not provide an outlet for unruliness, nor does he disrupt the social bounds. He is a culturally representative figure, not a marginal one, and his message is that the boundaries are already fluid, that there is ample space between his society's official rules and its actual tolerances."<sup>16</sup> Berton operates on just such fluid boundaries.

In his literary study of confidence men, John Blair argues that the confidence man "serves as figure for the writer whose artistic medium must manipulate pretenses and falsehoods even in order to probe the nature of the true and false

in the larger world.”<sup>17</sup> Thus we return to *Masquerade*. Broadly interpreted, Blair’s observation is no doubt true. But it is not just that Berton is a writer. It is that he is predominantly interested in masquerades, in the playing of roles, in trickery. As Momma says: “in life costume is everything. Costume is a two-way mirror. It casts a reflection. The role player sees his image staring back at him in the eyes of others, and the role becomes the reality.” Furthermore, Berton is a remarkably popular writer; his manipulation of his material and of his audience allows him to play games, as well as to instruct. He reminds Canadians of their materialism, of their willingness to be manipulators as well as victims. Survival may, as Atwood claims, be a significant Canadian theme. But Canadian victims, at least according to Berton, are amply balanced by persuaders who know what the game is, and how to play it. These too, he insists, are Canadians.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I refer to the following books by Pierre Berton. Except where noted, I have used McClelland & Stewart publications: *The Mysterious North*, 1956; *Klondike*, 1958; *Just Add Water and Stir*, 1959; *The New City: A Prejudiced View of Toronto*, 1961; *Fast, Fast, Fast Relief*, 1962; *The Big Sell* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1963); *My War With the Twentieth Century* (New York: Doubleday, 1965); *The Comfortable Pew* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1965); *The Cool, Crazy, Committed World of the Sixties*, 1966; *Adventures of a Columnist*, 1966; *The Centennial Food Guide* (with Janet Berton), 1966; *The Smug Minority* (New York: Doubleday, 1969); *The National Dream*, 1970; *The Last Spike*, 1971; *Drifting Home*, 1973; *Hollywood’s Canada*, 1975; *The Dionne Years* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977); *The Wild Frontier*, 1978; *Flames Across the Border* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1981); *Why We Act Like Canadians*, 1982; *The Secret World of Og*, rpt. 1983; *The Promised Land*, 1984; *Masquerade*, 1985 (pseud. Lisa Kroniuk).
- <sup>2</sup> Sandy Naiman, “Sexy Berton Tells All,” *Toronto Sun*, 12 July 1985, p. 16.
- <sup>3</sup> Thomas Haliburton, *The Clockmaker* (1871; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1958), p. x.
- <sup>4</sup> Susanna Moodie, *Roughing It In the Bush* (1852; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1962), p. 92.
- <sup>5</sup> Catharine Parr Traill, *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1966), p. 99.
- <sup>6</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (New York: Popular Library, 1972), p. 9.
- <sup>7</sup> Judith Timson, “The Berton Years,” *Maclean’s*, 5 March 1979, p. 46.
- <sup>8</sup> Stephen Weatherbe, “Pierre Berton’s Wild West Show,” *Alberta Report*, 17 September 1984, p. 45.
- <sup>9</sup> Gary Lindberg, *The Confidence Man in American Literature* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), p. 116.
- <sup>10</sup> Lindberg, p. 119.
- <sup>11</sup> William French, “Affection For History,” *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 8 September 1984.

