An Interview with Pierre Berton

JON C. STOTT

Pierre Berton needs no introduction to Canadians. Writer, broadcaster, and television personality, he speaks up for and writes about the Canadian identity, delving into aspects of our past, examining how others see us, and criticising, when necessary, our present. In addition to many books of history and social criticism, he is the author of The Secret World of Og, *one of the most popular and best selling Canadian children's books of all times. The following interview, in which he discusses his work as an historian and his views on Children's Literature, is a pastiche of interviews taped with Berton over a four year period. In 1977 and 1978, I interviewed him for a series of book review programs I was doing for CBC radio in Edmonton. Last fall, in preparation for this interview article, I talked with him in Edmonton and at Toronto's International Airport.*

STOTT: Wordsworth said that the child is father to the man. Can we talk about the birth of Pierre Berton as a writer? Did growing up in the Yukon and then in Victoria, two very historical places, make you think in terms of the past?

BERTON: No, I didn't think in terms of the past at all. At school, I wasn't particularly good in history, and I certainly wasn't good in English or composition or grammar. I was better at mathematics. I wasn't going to be a writer at all. However, my grandfather was a very famous journalist, and my mother wrote. She was an amateur writer really, but she wrote for the Dawson paper, and for *Saturday Night* and the *Family Herald* when they started, and she was writing a novel which never got published. I was raised in that environment of somebody at the typewriter, and I carried copy down to the weekly Dawson paper. In Victoria the Canadian Authors Association met in our front room. It rubbed off on me; but it wasn't until the end of my second year in college that I decided I wasn't going to be a chemist but a newspaper man. That was because I was spending all my time on the college paper and not in the lab. I was neglecting my studies for the Victoria (B.C.) College paper, which I helped found. I did the cartoons for it. Then I decided that I would go to U.B.C. and that I wouldn't spend much time in the classroom. I'd work on the *Ubyssey*, because all those guys got jobs and I was after a job.

STOTT: How did your historical interests evolve?

BERTON: They really came from writing *Klondike*. I had done a

couple of books which were historical, *The Royal Family* and *The Mysterious North.* I was looking around for another book and I suddenly realized that I was born and raised in the Klondike. I knew a lot of people there and thought I would do a book about it. That was the first real book about history and I enjoyed writing it very much. Then I wrote about ten more books before I wrote another real work of history, the railway books, and they were very successful, so I just kept on. I've written other books in between, too, but I'm mainly in that field now.

STOTT: Who do you write your history books for? Do you have a specific audience in mind?

BERTON: No, not to any great extent. I think I really write them for myself. I write the kind of book I would like to read about a certain subject. I'm frustrated with a lot of books I read. I think that they're not good enough, or that they talk down to their audience, or that they're too far removed from the audience. I really don't know what the audience of my books is going to be, and I certainly don't try to simplify them for an audience. I do try to make them clearer by putting in lots of maps and by setting the paragraphs small. I like the book to look like a novel. Instead of running all the dialogue in a great, huge, thick chunk, I bring it out like a novelist does, so that the book looks like a novel when it's opened. But it should be thorough and accurate.

STOTT: Let's talk about your choice of subjects. For example, what led you to write about the Dionne family and the social phenomena depicted in *The Dionne Years*?

BERTON: I'd had the idea for many years, but I didn't get around to it until I'd finished *Hollywood's Canada* and before I started *My Country*. As a writer, I thought that it was a very good story with a good beginning and a tragic end – from a narrative point of view, it was a hot story. And I didn't think that it had been done well enough before; it was virgin territory in many ways. But the main reason I wrote the book was because it took place in the thirties; that's the decade in which I grew up and I was interested in using the Dionne story to tell something about the times and attitudes, which are so different from our attitudes today. I wanted to show how swiftly in the Twentieth Century attitudes do an about-face.

STOTT: In a way, then, it's not really about the Dionnes at all; it's about the climate that created their unusual story.

BERTON: That is quite true. Actually, the original idea of the book

called for much more background than I finally included. What happened was that the Dionnes turned out to be such a good story that some of the social history got in the way. In the final draft, I cut 20,000 words out and I think that helped the book.

STOTT: The children themselves seem almost to be non-entities. They weren't given any chance to be themselves. So it is almost a story with a circumference and no center.

BERTON: That's right. When I wrote the book I could have put in a lot of cute stuff about kids, but I didn't. I went back and put a bit in because I felt the book was a little dry. But the story is not about the children, who were only pawns. They were little children; they didn't have any ideas or beliefs or thoughts. They acted like all cute little children – except that there were five of them and they were identical. The story is really about the impact, the ripples that widened out from these children. And you're right, there was no center. The children became people only later, and that in itself is instructive. I put a coda onto the book about what happened after that decade to the children, those who lived, and that was tragic.

STOTT: One of the themes I see in this book, as well as in some of your other books, is the idea of the family unit. You start talking about the idea of the family and it seems as if this story is about a group which is almost the antithesis of your idea of what the family should be.

BERTON: In a sense this family was split right down the middle: there were five children before the quintuplets were born and two after. And that family stayed together. But the middle of the family (the five girls) was taken away by legislative action (something that could not happen today with our attitude about civil liberties) and the family was split. This split exists to this very day, for a lot of complicated psychological and physical reasons. I thought, after I had talked to Audrey Dionne, who married one of the brothers, that the Dionne family as she described it was remarkably similar to my own. Everyone came home for big ritual days, Christmas especially, and they liked coming home. They spent a lot of time with their mother and father. I think that Dionne's idea of discipline and education would be different from mine. But the warmth of that family, the girls working in the kitchen, the boys helping their father, I think is really what a family should be.

STOTT: Another theme is the difference between dream and reality. The reality of the thirties made people look for a dream; then the terrible dream they created of the Dionne quintuplets created a

harsher reality for those children.

BERTON: Yes. I didn't use the word dream; I used the word soap opera. And in the book I used the word melodrama, which is what a soap opera is. One of the undercurrents running through this book is radio. We forget how powerful a medium radio was in the thirties, far more powerful than television is now, because we have other things to do and more money to do it. But then, you stayed home and listened to the radio. The soap opera was the nostalgia of that age, an age in which people were moving to and living rather badly in the cities, in which they were looking back to a quieter time when little villages, with little rivers and little dams and waterfalls and shady trees, and a pleasanter, fuller life existed. The town philosopher was the local barber, the local lawyer, or the local judge, and these are the heroes of the soap operas. Suddenly there emerged a soap opera figure named Dr. Dafoe, the quintessential country doctor in the small town. He was everything that the soap opera characters were – full of homilies, unruffled, selfless, didn't give a damn about money, especially in front of the media. He was built into a soap opera figure, and, in fact, a soap opera was made based on him with Jean Hersholt playing him, renamed Dr. Christian. And so people saw life, I think, in terms of a soap opera. Soap operas had titles like "Against the World," names that suggested people fighting against terrible odds and winning. The quintuplets were part of that soap opera, with Mr. Dionne as the villain. The little children romping merrily in their playground in the sun were going to have a fuller life than anybody else's children would have in the thirties, when the future for all children was very gloomy.

STOTT: Your books are peopled with some very unusual characters. This is particularly so of *Wild Frontier*. In that book, does the wilderness do something to the egos of these individuals to make them the rather strange people they are?

BERTON: No. I think they are that way first. I think that they're the kind of people who seek out the frontiers, and they don't have to be visible frontiers. I think that people who are seeking to cross a frontier have a peculiar stamp about them. You see, I was raised in a frontier town and I knew these types of people. I was raised in Dawson City when it was a very primitive area. All the people in that town had crossed their frontier both psychologically and physically; they had climbed the Chilkoot Pass and they had climbed their own inner passes. They were survivors. Certainly they were unusual, eccentric in many ways – but they had within them a kind of inner tranquility which you get when you've succeeded. A good example of this kind of person is Mina Hubbard, the first white person to cross Labrador. She did it as an act of therapy really. She was deranged by the death of her

young husband who had starved to death in Labrador and she was determined to carry out what she thought was his mission. Another thing that you notice about these people is that having crossed the frontier, got to where they were going, survived, and come back to civilization, every single one of them wanted to go back, if not physically, at least spiritually. The one who did not go back was Jewitt, the slave of the Nootkas; but he was obsessed by his own experience to the point where it really dominated his life. He should have been a blacksmith, but he had to go around peddling his story, telling it over and over again, in two books, a play, a song, a pageant, until his death.

You get this return, which I think is an attempt to relive youth. That's what nostalgia is all about, the memory of youth. It's not your memory of certain radio shows or a certain movie or a certain piece of trivia; it's your memory of what it was like when you first heard that song. I think that in Cameron's case, and some of the others, they were trying to relive the youth that had passed them by.

STOTT: One has the feeling that these characters couldn't exist in the 1980s, that the unique conditions of the environment and their own personalities made them what they were.

BERTON: Yes. Now, getting there is half the fun, but in the old days getting there was half the trouble. The helicopter and the airplane have changed that. You don't have to trudge along for weeks to reach the Arctic. Now there isn't the hardship; so the kind of crucible in which character is shaped no longer exists in that form.

STOTT: In each of the chapters of *Wild Frontier*, you have a preface which gives a sense of the landscape. Although there are seven adventurers in the book, the land is a kind of overall hero.

BERTON: That was purposeful. I was very conscious in this book of telling people what the country looked like and what it felt like in the days before civilization. I think that if you are going to understand your country you have to get the feeling of what it was like in the beginning - not just the people, but the country itself. Most Canadians haven't seen all of the country; the movies have never shown it because they are all Hollywood movies. I wanted to show the enormous diversity, the physical diversity, which affects the people. The environment has a very strong influence on the kind of people we are.

STOTT: In the preface to the book you make reference to the Frederick Jackson Turner thesis about the frontier. You seem to

imply, the book seems to imply, that these kinds of people and these kinds of adventures couldn't have taken place in the United States.

BERTON: No, they couldn't. These were typically Canadian adventures because of the terrain, the times, and the peculiar makeup of Canada. The plains were empty when Steel crossed them because the Hudson's Bay Company hadn't let anybody in. That's unique to this country; it has nothing to do with the United States. The Turner thesis, that the American democracy springs out of the frontier, certainly isn't valid for a country where there was no democracy on the frontier; it was an authoritarian frontier. Many of my ideas about the frontier sprang originally out of my research on the Klondike gold rush. The theory that I have about the frontier is that the environment has a good deal of effect on the kind of people you are. Immigration and the ethnic fabric also have a lot to do with it. The presence of Scots and Loyalists had an importance in Canada out of all proportion to their numbers. The same kind of people didn't exist in the United States.

STOTT: When I was rereading the books about the War of 1812 (*The Invasion of Canada* and *Flames Across the Border*) I couldn't help thinking about the popular image of Canadian history, both those held by Americans and those held by ourselves. Did you write *Hollywood's Canada* against the background of what you've done as an historian?

BERTON: Yes, in a sense. Of course as a kid I saw the American movies, and I didn't know they weren't the truth. I actually thought that Errol Flynn could ski across the Northwest Territories. I thought they were full of mountains because the movie that he was in showed those mountains. It was only when I saw Jimmy Stewart in "The Far Country" that I began really to understand that Americans were tranferring their ideas of their West onto our West, of their frontier onto our frontier, and therefore, that they were not only giving their people a false image, but they were giving ours one too, which was worse.

STOTT: I think one of the indications of the falseness is the fact that the "Challenge of the Yukon" radio scripts were just rewrites of "The Lone Ranger."

BERTON: That's exactly what they were; they fitted. All those things were really transferring the idea of the American individual to a colonial country with a colonial background. When *Klondike* was bought, the Americans were going to use a town marshall in Dawson City. They had to move the whole thing to Skagway because I

explained to them that it wouldn't work.

STOTT: And so the serious problem is not just that there are no mountains where Hollywood puts them, but that there's a difference in cultural mentalities, a difference that you talk about at the conclusion of *Flames Across the Border*.

BERTON: That's been a theme in all my books. It's been an underlying purpose in most of my work to explain to Canadians exactly who they are and who they are not – which is just as important.

STOTT: As a child, I heard about Laura Secord and her mythical cow; in *Flames Across the Border* you indicate just how little truth there is to that famous story. It seems to me that you could perhaps be called a revisionist historian – certainly a debunker of legends.

BERTON: I don't know if that is true or not. I'm interested in telling it the way it is, because I've always found it more interesting the way it is than the way it isn't. I was astonished, when I was doing some reading for *Klondike*, to find how many people tried to gild the lily, tried to make it, in their opinion, more exciting than it was. Actually the truth is the most exciting part. One of my criticisms of the CBC production of the Louis Riel story was that they abandoned the real story, which was better than the one they invented. I think that in drama it's sometimes necessary to add things, or change, for a lot of reasons, but not just for the sake of change. Here you had a great story which was messed up by Americans – an American writer and an American producer who didn't understand the story. But I wasn't the first one to debunk the Laura Secord story; that had been done many times before.

STOTT: And yet the legend still persists.

BERTON: That's like the legend of George Washington telling his father that he couldn't tell a lie, or the one about Alfred burning the cakes. These are legends that, as Winston Churchill said, if they didn't happen, they should have. The point I made, which upset the Laura Secord chocolate people, is that what she did really had no influence on the battle; it was all confused, and nobody listened to her very much. She believed that they took her seriously – I don't think that they did.

STOTT: Do you think that the story is an attempt by Canadians to create an American style myth like the myth of Mary Rollinson or the other captivity narratives – the lone woman in the wilderness?

BERTON: We tend to use the American model for everything; we tend to judge ourselves by the American model instead of judging ourselves by a Canadian one. We have used the American model for the West. It's very hard to convince people that we didn't really have a Wild West. I once edited a book by Frank Rasky called *The Taming of the Canadian Wild West* and I had to take out 100,000 words and the word "wild" before it became a book. This cliché idea that there were shoot-em-ups just doesn't belong in this country. When we foster these ideas, we have obscured the real excitement and the real frontier history of Canada.

STOTT: You said at the close of *Flames Across the Border* words to the effect that it is not history that makes men, but men that make history.

BERTON: A lot of historians feel that we are the creatures of the time. Well, if you believe that, you don't believe in human endeavour, you don't believe in the human spirit, and I do. All my reading suggests that certain individuals do make a difference. I don't believe that Napoleon was just a product of his times, that he would have been invented if he hadn't been born. I don't think so; it would have been a different kind of person.

STOTT: Two figures that stand out in the war books are Tecumseh and Brock.

BERTON: They are the most powerful figures in the two books, there's no doubt about that, because they are interesting people. Brock, I think, was the only really good general on either side. And he was also lucky, as good generals are. Tecumseh was, I think, the most interesting Native North American we have any record of. He acts very much like an Indian at times and very much unlike an Indian at other times; in other words, he's unique. What I said in the first book is really the crux of it – the mystery of Tecumseh. How is it that he and his brothers all spring out of one family? It's really fascinating. What produced them? We don't know. The father died early; it was the mother obviously. But the myth of the mother signing her son to revenge over the grave of their father was a fiction story. So we really don't know much about the background.

STOTT: He was being legendized almost from the moment he died.

BERTON: Even before he died. There was a sneaking admiration for him on the part of his enemies; even Harrison admired him because he was such a remarkable figure. He changed history, there's no doubt about it.

STOTT: You present a picture of an awfully bungling war. Is that just this war in particular, or does the idea come from your background as a war correspondent as well?

BERTON: All wars are badly bungled. The people in charge are generally not very smart; you are lucky if you have two or three smart guys. And they're the ones who rise in the ranks, like Fitzgibbon did. At the beginning of every war, you have to get rid of all the people who fought the last one, and it takes about half the war. That's what the United States was faced with in 1812. The British had a different problem; all their good people were fighting with Wellington. They were lucky to have Brock. But military men are bunglers anyway; because they are military men, they're very rigid. In that war they had blinkers on.

STOTT: You suggest that in the War of 1812, Canada was a pawn between the United States and Great Britain; in a way the Indians were too.

BERTON: Well, we could have become Americans. If they had had smarter people than Wilkinson and Hampton in charge, they would have taken Montreal. They had 10,000 troops; there was nobody in Montreal. They could have slipped down the river, obliterated the opposition, and taken Montreal or cut off Kingston. They didn't. On the other hand, we could have taken Plattsburg if Wellington's generals had been in charge instead of Prevost. We might have owned the southern half of at least one or two of the Great Lakes, Michilimackinac, and some of the upper Mississippi. But certainly the shape of Canada comes as a result of the war. Also, the psychological shape of the country was frozen by people whose vested interest was to freeze it. I'm not saying it was a good thing, but it happened.

STOTT: In writing, you use the historian's prerogative of exercising your foreknowledge. But do you think that it was inevitable that the War of 1812 turned out the way it did?

BERTON: Well, when you're writing you do know what's going to happen. The historian knows the future and he also knows the past; and therefore to some extent he is governed by that knowledge. There is another point - everybody shapes a book. George Woodcock, in the review of *Flames Across the Border* in *Quill and Quire*, says this. He is quite right; I was not just writing a book about this war but about all wars - about the idiocies, foolishness, and horror of war. There is a great deal of horror in this book - I purposely put it in. I wanted people to understand that nineteenth century wars were not the pretty little conflicts that were depicted in nineteenth century books and paintings.

STOTT: Or as they were depicted in the quotes that you include at the front of your chapters.

BERTON: That's right. I wrote a letter to the *Globe and Mail* about this because William French thought that I'd made the book too bloody. We are used to knowing that war today is bloody. It all began after World War I, with Stephen Spender and Robert Graves. They didn't write about war as a glamorous and gallant business. *All's Quiet on the Western Front* and the Second World War books – all very realistic and factual. But nobody bothered to change the attitude that the nineteenth century writers had imposed on our ancestral memories; so we still think that nineteenth century wars were rather gallant. So people were astonished when I wrote about the War of 1812 and talked about people who had their legs cut off, died of gangrene, or typhus, or when I told about civilians' homes and fields being destroyed. This is not supposed to have happened in the nineteenth century; but people forget that all wars are like this, and it is time that they were reminded. I wanted to make it very clear that there is no such thing as a nice war. Oh, they all start nicely; they start with people shaking hands across the border, and they end up with people being very vicious and very vengeful. Revenge is the great emotion that sweeps across a country towards the end of a war. The climax of the first book is about revenge. It's a book about Indians, really. They were very badly treated and they got their revenge at Frenchtown. That was obviously the place to end the book because justice was visited on the people who were trying to destroy the Indians. Now the second book is different; I wanted to show that the war really just petered out. People got fed up, they got tired like two boxers in the fifteenth round who can't raise their arms any more. And the second idea was to point out the business of revenge. All this burning had nothing to do with the war. It happened because people got mad and because there wasn't much discipline. That is one of several undercurrents in that book.

STOTT: How do you relate the historical books to the books you did in the 60s? I think of *Comfortable Pew*, which was a sensation when it came out in 1965, and *The Smug Minority*.

BERTON: Well, I'm a writer and I write anything that comes along that I want to write. The Anglican church asked me to write a Lenten book. Then I got dropped from *Maclean's* for writing that article on sex, so I thought, oh boy, I'm going to write the book for the church – that will be a hell of a gas. It's not the kind of book I enjoy writing as much as the narrative. I always enjoy telling a story because a story gives shape; it's like a novel except that you can't make things up. It's a little bit harder for that reason.

STOTT: The idea of the railroad was something we were quite aware of as school children. Did you find that you had to beat down a lot of old myths in writing *The National Dream* and *The Last Spike*?

BERTON: It's hard to remember what myths I had about the railroad. Most people, when they heard that I was working on a book about building the CPR, thought I was crazy. They said, "Who wants to read about a railroad?" They were talking about a company history really. Morley Callaghan said, "Why are you doing that?" He apologized later; he said "Now I understand." I'm not in the business of either making myths or shattering them. It's always fun to shatter a myth and it's always fun to find a myth that's bigger than life, to find legendary people – I'm very interested in them. But the railway books were different in that they were nationalistic. The Klondike book wasn't a national book, it could be read by anyone. It wasn't particularly about Canada. It was a book about man searching for himself – about what happens during a time of stress, like war, in which you find yourself. The railway books were about nation building and it happened to be my country and I was interested in that. The first book really isn't about a railway at all – it's a social history of the 1870s really. But you have to have something to hang your hat on. You have to have a thread. If you don't have the thread, you're all over the place and if you stick to the thread, then you've got some discipline in the book. That's why a war, building a railroad, or a gold rush are very interesting; they have a beginning and an end. I had no preconceived ideas of how I might start the war book. Actually when I started I thought that it might be quite nationalistic, because we all stood up and fought the bloody Americans. It turned out that it wasn't true, so I didn't write it that way. I think it's very bad to have any preconceived ideas when you start a book because you are usually wrong. I didn't know much about the CPR when I started the railroad books either. I know a little about Van Horne, but that's about all. I don't think I shattered any myths in the railway books – none that I can think of.

STOTT: I find heroes in your books, people that you obviously admire. I think Brock is one. When I read the stories collected in *Wild Frontiers* and *My Country*, I could see people that you liked and people that you didn't like.

BERTON: Villains are more interesting than heroes, and heroes are only interesting when they are flawed. I don't write about saints. Grenfell is very interesting because he was such a maddening man. I don't think that I would ever want to work with him. But there was something about him that intrigued me, obviously something that was infectious for the people that saw him. If you want to talk about

shattering myths – Grenfell was a hero to everybody but me. He was a human being; I tried to bring him out of the pantheon of saints and put his feet on the ground.

STOTT: You seem to like people with vision, some kind of personal vision.

BERTON: I think that is probably true. I also like activists. I like Van Horne very much. He got things done and he wasn't narrow. That's one thing I like about Tecumseh; he broke out of that narrow, rigid Indian thing, which was terribly narrow. I like Brock for the same reason. The only generals I like are those who know how to write well, listen to music – in other words, who have something more than the army in them. Van Horne was really an admirable man in that he is the only tycoon I have met, in history or elsewhere, who really was interested in other things besides making money. He was a builder, but he was also a painter and a geologist. And he had a sense of humour; he was a puckish kind of person. He liked to eat and drink. Sam Steele I like very much, for other reasons. He was just a guy that you would follow into the jaws of death. He'd be sure he'd look after you – the father figure.

STOTT: Has your attitude to writing historical books changed over the years?

BERTON: I think I'm more meticulous in my research and I'm more interested in primary sources. The other thing is that as you grow, your writing should grow with you. Lister Sinclair asked me recently if writing was getting any harder for me. And I said, "No, it isn't; but I'm making it harder. I'm giving myself more problems to solve." A good example is the writing about the War of 1812. The two books are written in the historical present, in a series of scenes just like a movie. It is very difficult; the disciplines that are forced on you by that style are considerable. What happens to work with these two books I don't think would necessarily work with anything else I wrote. *Drifting Home* was a difficult book to write in a way because I was moving from past to present through three generations and three levels of writing. I try to figure out a different way of writing every book, a different style and a different way of putting it together. It usually gets harder because I have more experience.

STOTT: When you're starting a book, do you plunge into the primary material and then let the shape gradually emerge?

BERTON: Yes, I do. One should read a little bit of secondary stuff first. One of my problems on the railway books was that I didn't read

the secondary stuff early enough. But, I usually get to the primary material pretty early. You know, a lot of the time the secondary stuff is wrong – that's the problem. I wrote a piece about Almighty Voice in *Wild Frontier*. All the secondary material I'd read was junk. It was all myth – if you want a myth to shatter. It was a tough myth to shatter and people were very upset with me. But I said that the guy was a punk. Just because he was an Indian, he doesn't deserve to be mythologized. There are lots of good Indians you can venerate, but to mythologize that guy is really to insult the Indians.

STOTT: How long does it take for the shape to come; does it vary with the subject?

BERTON: It varies. It takes, I would say, about a year; it may not come until I start writing. The historical present in the war books didn't come until I had written about sixty pages of the first book. The historical present really shaped that book, but it wasn't until the second or third draft that I really got it right. I tried to bury the research in this case. So when you read the war books and you read the railroad books you can see an enormous difference in style. The railroad books are written much more like conventional history.

STOTT: Do you go from a chapter outline to a section outline to a . . .

BERTON: Right down to the last sentence. I start with one piece of paper on which I list the chapters. And I start usually with the first chapter, but not always. In *Klondike*, I wrote chapter eight first, then I wrote chapter two. In *Flames Across the Border* I wrote the overview last. The opening, describing the snowshow march from New Brunswick didn't go in until the fourth draft. But usually I start with chapter one. I get out my cards and I go to card number one; the cards are arranged in the order of the book. I make a rough plan for the first two or three pages, and then that goes right down to the sentences and phrases even, because you are picking stuff up from all over, you see.

STOTT: Are you working on a new historical book now?

BERTON: Well, I've started a book on the West, from 1896 to 1914. It's going to be quite a different kind of book for me. The immigration period, the time of putting a million people on an empty plain, which seems to me to be an interesting thing to do. It's more an essay than a book, and probably one in which secondary sources will be more important than they were in the other books. I'm going to do a lot of the primary work, too. I've just got a big stack of stuff to read on the Indians; I've got some ideas floating in my head, but I'm not sure.

STOTT: As I was preparing for this interview, I found myself thinking time and again about *The Secret World of Og*. Your adult book deals with history and social concerns, but this early book seems to contain so many of your themes – for example, the family and cross-cultural relationships. Is that a fair statement?

BERTON: In a way; but it began because I had at that time five children just growing up, and I put them into a fantasy situation to see what would happen. The children had a playhouse and I wondered what would happen if a saw appeared and a hole were suddenly cut in the floor. Of course the idea of an underground fantasy world has been done before; but I wanted to see how the characters of my kids would develop. I didn't really know what would happen in the book until it was finished. I rewrote it, and then let it sit for a year, and then rewrote it a second time. I also wrote the book because I had been reading stories to my own children and I hated the damn stories because they were patronizing and really I thought that they were boring. They didn't seem to have any sense of fun or any sense of reality. For instance, television is what children watch, but you never see this in books. Book children didn't seem to do any of the things my kids did. If they had animals, the animals were the wrong kind of animals. But more than that, the children were too good. They were too single-dimensional. Of course, that isn't true of the great classics, but the books that my children wanted to read were pretty thin. I thought, "I'm going to write a book that fathers will enjoy too. I'm going to strike a blow for parents who want to read books to children. I'm going to put some jokes in which I think kids will get but which are really there for the adults." I had an awful struggle with some librarians who objected to all the things I put into the book. But they didn't have any faith in children. They didn't believe that children have any outside view of the world or that they have any sense of humour. One person wrote in the margin, "Must the dog watch TV?" Well the dog watched TV because he saw a dog on TV and wanted to be like him. You see the book (and no critic has ever caught on to this) is about role-playing; everybody plays a role – the dog, the cat, the children, and the people they discover in Og. It's a story about make-believe. At the end, two people drop their roles; they grow up. The baby stands on his own two feet and for the first time realizes that he's not a dog. Of course, there is some symbolism there: standing on your own two feet. And the eldest daughter realizes that she's an adult. She ceases to be a child because she has gone through an experience in which she must accept responsibility.

STOTT: Although *Og* is a fantasy, it's basically reality oriented. The children have fun and strange adventures, but the idea is for them to face themselves as individuals.

BERTON: Yes. If you write fantasy, everything except the fantasy must be absolutely real, otherwise the fantasy doesn't work. The people must be totally believable; they must do real things. Children think it works, because the characters are real children. The characters have real hopes, they all want to be something; Peter wants to be a garbage man, Penny wants to be Lucy Lawless because she reads the Lucy Lawless series of books. It was satire, and kids like satire, they like you to poke fun. I enjoyed writing the book and I must say that I still get fan mail on it after twenty years – more than for any other book I've written. The new edition I like very much because Patsy, who was a little girl in the book, has grown up and gone to art school. She illustrated the new edition. All the critics said these are terrible drawings, they look like child's drawings. And that's what they're supposed to look like.

STOTT: There are some interesting kinds of cultural interaction in *Og*. These little green people – you could almost say they were like Canadians have been in the past, influenced by a foreign culture, and the kids have to set them right.

BERTON: This is true and there is also, of course, a lot of racialism; the kids fear the unknown, the stranger which is the snake people who don't exist or, if they do, they've gone. There are a lot of undertones in that book – ideas about cowardice and bravery and growing up. some of that is not really intentional. It just comes out of you when you write it and other people spot it later on, or you spot it yourself later on. You say, "Oh, my God, I didn't know I was saying that." But I was, I guess. When I was writing it, it was just a story. I think it's my best work; I think that it still has something to say.

STOTT: What did you read when you were a kid? I ask that because often a writer seems to be influenced by the stories he enjoyed when he was young.

BERTON: I read Henty, Sir Walter Scott, H.G. Wells, E. Nesbit, Andrew Lang, The Shadow Magazine, Doc Savage, Terence X. O'Leary and his War Birds, The Spider, Range Romantics, Spicey Detective, Black Mask Detective, and the backs of cornflakes boxes. I read everything I could get my hands on.

STOTT: I'm interested that you mention Mrs. Nesbit because, in a way the kids in *Og* are like her kids; they're normal kids who have strange, unusual adventures.

BERTON: I think I would say now (I didn't think of it then) that Nesbit probably had an enormous influence on the kind of book I

wrote. I remember *The Amulet* and *Five Children and It.* It was when I was eleven or twelve, those books really knocked me out; I thought they were marvelous and I still do. I also read a lot of Wells' science fiction. In the actions of some of the people in Og, there's a lot of the pulp magazine stuff; they read comic books. Of course, the Alice books influenced me.

STOTT: One final remark: you really can say the Children's Literature isn't kid stuff.

BERTON: That's right, it isn't. The best kid's stories are also adult stories. And some of the best kid stories were originally written for adults. *Gulliver's Travels* is a good example. I was delighted a few years ago to see Gore Vidal doing a piece on *The Wizard of Oz* in the New York Review of Books. He objected to the put down of Oz by the librarians - who ought to be ashamed of themselves.

STOTT: Thank you very much.

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