

Profile: Talking with Pierre Berton

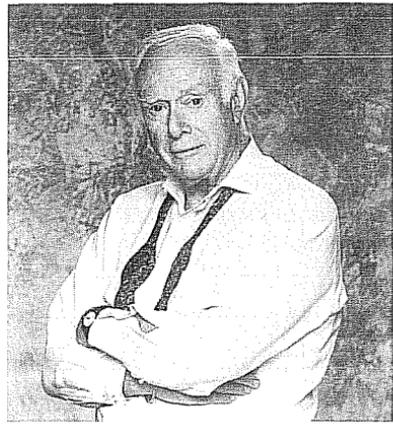


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Douglas Leighton

Résumé: Dans cette entrevue accordée à Douglas Leighton, universitaire de formation, l'écrivain Pierre Berton discute des dangers du révisionnisme politique et de la différence entre histoire populaire et histoire scientifique; le célèbre auteur résume ensuite sa carrière et présente ses projets.

Summary: In his introductory comments and interview with Pierre Berton, Douglas Leighton, an academic historian, conducts discussion on the difference between academic and popular writing, as well as on many of the revisionist and other issues confronting all historians. Berton briefly surveys his career and comments on his current projects.

Pierre Berton is probably Canada's best-known writer. Familiar to many for his participation in such television productions as "Front Page Challenge" and "The Great Debate," he has been a public figure for nearly fifty years. In the last quarter-century, his books have brought the passion and drama of Canadian history to a wide popular audience, including younger readers, through such series as McClelland and Stewart's "Adventures in Canadian History."

Born in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, in 1920 and raised in Dawson, Berton's interest in the past was first stirred by his early surroundings and by his father's participation in the Klondike gold rush. His *Klondike* began a series of historical explorations into topics such as the construction of the CPR, the War of 1812, and the era of the Great Depression. Inspired by situations where, in his own words, "large masses of people move through time and space," Berton's writing has also examined Arctic exploration and the Canadian participation in World War One.

Visible in all these works is a fascination with Canadian identity and a conviction that this country matters, that there are values here worth preserving and celebrating. No one has done more to make Canadians aware of their past and of their collective selves than Pierre Berton. He is still an enthusiastic and articulate national voice as the twentieth century nears its end. Such prodigious output — more than thirty books and countless articles — is the product of a careful and systematic approach to research and writing.

Berton has written for younger readers from an early point in his career. Many of us are familiar with his recent works on Canadian history and most will know the now-classic *The Secret World of Og*, first published in 1961 and currently in

its fourth edition. Indeed this delightful book, which features five of Berton's own children as its central characters, may be his most popular work. Many may not realize, however, that his interest in a younger readership predates the publication of *Klondike* in 1958. The Macmillan publishing firm asked Berton to write a book about the Yukon gold rush for youthful readers in their "Great Stories of Canada" series. *The Golden Trail* duly appeared and as Berton puts it in the following interview excerpts, "acted as a kind of pilot project for the major book."

Just as *The Golden Trail* led to *Klondike* forty years ago, Pierre Berton's more recent adult historical works have led to his current interest in children's literature. At his own suggestion, his publishers commenced a children's series on various episodes of the War of 1812.

Berton's success as a historical writer has sometimes led to criticism from academic historians. They have dismissed his use of the present tense in the two volumes on the War of 1812, argued over the veracity of some of his sources, suggested that he is too uncritical of older versions of the past, and vehemently protested his preference for narrative history rather than more intellectually demanding analytic approaches. Here, perhaps, lies the nub of the tension between academic and popular practitioners of the historian's craft. Some of these criticisms have merit, but others seem motivated by jealousies created in part by Berton's commercial success.

Berton's own response to his academic critics is surprisingly positive. He feels that there is a long tradition of excellent academic history in Canada, but a much shorter one of credible popular or narrative history. As he sees it, academic historians and popular historians play different, but complementary, roles in the process of understanding the past.

Berton is especially adamant about the influence of issues such as political correctness and appropriation of voice. He argues that the popular historian's function is to portray the past as accurately and sensitively as possible, not to recreate it in some idealized form acceptable to the ideologies of the present. He believes that history should enlighten, inform and entertain its readers. Through study of the past, one can obtain a greater sense of membership in an evolving human community, find individual inspiration and awaken new interests. For younger and mature readers alike, Berton's descriptions and insights have opened doorways that lead to enthusiastic rediscoveries of the Canadian past.

LEIGHTON: What has drawn you to write history? I was looking at your long list of books published since 1953 and the pattern seems to be that there is more social commentary in the '50s and '60s, but more and more history titles in the '60s and after.

BERTON: That's probably true. I got started in history because I wrote my book on the Klondike Gold Rush. I wrote that book not because I was interested in history, but because I come from the Klondike and my father was in the gold

rush. So it occurred to me that that would make a good story and I enjoyed writing it very much. I decided I liked writing books where large masses of people move through time and space. That has been true of most of my books of history. It was true of the War of 1812 — and all of them actually.

LEIGHTON: What role did the Centennial series of the *Weekend Magazine* play in your growing interest in writing about history?

BERTON: Well, I was involved in that, but what really got me interested was before that when we invented the *Maclean* “Flashback” series of popular historical articles. We did about 50 or 60 of them. What was an accident — I got in a piece about a woman ... and crossing a tight-rope, and I liked it very much — didn’t fit into our pattern so we invented the flashback just to accommodate that one article, and then sought out more.

LEIGHTON: It grew like Topsy at that stage?

BERTON: We used the criterion that the subject should be just past forgetfulness, just before people remembered anything and secondly that they should give some feeling of the times — that there should be a texture ... a flavour to them. And I adopted that method when I wrote *Klondike*.

LEIGHTON: You write popular history for large audiences. Do you aim for any specific kind of impact?

BERTON: I don’t have any particular crusade in mind when I write a book. I write the kind of book that I would read if I saw it in the window of a bookstore. That’s the way I buy books, and I buy that kind of book a lot. So I figured if it interests me, then maybe it would interest a lot of other people.

One of the problems with academic historians is the fact that they know so much. They dismiss some stories because they have heard them so often that they’re old stuff, but the average guy hasn’t heard them at all. One of the critiques of my books has always been that there is nothing new in the books, but for the average person almost everything is new.

LEIGHTON: About academic historians....

BERTON: We have some very good ones. The great thing in this country is that we have had a long tradition of academic excellence in history. However, we haven’t had a long history of popular, or what I call “narrative” history. Scholarly history doesn’t look at the story from a story point of view; it looks at it from an analytical point of view. My books really do have quite a bit of analysis in them, but it’s hidden. I don’t suddenly say “now we are going to have some analysis,” and throw in a big chunk of it. I slip it in very quietly so no one will notice it. But it is there.

LEIGHTON: You have spent a lot of time, particularly lately, writing for young people.

BERTON: My first book for young people was before *Klondike*. It was a book about the gold rush called *The Golden Trail* for Macmillan in their “Great Stories of Canada Series.” I was asked to write it. That got me interested and acted as a kind of pilot project for the major book.

LEIGHTON: What caused you to keep writing for young people?

BERTON: I had all this material and it just seemed to me that I should be using it in a different way. I went to my publisher and suggested to him a series on the War of 1812 battles. He suggested that I expand it, which I did, and it seemed to me that I was writing the same thing for a different audience. When I write some of my books for the States, I change them. This is especially true of the railway books. I reduce them to a shorter length, picking a section of the story which makes a book and then abridge it.

LEIGHTON: You have to keep the audience in mind —

BERTON: That's right. These are for twelve-year-olds, approximately. *The World of Og* was for younger kids.

LEIGHTON: Do you find that your research methods work differently for different ages?

BERTON: I don't treat the kids any different than the adults. What I do is leave out bigger words. I keep the sentences and paragraphs shorter and try to move the story along faster. I cut out all the side issues. There's a single story line from start to finish and I try to give a good opening.

LEIGHTON: One of your reviewers complimented you because you never talk down to your younger readers.

BERTON: You can't do that. No! No! That kind of book makes me very angry. I tell the story just as I would tell it to an adult, but simplify it.

LEIGHTON: What are the joys and difficulties of writing for young people?

BERTON: I write because I enjoy it. I've always written. I wrote as a kid. I wrote in high school and college. I wrote for the Boy Scouts. I've always written. I now do for money what I used to do for nothing. I like the creative act of writing. I work in a non-fiction field which is confining because you can't make anything up. This is a challenge. I often get criticized by the critics for making things up because they don't believe it happened.... Somebody once said, "how would Berton know what Lord Dufferin was thinking at the time of the contract debate on the CPR?" I wrote him back and said, "well, I know what he was thinking because he wrote a letter home saying that was what he was thinking."

LEIGHTON: Donald Creighton begins one of his paragraphs on John A. Macdonald saying that he was tired now, and someone asked how he knew that. In fact, there is a letter from Macdonald saying that he is feeling kind of down at that stage.

BERTON: I don't believe in making anything up. I believe you've got to be very careful. Careful with two things: one is trying to make the story better than it was — which usually makes it worse. Most of the books on the Klondike were ruined by the writer trying to go too far. Sometimes it is better to hold back. And the other thing is to be very wary of oral history — you've got to use it sometimes if there's no documentation, but people forget.

LEIGHTON: Yes. Academic historians sometimes are very concerned about things like different interpretations and different perspectives like revisionism.

We are living in an age when a lot of history is undergoing revision....

BERTON: Some of mine is revisionist too....

LEIGHTON: Does this revisionism influence you when you are writing for young people?

BERTON: Young people are not interested in revisionist history. That's for later on. What they are interested in is a recitation of events as interesting as we can make it. For young readers, I say what seems to have happened, and sometimes I have to say that there are three or four versions of this story. I certainly do that in my adult books, but not so often in the juvenile ones.

LEIGHTON: There's been a real change. When I was an undergraduate, our history courses were taught pretty much that way and historiography or whatever was saved for graduate school. And now it seems to be more and more a part of the undergraduate curriculum.

BERTON: There is no use telling a young reader that this is revisionist if they don't know the original source. Therefore, you've got to be careful; you have to say that people have always said this to be true, but actually it wasn't true, or something like that. I haven't come across too much of that in the writing for juveniles.

LEIGHTON: Do you find yourself reacting to or being influenced by areas that might be loosely termed "politically correct" ones: talk about cultural imperialism and appropriation of voice and so on?

BERTON: I pay no attention to that nonsense whatsoever. I refuse to shoulder the guilt of history. I'm not going to do that. Years ago, my mother's book — which I own copyright to — was used for a student book and they started changing things. They changed an "Indian runner" to a "Native runner." I wrote and said, "Just a moment — I'm a native, I was born in this country and so were six generations before me." I was taught to be specific. "Indian runner" is at least more specific than "Native runner," and if I knew which band he belonged to I would put that in, too, but you don't always know. They did several things like that. I said, "No. If you are going to re-publish it, I want it published the way it was originally written." They finally buckled under, but there is an awful lot of that going on. And I deplore it.

LEIGHTON: I think there is a certain danger in this changing. It is causing a lot of comments in the academic circles I work in....

About your work methods: When you are working on a book do you set yourself a goal of so many hours a day? Do you work best in the morning or in the afternoon?

BERTON: I work best in the morning, but I generally work all day. The work isn't the writing. That's typing and the easy part. The first thing I do is decide on a subject. I hope it's a subject that something new can be said about it, or which hasn't really been looked at from my point of view before. I choose subjects which are big subjects — large numbers of people moving through time and space. The biggest subject was *The Arctic Grail*, which covers a century.

That is my longest and I think my best book. Then I talk to my researcher. My research assistant and I sit down, and I say, "Do you want to work on this book"? If she says "no," then we move to a subject with which we're both compatible. I wanted to do William Lyon Mackenzie's revolution. And she said that she had been reading these handwritten letters for so long that she was fed up with it, and she hated Mackenzie, thought him a real son of a bitch. I said, "Well, *that* would be the story...."

LEIGHTON: I empathize with her. I did a lot of research on the early nineteenth century and I remember feeling a great surge of relief when the typewriter came in during the 1880s.

BERTON: John A. Macdonald wouldn't use a typewriter except for formal letters. And Alexander Mackenzie was so cheap he would write on both sides of the paper and upside down, and backwards. It was awful! Generally, my researcher has considerable enthusiasm; she knows how I think and I know how she thinks. We think alike, so when I suggest a subject, we generally agree.

LEIGHTON: It's great to have a collaboration like that.

BERTON: We have to. And then, for instance, I was going to do a book on the sixties, in Canada. We did a lot of research on the decade and she came to me and said she thought this was an awkward book to do. We talked awhile and then I said, "Let's do 1967." That was the centennial year. That was probably the last year the country was together — a pivotal year — so we are doing that. We are also working on a couple of other books....

We start the research, and then make a kind of a schedule, not for writing the book, but for what happened. We do it in chronology. And then we look at some of the secondary sources to get a feel for it. Then we research the primary sources. Thank God for two things — interlibrary loan and the xerox machine! Before *these* came in...! The railway books were hard work and so was *Klondike*. I did all my own research on *Klondike*. And for the railway books, I had a part-time helper but it was difficult. Now it's much easier. She gets stuff in, and I don't have to leave my office or house, and we meet once a week and talk on the telephone three or four times a week. And she sends me stuff and I keep asking for more, and for specific things that I want, and she makes suggestions. I try to keep the research moving and me moving with it. I have to file the research and I have a certain way of doing that — really under subjects or chapter headings in really huge loose-leaf books. And I make a card index of everything I want....

LEIGHTON: Has the computer affected you?

BERTON: No, I don't use one. I use a typewriter. But the books are tabbed so that I can find anything from the card index and the tab. I am working on a book now on the great lakes, and I just look up the shipwrecks of the different ships, and once all that's done I really have a plan for the book, and that is the card index, and I start writing. I try to do the first draft just as quickly as possible. I don't care about literary style or anything — just the order.

LEIGHTON: Do you include *everything* in that draft?

BERTON: During that period there is a lot more research to be done. I am very visual.... I have to see everything. If I can't see it, and there's a space missing, then I have to see what that space is.

LEIGHTON: On average, how many drafts would it take before you have a final version that you're happy with?

BERTON: Three or four, but then some texts are written 20 times and some are only written two times. But the book goes through four typescripts usually. And then there are a lot of inserts and things. That's the way the computer helps. Because when you reach the third draft what you are doing is rewriting certain sections and putting them on the computer. I don't do that — my secretary does it.

LEIGHTON: What is the next book we are going to see?

BERTON: I have been involved the last several months with six books. Three of them are done. My memoirs are done. They are not really memoirs ... they look at over half the century. I've done another book in the children's series, on the assault on Montreal — the battle of Chrysler's Farm in Chateaugay. I've anthologized myself, in a book called *Farewell to the Twentieth Century* — satirical pieces over the last 20 years, different aspects of our times. I am in the middle of writing the text and then we'll do the pictures after ... then a book on the Great Lakes.

I'm also doing a little children's book for children between three and six or seven — the extraordinary adventures of a cat, which are true, and are illustrated by my daughter. But we also have pictures of the cat. She was picked up by a hawk who flew off. And then I'm doing the 1967 book, and we have done some of the research for that. That's my schedule.... What else would I do? I don't watch television, so I've got all the time in the world to write!

LEIGHTON: Thanks so much. There's much for us to look forward to!

Douglas Leighton is currently chair of the History Department at Huron College in London, Ontario, where he teaches courses in Canadian history, native-white relations and the history of the automobile. His articles and book reviews have appeared in Ontario History, The Dictionary of Canadian Biography, The Canadian Historical Review and other journals. He interviewed Pierre Berton by telephone in July 1995.