

Canadians have difficulty defining their country but they try. Particularly in recent years, there has been a spate of such in books and pictures. In this issue Canada Today/D'Aujourd'hui will try to present a five-foot book shelf in which readers can seek their own definitions. We will start with the railroad.

[THROUGH THE HEART]

The Last Spike, The Great Railway, 1881-1885, by Pierre Berton, McClelland and Stewart Limited.

Mr. Berton may be Canada's best known journalist. His book broke first season sales records with over 100,000 copies sold between September and December, 1971. He lives at Kleinburg, Ontario, near Toronto, and is the father of seven children. He writes with the helter-skelter rush with which Canada built its railroads. In *The Last Spike* he writes of The Canadian Pacific as if it were a natural force, a national religion and an emotional spree. It was all those things. Canada, modern Canada, was built on its roadbed. The plains were empty until the steel rails approached and then through greedy magic the cities suddenly sprang up, Sudbury, Brandon, Regina, Calgary, Revelstoke and Vancouver. There was a crowd of men behind all this, bearded 19th Century men, bigger than life. One was William Van Horne, an emigre from the United States who became more Canadian than the beaver, which he resembled—hairy, ebullient and indefatigable.

In 1885 Louis Riel and his adjutant Gabriel Dumont led the Metis, half Indian, half French, in revolt in Saskatchewan. They were joined by the Cree Chiefs, Big Bear and Poundmaker. Canada had no army. It had scattered groups of militia and the Queen's Own Rifles. It had no unity. (The Halifax merchants said they would fire any clerks who went off to fight.) It had the scattered beginning of the Canadian Pacific, running west like a severed snake to Qu'Appelle. The builders were almost out of money. Van Horne announced exuberantly that the CP would carry the militia all the way, mostly by rail, sometimes by sleigh, and occasionally by foot:

"As the trains rolled westward and the cheering faded, the men from the cities, farms and fishing villages of the East began to glimpse the rough face of the new Canada and comprehend for the first time the real dimensions of the nation. Out of North Bay the land stretched off to the grey horizon, barren and desolate, the slender spruce rising in a ragged patchwork from the lifeless rock. The railway was completed for passenger traffic only to Biscotasing. Here the troops encountered the first of the CPR construction towns, a hard-drinking, backwoods village of some hundred huts and log cabins interspersed with mercantile tents all decked out for the occasion with Union Jacks and bunting. Between

the canvas pool halls and shops (some bearing crude signs reading 'Selling Off At Cost') were the inevitable blind pigs. On April 1, the day the Queen's Own arrived at Biscotasing, the police had just destroyed five hundred gallons of illicit whiskey. The first gap in the line began near Dog Lake. . . . The men, packed tightly in groups of eight in sleighs provided by the construction company set off behind teams of horses down the uncompleted right of way. At every unbridged ravine and unfilled cut the sleighs were forced off the graded surface, sometimes for several miles and onto the tote road, a roller coaster path that cut through the forests, ran over stumps and windfalls and rocks, dipped up and down the gorges and wound through seemingly impassable stretches of tightly packed trees. In some places the sleighs encountered boulders seven or eight feet high; in others they pitched into holes as deep as graves—the occupants flung over the dashboards and into the streaming haunches of the terrified horses. . . . One sleigh carrying members of the 65th overturned no fewer than thirteen times in the forty miles between Dog Lake and the end of the track at Birch Lake. Men already half frozen in the twenty degree below weather were hurled out and submerged in six feet of powdery snow. . . . Generally this trip was made by night when the sun was down and the weather cold enough to prevent the snow from turning to slush. The men crouched in the bottoms of the sleighs, wrapped in their greatcoats and covered with robes and blankets; but nothing could keep out the cold. To prevent themselves from freezing, officer and men would leap from the careening sleighs and trot alongside in an attempt to restore circulation."

The worst was yet to come. Beyond Dog Lake was Desolation Camp.

"The 10th Royal Grenadiers arrived at Desolation Camp at five one morning after a sleigh journey that had begun at eight the previous evening. There were no trains available to take them farther and so they endured a wait of seventeen hours. They did not even have the warmth of a fire to greet them. Tumbling out of the sleighs like ghosts—for the falling snow had covered them completely—they tried to huddle in the tent through whose several apertures bitter drafts blew in every direction. . . ."

The worst was still yet to come. They traveled by flat cars.

"In these cars, sleep again was all but impossible. . . . The cars were the same gravel cars