



*As every schoolchild knows, the time is 1885 and the place is Craigellachie in the mountains of British Columbia . . . Do they realize, as the shutter closes, that this is destined to be the most famous photograph ever taken in Canada? - Pierre Berton, *The Last Spike*.*

# THE LAST SPIKE

The Last Spike, The Great Railway 1881 - 1885

by Pierre Berton

McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1971

reviewed by Sheelagh Russell

Since its September 11th date of publication, with a first printing of 65,000 copies, Pierre Berton's latest book seems to be well on its way to another national success. The Last Spike has been greeted with the kind of critical acclaim that visits each of Berton's ventures into the telling of Canada's story.

The five hundred page account, which costs \$10, has been called "the blockbuster of the Fall publishing season". An account of the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway between the years 1881 and 1885 it continues the excitement portrayed in Berton's earlier volume in the C.P.R. story "The National Dream."

The Last Spike also seems destined to follow the success of the National Dream, now going into its sixth printing, which after forty-four weeks still tops the bestseller list for non-fiction in Canada. This second volume has been named as a Fall selection for The Book-Of-The-Month Club.

A fast-moving, action-packed story, which reads like a novel, The Last Spike is filled from cover to cover with the intrigues, trail-blazing courage, and political maneuvering that has characterized Canadian History. Berton describes the men and events that have forged Canada into one nation in one of the most turbulent periods of its life.

From such sources as unpublished manuscripts, diaries, letters, public documents and newspapers, Berton has constructed the story of the laying of 2000 miles of steel in five years, just one-half the time agreed upon in the

contract. We learn how the railway faced bankruptcy, and was saved by the "foolhardiness" of George Stephen and Donald Smith, C.P.R. executives who place their personal fortunes on the line. We speculate as William Van Horne averts final disaster and proves the worth of the railway by rushing over it 3000 troops to quell the Riel Rebellion.

The scenes are constantly shifting, from Montreal to Lake Superior to the Rockies and the book gives an account of the early days of a number of cities: Sudbury, Brandon, Regina, Calgary, Revelstoke and Vancouver, as well as of the land boom of Winnipeg in 1881-82.

But it is the men who dominate the saga, the land sharks, the construction geniuses, the politicians and the entrepreneurs, all combining a certain amount of shrewdness with a good measure of downright obstinacy. Men like Macdonald, whom Berton describes in 1885:

"He was a Canadian institution. There were many at that birthday celebration in Montreal who were grandparents, yet could not remember a time when Macdonald had not been in politics. The reports of his imminent retirement through illness, fatigue, incompetence, scandal, or political manoeuvre had appeared regularly in the press for all of the railway's days. His suicide had been rumored, his death predicted, his obituary set in type ready for the presses to roll; but Macdonald had outlasted one generation of critics and spawned a second"

And men like Van Horne:

"He was a true Renaissance man, the most engaging and versatile immigrant that Canada ever enticed across its borders and one of the few larger-than-life figures in the Canadian story. It is interesting to speculate on what he might have been in another era: a prince of the Church in the Middle Ages? the ruler of a dukedom in the sixteenth century? a Roman conqueror? In any age Van Horne would have fitted his times exactly."

The Last Spike, readable without recourse to the earlier book, is available either in a separate volume or in a boxed set with The National Dream. One indication of its hopes for success is the fact that a new cocktail has been dedicated to it.

The Last Spike Cocktail, a breakfast cocktail, was invented by bartender Claude Brossard of Toronto's Celebrity Club, and "designed to enliven dank mornings like that of November 7th, 1885 when Donald A. Smith drove in the last spike of the C.P.R. in the Rockies." The recipe follows:

To 4 oz. of Champagne (or sparkling white wine)

Add 1/3 oz. of Curacao

2/3 oz. of Cognac

dash of Orange bitters

a slice of fresh orange.

Stir gently and briefly.

It may also be served as a Last Spike cooler by adding an equal quantity of soda water to the cocktail.