

Berton on the Kent Commission, writing

Pierre Berton — Canadian historian, social critic (*The Comfortable Pew*, *The Smug Minority*), and former newsman for the *Toronto Star*, *Macleans*, the *Vancouver Sun* and the University of BC's *Ubysses* — was in Edmonton last week speaking to the Men's and Women's Canadian Club about the War of 1812, "the war that made us," which is also the subject of his last two books, the second volume of which (*Flames Across the Border*) has just been released. Gateway Arts Editor Jens Andersen interviewed him in his MacDonald Hotel suite.

Gateway: There was an article in the *Varsity* (the University of Toronto student newspaper) Oct. 7 that mentioned you talking about the Canadian character.... I should get the exact quote here.... "Writers in Canada need not fear censorship, (Berton) declared, because Canadians are terrified of the power of writers."

Berton: What's that? (reads paper) Whatever I said, he got it wrong. Of course, that's nothing new.

Gateway: You must have been saying something....

Berton: Well, I don't think there's much chance of censoring newspapers here, because newspapers themselves are powerful: that's what I meant. I don't see any way we could have censorship of the press or books. We have it in movies....

In a democracy it's very difficult to impose this kind of censorship. You couldn't do it here, but you couldn't do it in the States or England either. There's no way you can have censorship in a parliamentary democracy.

Gateway: You've often said things that have gotten people riled at you, like your article about Vancouver....

Berton:twenty years ago. Yes, they said they had the most beautiful city in the world. I said, no, that's not true — they have the most beautiful setting in the world. But they didn't plant the mountains themselves from seed, and they buggered a lot of the setting. I said that the most beautiful city arguably was Regina, because it had taken nothing — a flat piece of prairie — and made something out of it.

Gateway: Do you enjoy stirring people up like that?

Berton: Not particularly. I just say what I think. I don't go around trying to stir up people unless it's something I believe very strongly in.

Gateway: Your book *The Comfortable Pew* was probably the most controversial thing you've written, would you say?

Berton: Probably.

Gateway: Were you surprised by the reaction to it?

Berton: I was surprised that it sold so well. I thought there would be a lot of reaction to it. There was at the time; it's all past history now.

Gateway: I dug up this book (*Just Think, Mr. Berton (A little harder)*) by Ted Byfield, present publisher of the *Alberta Report*, written in 1965). It's actually a reply to *The Comfortable Pew*. You've heard of Ted Byfield?

Berton: Oh yes, I know the book well. The odd thing about that was: his book was published in the United States before my book was published there. It must have been very confusing for people who bought it, because they had bought a book which was replying to a book they couldn't buy.

I think it helped sell my book in the States; it sold very well in the States.

Gateway: Do you still write any columns for newspapers?

Berton: No, I write a column for *Canadian Heritage Magazine*, because I'm Chairman of the Board of Heritage Canada Foundation, a charitable foundation trying to save the historic buildings of the country, including this one (the MacDonald Hotel) and the Tegler Building.

Gateway: Do you miss column writing at all, or newspaper writing?

Berton: Sometimes I do, but not very often.

Gateway: You are doing a book now on the unemployed march on Ottawa in 1935?

Berton: No. I was, but I decided not to. I'm going to do a book on the prairies between 1896 and 1914 — the immigration era. I just started doing some research on it this fall. It's still two or three years away.

Gateway: So the 1935 book is shelved?

Berton: I'm not going to do it.

Gateway: At all?

Berton: It isn't a book: not enough material. At least not for me. Somebody else can do it.

"Allan Fotheringham is the first thing I read in Maclean's."

Gateway: Do you keep tabs on other columnists today, say Alan Fotheringham?

Berton: Oh I read them all, sure. I know most of them.

Gateway: Do you like Alan Fotheringham?

Berton: Yeah, I think he's pretty good actually. His column is the first thing I read in *Macleans*.

Gateway: Barbara Amiel?

Berton: Yeah, she's a pretty good writer. I don't agree with her, but she's not too bad. Writes well.

"The public, I think, really wants some kind of watchdog over the press, and I think they should have one."

Gateway: Do you have any thoughts on the Kent Commission Report?

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Berton: I agree with most of it; it makes a lot of sense....proven by the fact that the entire newspaper business in Canada said the same thing when it came out: they all attacked it and misinterpreted it totally, in my opinion. Began shouting about freedom of the press, which they always shout about any time anybody tries to get the minimum wage for newsboys.

They shout that too often. The public, I think, really wants some kind of watchdog over the press, and I think they should have one.

Gateway: Aren't the proposals for the Press Rights Panel sort of vague, like as to who it will be comprised of?

Berton: No. They say the newspaper appoints two or three people, the reporters elect two or three people and the rest are appointed from the public. I don't think that's terribly vague.

The press isn't under any compulsion to do anything the panel says. I don't know what the papers are screaming and whimpering about.

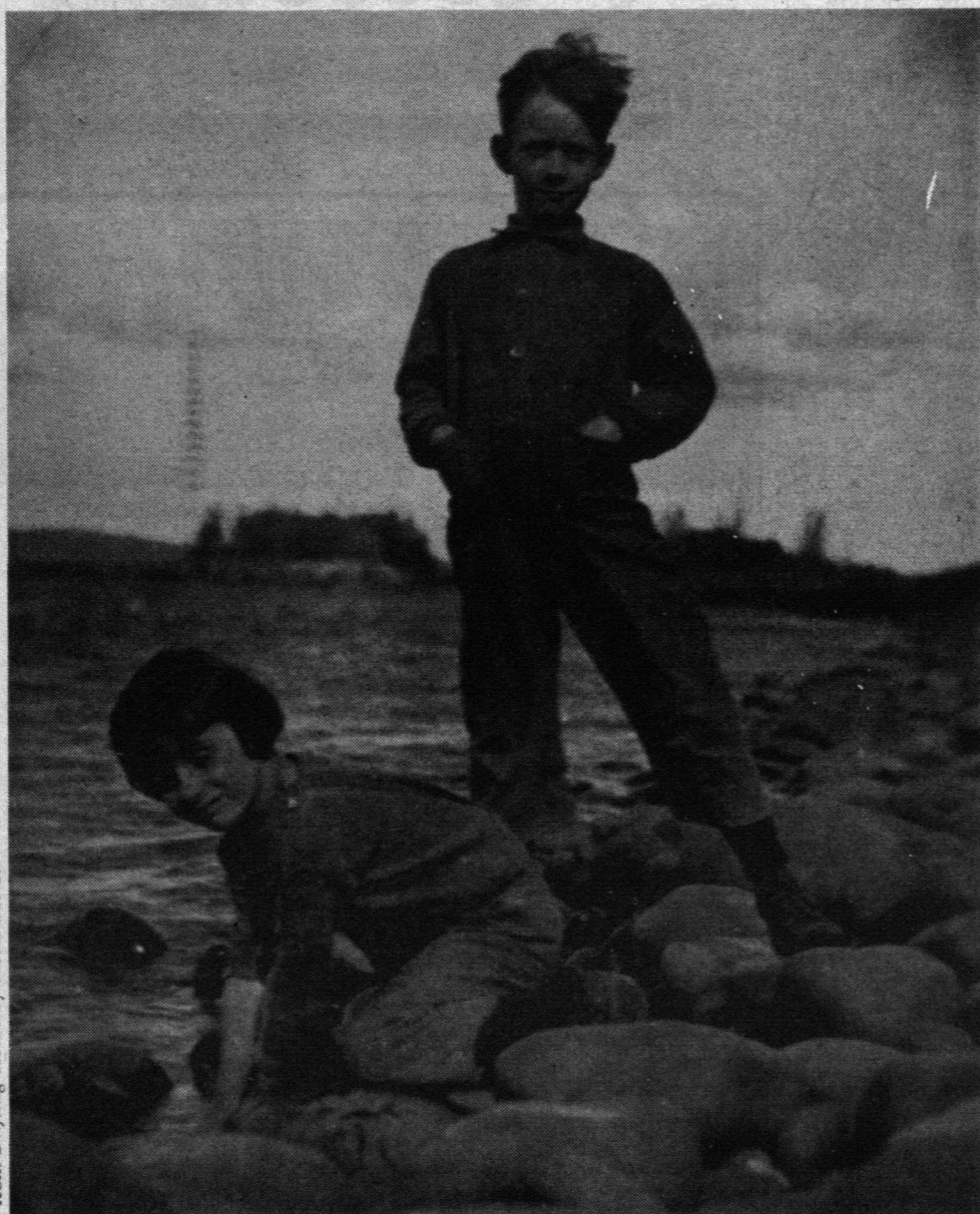
Gateway: You're thinking of the individual newspaper panels. I was thinking of the one that would be in charge of divestments.

Berton: That's up to government legislation.

Gateway: But their terms are fairly broad. Like, they can make exceptions in quite a few cases. Don't you think that leaves room open for intimidation?

Berton: Oh, I don't think a thing like that can be rigidly-arrived-at rules.

I don't know what the Thomson papers are screaming about, saying they're going to ruin the *Globe and Mail*; the *Globe and Mail* would be a lot better on its own. It's making lots of money; it doesn't need the Thomson papers. They're the worst papers in the country. They're terrible.



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