

Interlude:

A poet, a newsman

Bryon Johnson

Bruce Gates

It was the early fall of 1938, and war was impending as Hitler's troops prepared to march on the Sudetenland. Not far away in the Czech border town of Breclav, an impressionable nine-year-old boy lived comfortably among the fine literature and music of a well-to-do family. But that comfort and security was shattered by the Nazi invasion, as the family was forced to flee the approaching tanks. The flight from the homeland finally ended in 1940 when the grateful family arrived in Canada as immigrant farmers and settled near Burlington.

Nineteen-eighty and the seventh-floor office of *Maclean's* are far removed from Breclav and the Nazi invasion. And that nine-year-old boy — who had watched in a mixture of awe and terror as his home town was being invaded; who helped his parents on the family farm in their new country; who learned English in six weeks as a wartime boarder at Upper Canada College — is now the editor of Canada's *Weekly Newsmagazine*.

Peter C. Newman: student laureate, journalist, man of letters, author. His office walls are adorned with the covers of every *Maclean's* since it became a newsmagazine on 6 October 1975.

Newman leans back in his chair and takes a long, contemplative draw on the pipe that has become a trademark: "I can't honestly say that I've ever regretted writing something, or not enjoyed writing something. It's a very exhilarating exercise for me to write. I do it at four o'clock every morning."

"There sits the journalist, ever the outsider, hunched over, discomfited, suspect, fascinated and feverishly scribbling. It's a mad trade and I love it."

Newman said this in 1973. But his first love is writing his books. "*Renegade in Power* (1963) was

the most exciting book because it was the first book to try to look at a living politician in a real way," he says. "Before that, politicians had always been written about posthumously and just sort of unrealistically praised."

That book, which was about the Diefenbaker years, became an all-time Canadian political bestseller. And his other political book, *The Distemper of Our Times* (1968), about the Pearson years, became a Book of the Month Club selection.

In all, Newman has written six books, including the all-time Canadian bestseller, *The Canadian Establishment, Volume 1*. And he has two more planned: "I'm doing the second volume of *The Canadian Establishment* and I'm doing a history of *Maclean's* which is due out this fall," he reveals. The *Maclean's* book is for the magazine's 75th anniversary.

But before the books, before *Maclean's*, the *Toronto Star*, and the *Financial Post*, there was the University of Toronto and that first byline in the *Varsity*.

"It was the biggest thrill I ever had," he recalls of his initial article, which was a poem called "Interlude". It won second prize in an annual poetry contest. "I didn't publish much poetry but I wrote a lot of it."

Perhaps if the Faculty of Mining Engineering hadn't been being stationed in Ajax, Ont., Newman might have become a poet or an engineer. For journalism wasn't even in his stars at the time. But Ajax helped to change all that for him: "There wasn't much to do there — nothing to do — so I started keeping notes of what was going on and sent them into the *Varsity*, and they published them. And that's how it got started."

From his first story for the *Financial Post* about dog food ("it was a big deal then because it was a new thing for manufacturers to actually make dog food"),

Newman developed his own style of writing — a "new journalism" type of approach that applies the creative principles of novel and poetry writing to the more prosaic style of a standard news report. He was one of the first to add color to business writing.

"Yeah, I think if you want to put a label on it...that's really part of what I did was introduce new journalism into Canadian politics," he says. "It's hard to imagine now, I know, but before, people just sort of wrote down what politicians said and that was it. Nobody ever used adjectives on them, or said they were full of hot air, but of course now that's standard practice."

Newman has proven that creativity belongs in journalism, and he has shown how resourcefulness can reap rewards farther down the road:

"When I was at the *Financial Post* (1951-1955), I joined as the most junior of juniors. For the first year and a half, all I did was review annual reports. Every company, every annual report, I had to summarize — which I truly believe is the most boring job in the world.

"And yet, you know, twenty years later I could write *The Canadian Establishment*. And I knew the whole anatomy of Canadian business elite from summarizing those annual reports. I knew what every company did, who owned it...so you know, it came in useful."

Sitting back in his editor's chair, arms behind his head, legs crossed and stretched out underneath the circular table, he looks like one of the Canadian Establishment.

"It's more fun to write about

Newman: 'It's a mad trade and I love it.'



losers than winners. I find I identify with politicians who lose elections, and businessmen overthrown in boardrooms. I try to reconstruct the battles that destroyed them."

His politics is that of a nationalist, not that of a partisan. "I don't think that journalists should be partisan," he argues. "I think that a journalist should be neutral in a sense that he's against everybody who's in power. That's the function of journalism: to act as a vanguard within the democratic system. We're not being pretentious about it."

His speech is low-key, in the analytical tones of a professor, which he is, on a part-time basis, at York.

"I love it," he smiles. "With one exception — the drive out to York. By the time you pass the last McDonald's your soul is destroy-

ed. But apart from that I find the faculty full of exciting intellects, and I find the students extremely intelligent and courteous. On the whole it's been a great experience, and I want to do it again."

From his wide-ranging experiences as a young boy in Czechoslovakia, a gold miner in northern Quebec, an assistant magician in Eaton's Toytown, and a lieutenant for the Royal Canadian Navy reserve, there must be plenty of material for Newman to write that proverbial Great Canadian Novel.

"No. For one thing I think it has already been written, but also, I'm not... ah..." A fleeting smile flickers across his face. "What this country doesn't need is one more bad novel. And anyway I enjoy writing the books I write even better."

\$5.00 for 75 min. of your Time

Women undergraduates aged 19 to 25 years who subscribe to a lifestyle of minimal physical exertion please phone:

Susan Kirkland
667-2289

for an appointment.

To receive your \$5.00 the task is:

- 1) A simple slow 3-6 min. step test to music — (A maximum of 6 min. and you quit if you tire beforehand).
- 2) Complete three simple questionnaires.

**"Check VD.
For information
concerning
venereal disease
call**

367-7400 anytime."

Giant Pre-inventory Sale
at the Bookstore, Central Square
Monday, March 31 to Tuesday, April 15 inclusive

20% OFF

on Trade Books (Books coded Dept. 4 only), excepting
Trade Books whose prices have been reduced
substantially already

DON'T MISS THIS FANTASTIC SALE!

Beautiful Bargains



LONDON

May Departures

from **\$419**

June Departures

from **\$429**

One-Way Departures

from **\$275**

Any Departure...

**No one undersells CUTS,
we guarantee it.**

for more information contact the Student Federation office or

**Canadian Universities
Travel Services Limited**

44 St. George St., Toronto • 979-2604