



## Who the hell is Pierre Berton?

BY SALLY THOMAS

Pierre Berton's career in journalism has lasted well over 50 years. He has written 44 books, many of which are about Canadian history. He appeared on *Front Page Challenge* on the CBC for 35 years. He has also received awards and accolades time and again for his work.

Pierre Berton is also very opinionated. His view of the country, politics and his work are well voiced — and well defended.

Last week Berton was in town to promote his new book, *Seascapes*, a glossy album that looks at Canadian coasts of the Pacific, Atlantic and Arctic oceans. But his conversation deviated from the book to include politics, culture and the Canadian identity.

Berton has always found it necessary to voice his opinion on Canadian politics. Last week was no exception.

"It's still being run by incompetents," Berton said of our nation's government. "Politics in this country has been drab and when it hasn't been drab it hasn't been very good."

But the author does admire many of Canada's past politicians. Berton named several people whom he thought were the great Prime Ministers and men of this century. But in his discussion he failed to mention any women. Berton feels that women haven't played a major role in Canadian politics.

"Maybe a lot of them at the turn of the century, but they have not been important until recently because they didn't get the vote. But

after having got the vote they haven't made much use of it."

Berton went on to discuss the state of Canadian culture today and the threat of Americanization. He believes that Americanization is a tide we can't hold back because we're living in a shadow of an "enormous and vibrant country".

"A lot of Canadians don't understand that we're not like Americans,"

Berton said, alluding to differing geographic and cultural phenomenons in Canada.

"No one else has a Canadian Shield or an Arctic and that creates a different kind of people."

Despite our inherent differences, American influences pervade our culture everywhere.

For instance, the CBC is Canada's major media outlet, but many of its popular programs are American. Berton says that the CBC hasn't got the money to promote Canadian culture.

"I think the government has been very foolish in taking the one element in our country that is universal — our own which is

unique and tied up with our culture — and letting it starve."

He did say that Canadian culture has been considered fragile for awhile. Perhaps that's because we don't have an identity.

The Canadian identity is something that historians have debated over for years, perhaps since Confederation. Universities offer courses that only study the

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identity of Canada. But what has shaped the identity? Do we even have one defining aspect of our identity? Some historians feel that we are who we are because of the way we settled the west, or the way we assembled the country.

Berton either didn't understand or didn't endorse these theories.

To him, the Canadian identity is "being born and raised in Canada".

"Either you're Canadian or you're not," Berton said. He doesn't think there needs to be any discussion about the Canadian identity. According to Berton, a Canadian is simply someone who lives in this country.

But the reason Berton was in town was to discuss his new book.

In *Seascapes*, Berton talks about Canada's three coasts and their histories. The book discusses the industries that grew from the coasts.

However, it was quite west-centric. Berton points to several

places on the west coast, but with the east coast he points to only five places — Saint John, New Brunswick; Yarmouth, Lunenburg and Halifax, Nova Scotia; and the Strait of Belle Isle in Newfoundland.

When asked why he didn't cover more Atlantic seaside communities he said, "I put what I want in my book. I was not sending Andre Gallant [his photographer] to every Goddamn outport on the east coast".

There is a long standing myth that the Maritimes are

quaint, traditional and backwards. Berton attributes this to the economics and poverty of the region. He sees the Maritimes as being politically backwards and accuses Maritimers of being reluctant and opposed to change.

This myth is perpetuated in Berton's book, which shows photographs of a woman offering lobster and, of all things, *Anne of Green Gables*.

"I wanted to get some pictures that people would recognize that were specifically about the Maritimes. Like the Cabot Trail and the lobster dinners."

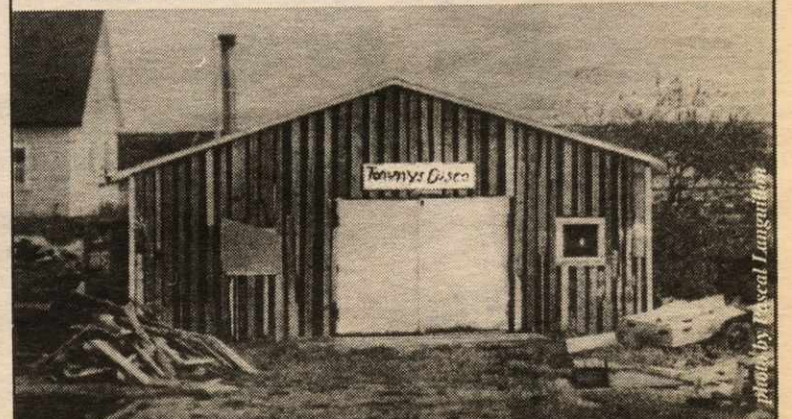
But what about the *Anne of Green Gables* house? That house has nothing to do with the ocean and the industries that come from the ocean. Berton thought it was all about finding scenes emblematic of the Maritimes.

***"[Women] have not been important until recently because they didn't get the vote. But after having got the vote they haven't made much use of it."***

"We're talking about iconography," Berton said. "We're talking about the fact that when Japanese come to this country there's only two places they go and that's Niagara Falls and *Anne of Green Gables'* cottage. It's in the book because it, along with the Cabot Trail, defines the tourist aspect of the Maritimes, which is all you have now."

Pierre Berton certainly has his opinions. However, many of them are dated against modern or popular ideas. At 78, he has every right to speak his mind, but does he really have to publish these thoughts?

### What the hell does Pierre Berton know?



One of the many great east coast attractions which Pierre so obviously missed - Tommy's Disco on the South Shore.