

Canada's storyteller

Pierre Berton changed the way we think about our country, writes Charlotte Gray

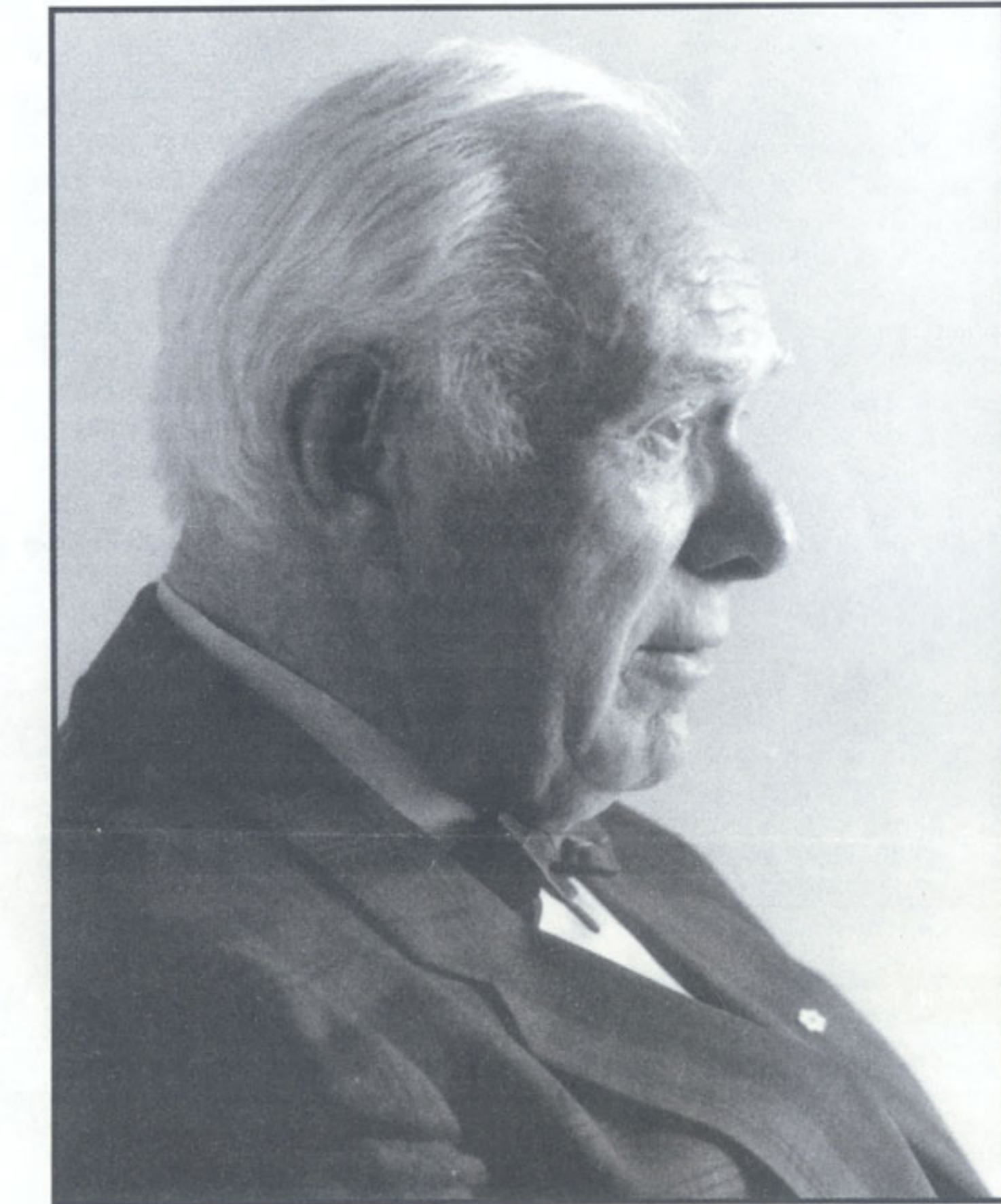
The last time I saw Pierre Berton was in June 2004, at BookExpo Canada in Toronto. The old warrior was in a wheelchair, and looked far more frail than he did in the photos that accompanied the obituaries in December. Elsa Franklin, his longtime friend, manager, and ferocious protector, was at his side, and she beckoned me over to say hello.

"I'm so envious of you, Pierre," I told Berton. "You've done a marvellous essay in your new book on one of my favourite Canadian characters, Robert W. Service. I've often thought I'd like to do a biography of him."

Berton's face lit up, and the years seemed to drop away as he advised me that there was plenty of room for a Service biography, that the poet's own autobiographies were a pack of lies, that there were a couple of books and archival collections that he could recommend, and that I should just get on with it.

It was quintessential Berton: fired up with enthusiasm for his subject, and generous with advice and encouragement to a younger writer. So many of us have cause to feel gratitude to him, whether it is for his role in founding the Writers' Union of Canada, for his enthusiastic and generous support for Canada's National History Society, or for the opportunity to stay in Berton House (the writers' retreat in Dawson City that he funded).

As a writer of non-academic history myself, I have a particular reason to feel grateful to Pierre Berton. He kept alive the tradition of narrative history in an era when academic historians had turned their backs on it. Sometime during the 1960s, the history professionals within universities decided that their subject belonged in the social sciences rather than the arts. The character-driven storytelling approach favoured during the 19th century by such British giants as Gibbon and Macauley, and more recently in this country by Donald Creighton, was seen to be bombastic and suspect. History was splintered into different schools – labour studies, military history, political science. The assumption that a single narrative line could tell the whole story of Canada was exploded. Academic history-writing became increasingly cautious and formulaic, picketed inside barricades of conditional clauses and footnotes. Academics who reviewed Berton's books took an unseemly delight, suggests Blair



Pierre Berton in 1995

Neatby, professor emeritus of history at Carleton University, in "catching him out. They belittled him because narrative history was out and women's studies were in."

But Pierre Berton was outside the academy: he always insisted that he was a journalist and a storyteller. His years as a provocative columnist and television personality honed his sense of what most readers want to know: not an analysis of the historical subtext, but the story of what happened to real people. He brought the skills of good feature-writing to books like *Klondike*, *The National Dream*, *The Last Spike*, *Vimy*, and *Prisoners of the North*. "Always describe the people, the places," he advised aspiring writers, "and check the weather."

And while most university professors drifted further and further from popular audiences, Berton's book sales exceeded his publisher's wildest dreams. In 1972, he had four books on

Canadian bestseller lists simultaneously – a feat that even *The Da Vinci Code* author Dan Brown has not achieved here or elsewhere. When I won the History Society's Pierre Berton Award in 2003, I confessed to him, "I wish I had your royalties." Only a handful of Canadian non-fiction writers today can boast book sales over 100,000 in their own country.

The main explanation for Berton's phenomenal success was his extraordinary talent for the craft. On a basis of solid research, he built adventure stories driven by dynamic plots, larger-than-life characters (usually male), and the kind of all-encompassing conclusions that make academic writers wince. "We are all creatures of the wilderness," he wrote in the introduction to *Pierre Berton's Canada*. "It lies just beyond the horizon.... holiday country today, but harsh, unforgiving land for earlier generations."

But Berton had additional appeal in the Canada of the 1970s and early 1980s, when he published his greatest

works, such as *The National Dream* and *Flames Across the Border*. He rode the wave of Canadian nationalism that had begun around Centennial year, and he wore his country on his sleeve. Canadians became interested in the creation of Canada, and Berton fed the appetite for stirring stories about the past. "No professional historians would allow themselves such unqualified nationalism," says Blair Neatby. "We see things in more complex ways." But Berton was always there with a new character, a new voyage into the past that, as the History Society pointed out after his death, "reminded us that there was much to be learned from where we had just come from." His patriotism was untainted by shrill anti-Americanism; it simply represented a passionate search for unique features of the Canadian experience.

He carved a majestic historical highway, and he made a real difference to the way we think about our country. And in his later volumes, he was not slow to add his own opinions to the story. In three of the four wars that Canada entered in the 20th century, he argued in *Marching As to War*, "our boys deserved better than they got." When questioned whether a "professional" (i.e. academic) historian would make such a judgment, he replied with characteristic bluntness: "It's impossible for anybody to be objective. We all carry the baggage of our own past.... [academics have] all got axes to grind as well."

Television appearances boosted Berton's book sales, and he made the writing look effortless. But only someone with stern self-discipline could have been so productive: 50 books, not counting the children's series; three Governor General's Awards; 14 honorary degrees. Pierre Berton worked hard to achieve his success, putting in 12-hour days, typing with two fingers on a series of ancient Remingtons.

Popular history has moved on now. Its vehicles include fiction and television, and it has broadened to include stories of women, First Nations, non-European immigrants, and regional figures. But those of us still producing popular histories owe a huge debt to Berton's muscular prose. He demonstrated that, under the surface of our celebrated (and bland) peace, order, and good government, there was drama, passion, and excitement.

CHARLOTTE GRAY is the author of several Canadian history titles, most recently *The Museum Called Canada*.