

liberty here in Canada," McLuhan once told me. "I wouldn't get that in the States, because I'm taken quite seriously there. The fact that Canadians don't take me seriously is a huge advantage. It makes me a free man."

McLuhan was wise enough to realize that being a hero in Canada is an existential state with a shorter shelf life than boysenberry yogurt. We have little talent for excess and no patience with anyone who believes that heroism is worth achieving, except perhaps by inadvertence. There is a vague but valid link between our heroes and our weather, which remains Canada's most essential reality. Our frigid climate reflects the selectivity of how we pick our heroes: Many are cold, but few are frozen.

*Great Questions for Canada,  
Edited by Richard Griffiths*

## POSTSCRIPT BY CHARLOTTE GRAY

I suffer from a very Canadian syndrome: TGIH.

What is TGIH? Well, let me explain it this way. Living here, I often suffer acute hero envy. Why can't Canada produce a brilliant literary bad boy such as Jay McInerney, or a steely-minded, successful politician such as Margaret Thatcher, or an outrageous sports personality such as Dennis Rodman? Why don't we spawn a few larger-than-life characters who bend the rules to fit them rather than shaping their own behaviour to the norm?

But then I leave Canada, perhaps to spend a few days on the turf of one of these braggadocio characters. On my return to Canadian soil, I am overwhelmed by TGIH. Thank God I'm Home, in a country where bully-boy tactics are not celebrated and civility is the norm. A country where we put dead and forgotten prime ministers, such as Robert Borden, on our bank notes, rather than kings and conquerors. The political and military heroes of other countries are celebrated for their fierce individualism, insensitivity to other points of view and driving determination. But these are not Canadian qualities. Canada is not a militaristic nation.

We admire other virtues. Our public discourse is rarely characterized by *Sturm und Drang* and when presented with a silver lining, we instinctively look for the clouds. I don't care if people

elsewhere jeer at Canada for being a decaffeinated version of the States. They can keep their Supermen and Superwomen, who exhibit a Darwinian selfishness in their teeth-gritting determination to survive. I breathe a sigh of relief that I am back in the land of Clark Kent virtues — modesty, respect for others, a certain diffidence and a well-developed sense of the ridiculous. And a steady ability to work with others for the common good.

Clark Kent virtues are not the stuff of conventional heroism. They do not trigger the emotional extravagance that hero factories require to lubricate their output. Our most successful and longest-serving prime minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, has generated fewer than a hundred biographies and books. A dumpy little pragmatist who shunned photographers, King could not have been less inspiring. Yet for over 20 years he rose brilliantly to the test that faces every Canadian prime minister, and which most of his successors have failed: He kept a nation riven with regional and linguistic tensions united. He was skilled in that most Canadian of arts: compromise. More colourful (and almost as long-serving) Canadian political leaders, such as Sir John A. Macdonald and Pierre Trudeau, have a few thousand more pages devoted to their wit, visions, long hair and personal idiosyncrasies. But neither enjoys the avalanche of celebratory biographies inspired elsewhere by political leaders who radiate sex appeal (John Kennedy) or national machismo (Winston Churchill).

These days, we have to make the distinction between celebrity and heroism. Magazines such as *People*, *Talk* or *Hello* smother the super-rich, super-thin and super-cool with indiscriminate sycophancy. They make money and glamour (or, in the case of people like Matt Drudge or Mike Bullard, attitude and a bad haircut) seem enough to guarantee you a place in the Hall of Fame. But this is ephemeral celebrity, not long-term heroism.

Heroes touch people's hearts not by appearance or achievement alone, but by less tangible qualities — their strength of personality, perhaps, or the way they capture in themselves the qualities that a nation believes it represents. Some heroes are, in the words of my counterpart Peter Newman, "go-getters who turn individual into collective history." But not all of them.

Newman has suggested that the one essential characteristic of all Canadian heroes is that they are dead. He argues that if a living Canadian laid claim to hero status, the rest of us would dismiss him or her as a boaster. As a nation, he states, we are "fuelled by envy." (The Japanese, who are similar to Canadians in that they attach more importance to collective than individual achievements, admit to the same sour-grapes behaviour. Citizens of the second most powerful nation in the world deplore their own tendency to cut down "tall poppies," as they call anybody with the nerve to stick his or her head above the crowd.) I would argue that Newman is using a borrowed and outdated definition of heroism, since his examples of heroes are European, pre-20th century soldiers and explorers who displayed against-the-odds bravery in the service of some national ideal. That kind of physical bravery is passé in the age of microchip empires and dissolving national borders. Its only current manifestation is probably in the nerves-of-steel takeover duels between our contemporary titans of capitalism tracked by Newman himself in his chronicles of the Canadian business establishment. Head-to-head battles between the rich and powerful make amusing reading, but selflessness and national pride play no role in corporate slugfests.

It is true that Canada is not a land of alpha males. Of course, this exasperates the likes of Conrad Black, men who revel in confrontation. But look what we produce instead! Millennial Canada is a breeding ground for alpha females.

Think of Céline Dion, Shania Twain, Diana Krall, Silken Laumann or Ann-Marie MacDonald. Some of these talented women will morph into heroes by proving they have staying power in the public imagination.

There is a Canadian appetite for people who symbolize our nation, and for occasions to celebrate our pride in Canada. It is impossible to forget the national exuberance sparked by Expo 67, or the coast-to-coast whoop of delight when Donovan Bailey became the fastest man on Earth in 1994. When the Millennium Partnership Project offered to help fund projects that would celebrate Canada's past achievements and individuals of note, it was inundated with applications. Two of the projects funded were a wooden sculpture of Tecumseh, the valiant Shawnee chief who fought for the British in 1812, and a national tour of a bronze maquette representing the five sturdy women who fought the Persons Case in 1929. A full-size version of the statue will be unveiled on Parliament Hill in the year 2000.

I don't agree with Newman that heroes cannot be manufactured. History has always been written by the winners' spin doctors. If there has been a shortage of heroes in Canada, it is because we have lacked enough spin doctors. We certainly have enough victories in our past. So the challenge, for those who want to feed Canada's appetite for heroes, is to redefine heroism. Who are we, and what kind of heroes do we want? Who are the individuals, alive or dead, who typify the best aspects of Canada, a tolerant, successful and unpretentious society with a sense of humour and a remarkable collective ability both to promote change and adapt to it? Just because our virtues are modest and anti-heroic doesn't mean that we have to celebrate wimps. Our characteristics throw up different kinds of heroes. Once you start matching Canadian qualities to

Canadian achievers, you quickly realize that there is plenty of material to work with:

- Collective strength. A nation that is itself a collective balancing act is a high-wire act that works. What could be a better symbol than the Cirque de Soleil, a colourful, gasp-making acrobatic ballet that works without words? Performers swing through the air, use each other as counterweights, balance each other's needs — all without speaking. Just like the Canadian federation: geographical, gender, linguistic balance.
- Quiet competence. In international affairs, there have always been unassuming, brainy Canadians whose objective was a better world. They include John Humphrey, who drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and Prime Minister Lester Pearson, who developed the idea of a peace-keeping force. But one unsung hero is Louis Rasminsky (1908–1998), the soft-spoken, charming and gifted economist who was the *éminence grise* at the 1944 Bretton Woods conference. Having observed the monetary chaos of the 1930s and 1940s, he quietly designed the International Monetary Fund, which stabilized the global financial system so that countries, large and small, could prosper and grow in the postwar period. Because he was Canadian, he never took credit. Because Bretton Woods is in New Hampshire, the Americans got it.
- Respect for the land. Canadians have raped and pillaged their landscape as energetically as anyone, but since pre-Confederation days there have also been ecological champions — native and immigrant. Nineteenth-century author Catharine Parr Traill was among the first to realize the dangers of environmental destruction. While Walt

Whitman was still waxing lyrical, she was on her hands and knees digging up ferns and identifying vanishing botanical species. A Rachel Carson before her time, until now she has been a prophet unrecognized in her own country . . . very Canadian.

- Common decency. No nation has a monopoly on this quality, but various Canadians have elevated it into a governing principle in their professional lives. Think of General Lewis Mackenzie, or broadcaster Barbara Frum. Best of all, think of Dr. William Osler. A hundred years ago, Osler revolutionized the practice of medicine not by any startling scientific breakthrough but by insisting that physicians treat the patient, not the disease. He was no goody-goody (he played some wicked practical jokes), but as a clinician, he demonstrated the importance of astute diagnosis, skepticism about unproven treatments and a humane approach to his patients. He dispelled gloom in the sickroom and inspired hope in his patients. He was an inspirational leader at McGill University in the 1880s, at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore in the 1890s and early 1900s and at Oxford University from 1905 until his death in 1919. All three institutions lay claim to his legacy, but he was born in Ontario and his ashes rest in the Osler Library at McGill. And his example lives on in every Canadian health professional who puts healing ahead of profit.

- Creative brilliance. Alice Munro is a hero on two counts. First, she took an underrated literary form — the short story — and produced such polished jewels that she raised standards worldwide. She exemplifies the Canadian ability to colonize a small area of artistry, and enlarge it into an important genre. (We did the same with documentaries and children's music. Another Canadian hero, Wayne Gretzky,

performed the same service for hockey.) Second, she has won all the big prizes — the Governor General's, the Giller — yet in typically Canadian style, she refuses to be lionized.

- Humour. How did Canadians ever earn a reputation for being boring when comedians are one of our greatest exports? Perhaps it is because Canadian humour is so deadpan. When a laugh track is fitted to emigrants like Mike Myers, Martin Short, Jim Carey and John Candy, American audiences finally get it. Alongside the irony, in a blazing talent like Rick Mercer, is irreverence and a burning sense of social justice. Mercer illustrates both the Canadian capacity for edgy comedy and our gift for not taking ourselves too seriously. He even gets politicians to laugh at themselves.

- Commitment to the common good. For Canadian peacekeepers, there is no personal glory in what they do. They just put their own lives on the line as they keep warring factions apart. Who doesn't get misty-eyed each time we see those chunky young men in fatigues, with shaven heads and big grins, loading up yet another lumbering Hercules aircraft with medical supplies and basic rations? Whether reassuring Albanians in Kosovo, or helping children in East Timor, they embody the spirit of mutual dependence that kept prairie farmers going during the Great Depression, or propelled Newfoundlanders to help one another when the fishery collapsed.

- Self-invention. The catalogue of our bogus heroes is delightfully long. Laura Secord didn't lead a cow behind the lines in the War of 1812. Grey Owl, the most famous Red Indian in the world, was born Archibald Stansfeld Belaney in Hastings, England. Billy Bishop wasn't quite the fighter pilot ace that the Canadian government claimed. But Canada has given all kinds of people the opportunity to reinvent

themselves, and we're *really good* at it. My particular favourite is Lili St. Cyr, the Montreal stripper who scandalized and seduced Montreal in the 1940s and 1950s. Lili's real name was Marie Van Schaak. She was born in Minneapolis in 1918, and she couldn't speak a word of French. She boasted that she had broken hearts and emptied wallets, but a helluva lot of people had a helluva good time in her presence. And she epitomizes the chameleon quality of Canadians: We adapt to the world around us.

#### POSTSCRIPT BY PETER C. NEWMAN

Pierre Elliott Trudeau came the closest to being Canada's modern hero. It was no surprise that just before the millennium, the country's media adjudicators voted him Top Newsmaker of the 20th Century. Certainly, he made news during and long after his 16-year reign as Canada's 15th prime minister. But that wasn't what made him a hero.

I first became conscious of his heroic qualities in the spring of 1968, at the Liberal Party convention, where enchanted delegates surprised themselves by choosing him as their leader. The cynical political pros — who ran Canada's "governing party," then as now — were accustomed to controlling the succession. Suddenly, they were faced with the prospect of an outsider who wasn't even a politician, taking the game away from them. I remember watching them, clustered in small worried groups, trying to size up the political magic of this strange and exotic newcomer. Politics is a harsh trade that normally requires half a lifetime's apprenticeship. Yet Trudeau seemed to have mastered

its vital elements almost instantly. Only months before, the Montreal law-professor-turned-politician had been proclaiming heretical positions on defence and the social contract, and now here he was, the candidate to beat. They ogled him, chomping their cigars in frustration, scratching their heads, trying to discover if he had some trick they might master.

But they came away puzzled still, telling each other tentatively that it must be his looks or maybe his age, his "radicalism," his money or his reputation as an intellectual. Yet, among his competitors, Robert Winters was handsomer, John Turner younger, Paul Hellyer richer, Eric Kierans more radical and Paul Martin had as many degrees. But nobody else could draw the crowds, get the laughs, fire the enthusiasm.

They didn't realize that Trudeau had the makings of hero, and heroism can never be reduced to a formula. It just is. It's a reaction, a feeling, an instant recognition of someone who can enter a room and raise the temperature.

Trudeau had that incandescent glow that thousands of photographers' flash bulbs impart to the flesh, and yet throughout the convention, he appeared remote and austere, his very presence generating an undercurrent of the unexpected. In one of the workshops he was addressing, the solid cadre of photographers and television men who followed his every move was blocking the view of the delegates. Finally, an exasperated delegate stood up and yelled: "Down in front." Trudeau barked back: "How far in front?", quizzically implying that the audience wanted him to sit down. It was a small joke, but it persuaded the photographers to move back, and won him a round of applause.

Any political convention develops into a circus for the candidates, with enough pressure to break the composure of even the strongest psyche. Yet Trudeau maintained a sense of inner

