

## Cultural Ventriloquists

Ioan Davies

Charlie Farquharson, c. 1988



Don Harron, c. 1988



### Best Seat in the House: Memoirs of a Lucky Man

by Robert Fulford

Toronto: Collins, 1988, 260 pp.

### The Private Voice

by Peter Gzowski

Toronto: McClelland and Stewart (A Douglas Gibson Book), 1988, 328 pp.

### Don Harron: A Parent Contradiction

by Martha Harron

Toronto: Collins, 1988, 325 pp.

The task of reporting on our culture for the State Networks is a specialized and centralized one. In English Canada, for the CBC (radio and TV) and TVOntario, Canadian culture is represented by perhaps no more than 50 full-time reporters and anchor people, whose work is also to be found in the Toronto broadside dailies and commercial periodicals such as *Macleans* and *Saturday Night*. Although they are augmented from time to time by newcomers — Alberto Manguel, Richard Gwyn or Margaret Visser come to mind — the network is firmly Toronto-based, as often as not educated in English literature at the University of Toronto, and characterized by an intellectual liberalism, tolerance and eclecticism which sets itself off against the more narrowly ideological definitions of *The Idler* on the right and *Canadian Dimension* on the left. Sometimes the

media elite seem to be the nub of a set of cultural networks that extend through the Writers' Union, the various Harbourfront reading and performing series, publishers across Canada, and a host of traveling musicians and actors, curators and folklorists. In a sense that is as it should be, because without the CBC none of us would know what is going on across the country. But what goes on inside the cultural programmes? The simultaneous publication of three books (two autobiographies and one biography) by or about major cultural emcees allows us to explore the assumptions behind cultural reportage.

The books are characteristically different. Fulford's book is the least personal or self-critical, written in the *I-Was-There* style of political autobiography, where the people whom Fulford has met are the real subject. Fulford's excellence at his job is taken for granted, as becomes an autodidact. Gzowski's book is almost painfully self-reflexive; in the same way that doing *Morningside* is the occasion for reminiscing about his career, his personal life, his relationship to the programme and to the CBC, and his Canadianness. Harron's biography is written by his daughter, though based in part on an unpublished manuscript by Harron (to have been called "Harronside": Harron was Gzowski's predecessor). It is therefore personal in a different way, reflecting the daughter's pride in her father's career — largely that of an actor and scriptwriter — but also her pain at his failed marriages, her father's

moods, her being transported frequently across North America and Europe. It says little about *Morningside* except that she listened to it — and thus for the first time to her father — while she was at home rearing children.

The "magazine" programmes that Fulford, Gzowski, Harron and their colleagues have worked for have audiences larger than print magazines (see inset). The readership for magazines that deal in any way with Canadian culture is clearly widely dispersed, and I am ignoring specialist genre journals. Radio and TV offer the only consistent thread joining these fragments. The aim of this review is to examine the premises implicit in Canadian cultural reportage.

Martha Harron refers to her father as "Renaissance Man," and, in a sense, anyone who is a host of a TV or radio show concerned with culture, politics, society and the arts has to be competent, as well as sensitive to a broad spectrum of ideas and practices. But of course we have a fair selection of Renaissance People, most of whom would not care to be hosts of a talk show, or, if they cared to be, would not be allowed the chance. Hence the gang of 50.

One of the prerequisites in Canadian media for being a cultural mediator or moderator is that the incumbent should neither be a major intellectual figure nor be known for their creative work. The exceptions are Erica Ritter, who lasted for three years on *Day Shift* (though she is now back with the radio theatre series *Air Craft*), and Don Harron, who lasted five years on *Morningside*. This contrasts with Britain or France where stage directors,

*Morningside* has an average of 250,000 listeners and a reach of one million;<sup>1</sup> *Realities* had an average viewership of 36,000; the *Journal's* Friday (cultural) audience is 1.4 million, with a reach of 1.6 million (though the Monday to Thursday editions have a reach of 5 million); *Gabereau* averages 110,000 listeners and reaches 616,000; and *Ideas* has an average audience of 52,200 and reaches 239,600. *Democracy*, CBC Television's attempt to do *Ideas* in film documentary, has an average viewership of 1.3 million. Ralph Benmergui's *Prime Time* has a dedicated average of 50,700 listeners and a reach of 264,000; while *Brave New*

*Waves*, at midnight on Monday to Thursday, has an average of 7,100 listeners and a reach of 31,000.

This might be compared with *Macleans's* weekly circulation of 620,000 copies and *Saturday Night's* (monthly) 115,000. But *This Magazine* is at a circulation of 7,000 copies (bi-monthly), *C Magazine* (quarterly) at 4,000, *Impulse* (quarterly) at 5,000, *Fuse* (quarterly) at 4,000, and *Border/Lines* (quarterly) at 1,600. Before its resurrection at the hands of James Lorimer, the *Canadian Forum* (10 times a year) had a circulation of 4,000; but the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* (twice yearly) has

a circulation of 3,000. The readership figures for print might be multiplied by three or four.

Within Toronto, the two weekly listings papers, *Now* and *Metropolis*, average circulations of between 75,000 and 90,000 copies on "free" sales; while *Toronto Life* sits around 98,000 copies monthly.

1. The concepts of "average" and "reach" are based on the "average" number of people who watch an entire programme, and the "reach" of those who tune in for at least 15 minutes per programme. The circulation figures for magazines are based, as far as I could establish, on subscriptions and newsstand sales.

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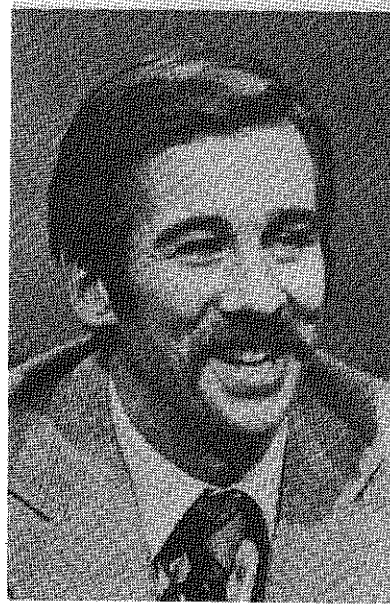
novelists and academics are actively sought to host or direct similar programmes — Jonathan Miller, Melvyn Bragg, and Canada's own Michael Ignatieff, whose confrontative *Three Minute Culture* is now running on BBC 2. This has significant advantages and disadvantages. In the British case it leads to a certain jumpiness of intent, where, particularly throughout the 1980s, the variety of TV and radio programmes shifted with bewildering rapidity. The arts programmes in particular have oscillated between magazine formats, documentaries, and live talk or performance shows, such as the current *Late Show* on BBC 2. On the other hand, magazines like *The Listener* and regular columns in the quality dailies and weeklies ensure a treatment of the production and content of the media as something that is seen not merely as *entertainment* but as an essential component of the cultural and intellectual life of the country. Witness, for example, Raymond Williams's regular columns for *The Listener* in the 1970s (now reprinted as *Raymond Williams on Television: Selected Writings*, edited by Alan O'Connor for *Between the Lines*, Toronto).

By leaving it to the journalists to handle cultural issues, Canada ensures a continuity of format and production. But it is a continuity which relies on the gang of 50 and which, incidentally, generates a curious by-product in the cultural business: the instant book by the emcees on "my problems in coming to terms with myself, intellectual life and Canadian Identity." These three books are classics of this genre, and their coincidental appearance allows us to look at their authors as

cultural gatekeepers as well as representatives of a particular intellectual ambience.

The idea of the public intellectual in Canada is generally reserved in the media for a few economists who are called in from time to time to spout on about "policy" questions whenever journalists want to do a good turn for their former professors; the heralding of writers who win the Governor General's Awards, and who are therefore considered to be politically significant; or the celebration of authors such as Grant, McLuhan and Macpherson who are discovered to be important just before their demise. A few foreigners are occasionally quoted or reprinted because they are newsworthy, sometimes because of what they say, but more frequently because they are weird or different or because they confirm the programme's editorial position.

To some extent, the cultural programmes stand apart from all this in that they try to provide a forum within which ideas can be developed. But, by Canada! it is a hard struggle. The commentators work for networks which try to establish a concept of neutrality and impartiality, as opposed to the regular media which is blatantly prejudiced even when it protests its objectivity. The idea of cultural programming is not taken as anything more than a series of checks and balances, a forum within which we can all splash around in the great amorphousness of our culture. Peter Gzowski is, of course, the great chameleon. He may be NDP or Liberal or Red Tory, but he is, above all, Canadian and decent. Gzowski is good with the human interest stuff, with the political and media



Peter Gzowski, c. 1971

gossip, but when someone like Simon Reisman comes into the studio to denounce everything Gzowski holds near and dear, he is left in the lurch. His interview with Noam Chomsky a few years back was an unmitigated disaster, and his encounter with Betty Friedan was hilariously awful, because he lacks a confrontative politics. Gzowski's autobiography is largely an encounter with journalistic self-image, and it is interesting how ratings, the observations of friends, getting honorary doctorates from universities, or going on book-promotion tours play an important part in what he has to say. And, ah! the anguish of broken families, the drunken remorse of wasted opportunities.

It is a pity, of course, that we do not have "Harronside." Don Harron is more than a journalist: Charlie Farquharson of *Hee Haw* fame, the promoter of *Anne of Green Gables* at the Charlottetown Festival, and arguably the nastiest Jimmy Porter of John Osborne's *Look Back In Anger*. Don Harron was not just the emcee of *Morningside*, as his daughter's book makes clear. He was, after Andrew Allen and the great drama years of the 1940s and 1950s, the first creative mind to take hold of CBC radio — aided and abetted by Krista Maeots, his producer, whose tragic suicide at Niagara Falls in 1978, ushered in a kind of burning twilight in the *Morningside* business. After Krista, a Marxist-feminist, it became clear that CBC did not know what to do with its morning radio show, and thus *Morningside* rapidly resorted to being the comfortable middle-of-the-road show to which Gzowski's book is a monument.

As emcee of *Morningside*, Don Harron was abrasive, inventive and sometimes rude — he had a tendency to interrupt his guests before they had made their point — as the programme's title, *Don Harron's Morningside*, should have led us to expect. He used *Morningside* not only as an occasion to represent different points of view but as an opportunity to confront other ideas and to present his own. He regularly read his own material. He deliberately crossed the boundary between objectivity and opinion. In listening to him, one felt that he was asking his guests what they wanted to do with their ideas before they were consigned to the archives. Don Harron made *Morningside* a creative stage upon which personalities acted out their ideas as a sort of free-form theatre, but

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Robert Fulford, c. 1971

with a Brechtian emcee as the alienated chorus of common sense. It was superb theatre, but was it radio? For all his faults, Harron is a man wrestling with the strengths and limitations of the media. He is a man who has taken incredible risks: theatre, scriptwriting, television, radio, film and advertising. The others, as journalists, were locked into a profession, and if they switched media, did so because their journalism demanded it. Harron switched because it was fun.

The scene shifts with Fulford, and if we spend a little longer with him it is because he is brighter than the others, more self-assured. His book starts with the *de rigueur* statement that his father was an alcoholic journalist, and therefore we are led to surmise that his achievement is based on him surmounting that obstacle. (Alcohol, rather than the sharp thrust of ideas or a relationship to community action, is a favourite topic with these authors. Gzowski apologizes for himself because of the influence of alcohol. Martha Harron, on the other hand, in describing her father's apparently despicable behaviour towards his family, is also careful to note that he is a life-long teetotaler — and nonsmoker to boot. Are we therefore to conclude that Harron is a nastier man because he does not have alcohol as an excuse? Of course, the whole issue as a moral stance on creativity is a piece of fashionable faddism, which Mordecai Richler has spoofed marvellously in an analogy with the Ben Johnson case in *Saturday Night*, January 1989. Fulford is, of course, a self-made man, who learned his ideas the hard way. That is an interesting story in its own right, and parts of this come through in these memoirs. Only a small part, however, because that voyage of exploration is to be found in the journalism and the TV programmes which have been Fulford's life. This autobiography is an exercise in writing over and against these other texts. It is an attempt at providing an authoritative account of why these should be ignored in favour of the person of Robert Fulford. It is part of the Canadian Problem, the problem of instant, authoritative fame.

Not only does Fulford write regular columns for newspapers — most recently the *Toronto Star* and the *Financial Times* — but he was for nearly 20 years the editor of *Saturday Night*. He has also been central to one TV programme, *Realities* on TV Ontario, and one on radio, *This is Robert Ful-*

*ford*. He has read and met a lot of people. In *Best Seat in the House*, he drops more names in some paragraphs than Conrad Black ever dreamt of, but the real issue is how he makes the imaginative connections between them. He tries to make the connections personal and Canadian — Glenn Gould, Michael Snow, Beland Honderich, Nathan Cohen, Marshall McLuhan, Ken Lefolii, Peter Gzowski, Margaret Atwood, Conrad Black — though sometimes people like W.H. Auden and Edmund Wilson get in.

Take, for example, the case of his school-mate Glenn Gould, the genius of pure sound and mathematical tonality. Fulford knows that his own love of jazz as a social medium must be contrasted with Gould's hermetic but polyphonic universe. Two of twelve chapters are spent on the subject. But nowhere is it suggested that this is part of a much wider debate on music from Max Weber and Theodor Adorno to Eric Hobsbawm and Imamu Amiri Baraka. We are presented with it as if it were Fulford's personal dilemma, something unique to him. Autobiography frequently suppresses thought, even when, as here, the autobiographer has surely read or even interviewed all the participants in a debate. Much more interesting in an autobiography would be an exploration of how an individual comes to terms with ideas which influenced him or her, rather than representing self as the sole mediator of all ideas. Fulford comes out of all this as if he were not just tone-deaf, which he says he is, but concept-blind.

Fulford's journalism and the *Realities* interviews are eminently sensible, bland and uncontroversial, academic chit-chat made palatable for the masses. Yet when major radical thinkers such as Raymond Williams, Noam Chomsky, and Edward Said sneak into the columns or the studios, it is not their ideas that are discussed but the curiosities of their lives and the peculiarities of their marginal situation. Prime exposure, of course, goes to the likes of Allan Bloom who are allowed to develop their ideas.

But Fulford's career is in public education and he is the nation's schoolmaster. It is through him that many people hear of important thinkers for the first time. His contribution is therefore incalculable. His style is fluid, the writing machine crackles on, and he is easily able to address virtually any topic of public importance. Given that most people who read him or watch *Realities* do not read any of the source material, it is his version of these ideas that prevails. And his concept of how to convey ideas is to personalize them, to turn discourse into a gossip column, as in his chapters on Atwood and McLuhan. By a marvellous theatrical device, the thinkers become the puppets to Fulford's ventriloquism. They say what he wants them to say. The three books are important in that they give a sense of what cultural reporting is and of who rises to the top of the pile in the public-owned networks. They demonstrate what the middle-ground of Canadian culture is, and what are the obstacles to creating anything more vibrant. The major obstacle is an ideological one, the deep sleep of middle-Canadian rationality, where three carefully-chosen specialists representing the PCs, the Liberals and the NDP comfortably debate reasonable politics; where Margaret Visser prattles on about our eating habits; and where the Great Cultural Ventriloquist makes everyone seem ideologically normal.

What is startling in all this is that different models do exist on how to do it, as well as there being different community-based organizations on which to draw, not to speak of alternative magazines. The public networks operate as if these did not exist. The emergence of a Harron or a Ritter on the airwaves suggests that breakthroughs are possible, though any major transformation would require much more concerted action than is evident at present. Meanwhile, the sleep of reasonability.

*Ioan Davies is a member of the Border/Lines collective.*

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