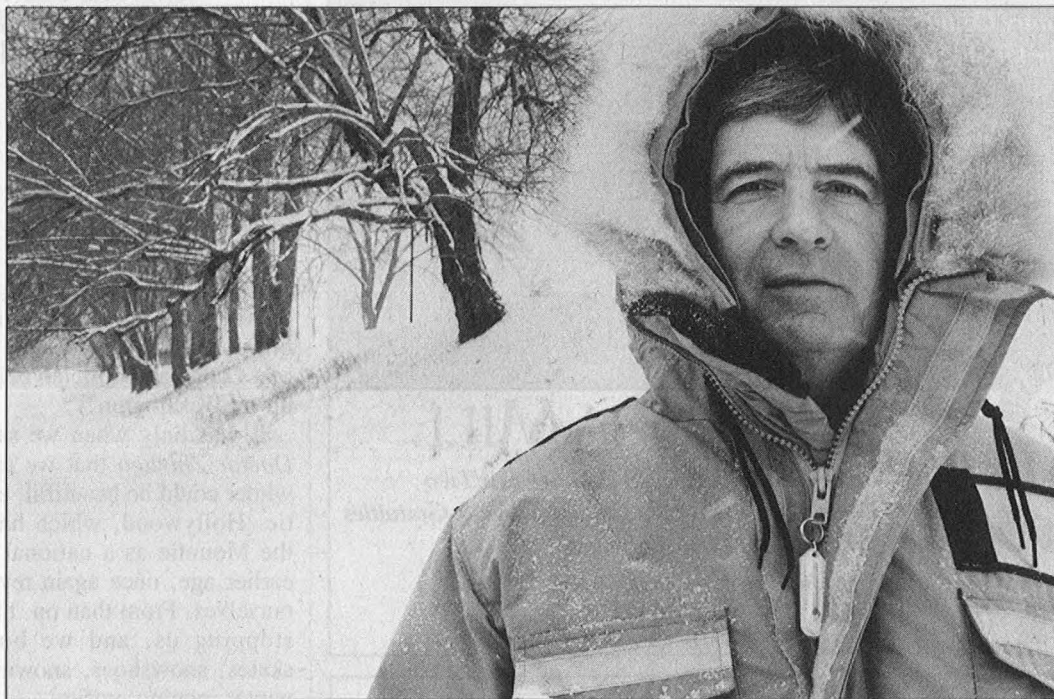


# THE MELTING OF A NATION

It's really the Canadian winter that preserves our national identity. / by Peter Desbarats



*Desbarats: When the great defrost occurs will anything hold us together?*

**M**emories of Canadian winters:

Pulling a battered sled up Cow Hill at the end of a grey Christmas Eve afternoon, seeing the cold Montreal sky grow dark above wooden back porches and the kitchen windows kindle a warm light that has glowed ever since in memory, a symbol of home, family and the pure joy of anticipation....

Playing poker in a nylon army tent on the edge of the barrens near Churchill, Manitoba, with the roar of a midnight blizzard outside, of a gas heater inside, and feeling the cold come down like an iron clamp on the sleeping bag when the sergeant turned out the stove....

Skating on the Rideau Canal in Ottawa, beneath the stars, rounding a bend and being engulfed in a freezing black wind, heavy with the scent of bread fresh from the ovens of the bakery beside the canal (replaced by condominiums a few years ago)....

Escaping most of the winter one year, on assignment in Australia, and feeling not the expected relief but a sense of something missing, almost of being cheated....

Each of us is filled with such memories. Canadians may be divided by geography, by language, by religion and by politics, but winter unites us in the face of the common enemy. We love to complain about the annual siege. The more fortunate among us trek to the south, sharing the hardships of airport terminals, francophone and

anglophone alike sitting in the Daytona sun and smugly sampling the newspaper tables of Canadian winter temperatures.

Those who are stuck at home are bonded together by envy, eagerly sharing news reports of frosts in Florida and earthquakes in California.

Snow and ice are our national glues. Some nations have been forged in the heat of civil wars; others in the crucible of revolution. Canada crystallized in the refrigerator of rational debate, provinces taking shape like ice cubes until we had a full tray.

For many years we turned our backs on this frosty heritage, pulled up our collars and tried to ignore it. This was understandable. Our ancestors couldn't see the poetry in winter, as they couldn't see the forest for the trees, and did their best to get rid of both. When most of the trees were felled, they built houses with thick walls and tiny windows.

In our parents' time, winter was a period of indoor somnolence, almost hibernation, interrupted by quick dashes through the hostile outdoors. We became so allergic to winter that we wouldn't go outside even to play or watch our national sport. We brought hockey inside where the Americans soon discovered it and took it all south, along with most of our natural resources and cultural leaders, television journalists and real estate

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developers, leaving us with nothing but politicians. (Have you ever heard of a Canadian politician being snapped up by Washington?)

It was only when we saw the film *Doctor Zhivago* that we realized that winter could be beautiful, even romantic. Hollywood, which had given us the Mountie as a national hero in an earlier age, once again revealed us to ourselves. From then on, there was no stopping us, and we bought skis, skates, snowshoes, snowmobiles and winter jogging outfits.

How ironic, and how very Canadian, that we finally embraced winter just as the rest of the world decided to take it away from us. According to scientists, man-made pollution in the atmosphere is creating a "greenhouse effect" that is slowly warming the Northern Hemisphere. In no time at all, we'll be growing oranges in Victoria Park and enjoying January picnics amid the warm smog at Fanshawe Lake.

Scientists also tell us that there is another scenario — the dreaded "nuclear winter," when temperatures will drop so drastically around the world that nothing will survive except cockroaches and Canadians.

But let's assume that mankind avoids this, and that we have to prepare for a balmier era. When the great defrost occurs will anything hold us together? Will our national ties dissolve with the glaciers on Baffin Island? Will we simply melt into the United States?

If the days start to drag as this winter plods through January and February, you can always kill a bit of time by worrying about this. ■