

BOOKS

of the day



This, Our Province

THE STATE OF QUEBEC. By Peter Desbarats. McClelland and Stewart; \$4.50.

REVIEWED BY JAMES FERRABEE

NEWSPAPERMAN Peter Desbarats is the latest person to stake his claim in the fast-developing area of English-French relations with his book "The State Of Quebec."

A few years ago this was almost virgin land. Now the library shelves are rapidly being weighted down with the increasing output from both "solitudes." This imaginative journalist's addition to the collection should stir up some still waters.

Peter Desbarats was brought up in Quebec and, although the name may lead some people to believe otherwise, his education and outlook were fashioned as that of a typical English-Canadian. In addition, he has worked most of his journalistic career in the province and covered many of the events and met most of the people involved in the resurgence of Quebec.

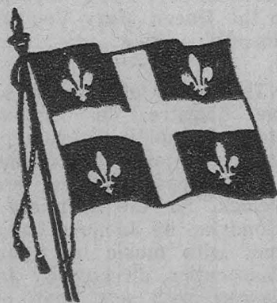
In the prologue, he explains the book was written during a four month leave of absence from his newspaper, The Montreal Star. He says that the full analysis of what has happened and is happening here must be left to the academic professionals and what he is offering is a "running report." True to his trade, he says he will not shrink from making a number of sweeping conclusions. He doesn't.

The first part of the book deals with the non-French element in Quebec. He has special chapters on business, Montreal English — whom he calls "Anglocrats" — and the Jews.

One sweeping conclusion seems to sum up the feeling of the first of the book. "The failure of the English-French partnership in Montreal is at the root of the problem in Quebec and Canada." He cites familiar examples of how the partnership has failed in the city; McGill and the University of Montreal, the two boards of trade etc.

The "Anglocrat" comes out of these chapters a rather bigoted, narrow-minded and insular person. This is fine myth-making

but I was hoping the author would have dug below the surface. For instance, he does not try to assess English-French relations in the legal profession or the medical profession or the church. The ecumenical movement in the city is surely one of the phenomena of the past few years here and although it can be overemphasized, surely this is a positive sign at the very basis of the two-nation partnership.



Here is one of his colorful descriptions:

"If he has an ear for dialect, the middle-class English-speaking resident of Notre Dame de Grace has little trouble distinguishing between Summit Circle English and Verdun English, the former with its clipped pseudo-British accents and the latter with its trace of Irish song-song and its prevailin' tendency to forget the 'g' in the 'ing' endings."

This is a description of Montreal but to what point? If one substitutes New Toronto for Notre Dame de

Grace, Forest Hill for Westmount and Broadview for Verdun would not the same paragraph apply equally to Toronto?

The latter part of the book is much more satisfying. One of the best pieces in the whole book is a reprint the author includes of an article he wrote last year describing Resources Minister Rene Levesque's speech to a local service club. Here is Levesque in a few hundred words, all the dynamism, flavor and energy of this fascinating man.

Chapters on the politicians in the province, the "Mafia" — by which he means the new and vigorous civil service being built up in the province — and Federal-Provincial relations make the book really worthwhile.

One sometimes wonders what a reader from outside Quebec would make of some of the passages. For instance, in the paragraph quoted above what is someone in Regina to make of the reference to "Summit Circle." Local color has a tendency to creep in unexplained.

To sum up, the book is a very readable account of the state of Quebec. Mr. Desbarats brilliant descriptive writing shines through from time to time to illumine a person or a situation. Occasionally he gets bogged down in trivia, which spoils some chapters. In short, he is a good reporter, an excellent writer but what he needed was a sharp-eyed editor.