

Books

Bitter analyses of a nation in the grips of 'pygmy' dreams. An angry thrust at our collective conscience

CANADA LOST, CANADA FOUND

THE SEARCH FOR A NEW NATION

BY PETER DESBARATS

McClelland and Stewart

126 pages, \$9.95

REVIEW BY ROBERT SHEPPARD

Not a pleasant fireside read, *Canada Lost, Canada Found* is from the outset a short, angry thrust at our collective conscience: "Truth will set you free, it is said, yet freedom is the one thing we have feared."

From that opening salvo, veteran journalist Peter Desbarats paints a harsh picture of the modern Canadian character and sets it against a background of constitutional strife and the twin pillars of Quebec and Western alienation.

In a piercing and often bitter analysis, Desbarats says we are a nation of Willy Lomans, enacting a tortuous, national version of *Death Of A Salesman*: "Our ancestors now seem like giants; it's embarrassing to place their dreams beside our own pygmy aspirations."

The polemic is a rare form for a

political book in this country, but it suits the cry of anguish, perhaps both personal as well as political, that emerges from these pages.

Best known for his detailed and insightful biography of Rene Levesque, *Rene: A Canadian In Search Of A Country*, Desbarats has had a long, distinguished career as a political reporter and commentator. He is now a senior consultant for the Royal Commission on Newspapers.

Far from being a dull people, he says, we are joined by "the most characteristic Canadian passion" — hatred. "We are in a constant state of suppressed fury with one another," he writes. The few successes we have are poisoned at the source, introspection has become a national industry, and we engage in constant, tragic struggles over our own bounty, be it resources or language opportunities: "Failure is the unifying theme" of Canada.

At this point, having softened up his reader considerably, Desbarats brings on his own solution for Canada at the crossroads. ("As

they say in Quebec, we now have to swallow our own spit.") But it is here that the book loses its bite.

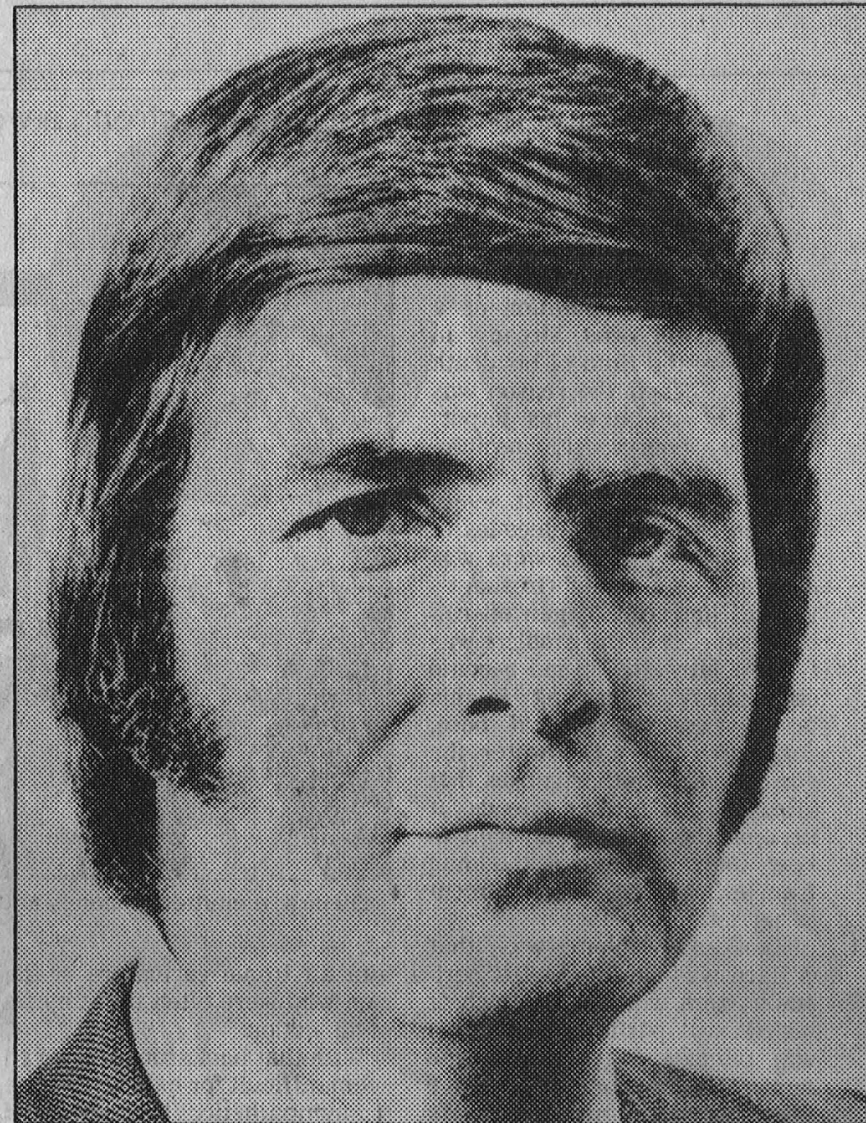
Canada Lost, Canada Found is nine parts bold vituperation and sharp, insightful prose, and one part sentimental mush. The cold, rational anger that sustains the book most of the way through drains away into an emotional plea to patriate the Constitution "no matter how flawed or incomplete the effort may be." Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau becomes the only political leader able to turn this trick, and now, the only time in history, it is possible, indeed imperative, to accomplish it.

It is a defensible thesis, perhaps. But perhaps not in a book that seeks to win and solve Quebec and Western alienation in the same political stroke. In Desbarats' view, the road to accommodation with Alberta "leads through Quebec." The Quiet Revolution in Quebec (which Desbarats, as an award-winning journalist, so well helped document) represents that province acting on a realization of

national failure two decades before the rest of the country tuned in. Alberta and Quebec now share the same basic desire — to be masters in their own respective houses — even if the major components of that desire are different, economic versus political sovereignty. In the author's view, that shared sense of pride can be the start of a mutual understanding and eventual compromise. Alberta will realize there have to be limits to its own desire for economic sovereignty if there is to be a limitation on Quebec opting-out of Confederation. And vice-versa.

Some may argue that this is a naive thesis and that contemporary history shows the provinces have to be smacked into line if the country is to hold together. Judging by recent actions, a proponent of this other view would be Trudeau, whom Desbarats holds out as the second pillar on which the *Canada Found* portion of the book is based.

Desbarats is too good a journalist not to describe the Prime Minister's warts: the innate inability to understand the West, to com-



Desbarats: Canada as a nation of Willy Lomans in *Death Of A Salesman*

promise, to refrain from political overkill. But, in the book's great strength and great weakness, he wants to see the dreams on which this country was founded brought

into the modern era. So he asks the Prime Minister to run, like Terry Fox, a marathon of hope.

Robert Sheppard is an Ottawa reporter for *The Globe and Mail*.