

Peter Desbarats — he's been 'discovered' again

Montreal's top TV journalist off to greener fields

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In journalism as in politics in this country one does not, if one wishes to reach the heights, make a naked display of ambition.

One awaits discovery, or the semblance of it. One must be annointed by and carried on the shoulders of men who give power as surely as kings once gave fiefdoms.

And Peter Desbarats understands this.

Never has he promoted himself. The phone always rings at his end first.

Like the time, five years ago, that a producer named Paul Wright asked him to become host of a daily television show on public affairs. Then called 7 on 6, the program would later become Hourglass.

COLUMN

Like the time, just recently, that a managing editor named Marty Goodman asked him to become the Ottawa based, nationally syndicated political columnist of the Toronto Daily Star. Desbarats resisted at first, but Goodman, nothing if not tenacious, had a drink with him during a visit here. Goodman spelled it out: an excellent salary and the freedom to work in television.

Here was the offer of a lifetime and Desbarats knew it. It would bring security. And it would bring a national audience, and thus it would bring influence and power.

And so Desbarats, with the calm of the elect, reached out and took it.

Born in this city 38 years ago next month, son of a printer who was son of a printer, descendant of Pierre Desbarats who was King's Printer at Quebec in 1690, Desbarats was instructed early in his youth on the uses of surety.

"My grandmother appropriated me very young," he was saying the other day as he pointed out her picture in the hall of his Ontario St. apartment.

"She was from Philadelphia," he said. "Her name was Jeannette Henkels. She always made sure that I understood that I was to consider myself better than other people. She was a real snob. And she had lasting effects on me — good and bad."

Independent from the first, Desbarats decided at 12 that he would not enter the family printing business. At 16 he owned a motorcycle, four years before Brando began the vogue of black jacketed defiance. The same year, 1950, he dropped out of high school and became a copy boy

at the Canadian Press. He has worn sideburns for a decade.

Yet he has always been acutely aware of the family connection and of its ties to this city. Four years ago, in a magazine piece called Montreal Confessions, he wrote: "I know exactly the few square feet reserved for me in the vault on the same mountain where my ancestors watch, behind wrought iron gates, the island, the river and the low gray swell of the Laurentians on the northern horizon."

And, he added, "No day passes that I am not consciously grateful to this city and whatever providential quirk cast me upon this island."

That quirk was a fire in 1869 at his great grandfather's printing plant in — of all places — Ottawa, after which he set up shop in Montreal.

Desbarats finds it a wry, not ominous, link. In going to the capital, he is giving up the easier role of television interrogator for the more exacting task of writing three lengthy columns per week. (Although you will be seeing much of him on the CBC programs Weekend and Encounter).

Moreover, there will be very great pressure upon him to succeed, pressure to be the most influential of his rank in the country as was Peter Newman, when he held the same job; pressure from which, obviously, Desbarats does not shrink.

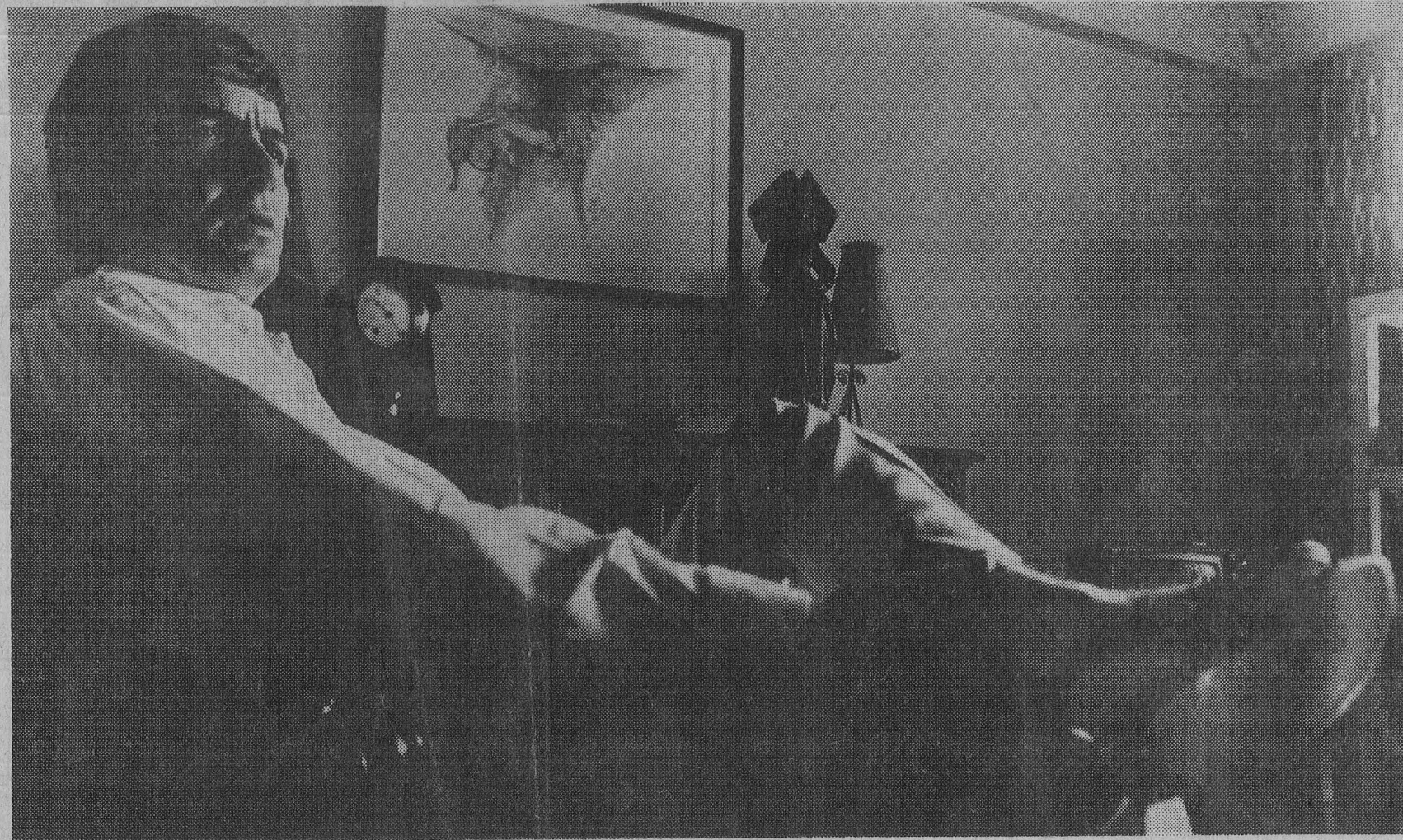
MUST BE BEST

"I want the column to be important," he said, as he sat in an Occasional chair in his living room, "I want it to be read. It has to be the best thing of its kind in the country and if it's not then it's a failure and I won't keep at it. But I don't consider that I shall fail.

"It's simply the best job for a writing journalist in this country. I look upon it as a long term commitment, 10 years or so. It's going to take a couple of years to get it going but Goodman and the publishers have the same point of view as I do in approaching it. They are interested in humanizing the column, in the past there has been too much insider's stuff. They like the idea of going out and taking a look at the country. They want it to be a national column."

Too, there is an election coming up next year. Making of the PM, 1972 and all that, from which — if Desbarats' touch of the nation is fine as that he has for his home city — may emerge the first best-seller on Canada and her people viewed during an electoral campaign.

Certainly Desbarats knows



(Gazette, Garth Pritchard)

Peter Desbarats in his Montreal apartment—he wants his Ottawa column to be the best of its kind in the country

the land. Ten years ago he traversed it for The Montreal Star. Three times, he covered the stalemated campaigns of the Diefenbaker-Pearson epoch.

"I will be curious to know how things have changed," he said. He poured himself a cup of coffee from a glass perculator and split and buttered a muffin. His infant son, Nicholas, was in the kitchen from which at intervals issued streams of conversational particles.

"Change," Desbarats said, picking up on his last word and changing direction, "Is something which, I think, every journalist needs."

It is the old matter of moving on when one stops growing or, worse, becomes stale.

In a way, of course, he went stale as an 11th grade student.

HANG-UP

"I went through the classic adolescent hang-up," he said. "I flunked my last year in high school miserably. I had an eight-year scholarship to high school and college at Loyola. I went from marks of 80 per cent down to 30 per cent. I lost my scholarship, of course, and went to work at CP as a copy boy. My uncle got me the job because he knew Alan Randal, who was news editor there before he became the news editor of The Gazette. Randal kind of

took me under his wing. He used to hold classes for me and another kid at night. He'd show us how to write leads. One day it happened that there were no reporters in the office and so they sent me to cover the return of the Canadian national hockey team from Europe. That was my first byline."

On the police desk of The Gazette he discovered that "when you put a funny angle on a story they gave it a byline."

"The story I've always been proudest of getting occurred around that time. The fellow who covered police headquarters was going on holiday and I was going to sub for him. Well, there was this dismemberment, a really grim story. They made an arrest in Quebec City and brought this guy in for questioning. Well, Bill Bantey was at The Herald then and he was pretty good at this sort of thing. He knew the police so well he was in on the questioning. I was right on deadline so I pieced together what I could, wrote it down and dashed to a phone booth across the street, called the cop in the room where they were questioning this guy and told him I had this bulletin from CP and would he confirm it. He corrected every mistake as I read along and I got the story."

But it was, he said, out

West that he learned his business, in Winnipeg, where he worked from 1955 to 1959 on the Tribune.

COMPETITIVE

"It was a fiercely competitive town. The guy from the Free Press and I left carbon copies of phony stories lying around in wastepaper baskets. All that movie stuff."

Finally, he came home and went to work as a feature writer for The Star, from which he resigned in late 1965 to commit himself full time to being the \$50 per week editor of a magazine called Parallel, which had an office in Cantlie House, and which offered a 100 year subscription for \$300. The magazine failed, though it was good enough to succeed.

"What shook me loose from the Star," he said, "was not TV at first but that magazine, it wasn't until then that I looked at daily newspapers from the outside, and I found that after years of turning out this terrific wordage, a lot of which meant nothing to me, that it got me down after a while."

His last five years spent on Hourglass, Desbarats describes as "quite extraordinary. Every day," he said, "you'd go on and discuss the day's news in that two hour conference with the whole staff. We had some terrific fights and sometimes it was

exhausting. There would be Nick Auf der Maur saying we had to free the working class and Paul Wright would make himself take the side of St. James St. and I'd usually be gingerly left of centre."

From 22 years as a journal-

ist, Desbarats has acquired an estimation of his profession, which is in this country, he says, in a "primitive state."

It is interesting, he says, that the first full scale investigation of the media, the Davy Commission, "was

launched by a non-journalist. There haven't until now, been systems of hiring and so people with no ability get on and stay on so long that they can't be fired. So there is a lot of incompetent people working in and running newspapers. And as television gets its people from the papers, it has faced the same problem."

BADLY ORGANIZED

Desbarats himself is like most journalists, badly organized. His Sherbrooke St. office appears chaotic and he writes best against a deadline. Luckily, he says, Linda, his second wife, (he has six daughters by previous marriage) can handle business stuff. "She's a nurse, and a fantastic amateur accountant, thank heaven's."

Desbarats had mentioned the family printing business had been sold following the death by cancer of his younger brother a while back. His mother, he said, retained a nominal interest. "Sorry to see what looks to be the end of a long line... Maybe my brother's son, maybe my son," he said absently.

Nicholas was in the hall now, back from a mid-day shopping trip with his mother. He is rather in the image of his grandfather, who, as a child, was in the picture with Jeannette Henkels on the hall wall.

But Nicholas Desbarats will grow up in Ottawa and, probably, he will not go into the printing business. He did not appear worried about this, however, as his father lifted him so that he could grip the handle of the fire extinguisher outside the front door.