

Provocative analysis of Canada's problems

Looking Forward In Anguish
Canada Lost, Canada Found

By Peter Desbarats

(McClelland & Stewart, \$9.95)

Peter Desbarats has written an angry book. It's deeply pessimistic. He's profoundly frustrated, and only very occasionally allows himself to clutch at straws of optimism. It is, above all, a polemic.

In short, it's aggressive and controversial. The author is one of Canada's most accomplished and experienced journalists. He is very, very worried that "the most characteristic passion, and the only one that joins us from coast to coast, is hatred."

While this may seem over-statement to many, there can be little doubt that the present near-impasse over the constitution and energy aren't helping make various regions and sectors feel too fondly about each other. Desbarats feels the country is heading, witlessly and unerringly, toward self-destruction. His book aims at alerting Canadians to the incredible dangers of such a state of affairs.

The book is well-researched and gives a useful, concise roundup of various significant events and processes of recent years. He is critical of the bureaucracy. He assesses the strengths and weaknesses of Trudeau, but makes clear he (Desbarats) feels patriation is a kind of last, best hope. He gives, incidentally, a valuable reminder of Trudeau writing 20 years ago, before he even entered active politics, of his proposals of constitutional amendment — and then to bring the constitution back to Canada.

Desbarats feels Canadians "are beginning to understand, for the first time in our experience, the extent of our failure. It is awesome and frightening, but at least it has

the ring of truth and we can start to build upon it."

This is strong stuff, but he sets out well and clearly his grounds for severe pessimism. He has the experienced journalist's knack for getting right to the core of the question. For instance, in his chapter on Montreal, he states quite simply at the beginning: "If there were no Montreal, there would be no English in Quebec. If there were no English-speaking Quebecers, Canada as we know it today would not exist. It would be a different country, or countries, with different problems."

This is a rousing book. It's well-written and hard-hitting. That's in the tradition of polemics and pamphlets, ever since the invention of the printing press. So, too, however, is the tendency to exaggeration, to an impassioned desire to fit everything into the framework of the writer's argument. Has everything about the post-Confederation period been negative? In democracies, people complain loudly and publicly much of the time, surely? In a federal system, isn't there a constant stress on compromise? And isn't it twisting, or at least grossly over-simplifying, history to praise American reaction to Watergate by describing it merely as "a third-rate burglary of a party headquarters."

Nonetheless, these are minor blemishes. Desbarats' book is consistently provocative, continually asking questions, worrying throughout. Bubbling with its usual bravado and bluster, the blurb insists "this is a book no Canadian can afford to ignore." Like the book at times, that too is a bit of an over-statement.

For Canadians trying to understand the background to the country's current problems, this book provides a short and stimulating statement of one set of views.

Reviewed by Alexander Craig



PETER DESBARATS