The Making of A People’s History: An Improbable Struggle, an Epic Result

Mark Starowicz

In 1995, a low moment in the history of the CBC, the fate of Canada itself hung in the balance with the Quebec referendum. Paradoxically, Mark Starowicz seized on the moment to propose the biggest and boldest production in Canadian television history, Canada: A People’s History. Five years in the making, it would run in both English and French on CBC and Radio-Canada, attract an audience of millions, become a best-selling boxed video set, and win a shelf full of awards. In this exclusive excerpt from Making History, his book on the making of the series, Starowicz recounts its improbable origins and how it almost sank — literally. Starowicz, founding producer of Sunday Morning and The Journal, tells of the struggle out of which a television epic was born.

On its very first shoot, the Canadian History Project comprised five drenched people on the deck of a twelve-metre boat that was sinking slowly in the middle of the ocean. It was the dead of night and we were miles from land. “Whatever you do,” Keith Bonnell shouted, “do not jump in the water! You’ll die of hypothermia in ten minutes.” The wheelhouse was billowing smoke, and the boat had sunk so low that sea water was lapping at our shoes whenever we moved. I had been in danger before – once I was even caught in an ambush in Cambodia. But this dark, silent moment in the Strait of Belle Isle off the coast of Newfoundland was the closest I have come to dying.

What made this different from my previous brushes with fate was the slowness. There was none of the sudden confusion of an ambush or the terror of an exploding mortar shell; this wasn’t a bewildering surprise. It was more like waiting in line, wondering how soon the boat would slip below the waves and contemplating how death would be. But there is a greater horror than drowning alone. Beside me on the deck was my thirteen-year-old daughter, Caitlin, whom I had brought on the expedition. When I realized that we were sinking, I panicked for a moment, thinking that I had doomed my own daughter. Then I remembered the tiny rubber dinghy that was tied half-swamped to the starboard side. Caitlin and Louis Martin from Radio-Canada could both fit in it. Surely everyone would agree to save the oldest and the youngest. The dinghy wouldn’t hold anyone else. Not the boat’s three crew members. Not Gene Allen, the journalist and historian, who was the brains of the project. Not Michael Sweeney, the cameraman who had been to every war zone in the past twenty-five years. Caitlin and Louis would watch us drown.

It was July 28, 1997, and it had taken us two and a half years to get to this dark moment: years filled with corporate intrigue inside a devastated and divided CBC and with dramatic negotiations that took us into the boardrooms of Canadian industrial giants and into the governor general’s resi-
Prime Time News was one of the biggest disasters in CBC Television history. By the winter of 1995, the news ratings were in the toilet, the regions were living in terror of being eliminated, the current affairs department was totally demoralized. For months, television columnists had feasted like sharks on daily rumours from Prime Time News that the hosts, Peter Mansbridge and Pamela Wallin, loathed each other.

The political climate at the CBC wasn’t only toxic, it was also absurd. Velleux had gone to a senior post at Power Corporation in Montreal, and Pattillo moved to Toronto, provoking a minor but memorable crisis. He was now vice-president of communications, and CBC protocol says that vice-presidents get toilets in their offices. But his new office in Toronto did not have one, so considerable replumbing was undertaken by the building services department to honour his status. This was awkward in a period of the impending layoff of hundreds of people, so it became legend around the building.

It was depressing to walk around the CBC. The journey to this night began in 1995, a year when Canada looked like it might come asunder, the CBC was definitely falling apart, and I wasn’t feeling so good myself.

This was the year I turned forty-nine, and the prospect bothered me. “I’d rather be fifty,” I told my friends. Television commercials were full of fifty-year-olds eating margarine on mountain summits. “You can be a young fifty,” I argued, “but you can’t be a young forty-nine. That’s just a decrepit forty-year-old.” The thought of being forty-nine was bad enough, but the anniversary that really made me edgy was coming up in March of that year: I would be inducted into the twenty-five-year club at the CBC.

That meant I had spent more of my life in the CBC than out of it, since I had joined when I was twenty-four. And that winter of 1995, the investment of half your life at the CBC was worth as much as a handful of Yugoslavian war bonds – or, for that matter, the Liberal Party’s Red Book of promises from the recent election. Because two days before my anniversary, even the president of the CBC bailed out of the ship I had sailed for a quarter-century.

Robert Pattillo, the vice-president of communications, signed the announcement of Manera’s hurried exit. Pattillo, who was devoted to his two pet Dobermans, had been Gérard Velleux’s “special adviser” and one of the masterminds behind the 1992 combining of The National and The Journal into one lumbering package called Prime Time News – thereby killing the two most respected brand names in Canadian television and executing its leading current affairs program – and marching the news hour boldly to 9:00 p.m. It was one of the biggest disasters in CBC Television history. By the winter of 1995, the news ratings were in the toilet, the regions were living in terror of being eliminated, the current affairs department was totally demoralized. For months, television columnists had feasted like sharks on daily rumours from Prime Time News that the hosts, Peter Mansbridge and Pamela Wallin, loathed each other.
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Hubert Gendron, Radio-Canada

Les Patriotes make a defiant and desperate stand against the Red Coats in the making of Canada: A People’s History

by which Canada was certain to lose the global competition, we had found it.

In April 1995, I was in London with my colleague Don Richardson for negotiations with the BBC. Our mission in London involved the biggest co-production ever undertaken between the CBC, BBC Television, and the History Channel in the United States. It was a six-part documentary epic called Dawn of the Eye, on the history of newsreels and television news, from Thomas Edison to O.J. Simpson, to coincide with the centenary of cinema. A hundred years of deceit, distortion, and scandal.

It was good to be away from the CBC for a couple of weeks and to have a project that was immune from the savagery going on in Toronto, because it had foreign co-production money. It was good to be researching, visiting archives, and screening famous footage – in short, being creative again. It was even better to be embarking on a global television stage, where I thought the CBC should be pushing with all its documentary talent. In effect, we would be doing the history of British newsreels and television news, along with our British colleagues. We would be writing the history of American television for American television. That felt good.

In the bar of the Langham Hotel and the Acme Bar and Grill in Toronto, we schemed and dreamed. We were going to build a tight, fast, and mobile production machine that could compete with the world and put Canada on the production map again.

That is, if Canada as we knew it was still on any map.

Joe Clark was right when he warned that Canada was sleepwalking into disaster. In September and October of 1995, English Canadians started to wake up and realize that something historic was imminent. I decided that I couldn’t just watch the referendum from Toronto. I was raised in Quebec, I spoke French, I had been there the day René Lévesque walked out of the Liberal Party convention and set up the fledgling Mouvement Souveraineté-Association. I called my closest friend, Nick Auf der Maur, to find out where my old Montreal gang would be watching the results. I should have saved myself the effort: “At Winnie’s, of course,” he said with the contempt of someone who has just been asked where the Pope lives. Winnie’s – the Sir Winston Churchill Pub on Crescent Street – was the gathering place for Montreal’s anglophone journalists, writers, sports columnists, one Cuban gunrunner, and several gentlemen who had a lot to do with stolen cargo and who tended to keep to themselves. Mordecai Richler made Winnie’s famous in his writings and could usually be found there arguing with Auf der Maur. “Everyone’s going to be here,” Nick promised, “including live television crews.” He made it sound like the
Restaurant at the End of the Universe.

I decided I should take Caitlin, my elder daughter, who was twelve and had been in French immersion since Grade 1. I told her, “We may see the birth of a new country begin tomorrow, and though it won’t be the happiest day for me, it’s your generation that will deal with that future. You might as well get to know your counterparts now, and be able to say that you were there to see the beginning.”

The escalator from Central Station leads up to Boulevard René-Lévesque. As we stood waiting for a taxi, I pointed to the street sign and said to Caitlin: “I knew him before he became famous. He was a friend. He started all this.” I always feel a mix of emotions standing in that spot, seeing someone I knew in ordinary life, sitting next to him in a bar on a boring Tuesday evening, his name now emblazoned on the street corner opposite the Roman Catholic cathedral. This Monday afternoon, just hours before the referendum that might complete his vision, I felt a little empty, arriving in Montreal like a total stranger to the denouement of a story that had once been so large a part of my life.

Nick Auf der Maur had been chief copy clerk at the Gazette when I joined as junior copy clerk, and he introduced me to a life I had never even imagined existed. He took me with him to the bohemian underground of east-end Montreal, where he knew every artist and hothead in the city, and thoroughly corrupted the life of a studious immigrant teenager from the west end. He was my oldest friend and my older brother. We covered the rise of nationalism together, interviewed all the leading players, covered all the riots and demonstrations. He had gone on to become a folkloric figure in the city, a television personality, a newspaper columnist, a city councillor, a federal candidate, an author, and a much-sought-after commentator on Quebec affairs.

The TV set at the bar was already blaring, and within minutes the electronic map of Quebec was showing a tide of Yes sweeping from east to west with incredible speed. Every region except Hull was voting Yes, and the future of Quebec would all be decided on the densely populated island of Montreal. I couldn’t continue watching this at Winnie’s. History wasn’t going to happen here, it was going to happen a few blocks away at the Palais des Congrès, where the Oui side was massed in its thousands, watching the results on giant screens. Caitlin and I flagged a taxi, and I was afraid everything would be over in the ten minutes it took us to get there.

The vote percentages for the two sides were even, flickering a fraction below or above 50 per cent. Then the Oui began to hover longer and longer at 50, then 50.5, then 51. The roar of the crowd became constant. “On veut un pays!” (We want a country.) Whatever happened next would be divisive. A very narrow victory or a very narrow defeat would resolve nothing and held the potential for ugliness.

Then within two minutes, everything changed. The huge digital counter stopped racing, moving only sluggishly, as in some tawdry B-grade movie which shows the countdown on a nuclear bomb. Half a percentage point short of a Yes, the count froze. The chanting stopped and people milled around, uncertain. Was it over? Would some ballot box somewhere tip the total past 50? The mood had gone from mounting excitement to unbearable suspense and then, suddenly, numbed nothingness. The counter refused to budge.

While we were in the cab back to Winnie’s, Parizeau was making the vulgar concession speech that blamed immigrants and big money. By morning, to Quebec’s credit, denunciation of his remarks by commentators was so widespread that a clamour was already building for his resignation. There was no joy at Winnie’s. This crowd of Quebec Anglois had been too savvy to share in Ottawa’s overconfidence before tonight. But half a percentage point! When you lived on the linguistic fault line of the country every day, you knew this was no victory.

It was obvious that, in this new information order, ownership of content was everything. Bricks and mortar didn’t matter. Who owned the rights to Casablanca? Who owned the production apparatus and the talent that could produce drama and documentary?

The next morning we boarded the train back to Toronto. On the five-hour trip I wrote the first of many drafts of a memo:

When I went to Montreal on Referendum day, I took my elder daughter with me, and on the train - with Xeroxes from encyclopaedias – I tried to tell her how we got here: Conquest, American invasion, Upper and Lower Canada, Act of Union. . . . Poor kid.

And it underscored for me that I can buy her two television histories of the Civil War, or the History of Baseball, or the War of the Roses, five boxed sets on World War Two, two on the Vietnam War, and one on the Civil Rights Movement, three on Sexual Technique, the complete Edward R. Murrow Collection and two sets on Mutual Fund management. But I cannot give my children the History of Canada. It is missing, effectively, from the television archive of our country.

We have not done, for this generation, the most important story of all . . . . The nation is undergoing not only tremendous crisis, but also fundamental change from Quebec sovereignty to Free Trade. There is no current material that can show our audience the exciting and dramatic evolution of our country. . . . This is more than a pity, because of the excitement inherent in the story.
this is a social and even political problem. This is a failure of cultural policy, and it’s happening on our watch.

The shock of the referendum was not the genesis of the Canadian History Project. I had been actively talking about the idea for years, and in the documentary unit, we hoped it would be the next project for the Dawn of the Eye team. But until now, I had zero confidence I could sell it in the acrid climate in the CBC. I began to think that now might be the moment to make the formal move. The referendum, I was betting, would change the climate in the CBC, because it had given us all a brush with history.

Over the next three weeks, I crafted the memo to Bob Culbert, who I knew would support the project. The memo gave Culbert the tactical instrument that would allow him to begin staking out the ground for us and begin to mobilize support. The memo went on to describe the series, showing that we had already developed a pretty clear idea of the approach - but massively underestimated its eventual length, by twelve hours:

It would be A People’s History of Canada, a narrative history emphasizing the diaries and letters of farmers, explorers, traders and immigrants, rather than a diplomatic history. This is the core approach of Shelby Foote’s A Narrative History of the Civil War and Peter Watkins’s Culloden. It is vibrant, story-driven and exciting. It is also very good historiography.

This series would assemble a committee of historical advisors which would be the best in the country. Within the series, every name, every line from a letter, every scene would be impeccably accurate. It would begin with the history of the aboriginal people, and end with the 1980’s. We’re certain we can make this a must-see national event. This is not intended to be didactic.

I’m always uncomfortable whenever I am asked when I got the idea for the project. It was hardly an original idea.

When I first met Peter Herndorf in the mid-1970s, when he was vice-president of English Television, he told me, “There are two great ancestral projects which we have to do someday. The first is a history of Canada. The second is the twenty great classics of Canadian literature.” I wasn’t even thirty yet, and not even in television. It would take the conjunction of the millennium, the near-collapse of the country on October 30, 1995, and the virtual collapse of the CBC as we knew it before anyone could roll this boulder over the hill. And it took the most improbable team the CBC and Radio-Canada had ever seen to get the boulder there.

Improbable things happen all the time. Creationists (e.g., William Lane Craig) and all manner of non-rationalists like to disparage their opponents or bolster their own arguments by pointing out the lack of probability of something happening. Out of all the possibilities, they say, this one is the one that occurred â€“ how fantastically unlikely and amazingly miraculous! It is simply impossible to believe that it just happened by chance! It disguises the epic struggle over power, money and influence that is about to ensue. There is genuine internet technology involved in the â€œInternet of Thingsâ€. However, the legacy internet of yesterday is a shrinking part of what is at stake now. Digital commerce and governance is moving, as fast and hard as it possibly can, into a full-spectrum dominance over whatever used to be analogue. In practice, the Internet of Things means an epic transformation: all-purpose electronic automation through digital surveillance by wireless broadband. In this essay Iâ€™ll describe how this is likely to wo Until then, people had believed that some sort of fundamental force separated animate from inanimate matter. The artificial creation of a chemical of nature, such as urea, out of inanimate substances in a laboratory had been considered totally impossible. Wohlerâ€™s discovery spawned a second front in manâ€™s knowledge of how to use the same materials as nature, but for his own means.