

Peter Gzowski: A Biography By R. B. Fleming

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blended perfectly with the intriguing partnerships of the English, Scottish, French-Canadians and Metis of the North West Company.

Feasting and Fasting will appeal to historians, cooks and trivia buffs alike. It is well referenced with a strong bibliography. One would expect no less from Ms. Duncan. An entertaining and interesting read indeed. In the end, it felt complete while still urging us to engage in further research on the material found in any one of these chapters. This is a perfect sampler of our

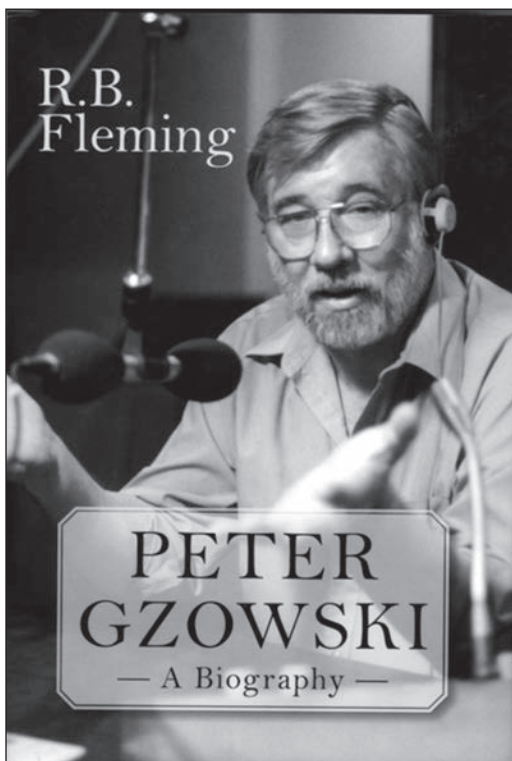
socio-cultural culinary history. As Canadian perspectives on cooking and feasting often exclude any reflection of our food heritage, Duncan encourages us to connect to our not so distant foodways. The potential impact of such a connection on our culinary landscape is immeasurable. It could even inspire us to cook!

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Peter Gzowski: A Biography

By R. B. Fleming

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010. 512 pp. \$40.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-1-55488-720-0 (www.dundurn.com)



Peter Gzowski was an icon. As host of the CBC radio show *Morningside* from 1982 until 1997, he articulated a view of Canada that resonated across the country. His biographer, R.B. Fleming, talks of Gzowski's ability to imagine this view of Canada into existence. But that was not quite it. Rather Gzowski had an extraordinary ability to clarify the imaginings of his audience, and then reflect them back.

For a newspaper man of his era (and even in radio, Gzowski was a newspaper man), his life was not particularly unusual. He drank and smoked too much. He preferred hanging out with his cronies to life at home with wife and children. He was unfaithful.

The man who would eventually be lauded as one of Canada's premier journalists fell into his profession by accident. In 1954, he was doing badly at university and needed a job. Thanks to family pull, he landed one at the Timmins *Daily*

Press, a small northern Ontario newspaper. He discovered he liked the work. He also discovered he was good at it.

From Timmins, Gzowski bounced across the country. He returned to the University of Toronto (from which he never graduated) to edit the student newspaper. He got jobs at dailies in Moose Jaw and Chatham. He was talent-spotted by *Maclean's* editor Ralph Allen, himself a journalistic icon of the period. He quit *Maclean's* in a huff, spent some time at the *Toronto Star* (again under Allen), took over the *Star Weekly* for a year until it folded, returned to *Maclean's* and quit once more.

Fleming describes how, as a print journalist, Gzowski was eclectic, writing on everything from sports to popular culture. During a period in which Canada moved from John Diefenbaker to Quebec's Quiet Revolution to Pierre Trudeau, he was also an astute observer of politics. But in that early period, he made his name less as a reporter than as brash, young editor—an *enfant terrible* who not only understood what engaged the public but could motivate others to write.

It was a talent that he took with him to CBC Radio. His critics may have been right that Gzowski's depiction of Canada over 15 years of Morningside—as a civilized, somewhat Red Tory land of quiet heroism and home-baked blueberry muffins—was incomplete. But in those years, it was a dominant image, one that appealed to far more than the 350,000 listeners who made up the average Morningside audience.

As a radio interviewer, he was unequalled. Fleming, comparing Gzowski's technique to that of hockey star Wayne Gretzky, writes how he would metaphorically circle a guest, as he searched for the right opening. He also did his homework and worked his staff hard. Most important,

though, was his almost unerring ability to make guests feel comfortable.

In part, this was the result of a deliberately shambling style (his on-air stutter, for instance, was largely contrived). But he also had an inexplicable ability to make interviewees feel that he was genuinely intrigued by their every word—even when he was not.

Biography is a tough art, particularly when the subject—unlike, say, a politician anticipating fame—neither keeps a diary nor employs someone who does. Fleming has done a thorough job here, searching out whatever archival sources do exist and interviewing those who knew or worked with Gzowski. There is the occasional minor error (Timmins' bilingual radio station was CFCL not CKCL). But, in general, the scholarship is impeccable.

Fleming's overriding thesis is that Gzowski was a mythmaker, both nationally and personally. Certainly, there is evidence of that. One of the book's most intriguing sections deals with how Gzowski deliberately censored his own book on hockey, *The Game of Our Lives*, by omitting some of the more unsavory aspects of players' behaviour. Apparently, he did not wish his paean to Canada's national sport tainted by accounts of cocaine and fellatio.

Still, at times, there is a sense that the biographer is trying to prove too much. Fleming dismisses as an invention Gzowski's claim that his grandfather once saved the life of a Chinese employee, arguing that "the anti-Oriental mood of Canada at time" made such a good deed unlikely. He concludes that Gzowski's mother engaged in extra-marital affairs on the basis of gossip from an unnamed source. He returns again and again, and for no apparent reason, to Gzowski's discomfort with homosexuality.

The most controversial portion of

Fleming's book is his revelation that Gzowski secretly fathered a love-child. Curiously, the biographer chose to confine this entire episode to a self-contained epilogue rather than weave it into his chronological narrative.

At one level, that's unfortunate since it prevents the reader from seeing how Gzowski's secret life informed his public

one. But perhaps that how this talented—if flawed—interpreter of myth would have preferred it.

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Political columnist at the Toronto Star. He has been interviewed on radio by Peter Gzowski and was briefly on one of his Morningside panels.

Imagining Toronto

by Amy Lavender Harris

Toronto: Mansfield Press, 2010. 333 pages.
\$21.95 softcover. ISBN 987-1-894469-39-5
(www.mansfield.press.net)

There's an array of names you can give the place: Muddy York, Toronto the Good, Toronto the dull and/or ugly, the most multicultural city on earth, the city of neighbourhoods, the most hated city in Canada. It's a long list of possibilities, and as this book makes delightfully clear, for each term someone is conjuring up a way of looking at the place and making it real.

In fact the way we imagine Toronto probably is much more persuasive in realizing the city than any amount of park or concrete, big buildings or small, rich people or dispossessed. It is not so much that art is truer than real life but rather that it is capable of giving us the ability to grab on to some important aspect of the city. The merit of new works of art is that they give us new ways of seeing the city we live in, afresh.

And it is not until one begins to browse this fine book that the scope of ways to think about the Toronto becomes so vast. I counted well over 600 books that Harris refers to along the way, most of them fiction, but also some poetry and plays, and a few even claiming to be non-fictional although

they too contained their share of imagining. Some, like books by Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, Anne Michaels, Raymond Souster and M.G. Vassanji, are well known. Many are not, and Harris's great service is to give the lesser knowns a presence, and to open the door to their delights. Rabindranath Maharaj's *Homer in Flight* has entered my must-read list, as has work by Zoe Whittall, Gwendolyn MacEwen (whom I knew about but hadn't want to treat as seriously as Harris thinks I should), and Phyllis Young as a start.

Harris chooses themes and places and turns to authors to see what they say. The waterfront often is a place for suicide; the Toronto Islands for sexual endeavours, as sometimes is Kensington Market; ravines are places of violence; streetcars are generally welcoming to people (although subways can be a threat); Union Station is uplifting.

She recounts the extensive talk about neighbourhoods and how they define our lives and social status, from Hugh Garner's Cabbagetown to Timothy Findlay's Rosedale, Pat Capponi's Parkdale and Katherine Govier's Annex. Who knew that we had so many writers who had so many interesting things to say about every corner of the city. Harris delves into half a dozen novels about the homeless—a derelict ex-doctor, a disgraced ex-judge, and more—and concludes that "all of them are