

# Wonderfully weird, we Canadians, eh?

BY PETER O'BRIEN  
For The Financial Post

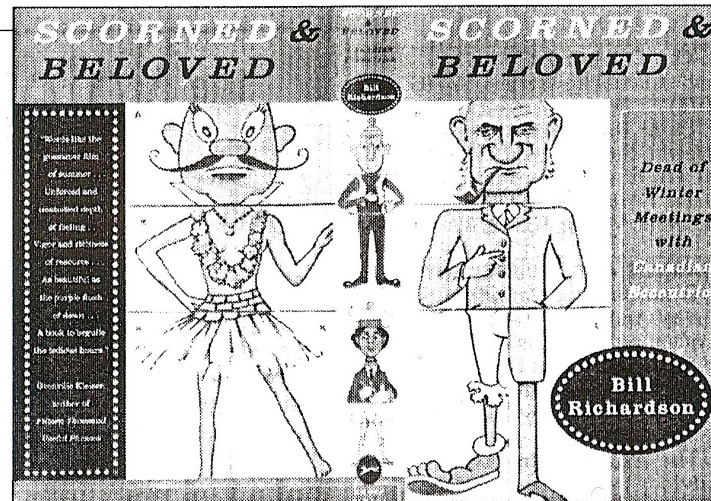
Like its topic, *Scorned & Beloved* is quirky, effervescent and sometimes a little schmaltzy. The defining energy of the book is not so much the cast of queer and marvelous persons collected here — and there are many — but the character of Bill Richardson himself. A self-described Nosy Parker, Richardson is a past winner of the Stephen Leacock Medal for Humor and host of *Richardson's Roundup* on CBC Radio One. A sympathetic listener, prodigious gatherer, and idiosyncratic storyteller he is the perfect guide for such an exotic journey.

Among those he has gathered are Sylvie Longpré of Repentigny, Que., a veritable Barbie. Sylvie not only has a considerable collection of Barbies (Ballerina Barbie, Equestrienne Barbie, as well as Korean Barbie and Inuit Barbie), but also looks, dresses and "tries her best to lead a Barbie kind of life." Many of her clothes, made by her mother, are duplicates of Bar-

bie attire. She also owns two Afghan hounds and drives a Corvette because you-know-who does.

Paul Wuketsewitz, aka Paul Bog, is an eccentric of a different scent. Originally from Vienna, Man., after various bouts of bad luck. He took up residence, with his horses and cats, for 20 years in a manure pile. When he got hungry he would kill and eat one of his horses. When his home burned down he moved into a friend's barn, taking with him two garbage bags that he had buried. They contained \$34,000. He died in 1987, aged 86.

And then there is Arthur Thurston of Yarmouth, N.S., who kept pigeons, lots of them, in his house. Although he has written 19 books about the American Civil War and various Yarmouth-related topics, most people remember him for his pigeons — and for the fact that it took the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia to issue an ultimatum that ended up with Thurston's 120-



## Scorned & Beloved: Dead of Winter Meetings with Canadian Eccentrics

By Bill Richardson Knopf, 342 pp., \$29.95

year-old house being razed in 1990.

There are dozens of other curious characters within these pages, some historical and some still with us. They include Charles Henry Danielle, proprietor of the Octagonal Castle in Paradise, Nfld., who designed a marvelous casket for himself, covered with black satin and upholstered inside with 7,800 white satin shells; Jean St-Germain, who invented the disposable baby bottle and went on to build a 2.3-million-pound marble and granite pyramid in St-Simon-de-Bagot, Que.; Lillian Alling, who walked from New York to Siberia in the late 1920s; and Charles Domery, a famous glutton who could eat at a single sitting a bullock's liver, three pounds of can-

dles and a few pounds of beef. As Richardson would say: "Holy Doodle!"

Woven throughout these histories is a constant cacophony of allusions and corny puns, as well as Richardson's singular affection for all things that dazzle and delight. He is a marvelous storyteller of the meandering of his own flesh and blood.

In the chapter, "The Offending Hand," he recounts his first masturbatory dream. There sandwiched between Tony Curtis and Robert Goulet is the young, naked, unshamed Bill Richardson. They have saved him from pygmy cannibals and spirit him away through the jungle, swinging from vine to vine as Goulet sings *The Impossible Dream*. The description is hi-

larious and, well, touching.

Richardson's retelling of the story of Noah — a seven-page preamble to the chapter "Ark" — is also uproariously funny and alone worth the price of the book.

Not all the meetings here are of the dead of winter, one-on-one with Richardson variety, and not all of the people discussed would be considered eccentrics. But the book is an attempt to hang on to the scraps of ephemeral history that fly by us and vanish all too quickly into an otherwise predictable, even-keeled world. As Richardson says, "we require the profane to remember the sacred; that in the midst of all that is holy, you must be ready to invite the devil into your house for a dance."

The purpose of the book, he says, is to prove that not all Canadians are "peace-keeping, maple-tapping, syrup-sucking, snow-fort-building rustics" who do little more than "trail clouds of blandness behind us where'er we walk." He also believes we have more to offer the parallel world of curious inhabitants than Glenn Gould, Emily Carr and Mackenzie King.

In another writer's voice this book would be curious and wonderful, but perhaps a bit objectifying or ghoulish. In Richardson's hands these people are alive, sympathetic, endearing. And the writing is electric, kinetic, bristly.

There's certainly more eccentric stories out there to be told and I await a sequel to *Scorned & Beloved*. Or perhaps Richardson could retell chunks of the Bible or the Talmud. They would have a fresh zippiness in the versions he would spin.

Peter O'Brien is a Toronto editor and writer.

January 24, 1998 *The Financial Post*