

PETER JENNINGS — AN APPRECIATION

Anthony Wilson-Smith

Peter Jennings had a world view, and a sense of the reporter's role in a story, formed by his personal and professional roots in Canada. Anthony Wilson-Smith writes that Jennings thought Canadian journalists were sometimes better suited than Americans to covering international news because "Americans were used to seeing their country as the leading actor on the world stage...while Canadians understood our role as spectators." Endlessly curious, relentlessly perfectionist, he had a way of getting what he wanted as the anchor of ABC's World News Tonight. In a fond appreciation, Wilson-Smith recalls the public grace and private kindness of a luminous star of whom Canadians were immensely proud.

Peter Jennings cultivait une vision du monde et des convictions journalistiques façonnées par ses racines canadiennes, tant personnelles que professionnelles. Anthony Wilson-Smith rappelle que Jennings pensait que les journalistes d'ici étaient parfois mieux à même de couvrir l'actualité internationale que leurs confrères américains, qui « voyaient leur pays comme le principal acteur de l'échiquier mondial (...), tandis que les Canadiens comprenaient mieux leur rôle d'observateurs ». D'une insatiable curiosité, ce grand perfectionniste a toujours su obtenir ce qu'il voulait dans ses fonctions de présentateur de l'émission « World News Tonight », sur la chaîne ABC. Wilson-Smith rend ici un vibrant hommage à Peter Jennings, évoquant le raffinement du personnage public et la discrète générosité d'un géant du journalisme dont les Canadiens étaient extrêmement fiers.

The first time I saw Peter Jennings in the flesh, he was lined up at a press centre in Communist-run East Berlin in the fall of 1989. The ongoing collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite countries was the big story of the moment — perhaps of the last half of the 20th century — and Jennings, never one to stay home when news was breaking elsewhere, had come to report on events marking the 40th anniversary of the German Democratic Republic's creation. He was wearing an elegant gray suit and a green trenchcoat that both looked tailored-to-measure, and, in a room full misshapen outfits that appeared to be made of a combination of cardboard and plastic, was as out of place as if he had just landed from another, far more urbane, planet. But he took his place quietly in line and, resisting repeated entreaties from a staff member to try to jump the queue, fidgeted only a bit as he waited for his accreditation. When his turn arrived, the clerk took an especially long time studying Jennings' documents, focusing on the apparent discrepancy between papers identifying him as a representative of the *American Broadcasting Company*, and the passport that suggested otherwise. Finally, after conferring with another functionary, the clerk asked the question troubling him.

"Why is it, Mr. Jennings," he said, "you work for American television, but carry a Canadian passport?"

"Oh, geez," sighed Jennings, rolling his eyes as he turned to the nearest North American-looking person in line (me): "I thought I could at least leave that question back in America for once."

No such luck — then or through most of his remarkable career — but if being a Canadian caused the occasional disruption in his life, it was also something Peter was prepared to endure and, most unusually for him, to brag about. He referred constantly to his Canadian roots, and prided himself on his close knowledge of ongoing events north of the border. He loved his adopted country (and, of course, eventually took out American citizenship as well), but he was very conscious of the distinctions between the two countries that shaped and claimed him as its own. Years after that East Berlin episode, we met more formally when I was assigned to write a story for *Macleans* on all the Canadians playing key roles on American news broadcasts. A couple of weeks after the piece appeared, Peter, ever the perfectionist, sent me a note pointing out a factual error in the story (I had written that he owned a piece of property that, in fact, he only leased). Ever the gentleman, he followed that up a couple of days later with a phone call inviting me to dinner the next time I went to New York. Later, after we had become friendly, I asked him over dinner one night

whether he remembered anything about that time in East Berlin. He didn't answer the question directly, but it launched him into a long discussion about the difference between Canadian and American journalists abroad, and why Canadians were often better suited to the world of international reporting. Americans, he said, were used to seeing their country as the leading actor on the world stage, and so even reporters had a hard time separating themselves from

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In ways, both personal and professional, Peter reflected that distinction. On camera, he always treated America as a beat to be covered fondly, but carefully, the way a doctor treats a longtime patient he likes, but knows needs careful attention. He always refused to use the word "we" on newscasts because, he explained once, "Journalists shouldn't include themselves in the story: that's something I learned at the CBC."

Similarly, there was a very good reason why ABC's nightly newscast was called *World News Tonight*, despite the very strong demonstrated preference of many Americans for large heapings of domestic news. Peter felt very strongly that Americans as a people needed to get out more and discover the rest of the world, and he was determined that his newscast should provide both a window on places elsewhere and a starting point with which to begin that quest.

Even as other American networks shrunk both the volume of their international coverage and the size of their staff overseas, Peter made heightened international coverage at ABC a personal mission (and played a direct role in the

hiring of many Canadians as correspondents — so much so that some frustrated colleagues took to joking that ABC stood for "American By Canadians"). His sense of curiosity was something he once described as "a Canadian insatiability to see the rest of the world."

The bookmarks on his computers both at home and in his book-stuffed ABC office included links to news sites from around the world —

including many in Canada — and with his restless, inquisitive nature, he never really stopped thinking about how things he learned could be processed and packaged into news stories. (Twice in recent years, I mentioned news events happening in Canada in the course of our conversations, and then several hours later found myself on camera, being interviewed by an ABC producer for segments Peter had immediately ordered on those subjects.) And Canada appeared far more regularly as a story subject on ABC broadcasts than it did on either NBC or CBS — not so much because of Peter's roots, but rather because he felt it behooved viewers to know much more about America's largest trading partner. So if you were an American ABC viewer, you emerged better informed about things like the 1995 Quebec referendum (Peter flew into Montreal to report on the outcome) or the "Joe Canadian" Molson commercials a few years back, and what they said about nascent Canadian nationalism sentiment among young males. And when Brian Mulroney was asked to speak at Ronald Reagan's funeral, Jennings understood how remarkable it was that a foreign leader be treated with such distinction and, alone among the Big Three networks, his newscast focused on that point.

He had wide-ranging interests, and he used his power and bully pulpit within ABC to repeatedly prod them to air more prime-time documentaries on topics that he found interesting and important — but far from certain to gain the big ratings numbers network executives craved. He had no illusions about why they let him produce and narrate productions such as the special he produced on the life of Jesus: "I'm in a position where I can push ABC to do certain things to keep me happy, and getting them to air things they might otherwise not approve is one of the things I push for," he remarked one time when one of his documentaries was about to go to air.

In his private life, Peter was able to mix the Canadian quality of reserve with, nonetheless, an ability to handle his celebrity with an understanding of both the perks it brought him and the accompanying lack of privacy. He sounded quite embarrassed on one occasion because he had just disembarked — for one of the few times in his life, he said — from a chartered aircraft that ABC sent to ferry him home from a promotional tour. On the other hand, he understood that his fame opened up opportunities and contacts that he could use to great advantage as a journalist — and that a lesser-known journalist could never dream of having.

The apartment he shared with his wife, Kayce Freed, on Central Park West, was sprawling, homey, and reflected his lifelong love of Inuit art and sculpture. It was also free of the various gewgaws, photos and awards that media people often display to advertise their worth; one of the only photographs of Peter in evidence, in fact, showed him as a teenager when he was a member of the cricket team that represented Canada on a trip to Great Britain. It was a source of pride with him that he seldom, he said, paid more than \$12 for a bottle of wine, although if that was the case, he must have had a terrific sommelier advising him, because nothing he served ever

tasted like plonk. His staff had all been with him for years: Ken, his driver on 24-hour-call, was also a lawyer-in-training who continued to drive just because he liked the gig — and the boss. Gretchen Babarovic, his longtime assistant at the ABC office, was referred to by Peter's younger sister, Sarah, as "the unofficial eldest sister" because she had been with him so long and knew him so well.

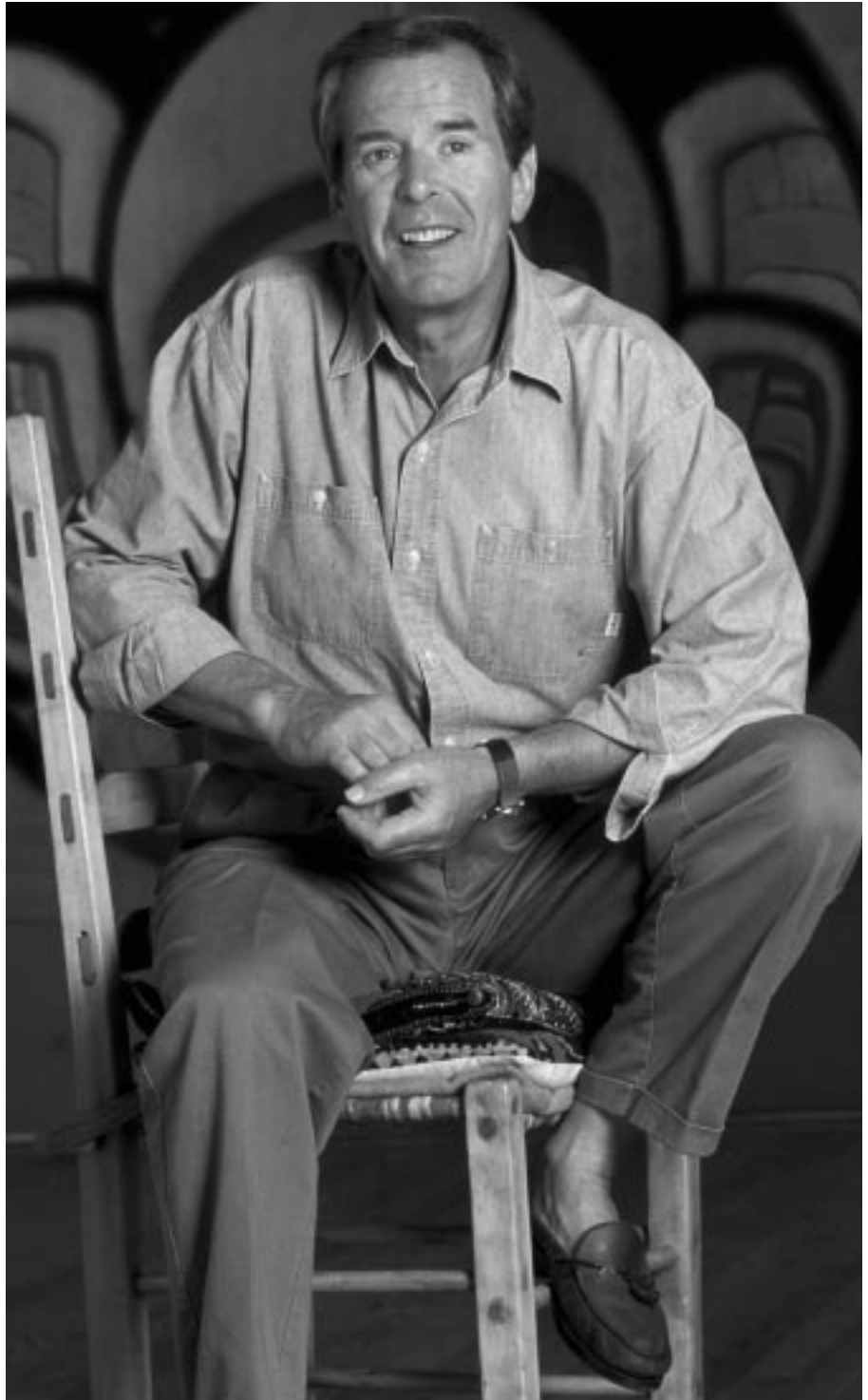
Even in Manhattan — a place where you seem to see someone famous on almost every corner — the level of Peter's celebrity was extraordinary and incandescent. At the official season's opening in the fall of 2003 of Carnegie Hall — in a room filled with well-known people, some of whose worth could be measured in the billions — a number of guests actually broke into applause when Peter and Kayce arrived. Ever the gracious host, he would ask a visitor to New York "who would you like to meet this time?"; that led to everything from a breakfast with Tina Brown to a dinner outing at which David Halberstam dropped by to say hello. One of Peter's remarkable gifts, acquired over the years, was his ability to appear to engage fully in all sorts of spirited debates without ever actually delivering an opinion of the sort that could come back to haunt him. He knew that part of the price of his renown was the number of people — American viewers and some colleagues in the media business — who were just waiting to catch him out on a rhetorical misstep or badly-expressed opinion so that they could brand him, again, as a closet liberal and, even worse, a foreigner.

So to some extent, his public persona in large social gatherings or dinner parties was not unlike his on-air manner: he would ask provocative questions, draw out opinions from others at the table, offer up his own anecdotes, but never quite be pulled into more troublesome waters. One time, we went out to a Manhattan restaurant with some of his friends the day after the Republicans had swept congressional races across most of the country. As is the case in New York,

most of the people there were Democrats, angrily decrying the state of national politics. Peter took full part in the discussion, and it wasn't till later that I realized that while he hadn't disagreed

with anything said, he couldn't necessarily be said to have agreed either.

The exception to all that was Peter's annual three-week retreat to the Gatineau Hills (along with shorter



Peter Bregg, *Maclean's*

Peter Jennings at ease at his weekend home on Long Island, which reflected his taste in Canadian furnishing and Inuit art. Of the many photos he took of Jennings, *Maclean's* photographer Peter Bregg says, "this is my favourite."

intermittent visits): it was the place, Sarah said, “where Peter could drop his defences and recharge himself for the rest of the year.” Ottawa was important to him both for what it was and what it represented: the place where he grew up, and where he could wind down. Some years ago, he was en route back from a gruelling weeks-long trip to the Middle East when he learned that Irving Rivers, a longtime merchant in Ottawa’s Byward Market area, had just died. When Peter landed in New York, he didn’t bother to go home: instead, he hopped immediately on a flight to Ottawa so that he could make it in time for the funeral service.

Not surprisingly, in a business — and an environment — with more than its share of sharks, Peter knew how to play hardball in his own elegant way. He made it his business to know exactly what he wanted, and whatever that might be, he was used to people getting it for him. When you picked up the phone and the voice at the other end said “it’s Jennings,” you knew there would be little time for small talk, and no matter how busy you were, you shouldn’t even *think* of asking to call him back if you wanted to talk to him anytime soon. With the news staff, when things went wrong or someone appeared not to have done their homework, he could turn the air blue on occasion with the best of them and, behind the politeness and urbane manner, it was a good idea to beware of the steely, brusque tone that could creep in if he was being frustrated. By his own admission he was impatient and easily bored, but those qualities were also what helped make him a superb reporter even as an anchorman; he liked to phone his own contacts on breaking stories and then challenge the ABC reporters working on them to see if they could match or shoot down the information he had been given. He liked to learn new things, disliked being fawned over, and expected everyone around him to work as hard as he did.

The sense of reserve that Peter usually reflected on-air was deliberate, and reflected both his belief that an anchor should tell a story but not be part of it, and his suspicion and dislike of the present-day fondness for folksy anchors bantering with each other between stories. The exception to that was Peter’s manner in the 60 hours he spent on-air reporting the events of September 11, 2001. On this occasion, he reflected both anguish and anger — at one point remarking acidly that President George W. Bush, who went incommunicado in the first few hours under heavy security, would have to do a better job of demonstrating leadership. His emotion and sense of his own humanity — he said later that he had lost several acquaintances in the Trade Centre collapse — formed his narrative, and helped Americans find perspective and a sense of self in the terrible first hours of tragedy.

But my own fondest memory of Peter as a person is far more down-to-earth — and trivial. In the spring of 2003, staying over at his place during a trip to New York, we spent one night watching the Montreal Canadiens beat Boston during the playoffs. He was a lifelong and very passionate fan (who often flew into Montreal on weekends for games), and he yelled it up in a manner that finally caused Kayce to abandon the corner chair in the same room where she was sitting, reading, in favour of more quiet space. When the game was over, he suggested we take their terrier, Harper Lee, across the street to Central Park for her nightly constitutional. It was a warm spring evening and, as we entered the park, Peter spotted a cameraman nearby, clearly from one of the networks and just as clearly waiting for something to happen. His journalist’s instincts in full cry, Peter asked the man what he was there for. Just you watch, he said, pointing to a nearby rise. As if on cue, a figure suddenly appeared, huffing and puffing with two enormous men just behind, and a Humvee vehicle backlighting them with its brights on.

A couple of seconds later, the man huffed and puffed to a finish, right where the cameraman had strategically placed himself. Then he looked up, sweating, and suddenly his face creased into a grin. “Hey, I know you, man,” he said. “You’re the television newsguy. My name’s P. Diddy.”

And with that, two men — hip hop’s most enduring star, and the television news icon — launched into a warm 10 minute chat that made clear they had little in common, but a great comfort level nonetheless with each other thanks to their equivalent levels of celebrity.

On the way back to the apartment, I remarked that I expected to be telling the story of that encounter for years to come. At one level, he didn’t quite understand my fascination — he understood that Diddy was a big deal, but didn’t know much more about him — but he liked the idea that it served as proof of one of his favourite themes: in the end, he said, New York was nothing more than a big village, with everybody constantly bumping into everybody else.

Perhaps, I said — trying to find a polite way to disagree — that was true if you were the sort of person everyone recognizes. But for the rest of us, the idea of a chance encounter between Peter Jennings and P. Diddy serves more to prove the thesis that New York City is a place where anything can and does happen.

He was unconvinced. “Well,” he said finally, “maybe it’s just a question of perspective, of looking at things from where you sit.”

And, of course, he was right. For Peter Jennings, the world really was a relatively small place where people came to know each other and their respective stories, and eventually came to understand each other a little better. Few people, after all, have ever done a better job than Peter of making things that way.

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