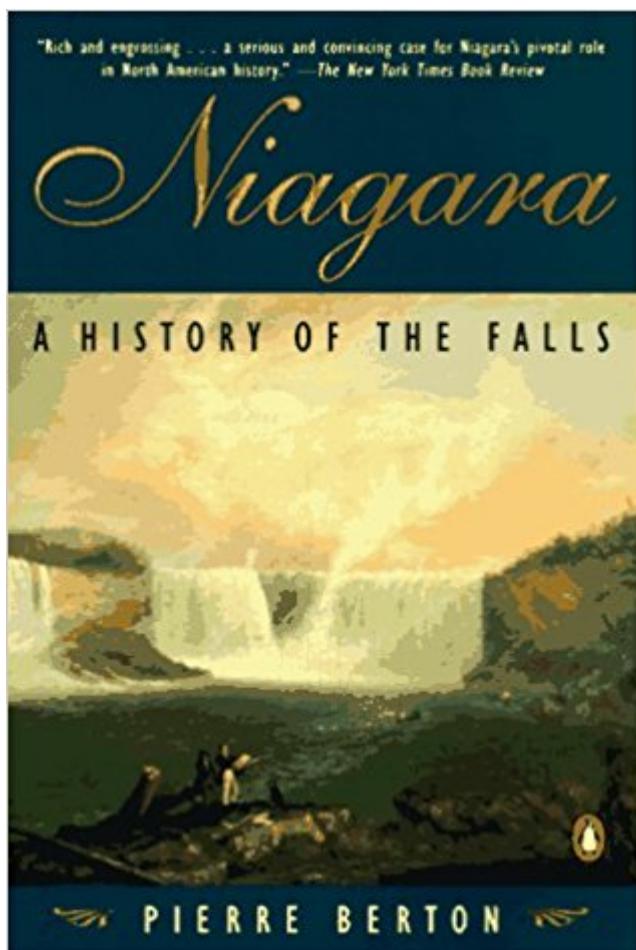


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# Niagara: A History Of The Falls



## **Synopsis**

Anthony Trollope's mother wept at the sight of it; Charles Dickens saw God in its rushing waters; and Harriet Beecher Stowe became so "maddened" by its beauty she contemplated flinging herself into the cascade. Few natural wonders have inspired the passions and the imaginations of so many as Niagara Falls, whose sublime beauty and awesome power have made it a magnet for statesmen and stuntmen, poets and poseurs, ordinary sightseers and exceptional visionaries. Popular historian Pierre Berton traces the history and allure of one of America's great natural phenomena. As Thurston Clarke noted in his front page New York Times Book Review, Berton "makes a serious and convincing case for Niagara's pivotal role in North American history.... His Niagara is a lodestar for North American culture and invention: site of the first railway suspension bridge, inspiration for Nikola Tesla's discovery of the principle of alternating current, and the subject of Frederic Church's most celebrated landscape; a natural wonder that has bewitched generations of scientists, authors, and utopians, and stimulated innovations and social movements still casting long shadows."

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Sometimes a place can be as good a subject for a "biography" as a person--and Niagara Falls turns out to be such a place. Fortunately, it found its ideal biographer in Canadian historian Pierre Berton, who chronicles its colorful history with a storyteller's verve. Niagara Falls was a sort of laboratory and breeding ground for a wide variety of American phenomena: carnivals and theme parks, destination tourism, industrialization based on cheap hydroelectric power, and the conservation movement, among others. Berton weaves all this together in a readable, well-paced book rich with

anecdotes, memorable characters, and nicely crafted language. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

The first Europeans to see Niagara Falls were struck with an awe akin to terror, but with the passage of a couple of centuries the site came to be regarded as the ultimate symbol of God's creative power. Even Charles Dickens, who didn't think much of what he found on this side of the Atlantic, was deeply moved. In the 19th century, the American side of the falls became a Mecca for honeymooners, first luring the rich and then the middle class as well. Later in that century, the unparalleled opportunity for hydroelectric power, combined with the development of alternating current, which meant that electricity could be sent over long distances, brought a wealth of industrial development. Canadian historian Berton (The Wild Frontier) tells dozens of absorbing tales about the region and those who passed through it: the "funambulist" Blondin, who danced on a tightrope high above the chasm; John Roebling, better known for the Brooklyn Bridge than for the one he built to span the Niagara River; the adventurers and crackpots who went over the falls in barrels; the lengthy struggle to close the Love Canal toxic waste dump. He tells them all superbly, aided by essential maps and a few reproductions of posters advertising some of the more bizarre stunts.

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I bought this book for my husband for Christmas. We recently went to Niagara Falls and he was fascinated with the history of the electrical plant and how the falls were made to accomodate it. Great pictures and good historical information- he has enjoyed reading it.

A fascinating presentation of the history and characters behind one of our most familiar landmarks.

EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT THE FALLS....VERY INTERESTING

What a history loved it

I was expecting more photographs, instead the book was a college theis on Niagara-booring! I returned it to the seller.

I give this book four out of five stars. It's a very good read, providing an excellent history of one of the most beautiful and awe-inspiring sites on the earth. The book covers the beginning of Niagara

Falls during the Ice Age, continues to the early explorers and first tourists of the Falls, and then goes on to provide an expansive and yet easy-to-read history of the Falls since then. Much of what Berton recounts in his book is anecdotal, but all in all it is an excellent and informative read. I took one star off because the pictures in the book really aren't very high quality, but the writing is top-notch.

This is the kind of book that can make someone love history. Yes, it's about Niagara Falls, but it's not a regional book. Because it's a natural phenomenon, Niagara Falls also had an indelible part in the history of mankind in the area, from Native Americans to colonials, through its era as the resort of choice for industrial barons, debate of hydro power vs. aesthetics, displacement of Native Americans, public funds for private gain, through the spawning of significant elements of the environmental movement (Love Canal). This is the first book I've read by the author, but I would read more of Pierre Berton. He captures the essence of "place", the effect it has on people - and vice versa. The book sorta reminded me of "Devil in the White City" in that it provides a great snapshot into the happenings of the day. For people who aren't from the area (I lived in NE Ohio), imagine the story of Las Vegas from the time of the Rat Pack up to the opening of the Bellagio. That mirrors our society's changes in taste, entertainment, attitudes about gambling and sex ("what happens here, stays here"), and extravagance. Turn back a few decades, set the stage next to a natural wonder of the world - and you've got this book.

"Niagara" is a nice little book, stringing together a series of anecdotes about Niagara Falls and its immediate region, especially from the mid 19th century to the mid 20th century. As histories go, it is fairly light (the author does not cite his facts, although he does include an extensive bibliography), but Pierre Berton is adept at telling stories, especially human stories. The stories mostly develop along one of two themes - daredevil encounters with the Falls, and human manipulation, either for the purpose of exploitation or protection of the Falls. Berton is best with the small stories of explorers, tightrope walkers, barrel riders, a family of "rivermen" (the Hills), and their ilk. The small becomes large with what is perhaps the best-crafted story, that of Lois Gibbs and the toxic tragedy of Love Canal, with which Berton ends the book. Although the story of the Falls did not end in 1980, Love Canal is a fitting final story. Despite the occasional preservationist triumphs, the story of the Falls really culminates in Love Canal. The natural wonder of the Falls became framed by hucksters, factories, power stations, tacky museums, homes, roads, manicured parks and everything else unnatural. Engineers even managed to stop the falls in an attempt to clear out fallen rocks (they

wisely chose not to once they realized that the rocks propped up the rock face behind the falls). A visit to the Falls today is a jarring reminder of what a mess we humans have made of the natural world. It is an obscene juxtaposition of nature's best and humanity's chintziest. Berton is less skilled at relaying scientific stories about the formation of the falls, and the energy and chemical industries. He also seems less than passionate when writing about big business deals - his treatment of power-mavens Adam Beck and Robert Moses palls beside his treatment of activist Lois Gibbs or "riverman" Red Hill. As a result, the book is somewhat inconsistent and (ironically, considering the subject matter) does not always flow. Conspicuously missing from "Niagara" is ancient Native American history and the eventful history of the last 20 years. The former may not be possible to write for lack of information, but the latter (which includes the establishment of a gambling casino overlooking the Falls) warrants an update. Also lacking is some of the political history surrounding the Falls. For all these reasons, this is more a three-and-a-half star book than a full four star book. But I'm giving it four because it was fun to read and provided me, as a native of Western New York, with some history of my home region. I'm not sure how interesting all this will be for those with no personal experience of the Falls, but for those of us who do, it's worth reading.

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