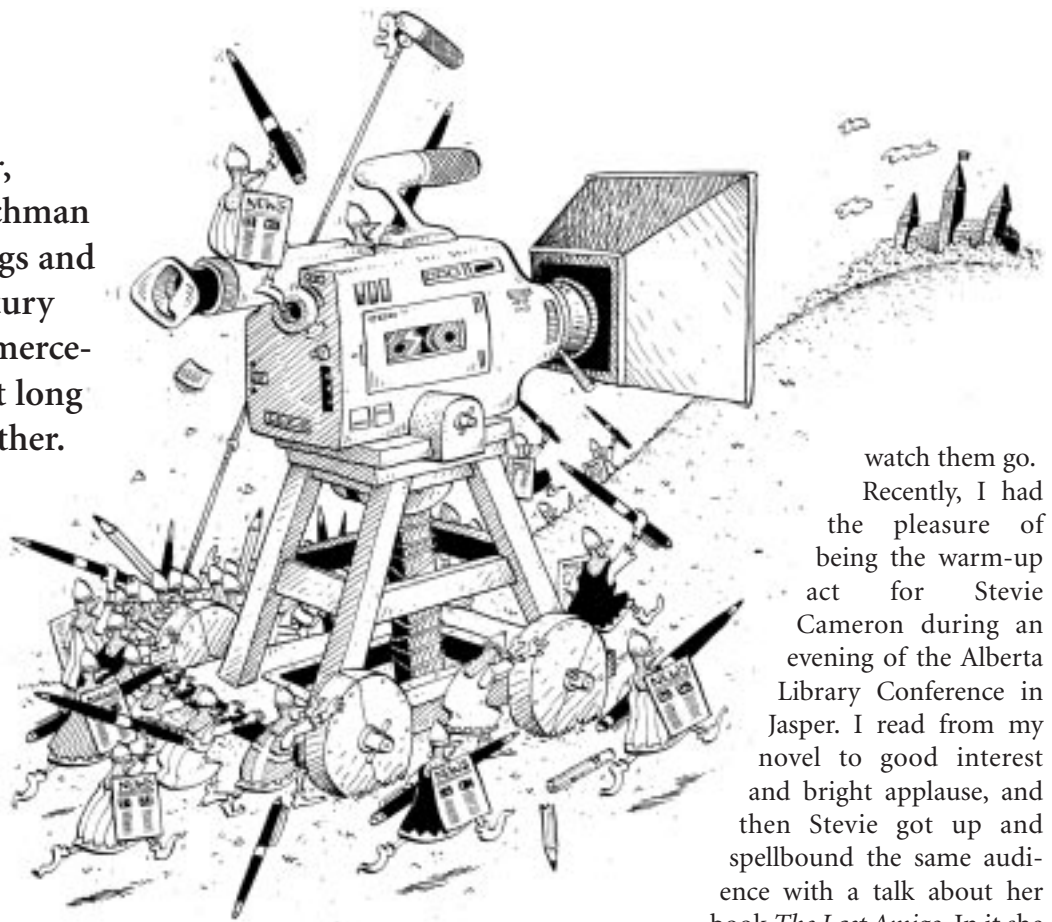


The 21st Century Media

BY FRED STENSON

In *A Distant Mirror*, author Barbara Tuchman tells us how the kings and queens of 14th century Europe assembled mercenary armies to fight long wars against each other.

The bill was paid in part by plunder and pillage. The soldiers went along, sacking villages, eating stolen livestock, pocketing valuables, and all the ghastly rest. When peace broke out, all this should have stopped, but nothing changed except whose army you were being pillaged by. Instead of disbanding when they returned home, the armies stayed together and continued what they had been doing abroad. Perhaps lacking other skills, or not wanting to go back to being the village collector of slops and offal, they pillaged and sacked their own towns and villages, eating stolen beef and lamb, pocketing valuables, and all the ghastly rest. I can't remember if Barbara Tuchman draws this inference, but one assumes the kings and queens might have started new wars just to get their armies out of the country.



watch them go. Recently, I had the pleasure of being the warm-up act for Stevie Cameron during an evening of the Alberta Library Conference in Jasper. I read from my novel to good interest and bright applause, and then Stevie got up and spellbound the same audience with a talk about her book *The Last Amigo*. In it she

The parallel I see between the mediaeval armies and modern media has to do with what happens when the media are idled by lack of news. These are sharp people. Everything about them is sharp—minds, wits, tongues. Sword of Damascus sharp, and able if irritated to lop off the self-esteem and career of anyone in their path. In time of news, they do us proud. Domestic or international isn't the issue. Give them a suicide bombing, a scandal in government, a water quality crisis or a cover-up and

explains in detail how Karlheinz Schreiber, a German trying to sell helicopters to the Mulroney Conservatives on behalf of German industrialists, managed in short order to bribe every Canadian parliamentarian, senator, bureaucrat and influential masseuse east of Lake of the Woods—or so it seems. If extradited to Germany, where his countrymen are anxious to crucify him upside down, Karlheinz promises a Canadian political scandal that he claims will dwarf Watergate. I can hardly wait—

except that the ruling Liberals are for some curious reason not anxious to let him go. It's almost as if they fear the skeletons revealed won't all be clad in Tory blue.

But, I'm getting off topic. The point is that Stevie Cameron, investigative reporter extraordinaire, is a media fighting machine of awesome tenacity and ability. She goes where the RCMP fears to tread. She names names and numbers in Swiss bank accounts. She delivers. Canadian media at its best.

But what happens when the media army does not have enough to do, or has risen in glory to a point where the scribes can write anything or nothing as suits them, and are, in a sense, above the truth. Basically, lock up your whole family, because they can and will, out of unfulfillment or boredom, sack your village.

Look at how many times they sacked Joe Clark's. Back in the late seventies up until 1980, during Joe Clark's campaign and victory election over PET, during his brief reign as PM, during his subsequent losing campaign against the resurgent PET, the media had nothing much else to do but walk around after Joe, listening for statements to humorously take out of context, and looking for pratfalls and gaffes. Through the media we learned such important facts as that Joe's head was so large that he couldn't swim; that he took a wrong turn while reviewing the troops of a foreign army and almost got himself bayoneted; that he asked an Indian farmer a stupid question about chickens; that he lost his luggage. When you or I lose our luggage, we blame others, but when Joe lost his, it was played up in the papers as a personal failing and a sign of disarray in his party.

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In Joe's latest return to the political fray, the media were bored again and they livened up a little to see their old joke-butt win the leadership of the Mulroney-destroyed Tory party. Cue the sound of whetstone on Damascus steel. And they were cutting him up merrily, him and his little rump of Tories off in the corner, when a funny thing happened. Joe began to deliver the best speeches in the House. He was at once the most feared opponent of the Chrétien majority and the Alliance official opposition. Jean

Chrétien, slightly crooked local politician that he's always been, got his hand caught in the till. Stockwell Day, displaying small understanding of the "innocent until proven guilty" part of the British com-

mon law tradition of criminal justice, got sued and spent almost a million of our money defending his mistake. Joe Clark emerged as the only credible leader in the House of Commons.

I wonder if the media army ever stops, looks at its soiled weaponry, has a think, and feels a little guilty. I wonder if they ever wonder what the country might have been like if they hadn't slaughtered Joe Clark so gleefully in 1979 and '80. Let me see: we would not have had the NEP; we might have made an accord with Quebec that stuck; and we definitely would not have had Brian Mulroney. Just the last part alone would have saved the country who knows how many millions. Billions?

Media responsibility, eh? My advice to them: when bored, be silent. If my newspaper is a little thinner, and if there's occasional silence on the tubes, I promise not to complain.

Fred Stenson has written more than 130 produced films and videos, and eight published books of fiction and non-fiction.