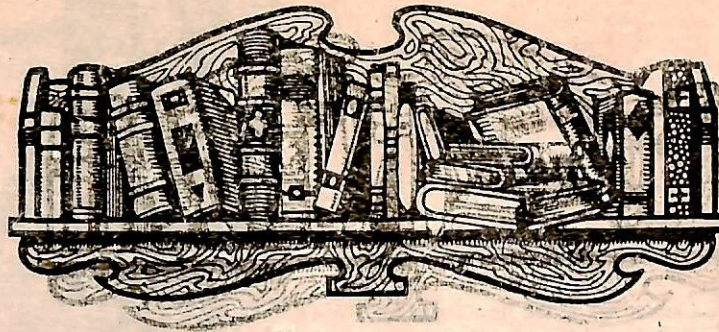


CURATOR'S MANDATE

This article appeared in our "Home and Country" issue Fall 1995 and is worthy of inclusion.

Tweedsmuir Histories: Preserve, Protect and Promote



By Linda Ambrose

Nobody really knows for sure how many Tweedsmuir History Books there are in Ontario, but in 1964 it was reported that "well over 1100" Branch histories were in the process of being compiled. Add to that the District and Area books, and the new Branches which have been started since, and just imagine how many Tweedsmuir History Books are waiting to be read.

Over the past two-and-a-half years, I have looked through several hundred of those books as I travelled across this province visiting with many of you in your Branches and Districts. Wherever I have gone, you have rolled out the welcome mat, put on the kettle, and lugged out your history books. In some cases, I looked at your books without even coming for a visit, because I used microfilm copies at archives and museums. Indeed, Tweedsmuir History Books have been one of my most important sources as I worked to research the Ontario Women's Institutes for the upcoming centennial in 1997.

You are very proud of these books, and well you should be. They capture your local community history and preserve it in a unique way. Your curators have spent many hours lovingly compiling these bulky, big volumes. The cover is proudly emblazoned with your Institute's name, and in many cases that cover itself is a work of art fashioned from leather or from wood.

These books are important to you. But not only to you. Do you realize the importance that others have attached to them over the years? The books had a very distinguished beginning. You are probably aware that they were originally known as "The Tweedsmuir Village History Books," so named in 1940 for the former Governor General of Canada, on the suggestion of his widow, Lady Tweedsmuir. Recognizing the challenge of compiling a local history book, Susan Tweedsmuir said: "It is necessary to have the patience of Job, the strength of Hercules and the powers of a private detective to do Historical Research."

Endorsement by such an eminent family was only the beginning, and after that, the books won many accolades on their own merit. Did you know, for example, that in 1950 the Honourable Vincent Massey in-

quired about Tweedsmuir histories so that he could include them as part of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences? He considered the Tweedsmuir History Books to be an important part of Canadian culture. And he was not alone. Just one year before that, in 1949, the Women's Institutes' Tweedsmuir histories earned a very prestigious prize from the American Association for State and Local History. Similar honours would follow a few years later when, in 1962, Canada's national organization of professional historians, the Canadian Historical Association, awarded a certificate of merit to the Women's Institutes for their work in preserving local history.

For several years, members of the Board of the Ontario Historical Society acted as judges for the Tweedsmuir competitions where the history books were entered in competition for the coveted Tweedsmuir cup prize. The Ontario Genealogical Society published a guide to using the books in a 1976 newsletter. Currently, university researchers in women's history are showing real interest in your books, using them to write papers on women's organizations, community history, and even the history of the histories themselves. You have in your possession a veritable gold mine of information. In fact, Tweedsmuir History Books are one of the most important resources we have for studying Ontario history at the local level.

Formal efforts to preserve Tweedsmuir Books have been in place for some time. Recognizing their importance, the Archives of Ontario entered into an agreement with the Department of Agriculture and Food in the 1960s to begin to preserve these books through microfilming. Through that project, several hundred Tweedsmuir History Books are now available at the provincial archives in Toronto, safely preserved and fully accessible to the public. The University of Guelph Archives deemed that collection to be so important, that they bought the complete set of films and users can read them there. Since that project ended, Branches have sought out other means of microfilming using the services of private companies like Production Micrographics in London, Ontario.

The wonderful thing about microfilm is that it makes the book available in a conven-

ient format that takes up so little space on the library shelves. Making a copy of your Tweedsmuir History Book is like buying insurance - you know that if anything ever happened to the original books, at least you would have a copy. Several Branches have done this already, and if you haven't, then you are taking a big risk with your history book. In one Branch I visited, they had photocopied the complete books and placed copies in the local library so that their original book was not damaged by curious researchers or eager school children. You need to be concerned about both things: keeping the books safe and, at the same time, making the books available.

Over thirty years ago, Hester Walker, the Provincial Curator of the Tweedsmuir histories, and Muriel Mack, the Provincial Convener of Historical Research, issued a special challenge to the members of the 1962 FWIO Board. In light of the approaching celebration of Canada's centennial in 1967, they asked: "Could we make definite decisions about the preservation and protection of these valuable histories and plan special events to emphasize them?" I would echo their challenge to you as 1997 draws near, the celebration of your own centennial.

Could you make some definite plans about the Tweedsmuir History Books in your care? Your books are very important. So please, preserve them, protect them and promote them.

Linda Ambrose is an Assistant Professor with the Department of History at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario; she is also the Researcher/Writer of the Women's Institute Centennial History Book.

Make Plans Today

Have your Tweedsmuir History Books microfilmed now. Call or write to Valerie Mann at Production Micrographics at 4500 Blakie Rd., Unit 135, London ON N6L 1G5, (519)652-1091.

Valerie is willing to speak to any group interested in the process.