

# Several favourite books to be revisited

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I'm currently writing a biography of George Henry Martin Johnson, Teyonhekwé, a legendary Chief of Six Nations in the 19th century. Many of the records on Indigenous subjects in Canada have been digitized recently, in part because of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's work, and this has been invaluable! I have now gone through tens of thousands of such documents online, which would have been impossible without Canada's central library and archives.

**Q. How did reading as a young person influence you as a doctor and a historian?**

They're two different solitudes: science and history, although they do come together in another interest of mine: the history of medicine. As a medical student one learns to take a patient's history and, after the physical examination, one interprets any lab and radiological findings. In challenging cases, the physician may even consult reference sources. Interpreting and writing history in many respects is a similar

process. But I'm convinced that being exposed to different writing styles and genres invariably improves one's own writing style. I've read a lot of history and non-fiction adventure/expedition books over the years — Ernest Shackleton's *South: The Endurance Expedition, 1914-1916* comes to mind; more recently I've been influenced by Canadian historian Charlotte Gray, whose many works include biographies of Pauline Johnson and Alexander Graham Bell, who was a good friend of 'my' Chief Johnson. Pierre Berton's output was truly remarkable — I once met him at a book launch and he freely admitted that he had three or four researchers — I wish I had those resources.

**Q. What is the value of a library?**

As I explained, the library has been invaluable for me personally; however, I was so impressed whenever I came into the library to use the microfilm reader, just how busy the library was: I would witness children of all ages coming either with their school class or on their own, excitedly picking

out books to take home; sometimes there was a librarian simply reading to a small group of children, while on other occasions a parent (or grandparent) would be sitting there quietly reading a story to his/her own child. And whenever I'm at the front desk I'm impressed by all the coming and going of folks of all ages. I also know of at least one person who comes in regularly to the library just to use the computer. I'm familiar with others who enjoy the periodicals. No doubt, for some the library provides a refuge — a pleasant, 'safe' place to escape from their little apartment or perhaps some social conflict.

**Q. Do you have a favourite book that you keep coming back to read again and again?**

I'm sure for many, one's favourite book changes from decade to decade or genre to genre or simply evolves according to one's stage in life. There are books that on reading the last sentence, you sigh and think 'wow, that was the best read yet.' Then you find other books perhaps equally impressive and you conclude that

someday you will just have to go back and relive that special read. One that sticks with me is *The Englishman's Boy* by Guy Vanderhaeghe — I'll be coming back to it, someday. Also, *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr was wonderful, in part from my own perspective as an ophthalmologist. I really enjoyed Canadian author Alistair MacLeod's novel, *No Great Mischief*, although I was frankly disappointed to learn how little regard General Wolfe had for my Scottish-soldier ancestors.

One would be remiss if I didn't mention *The Journal of Major John Norton 1816* with its remarkable narrative of Indigenous Peoples and the War of 1812, including many references to Niagara. I was fortunate to hold Norton's original manuscript in my hands in the library of Alnwick Castle, England, where it sat forgotten for 150 years until discovered by a researcher and published (and later reprinted) by the Champlain Society.

**Q. Has the library supported your work as an author?**

Yes — they held an evening



Dr. Richard Merritt with his books. (I. Andzans)

event where I could talk and answer questions about my recent publication — such an important resource to have an institution like a local library that supports local writers.