

TREADING THE LINE BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION

Connie Brummel Crook

Résumé: L'auteur parle des difficultés particulières que peut soustenre la recherche historique. Par exemple, pour ses romans *Nellie L.* et *Meyers' Creek*, qui relatent l'histoire de Nellie McClung, elle a dû obtenir le droit de reproduire des extraits des écrits personnels de son héroïne.



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“You found it!” I shouted with joy, forgetting that I was in the middle of a graveyard — Carrying Place Cemetery in Prince Edward County, Ontario. To my great relief, the only living person in sight was my husband. He had just discovered the tombstone of John Bleecker Jr., the first white person born at Carrying Place and described in my novel, *Meyers' Creek*. I was checking out Bleecker's birthdate as part of my research.

It is not unusual for me to do research in graveyards, since all my novels have taken place in earlier times — even before the census. However, writers of dramatized historical biographies do many different kinds of things to make sure their stories are accurate as well as interesting. Some books are easier to research than others. For *Meyers' Creek*, I looked up birth, marriage, and death dates in the records of the Reverend John Langhorn, the Rector of Bath. I did the same for *Flight*, a story of the family of John W. Meyers, the founder of Belleville, Ontario. I also found records in a special room preserved by the Historical Society in the Belleville Public Library. There, I obtained old handwritten letters, newspaper clippings, and the will of John W. Meyers on microfiche, which named all his grandchildren, to whom he left his estate. Also, I read several books about the time period of the novels — about the American Revolution and the Loyalists, who were persecuted during the American Revolution and fled for safety to Canada. For example, for Part II of *Flight*, I read three books from the Bata Library at Trent University that described conditions during the siege of New York City during the Revolution.

For historical novels like mine, writers always have to research details about such things as clothing, furniture, houses, food, muskets, and heating. With *Meyers' Creek* and *Flight*, however, I had an advantage. John W. Meyers is one of my ancestors, so I had grown up hearing about his family's adventures. My other novels, *Laura's Choice* (the story of Laura Secord) and *Nellie L.* (about Canadian feminist and activist Nellie McClung) were more difficult.

To research *Laura's Choice*, I travelled to Niagara Falls and studied letters and other materials in collected files at Niagara Falls Public Library. I also read letters at the beginning of one version of Emma A. Currie's *Story of Laura Secord and Canadian Reminiscences*, printed by William Briggs in 1900. Then

I visited the Laura Secord House at Queenston and a museum at Niagara-on-the-Lake. Later, I visited monuments inscribed to Laura at Queenston Heights and Drummond Hill Cemetery in Niagara Falls, where she lies beside her husband, who wished to be buried on the site of the Battle of Lundy's Lane, the last and bloodiest fight of the war of 1812-14, where many of his fellow soldiers had fallen. I also retraced Laura Secord's steps from Queenston Heights to the site of the headquarters of Lieutenant James FitzGibbon — the officer who won the battle of Beaver Dams on the strength of Laura's information.

On June 22, 1813, it took Laura from before 6:00 a.m. until almost midnight to travel this route — through the snake-infested great black swamp and over fallen trees and flooding streams. Nearly two centuries later, it took me almost a day to cover the same route, stopping to take notes and to talk to local people — but the only obstacle I encountered as I walked (my husband drove and I rode, too, at times) was the Welland Canal. But by retracing her steps, I got a sense of the lay of the land, the height of the terrain, and the kinds of trees she would have encountered. I needed that to make my description of her walk believable.⁴

The book I found the most difficult to write was *Nellie L.* Because I wanted to stay very close to the facts, I went through Nellie's own autobiographies, as well as other sources, to understand events in her life and to collect bits of conversation that actually took place. But this posed another problem — a serious one. When I began writing the novel, I phoned the publisher of Nellie's autobiographies to ask about obtaining permission to quote from these works in my novel. I was told that I would be permitted to do this, so I proceeded to write.

Two years later, when I had already signed a contract with Stoddart, I phoned Nellie McClung's publisher again to finalize details for the right to use the quotes. To my surprise, the rights had returned to the family. So, immediately, I had to find the family and ask *their* permission. All the children had died, so I had to track down Nellie's grandchildren and seek permission from them — what a task! At the same time, I was very busy with my writing, for my publisher's submission deadline was coming up soon. Fortunately, the family responded and their permissions came by mail quite promptly. Jane Brown-John, the only daughter of the only daughter of Nellie McClung, was a wonderful help. In addition to granting me permission to use the quotations, she gave me addresses of other members of the family. Harry Mooney was also very helpful and encouraging. He is the grandson of Nellie's brother, Jack Mooney, and still lives on the original Mooney farm in Manitoba. When he first phoned me from Manitoba and said, "This is Harry Mooney," I had a feeling that a character right out of my book (his grandfather, Jack) had come to life and was speaking to me.

This experience made me even more aware that researching a dramatized historical biography is much more than paperwork. After speaking with the descendants of the people you are writing about, you have a more immediate sense of the family and you realize what a great responsibility you have to present the person's life in an accurate way.

I am currently writing a sequel to *Nellie L.* and I have contacted both Judge

John McClung, the son of Nellie's oldest child, and Mrs. Jane Brown-John to comment on some incidents before writing them down. In both novels, I have tried to present the real Nellie McClung while still being fair to her grandchildren's memory of their grandmother — a truly great lady! My contact with Nellie's family has also inspired me to keep writing when I might have become discouraged. During the winter of 1994, I was very busy writing. (*Nellie L.* was scheduled to be released in September, which meant I had to be on hand for revisions and proofing.) This made me anxious — as did the fact that I had yet to hear from some of Nellie's descendants. So I did not even know whether this book, into which I had poured so much effort, would ever be published.

Then Judge McClung's letter came in the mail. In granting me permission to use the quotations, he said, "... I do not speak for the other beneficiaries, but as far as I am concerned, you are free to use the contents of her autobiography as you see fit. I have no reason to believe that any other beneficiary would see things differently. That would certainly be *Nellie L.*'s wish."

That too is my greatest wish. Though I always try to write an exciting story, it is just as important to write something that is accurate enough that the subject of the book would also enjoy reading it. If John W. Meyers, Laura Secord, and Nellie McClung were alive today, I hope they would find their lives honoured and accurately reflected in the books I have written about them.

Connie Brummel Crook taught English in Ontario's secondary schools for thirty years. In the last five years, four of her novels have been published: in 1991, *Flight (Stoddart)*, the story of the children of John W. Meyers, who founded Belleville, Ontario; in 1993, *Laura's Choice (Windflower)*, the story of Laura Secord.; in 1994, *Nellie L. (Stoddart)*, the story of Nellie McClung from ages ten to seventeen; and in 1995 *Meyers' Creek (Stoddart)*, the sequel to *Flight*, her first novel. In 1997, her first picture book is being published by Stoddart Publishing.

BUT WHAT ABOUT CANADIAN HISTORY?

Mary Alice Downie

Résumé: L'auteur raconte l'évolution de sa passion pour les récits historiques, de son enfance à sa maturité; elle s'attache à définir sa carrière de romancière et le changement profond de son orientation personnelle: inconditionnelle de la grande histoire de l'Europe, elle s'est progressivement convertie à l'histoire du Canada, qui est maintenant au coeur de son oeuvre narrative.



Mary Alice Downie

Photo credit: Jocelyn Downie

It began with Abraham Lincoln. I still remember being entranced, as a very small child, by a picture-book biography of "the Great Liberator" that my mother