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.

Photo credit: Joselyn Downie

Mary Alice 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

gave me. It was an odd choice for a homesick "Canadienne errante" to give her young daughter, but I was born in Illinois on February 12, and he's not a bad person to share a birthday with.

Once I crossed the magic threshold of literacy — it must have been part way through Grade 1 — Mary, John and Peter were busy planting tulips — I spent most of my time reading: the classics, trash, the opera and novel plots from *The Book of Knowledge* — prophetically I skipped the science bits — and we had a set of John Lord's *Beacon Lights of History* from the long-gone family farm in Huron County, which I mined enthusiastically. I loved historical novels, particularly Caroline Dale Snedeker's *The White Isle* and *The Forgotten Daughter* (I was pleased to find that they're still in the Kingston library), and the vigorous stories of Geoffrey Trease.

It became a persistent dream to write historical novels for children, bringing to others the joy they brought me, but it seemed unattainable. In those days, writers didn't trek through schools giving readings: these mythic creatures seemed as remote as the gods of Greece and Rome. Still, the dream lingered through school, and a degree in English at the University of Toronto. In truth, I did a minor in English and majored in *The Varsity*!

After graduation, there were the usual jobs of the arts grad who doesn't want to teach: inept typist in the Maclean-Hunter Steno pool, editorial assistant at the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* where I wrote obituaries and bought the cookies for morning coffee. Then I stumbled into a dream job, working for the Toronto branch of Oxford University Press, first as librarian, then as Publicity Manager.

I had many conversations with Bill Toye, the Art Director, already on his way to becoming a legend in the publishing world. When I confessed my ambition, he was encouraging. "I'll help you." But he frowned when I excitedly spoke of writing novels about ancient Greece/Rome/Britain/the Dark Ages. "There are plenty of people doing that already. What about Canadian history?"

I balked. Like every right-thinking young citizen, I thought our past boring. All those dreary explorers. Did we really study them from grade four to eight? It seemed that way. Now, I'm told, they're not studied at all.

I married, moved to Pittsburgh and spent a year making notes for a picture-book biography of Charlemagne that was intended to be along the lines of my beloved Abe Lincoln book. This project was interrupted by the arrival of two daughters, two years apart. I turned to book, film and theatre reviewing, which were easier to do while looking after spirited babies.

In 1962 we returned to Canada and settled in Kingston, in one of the Hales Cottages, a row of picturesque old houses built in 1841. Bellevue House, a Tuscan villa where Sir John A. had spent several unhappy months in 1848, was across the back lane. (He called it Tea Caddy Castle or the Pekoe Pagoda and it's now a fine museum, honouring his memory.) I was literally surrounded by Canadian history, but still it didn't take.

One of my friends was Barbara Robertson, who had been the awe-inspiring editor of *The Varsity* when I was a humble headline-writer. With the encouragement of Bill Toye, we became involved in a project for Expo year: an anthology of poems for children written by Canadian poets. It took three years: there were books piled in tottering heaps on the dining-room table, endless hours spent reading very good — and very bad — poetry, bitter arguments, hard-won agreements. We're still friends, have done two more books together and are hatching another.

We missed the 1967 deadline — I produced a centennial daughter instead — but *The Wind Has Wings* was published by Oxford in 1968 with groundbreaking illustrations by the late Elizabeth Cleaver. This was all very gratifying, but there was a bonus. As a result of digging around in the past for pets, I belatedly fell in love with Canadian history.

Suddenly, I wanted to write about it — but what period or place or person? One day, our landlady came to tea and was keen that I read a diary that had been written by a distant relative. I was politely evasive, until she mentioned that Dorothea had been an eyewitness of the Boston Tea Party. I immediately borrowed the manuscript — it was written in an exercise book, dictated by Dorothea in her old age, to a granddaughter. Fascinating stuff. As a child, Dorothea had come from England with her parents, lived in Boston, been taken to Quebec by a Loyalist uncle and aunt, and eventually wound up in New Hampshire.

I sent it to Bill who wrote back expressing enthusiasm. "Here is a plot ... that has been handed to you on a silver platter," but I needed to get permission from Miss Ethel Jamison, an elderly direct descendant who still lived in New Hampshire. She wrote back that she hoped to do the book herself. "It is very dear to my heart."

Despair, for although I doubted that Miss Jamison would do anything with the material after so many years, it *was her* ancestor. Then I realized that there was no reason I could not use the period and create my own story about the people who "lost" the Revolution.

Three more years of books everywhere. By this time we had moved to a high Victorian (literally and historically) house with a small extra bedroom for a study where I could leave my piles of books around on the floor instead of removing them for dinner.

My husband, blessed with the benefits of a Scottish education and confidence, has always edited my writing. But this time, his contribution was clearly more than editing and he became co-author. I would write all morning, then crouch on the stairs with my current chapter, waiting for the two older children to drift home for lunch and listen to it. John would come in from teaching Chemical Engineering, finish his work after dinner, then stay up late into the night, rewriting my chapter. After cries of mingled pain and rage at his changes, I would spend the next morning grumpily revising his revisions and incorporating them into the text.

Honor Bound was published by Oxford in 1971. Since then my literary anchor has been firmly embedded in this place and time of Canada. Even when the books have not been overtly historical, they have roots in our past: there are folktales of early settlers from France and Scotland, *The Well-filled Cupboard*,

a modern "huswifery" book about cooking, gardening and cellaring through the seasons is filled with poems and quotations. *And Some Brought Flowers* — "a botanist's view of Canadian history" one reviewer called it — uses quotations from the explorers (I now find them fascinating), missionaries, settlers, about the strange plants they found in the forests of the New World, and sent back to the botanical gardens of the Old.

Even in my modern stories history creeps in. "The panther in the park" in *The Cat Park*, set in present-day Vancouver, sprang from Emily Carr's reminiscences about her childhood. Much of the description of the winter festival in *SnowPaws*, a fantasy set in Montreal, was inspired by Lady Aberdeen's account in her journal.

And so it will continue, I hope, until, to paraphrase Christie Harris, they find me slumped at the computer — with a volume from the Champlain Society open on the desk beside me.

Mary Alice Downie *shares a 102-year-old house in Kingston and a 106-year-old cottage on the Rideau with her husband and two of her feline characters: Burnaby (*The Cat Park*) and Emily (*SnowPaws*).*

TIME AND PLACE

Tony German

Résumé: Tony German, auteur de nombreux ouvrages de vulgarisation scientifique et historique, parle de sa trilogie des aventures de Tom Penny, qu'il a situées dans la vallée de l'Outaouais au début du XIXe siècle. Il s'intéresse particulièrement aux rapports conflictuels entre Amérindiens et colons français, anglais, écossais et irlandais.

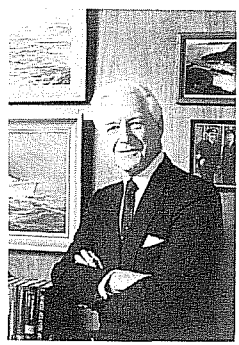

Photo credit: Philip Doyle

Tony German

Writing a book, any book, is a tough enough proposition on its own and choosing to set it in another place, another time, where, by definition, we've never been is surely nothing short of a self-inflicted wound. I guess that could be said, though, about writing any kind of fiction. We do it, I think, more from compulsion than common sense. It certainly takes some kind of obsession. And an extra big one to go historical.

My own fascination with Canada's past hit me late in life. What I'd learned in school about our history — while a shade more than the near-total denial of the subject in today's schools — was sketchy at best. But in 1962, when I had had twenty years in the navy and was about to take command of a spanking new, Montreal-built destroyer escort called HMCS Mackenzie, my family presented me with a fine first edition of Alexander Mackenzie's *Voyages from Montreal to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans 1789 and 1793*. From the minute I dipped into it I was hooked and,