

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 Américains et colons français, anglais, écossais et irlandais.



Tony German

Photo credit: Philip Doyle

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,

starting with the fur-trade, I began to read everything about our country's history I could find. Late, but not too late. The wonders of Canada's early days and the extraordinary feats of those who have built this country absorb me to this day.

Then, eight years later, out of the navy and living in Ottawa where I'd been raised, I got back in touch with those rivers and lakes, back-roads and trails and portages where I'd paddled, camped, fished, sailed, explored and skied as a boy. Introducing our own growing brood to those same delights led to weaving tales — mostly in the car en route and mainly, if the truth be known, to keep the back-seat squabbling in check — around imaginary Tom and Jenny who'd lived their own adventure in those magic places in “the high and far-off times.” When an older daughter said, “Great stories, Dad. Why not write a book?” I took her up, and I instantly foundered in the great gaps in my knowledge of what had actually gone on in years past in this place where I'd grown up.

So I dug into local history and the books and maps, letters and memoirs and old newspapers took me right to the roistering 1830s when lumbering, river driving, canal building, pioneer farming, and the swan song of the fur trade collided at the traditional Indian meeting place of the Chaudière, where the Rideau and the Gatineau Rivers join the Ottawa. With Bytown on one side and Wright's Village on the other, the raw little settlement-cum-construction camp was fast on the way to fame as the roughest, toughest, brawlingest place in North America. French, English, Irish, Scots, not to mention Catholic versus Protestant, all flailing away at each other and all of them elbowing the native people. Not a pretty time. But a rousing a one, as great a one for dread deeds and high adventure as anywhere; and what material for stories! So I started typing. My life changed. I began a totally new adventure of my own.

Don't we say to young people we talk to in schools and libraries and lecture rooms that a story is a story wherever and whenever it's set? When those maybesome-day writers say, “But where do you get your ideas?” don't we say “Write what you know. Look around you, at your own friends, your family. Look at home, school, the mall, the creek, the coffee shop, your own backyard.” Sure, setting your story in some distant exotic place may add a dash of intrigue, but, if you haven't been there and don't know the place inside out, you're a pretty crafty writer if you can convince your readers that they're really there with you. And unless you do that your story will miss the boat. Exactly the same goes for setting it in another time.

There's a bonus in going back, of course. The wretchedness, the villainies, injustices, the brutishness of the past are there to use if you want but they've faded long since in favour of its romance. Remember *Treasure Island*? Life “back then,” for those who could survive it, seems to us to have been a huge adventure. Writing in the past you feel somehow free to splash the colours more extravagantly on your canvas. But if you do choose to set your story at a certain time, you'd better — as I found with that first book — have your palette as fully loaded as a rainbow.

You soak yourself, before you start writing, in everything you can lay your hands on about everything: the clothes people wore, their food and drink, money, tools, vehicles and weapons, their language, their slang, the letters they wrote, the books

they read and the songs they sang, their ailments and medicines and deaths, manners and taboos, courts and crimes and punishments, the ways of their whole society and on and on. On top of that, what was the particular place really like at that particular time? Know it in the present for starters, then plunge into its past through the maps and sketches and travel books that people crafted at the time. Total immersion in that time and place is like learning another language. When you've mastered it, can think and dream in it, then start to write. Or you'll miss the boat again.

The Ottawa and Gatineau Valleys of the 1830s gave me my first three books, but my delving had started with the fur trade, Canada's first commercial lifeblood. Beyond the books and museums, archives and art galleries and re-creations like Fort William, I followed the canoe routes themselves. I was enormously intrigued by the society that had developed in the North West over two hundred years into a sprawling network of commercial and family relationships between Indian, French, Scots, English. Living for years in the North West, most men in the trade would take a "country wife" and raise a mixed-blood family. The wealthier traders often sent their children to school in Montreal or even Scotland. When rich enough to retire it frequently meant leaving the wife and uneducated children behind, turned over with a financial consideration to a junior in the company, then going "home" to a white church marriage and comfortable lie.

Alexander Mackenzie, without mentioning it in his famous journal, had a Chipewyan wife at Great Slave Lake. Their son, Andrew, went to school in Montreal and was forging a successful business career there when he died in his twenties. Mackenzie père, as a head-office mogul of the North West company, enjoyed his hard-earned wealth and a favourable marriage. His company locked horns with the Hudson's Bay Company in ferocious conflict over control of the whole trade and — here was all the stuff for the next book — except I'd never been to the places in the North West where I wanted to locate its key events.

So, in three weeks one summer I paddled and packed a four-hundred mile stretch of the fur trade highway from Isle à la Crosse down the Churchill and Sturgeon Weir Rivers to Amisk Lake. Most of it was exactly as Mackenzie had described nearly two hundred years before — conspicuous white rock; portage 366 paces; native picture of animals on the rock here ...

No, I don't think I really chose those times and places for my books. It was much more a question of just lifting the trapdoor to our own marvellous history and tumbling in.

Tony German *has written historical adventure novels for children and young adults, popular history for adults, documentary, docu-drama, training and orientation films and radio specials. "Lifeline to Victory" (Primedia 1993, TV movie of the week, Global) was adapted from his best seller The Sea Is At Our Gates and he was historical consultant on the production. His fiction books include the three Tom Penny action adventures set in the Ottawa Valley in the 1830s — Tom Penny, River Race, and The Grand Canal (Scholastic Canada, 1990 [1977-82]) — and A Breed Apart (1985), set in the fur trade in the early 1800s.*