

Joseph Muike

Outdoorsman and historian Mike Parker loves the thrill of the hunt—especially when the hunt is for archival evidence.

# Keeping the stories alive

Mike Parker shines a light on history through careful research and a passion for great storytelling

**Sandra Phinney**

The year is 1988. Canada and the US sign a free-trade agreement, *Phantom of the Opera* hits Broadway, and the Summer Olympics are held in Seoul, South Korea. Mike Parker remembers the year well—but for other reasons.

Parker had submitted his first manuscript, *Guides of the North Woods: Hunting & Fishing Tales from Nova Scotia*, to Doubleday Canada Publishing Group. In a rejection letter dated August 30, editor Jill Lambert took the time to add, “PS—I really did enjoy this manuscript; I thought it was well written and interesting. I’m sorry it’s just not right for our list.”

After researching other publishers, Parker zeroed in on Halifax’s Nimbus Publishing. Eventually he walked in and dropped off his manuscript. The next morning he received a call to say it had been accepted.

Twenty-three years and 15 books later, Parker is now doing presentations based on his latest tome, *Into the Deep Unknown: Land of the Tent Dwellers—A Trip Through the Wilds of Nova Scotia* (Pottersfield Press). Although the subject matter of his books spans everything from community histories to merchant seamen, guiding and ghost towns, one thing is constant: his books offer a compelling read.

**CAPTURING STORIES FIRST-HAND**  
How does a historical non-fiction writer capture—and keep—the attention of readers?

“I believe the key to writing non-fiction is to write about what interests you, the author,” Parker says, “because if the author isn’t into it, the reader won’t be. I go into the research phase of every book without knowing much about the topic, other than that it

interests me, and I want to find out more. Then I try to pass that on to the reader.”

Thomas Raddall and Pierre Berton are two of Parker’s favourite non-fiction writers, although he’s quick to say that he doesn’t put himself in their class, nor does he copy any particular style. “But I do try to write in such a way that the reader remains conscious, and their eyes don’t glaze over.” This may explain why his writing is not laced with a lot of boring bits or prudish parlance.

Recorder in hand, Parker takes time to interview people face to face, capturing stories first-hand. In fact, he abhors what he calls today’s gaggle of gadgets; he doesn’t even have a cell phone. “People are becoming social misfits, wrapped up in hand-held devices ... butchering the English language to the point of being

unintelligible, and being unable to carry on a coherent conversation with another human being.”

Aside from conducting long, intimate interviews, the 61-year-old author spends a lot of time digging around to find diaries, journals and photographs. He loves the thrill of the hunt. While preparing *Into the Deep Unknown*, Parker yearned to have a photo or two of Eddie Breck, one of the many characters in his book. He contacted Linda Miller, whose parents were former managers at the legendary Nova Scotia wilderness retreat, Milford House, where Eddie Breck used to stay. Miller suggested the author contact American Tim Coggeshall (a long-time guest at Milford House), whose wife’s grandfather just happened to be Eddie Breck.

It didn’t take Parker long to connect with Coggeshall, now in his 90s. Indeed Coggeshall had several photos of Breck and the guides—some dating back to the 1890s—and agreed to bring them to Milford House that summer. “When I saw them, my heart pounded,” Parker says. “I scanned photos for nine hours.”

## HISTORY PROFILE

**EXPERIENCE AND PERSPECTIVE**  
*Digby Courier* reporter, back country paddler and fan of Parker’s work, Jonathan Riley, says of the author’s latest publication: “This kind of book is beautiful. It’s history right out of the mouths of the people who were actually there. It’s like bringing 100 friends along with you into the wilderness ... friends with experience and perspective.”

Riley surmises that Parker’s books hold their readers’ interest because he gets so much first-hand information through interviews, dairies and journals. This means fewer filters for the reader to sift through; the resulting experience is more direct and satisfying. Riley adds: “Parker shines a light on history; you can get close to his subjects.”

Occasionally Parker doesn’t discover something until after a book’s been published. For example, as soon as *Into the Deep Unknown* hit the stores, he met the granddaughter of Charles (the Strong) Charleton—who appears in the book. She informed him, “We have a box of old photos the American sports used to send.” Lo and behold, the box included scores of photos of the old guides, guests at Milford House, and even a rare signed photo of Albert Bigelow Paine who penned *The Tent Dwellers* over 100 years ago.

Although Parker would love to have had some of these photos in his book, he’s now putting them up on Milford House’s Facebook page, in an album called “Land of the Tent Dwellers—Images From the Past.” By doing so, he hopes the public will not only have access to these photos, but that they can help identify some—another indication of Parker’s passion for history, and his desire to keep the stories alive. ■

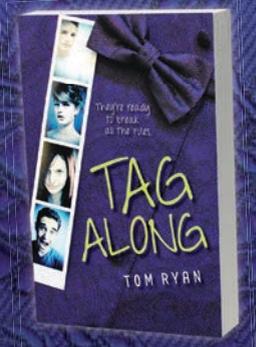
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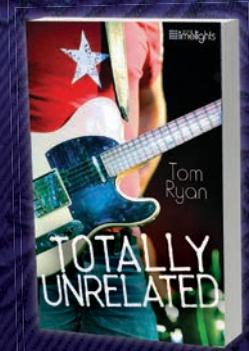
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