Library Marketplace-Interview with Norman Desmarais, Professor Emeritus, Providence College

John D. Riley
BUSCA, Inc., jdriley@comcast.net

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6234

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
both have lots of fun things planned. Helen is just back from a month driving a Jeep around the Rockies, and Hazel is planning to do a house swap with a friend in Australia for the spring. Once Helen’s hip is up and running again, she and Chris have several grand plans for adventures, some of which include Hazel and Fytton. Thank goodness for Skype and email.

ATG: We know Helen likes golf and kayaking. How about you Hazel? What are your favorite activities?

HH: It is actually Chris who does the kayaking. I just watch him race or track him with special devices.

HW: I love walking, having just been up to the Lake District and scaling several peaks. I also love tennis, and I keep on promising Helen I’ll continue my golf lessons.

HH: Once Hazel can actually hit the ball, we have some fabulous golfing holidays planned.

ATG: Are there other favorite pastimes that we don’t know about?

HH: I’m having a wonderful time in Scotland cooking with our fabulous local produce. There are a lot of friends coming to stay in with us, so much of the time I am running an upscale bed & breakfast for them (however, they do have to reciprocate when I’m travelling to see them!). I’m beginning to get involved with the local arts scene around Kirkcudbright, which is very vibrant.

HW: I am also a keen cook, and we love cooking together and swapping recipes. Don’t ever let us loose in a market, as we’ll spend a fortune. You should have seen what we brought back from Siena after the Fiesole Retreat. A lesser known fact about me is that I am a volunteer custody visitor and spend quite a bit of time in police cells — which is very rewarding.

ATG: Thank you both for taking the time to talk with us. It was fun! And we learned a lot.

Library Marketplace — Interview with Norman Desmarais

Professor Emeritus, Providence College and Author of Battlegrounds of Freedom: A Historical Guide to the Battlefields of the War of American Independence <normd@providence.edu>

Column Editor: John D. Riley (Eastern Regional Sales Manager, BUSCA, Inc.) <jdriley@comcast.net> www.buscainc.com

Congratulations Norm on your retirement as acquisitions librarian at the Providence College Library and also upon your Emeritus Professor status there. But you haven’t slowed down a bit in your retirement. You have always been famous for your many projects, such as writing for CD-ROM Professional, CD-ROM Librarian, CD-ROM World, Against the Grain, and other periodicals as well as for your CD-ROMs and books on HTML and other subjects. In your spare time, you also devote a lot of energy to American Revolutionary War history and re-enactments. That passion has now become a full-time project for you (other than spending time with your grandson Lucas). I think the Against the Grain audience will be fascinated to find out more about your transition from librarianship to full-time scholar, author, and re-enactor.

You are now the author of six books on the Revolutionary War, and you have covered all the major and minor battles from Canada to Florida. You have personally participated in many of the re-enactments of those battles, giving you a unique perspective as an author. Was it much of a transition from your library work to working full-time on your writing and publishing?

Norm: No, it wasn’t. I have been involved in writing almost my entire career as a librarian. During my last sabbatical, I devoted myself full-time to writing and completed two volumes of my Guide to the American Revolutionary War. Toward the end of that sabbatical, I estimated that it would take me another 20 years to complete the rest of the set while continuing to work full-time as a librarian. I decided to retire and write full-time, and I can now see the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. I expect to finish the final volume by the fall of 2013. However, that doesn’t mean I’ve exhausted the subject. During the course of my research, I found a number of topics that I want to research further and write about in journal articles.

How did you first become interested in the history of the Revolutionary War?

Norm: I’ve been interested in the Revolutionary War since I was in junior high school. When I was editor of CD-ROM World, I did some consulting for a publisher who asked me, in a casual conversation during dinner, if I had all the funding and necessary resources at my disposal, what topic would I cover and how would I go about it. I responded immediately that I would create a multimedia CD-ROM on the Revolutionary War because nobody was writing about it at the time, and it’s the period continued on page 45
What did you learn from re-enacting that helped you in your writing?

**Norm:** First of all, I became intimately familiar with the lifestyle, clothing, and equipment of the common soldier of the Revolutionary War period, which helps in understanding why they did things the way they did. For example, military strategy depends on the technology of weaponry. Secondly, reenacting on an actual site gives you a better appreciation for the events that occurred there. It’s one thing to visit a site as a tourist and quite another to do so as a re-enactor. Climbing a hill at a leisurely pace on a sunny afternoon is one thing. Attacking that same hill on a hot, humid day, carrying all your gear and under gunfire is quite another. We all know that we’re only firing black powder but the emotions and feelings are as real as if it were live ammunition. It’s somewhat analogous to playing video games. Studies have shown that the player has much the same emotional and physical experience as a participant.

When we go to a historic site which has a visitor center or a museum, we often get a behind-the-scenes tour or a more thorough tour than is available to the public. These tours are generally given by the site director or top personnel after the site closes to the public. The staff know they have a very knowledgeable audience, and the quality of the questions sometimes engenders interesting discussions. Information we learn can help us interpret sources by viewing the terrain and comparing it with the written documentation.

We also get a better understanding of and appreciation for the physical rigors our ancestors endured. When selecting a location from multiple possible sites, some can be ruled out simply by physical constraints, such as how far a person can reasonably travel in a certain period of time. Some historians seem to attribute decisions to what amounts to a whim of the commander when in reality physical conditions are the deciding factor. For example, when the French fleet arrived, they expected to go to Sandy Hook, New Jersey. However, when they arrived, they found that their ships could not get over the sandbars and could be trapped in the harbor at low tide; so they went to Newport, Rhode Island instead. Some historians make that decision appear as though the French were afraid of being attacked by the British in New York.
You mentioned safety and casualties. Would you elaborate on that?

Norm: This is theater on a grand scale, and it’s an inherently dangerous hobby, so safety is a prime concern. We usually have rescue vehicles on standby at major events and some of our members are medical personnel: doctors, nurses, EMTs etc. The organization I belong to has an excellent safety record as far as weapons. It set the standards for the care and handling of weapons and black powder that other organizations have adopted.

If anybody notices a safety violation, he can raise his hat on a musket or a sword and the action will stop immediately. This is an instance where a private can overrule an officer’s command. Sometimes we have a field hospital to demonstrate 18th-century medical practices. The surgeons often look for people to portray patients. Occasionally, they’ll get somebody with a real wound and treat them with modern medical techniques.

How do you know when to “die”?  
Norm: When your weapon misfires two or three times in a row or when you run out of ammunition, it’s a good time to die. Sometimes you’re tired and just want to rest or you want to go down to watch the rest of the battle from a good vantage point. Sometimes an officer will say that we need casualties. At other times, the circumstances demand it. For example, one time this summer, a company of redcoats had just discharged their weapons and took cover behind some bushes. My company pursued them, anticipating capturing them before they reloaded. As we came around the bushes, most of them had reloaded and fired at us. Most of us went down. I think we surprised them as much as they surprised us. Usually when we go down, we alert the people aside of us so that nobody thinks we’re a real casualty.

You are also working on compiling background documentary databases utilizing diaries and other firsthand documents. How much of that have you released, and would you tell us more about that project?

Norm: I’ve compiled over a thousand published diaries and personal accounts. Many of these were quite difficult to locate and obtain. I thought that if I, as a professor and academic librarian, encountered these obstacles, it would be next to impossible for the average researcher to get access to much of this material without spending a small fortune on travel.

That convinced me to digitize these accounts to help me in my own research and to benefit that of others. About half of these accounts are available on thematic CD-ROMs from Revolutionaryimprints.com. I also have continued on page 47
more than 100 that are covered by copyright and will not be publicly available.

How does your work differ from the many histories of the Revolutionary War?

Norm: Most historians cover only the major engagements, those that were strategically important. I also cover the forage wars, raids, and skirmishes. While many of these engagements are not strategically important, they did result in casualties on both sides and significant property damage that also had an impact on local communities and the civilian population. Some historians are using my work as the basis for their research in creating social histories, such as how the war affected the towns in the Hudson River Valley or the Mohawk Valley.

The most comprehensive published list of military engagements I found totals 1,330 actions. I’ve compiled more than 3,000. The extensive notes also document these events with primary and secondary sources. In addition to learning about individual actions, the reader can get a sense of how the war affected a given community or region. Some people are also using my work for genealogical research.

Did you learn anything that surprised you?

Norm: Yes. There were many events that I discovered as I pursued my research. I found that many professional historians and museum curators also know nothing about them. One event that surprised me was Paul Revere’s court-martial for treason. (That’s going to be the subject of one of those articles I mentioned that I plan to write.) There were also a number of ironies of war that I found interesting. One of these involves the terms of surrender at Yorktown. They are identical to the terms of surrender the British imposed on the Americans at Charleston the year before. Another is that Patrick Ferguson had an opportunity to shoot General Washington at Brandywine. He thought it inappropriate to do so because Washington was unarmored at the time. Had he done so, the British might have won the war after only two years. Another is the story of a free black man who enlisted in the army, was captured as a prisoner of war, and was sold into slavery. He managed to regain his freedom and rejoined the army — only to be captured and sold into slavery again. There were quite a few human interest stories that I learned about and included in the books.

You mentioned that there are a number of British historians who study and write about the Revolutionary War from a British perspective. Does their narrative differ very much from the American historical record?

Norm: The American War for Independence, which the British referred to as “the Troubles,” was not as important to them as the war in India. The most important British book on the war, in my opinion, is Christopher Hibbert’s Redcoats and Rebels: The American Revolution through British Eyes. Other historians include Jeremy Black (War for America: The Fight for Independence), Brendan Morrissey (Yorktown 1781: The World Turned Upside Down), Armstrong Starkey (European and Native American Warfare, 1675-1815), and David Syrett (The Royal Navy in American Waters, 1775-1783). A contemporary history written by one of the participants is Charles Stedman’s The History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War. There are also many diaries and memoirs of British officers such as Frederick Mackenzie, Anthony Allaire, Banastre Tarleton, and Henry Clinton. The papers of General Charles Cornwallis have also been published recently.

The facts remain the same. How different authors interpret them is what changes and what’s important. History is written by the victors, so it’s rare to get contemporary accounts from the losers or accurate casualty totals. This war is one of those rarities. Not only do we have many diaries from the British and French perspectives, we are getting more and more from the Hessian perspective as well, particularly thanks to Bruce Burgoyne, who has translated several Hessian diaries.

What other books and authors do you think are important in studying the American
Revolution? Which ones have influenced you the most?

Norm: Mark M. Boatner’s Encyclopedia of the American Revolution is the single most valuable source and is considered the Bible by anyone studying this war. Harold E. Selesky revised it and published it in a much more expensive updated version in 2007. Another good alternative is The Encyclopedia of the American Revolutionary War: A Political, Social, and Military History (5 vols.), edited by Gregory Fremont-Barnes and Richard Alan Ryerson. The Naval Documents of the American Revolution (11 vols.) is a very valuable set. The title may mislead people into thinking it covers only the major naval battles. It covers almost anything involved with watercraft. If somebody crossed a river in a canoe to attack an enemy camp, it’s likely to be covered in this set. Since the British didn’t venture very far from the water, there are primary sources for a large number of engagements. Thomas Fleming and David Hackett Fischer are also favorite authors. I posted a 119-page bibliography at https://www.buscainc.com/publishing/guide_american_revolution_bibliography.html.

If you could be a personage from the Revolutionary War who would you choose? When you are in a re-enactment who do you normally play?

Norm: We usually portray the common soldiers of the Revolutionary War. Of course, when we do a historical action, we know the names of the officers. The people selected to portray them are usually selected from the officers of the participating units. They may be an officer this weekend and a private next weekend.

Several years ago, we were interpreting General George Washington’s visit to Kingston, Rhode Island. I was standing guard at the entrance to the old statehouse when I learned that the person who was supposed to play Washington had gotten injured the day before and was unable to come. I was asked to portray His Excellency, but I didn’t have the proper uniform and accoutrements on such short notice. I kept saying that you’ve got to love this army. You’re a private standing guard one moment, and half an hour later you’re Commander-in-Chief.

If I could pick a character to portray, I’d like to interpret Joseph Plumb Martin, but I’m too old to do so now. He lied about his age to join the army at the age of 15. He fought almost the entire war from Bunker Hill to Yorktown. He was illiterate when he joined. We know that because his early pay records, now in the Library of Congress, were signed with his mark. They were also authorized by Gen. Washington. Martin learned to read and write while in the army and became a sergeant, a position which required the ability to read and write. He wrote one of the most fascinating, and probably the most republished, diaries of the War. It has a variety of titles such as Private Yankee Doodle, A Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Dan-
Crown forces dug as they moved closer to the Continentals. **Generals Henry Clinton** and **Charles Cornwallis** made their headquarters at **Rebecca Motte's house**, on King Street, during the occupation of Charleston in 1780.

There’s a tragic story to tell about that surrender. When the British collected all the captured weapons, they were warned that some were still loaded and should be handled carefully as they put them in wagons. The wagons were then driven to a warehouse which contained 4,000 pounds of ammunition. Another powder magazine, only 200 paces away, contained 10,000 pounds of black powder. As the troops began tossing the weapons into the warehouse, there was an explosion that blew debris and body parts about 0.3 miles and set fire to several nearby buildings. Between 200 and 300 people died in the explosion and fire, almost as many as were killed during the three-month siege of Charleston.

**Could you tell us more about Francis Marion, the “Swamp Fox” of Charleston fame?**

**Norm:** While Francis Marion saw action at Charleston, that’s not where he gained his reputation as the Swamp Fox. That was Ox Swamp on November 8, 1780. **Banastre Tarleton** chased him about 25 miles “for seven hours, through swamps and defiles.” When Tarleton abandoned the pursuit, he supposedly told his men, “as for this damned old fox, the devil himself could not catch him.”

Tradition says that **Marion** used Snow Island as his camp from August 1780 to March 1781 because it gave him command of the rivers and made his camp inaccessible except by water. Recent archaeological research is questioning that location, as very few Revolutionary War artifacts have been found there, and there’s no evidence of a camp. The camp may have actually been at Goddard’s Plantation, a large site across the river from Snow Island. Many artifacts and burned remains of an 18th-century camp found there seem to agree with the description of the raid on Marion’s camp.

There’s a legend that a British officer came to Marion’s headquarters under a flag of truce to discuss an exchange of prisoners. Marion entertained him at a dinner that consisted entirely of sweet potatoes baked in a campfire. The officer was astounded that men were willing to fight for a cause that provided such meager rations. When he returned to Charleston, the officer supposedly resigned his commission, saying that the British could never defeat an army that would endure such hardships. Whether true or not, there must be a kernel of truth for the legend. Nevertheless, the story is part of Marion’s mystique and illustrates his influence and the respect he had from his men and fellow countrymen. **John Blake White** illustrated the story in a painting which later became a **Currier and Ives** engraving.