

Mary Donaldson Lecture

Presented by Roch Carrier



Thank you very much for this nice introduction. Mr. Minister, Colleagues and Librarians, it is a pleasure to be back in beautiful Saskatoon, and it's a great honour to have been invited by you to this special occasion. I am not forgetting that my experience in the library field is only a year and a half, so I'm not coming here pretending to teach you anything. I will just tell you the story of what's happening at the National Library of Canada, and what we are trying to do. And certainly I will be curious to listen to your reaction.

It's a great honour also to be giving this Mary Donaldson Lecture. I asked for information about this important person. She is impressive because she did what she had to do. And when I was reading about her I was thinking of another lady who was really important for the National Library of Canada. And I think that both ladies - Mrs. Donaldson and Mrs. Shepard* - were cut in the same wood.

I met Martha Shepard last year. We were celebrating the 50th anniversary of what was called the Canadian Center for Bibliography, and it was the beginning of what became the National Library of Canada. So we had a small celebration. Martha Shepard was there - 84 or 85 - straight, tall, beautiful, bright, funny, quick. She spoke without notes and she told us her story.

I must tell you that I was really inspired by Mrs. Shepard, and I'm sure that if I had listened to Mrs. Donaldson's story, I would have been inspired in the same way. Mrs. Shepard gave me that lesson: If you want to do, you do, because you have to, and you don't wait for the best conditions, the best budgets, the best support. You do what has to be done. And I was so impressed that I made that my principle, and I think of that many times during the days, when we are struggling for better budgets, better facilities and acquisitions budgets, better budgets for the technical stuff, and thinking, "What would she be doing?" She would do what has to be done, and we have to push, and it will happen.

I was inspired also by your theme - "Rediscovering Our Core Values." It's important to do, and I can say that because we are just in the midst of doing that exercise at the National Library of Canada.

Coming from outside, it's amazing that all of us, we love books, but we never talk about books. Did you notice that? We never talk about books. And if we are going back to core values, I think we have to go back to this great feeling we all had when we discovered books, when we discovered reading. In my case there were not books around. There was nothing, only newspapers. And all of us, we discovered reading in our own way. Can you remember this very exciting feeling that suddenly you could read a letter, some words,

and suddenly there were sentences.

I remember the first sentence I learned to read. I came back from school. "Maman! Maman! Je sais lire! J'ai appris `a lire!" And I started to read in my little book, and my mother was - I think I will use the word "flabbergast" - because I was reading the way the nun taught me how to read. This nun was Sister Bridget, and she was Irish, and she was speaking

French the way I speak English!

We have to remember this excitement that reading is, because this is what we are about. Of course, we are respectable, and we are in the world of information. Yes, but information, that's about fun, that's about excitement, that's about discovering, that's about conquering new territory, that's about growing up. We have to get back this basic excitement that books and information bring to us and to our clients.

Of course, librarians are for freedom to read, but freedom to read in a safe place. If you think of the old library core values, that's what it was about, a safe place to discover the world. Perhaps we have to think about this very basic value also, that with your expertise and commitment libraries are a safe place to widen and discover the world.

And you are very involved in family literacy programs and children's programs. Traveling through the country I saw everywhere wonderful ways of promoting family reading. I saw great stuff. In the Territories, for example, the kids bet that they would read one million minutes during the year. Can you imagine, one million minutes! And they had an hourglass full of candies, and the candies would fall according to the number of minutes. That was motivating.

There was another program. There was a bet with the principal of the school, so if the kids read that many minutes during the year, at the end of the year the principal would have to move to the roof of the school with his desk, whatever the weather.

So there is a great number of incentives. And those are the core values; promoting reading, because reading is magic. Reading gives you the world.

Just to connect with real life, about every third week I go out to read some stories to some kids, wherever I am, in any city in any part of Canada. And I learn a lot. A kid told me, "A book brings me to places my feet cannot." I would like to have invented that sentence. This is great! And we have to think, because that's your business, that you give some magic shoes, the books. Those shoes bring the people where their feet cannot bring them - to another place.

When I went to one of those schools, the big guy's coming, so the kids are tame, dressed, rehearsed, so they are well prepared. And this time I came into the library. I said, "Good afternoon, kids. Do you read books?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Do you READ BOOKS?"

"YES, SIR!"

"I don't."

Well, what do we do? This is not rehearsed. And the teachers are very uneasy with that weird dude. What is he doing to our kids? And I just keep the effect like that. And there is always, at the end, the big boys, those who are playing hockey, and bored with school. And they were there, a bit uneasy. And one of them raised his hand and said,

"Sir, you should read books."

"Why's that?"

"To get smart!"

I think he had understood what it's about.

So there is a great number of incentives, and they are part of your core values. You have to think about that. I think we became in the profession much too "professional". Let's think about the basics, because the basics are solid. The values are there. You have great power. This power is to change life.

And if I think just of my little story, I have a great life because of books. Books really changed my life. And it's amazing to think that when I was growing up until 9 or 8, there were zero books around me. I was from a very modest family. And there were 0 books around me. I would have become like any one of my friends - I don't know - a truck driver, a lumberjack, whatever. That's what my friends were becoming. They are very honest citizens. They are paying their taxes. They are great family men. But because my Dad suddenly did some business and was paid with books, suddenly there were a number of books at home, and it really changed my life completely. So when I visit libraries, and I see a librarian giving a book to a kid, I cannot help thinking that something is happening, and perhaps this kid, because of the book, will have his life changed. So that is the core value of the profession. And those values, however, should not keep us in the past, because those values are also the values of the future.

Because we have to make a number of decisions at the National Library of Canada, we are going through the exercise of a strategic plan. And the big question when you do that exercise is, "What business are we in? What is our business?" So we had all kinds of themes working. And they decided at one time that we are in the information business. Now, that's true. You are in the information business. But coming from outside and enjoying playing the devil's advocate, I told them, "Ah, you are in the information business. That's wonderful!" And now, as National Librarian, I go to see my political master, and I say,

"I need a number of millions."

"What for?"

"Because I am in the information business."

"Oh ho, you are in the information business. But there are in Canada one million companies who are in the information business. And they are not coming to ask me for

millions."

So we have to define what we are about. And if we connect the information business with those core values, we are getting unique. We are in a business that no one else can do. And we do that business in the best way. And this is what we are promoting. So we have the new values of information business, supported by technology and all that stuff that you know better than I do. But we are doing this business with the core values, the traditional values of the profession. And because of that, nobody can do as well as we are doing.

So we are working on that. And again, please, I am not preaching. I am just telling you the story of what we are trying to do.

The National Library of Canada will be fifty years old. That's quite young for a national organization. The challenge for the new National Librarian is to push this organization ahead in the new millennium. We have our traditional activities. There is some context because of the technological revolution. Some think that everything that's paper will disappear. We have a collection of over twenty million items in paper. That will not disappear. If I put all the shelves at the same level, we'll have something like 180 km. of shelved material. That will not disappear. Even if we digitize all that (and we will not digitize that next year), we will not burn those books. We will not burn those incunabula. We will not burn those precious books. People will want us to keep them.

So we have the traditional work, but we have also the new support of technology. We want to make those treasures accessible to all Canadians. Why? Because we are a national institution. And why are we a national institution? Because Canadians pay taxes. So we should receive better services. And we are working to improve those services.

We have great treasures that are unknown to most Canadians. We just bought a wonderful piece, for example. It is called "England's Honour Revived".** It's the oldest piece in the English language where there is the mention of Canada. It dates to 1628. It's a poem about the Kirke brothers who were coming to invade La Nouvelle France, French Canada at the time. And it's a wonderful text, and we have in this poem the Old World of the time. I will do my best to read four verses. It is fascinating. It's in ancient English. I'm not terribly strong in Ancient English. So let's try:

Three Ships that lancht fo[r]th lately,
(Vessels tall and stately,
Under the command of brave Captaine Kirke.
Hath had such auspicious chance,
Against our vaunting foes of France,
That all true English may applaude this worke.

So you can read that poem if you go to our website. It's a wonderful treasure.

And perhaps you know I am doing a lot of peddling. I'm going to explain to politicians what we are doing and how we are important. I never show up without my "England's Honour Revived" under my arm. So I come with my book like a real peddler. And in fact I was in the peddling business, and my dad was. So I deposit the box on the table. I put on gloves and a mask and here is the piece. And it attracts a lot of attention, and people can just not believe that we have such treasures. And then I say, "Yes, and we have much more." We want to find ways to make those treasures available to Canadians. We plan to do some traveling exhibitions, and we will start this year.

We have wonderful manuscripts. Canadian writers gave us their manuscripts, writers like Gabrielle Roy, Michael Ondaatje, Carol Shields, George Bowering, W. P. Kinsella, Marie-Louise Gay, Glen Gould, Oscar Peterson, and so on. We have those treasures, and Canadians should be able to see them. So we are working to find ways of doing so.

Why? Because when we plan for the future, the first step is to listen to people. We did that last year. We did a tour of consultation, and we listened, and we are on the road a lot. We try to listen as much as possible. And one of the first questions people ask when we are talking about those treasures is, "How come we cannot see them?" Yes, we will make them available now.

A way of making some of our treasures available is through the system AMICUS. I don't know if you are using AMICUS, but since I took the responsibility we are working hard to make this service free because Canadians who are paying taxes should have access to their Canadian data base. There was a big cost in the budget. I think we fixed that, explaining that it's not right to ask a fee for giving Canadians what they are owed already. I think we won that point.

We try to improve many departments of the National Library, but the department who sends bills - it's not working very well, and it's not my intent to repair that department. So AMICUS will be free soon. We are in the last details of negotiations with a private company which holds rights on some of our stuff. We'll do it. No doubt we'll do it.

So if you are interested in AMICUS, please just ask information at the National Library. They will try to facilitate you. And since the rumour is that AMICUS is free, the use is climbing vertically every month. That's just amazing. So ask your friends, or phone the National Library. Take the information and see what can be done for you. The National Library will try to help you because that's what we want to do. We want to help.

We said that technology is an important support, and we are just launching a series of quite interesting sites. You already know certainly "Canadian Information by Subject". That's very useful. We organize websites by subject with Canadian contents. And we've launched a new thing. It's about comic books. We are diversifying our activities. The site is called "Guardians of the North." It's just new, and they are starting now to use it in schools. And you will not believe

it comes from the National Library. The music - someone daughter said this site "rocks". (I don't know exactly what that means, but I think I know.) It's about comic books, so you have Captain Canada, Captain Canuck, and you have the beautiful Fleur-de-Lis. So I suggest that you check "Guardian of the North".

One of our mottoes is "partnerships". So we have a number of partners. And we want to open it up. We are now in the lab. We created "Images Canada" because we are collecting on that site images from all areas of Canada, all kinds of activities, so we will have a bank of images that is really extraordinary.

We digitize also, and we will be launching in some days from now "Canadian Illustrated News". It's a magazine that was published at the end of the last century. It's beautiful. It's about every city that was doing anything special in Canada. There are over 400 photographs and thousands of great illustrations and articles on sports, strikes, mining, factories, arts. It's a wonderful document.

We have "Zoom" for children. This site shows how you do a book for children, from the idea to the finished product, how the artist works, and will encourage children to do his or her own book.

We have some political information - "Canadian Confederation for Kids". So confederation is being explained to kids. And we have also "Confederation for Adults". It's about the same thing, but the language is different.

We have a game to teach history. It's called "First Among Equals." It's a game with pictures of the prime ministers of Canada.

So these are some of the sites we are launching. The circumstances are good because the Government of Canada wants to connect all Canadians by the year 2004, and they are serious. It's amazing! They are putting the resources there and they want to do it. We received \$2.5 million last year to do some of these projects that I mentioned to you, and some others that are in process of being done.

I made a big decision. The National Library was doing a number of digitization activities, but it was according to the free time everybody had. And sometimes, somebody would do the same thing as someone in another department. And they would not know. So I created what I call a Task Force. And coming from the military - I spent some time with the military - I like this expression. And in fact the first one was a SWAT team. So I said it will be my digitization SWAT team. It was not going very well in that environment, so we changed. The approach was that you work as a SWAT team, meaning we don't have the money, we do the job. We do hours. We work like crazy because it's fun, and we will impress everybody and they will run after us and give us some money. That's what happened! And we have \$2 million again this year because of what was done.

So we work - I will not say on a shoestring. There was no shoe and there was no string. There was just the competence and good will of those people and it was

wonderful. Now I will talk with the unions. That's another issue, but for the moment everybody's really excited about what has happened.

What we discovered is that nobody can do the job alone. We have to work in partnership. One of the first decisions we made was to create a partnership with the National Archives of Canada. I know that in the past there was some competition between the two organizations. Some would say there was war. I don't know which word is precise. But time is precious. We can't spend 100% of our time fighting, but we can do a number of interesting things also during that time. So we decided to create a common I[nformation] T[echnology] team, to join the two technology teams together. That means that through AMICUS, when we are finished, the client, meaning you, everybody, will have access not only to the National Library of Canada's treasure, but also to the Archive's treasure. This will be quite impressive. And it's working, so the two teams are together. Not only is it working, but now other agencies are asking, "How could you work together?" We'll have results very, very soon.

Partnerships of course will be with you. It's something that we wish. Again, coming from the outside and traveling through Canada, I was in Western Canada - I think it was B.C. - and I asked this naive question, "How many libraries are we in Canada?" To my amazement, nobody could give me an answer. It took something like three weeks before I got an answer, and they told me that they are not sure of the figures. It seems it is around 21,000, including school libraries, local libraries, small university and provincial libraries. 21,000 libraries! It's quite a network. And just think! You are connected. You have the experience of the technological revolution. You have experience in managing information. You have expertise. The Government of Canada is trying to connect Canadians. And there is this network of 21,000 libraries with expertise in information management, in preservation of documents, preservation of information. There should be a role for librarians.

So this is that value that we are trying to sell. And they are discovering us in Ottawa, and I think that some partnerships will be established. We are really promoting the expertise of libraries and librarians in terms of information management. So this is what we are doing. We are partnering with museums. We are partnering with the Canadian Institute for the Blind. Our last partner is the National Library of Quebec. After a number of conversations, they accepted to join our AMICUS. So they sent us 350,000 notices that are now included in our catalogue of AMICUS. So we are multiplying partnerships because together there will be real strength, and we will be able to fulfill the challenge and do what we have to do - that is connecting Canadians.

On the international level there is also something we can do. A lot of people are worried. There is a wealth of information, but you cannot be certain about the sources. In fact, one of the great scientists in Canada was telling me that one of the great problems of the Internet in science is that it's

not validated information. We can give validated information. So the National Library of Canada, with the Library of Congress, the National Library of Australia and the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, and a number of other institutions from Europe and the States created a group. It's called CDRS [Collaborative Digital Reference Service]. So we are working. The result is that the information will be validated, and their system will refer a question - let's say it's about Aborigines from Canada - to the library member of this organization in Canada, and the same in Australia, for example. So the project is at its beginning, but you will certainly hear more about that because there's a lot of interest, and again it's applying the core values to new situations.

So this is what's happening at the National Library of Canada. I am having the time of my life, I must tell you. And I hope that when I leave this responsibility the place will be better than it was when I came in. This is the principle. You build on what people built before you.

So again, I repeat, we are open for business and partnership. Visit our website - www.nlc-bnc.ca. Or e-mail - reference@nlc-bnc.ca. We have a toll free number - 1-877-896-9481. We have a TDD number - (613) 992-6969 or 1-866-299-1699 (Toll free in Canada). There are a number of ways of getting to us. We want to be partners, and as they say, "We want YOUR business!"

Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure talking to you.

**Martha Shepard was the first Director of the Canadian Bibliographic Center, the precursor to the National Library of Canada.*

***For a description of this important piece of Canadian history, and to read the full text of the poem, visit the following website: <http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/1/1/n1-224-e.html#england>.*

*Tape transcribed by Ken Vaughan
Regina Public Library*

THANK YOU KEN, FOR A JOB WELL-DONE!!



*The National Librarian meets the Provincial Librarian:
Roch Carrier and Joylene Campbell*