

Ann Regan Leaves Her Mark --- on History

Allison Ortiz

IN 45 YEARS of her storied service to Minnesota letters, Ann Regan has had a soundtrack: the steady ticktock of an ancient regulator clock, brought over from the old Minnesota Historical Society building on Cedar Street, that graces the offices of the Minnesota Historical Society Press (MNHS Press).

Regan faithfully resets the clock every few weeks, a delicate procedure requiring a gentle twist on the bottom of the pendulum. By all accounts from authors and colleagues, her care of the clock is right in keeping with her committed, meticulous, tactful, selfless, and inspired work as a longtime editor and publisher at the press.

“For 45 years and counting, Ann has demonstrated exceptional dedication and outstanding work in fostering books, reading, and literary activity in Minnesota,” said Nina Archabal, director emerita of the Minnesota Historical Society. “Minnesota’s vibrant publishing and literary community is inestimably better for [her] contributions.”

Regan’s legacy includes more than 280 titles—from Evelyn Fairbanks’s *The Days of Rondo* (1990) to Anton Treuer’s *Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians but Were Afraid to Ask* (2012 and 2023) and Patty Wetterling and Joy Baker’s *Dear Jacob: A Mother’s Journey of Hope* (2023).

As she prepares to retire, Regan keeps her characteristic posture of gratitude and humility: “I’ve learned something from every project I’ve worked on . . . from every author I’ve worked with,” she said. “That continual learning has been a major source of joy.”

Among regional authors and publishers, she’s now a legendary figure, distinguished not only by her considerable body of work but also by her great height and unmistakable snowcapped head, bent slightly forward as if prepared to take in the next manuscript, and the next.



MNHS Press editor in chief, Ann Regan (MNHS/PHOTO BY FRANCIS SAMPAH)

Born to Read

Regan’s love of language and stories began in childhood in Billings, Montana, where the lure of other places and worlds within stories proved irresistible. Reading was in her blood. Her father, an architect, read to Regan and her three siblings nearly every night. Her mother, a junior high teacher turned state legislator, was a fierce proponent for education. At family reunions, it was perfectly acceptable to walk into a room with a book and to sit down and just read.

“I realized . . . that in reading, I could experience somebody else’s reality,” Regan reminisced. “With immersive reading, you get lost in a story. You can channel [other people’s] emotions and see what it’s like. You can try out another life.”

Regan developed such an extensive vocabulary that her junior high and high school classmates teased her for being a bit too polysyllabic. “I had a big vocabulary. I didn’t know how to pronounce all the words, but I used them,” she recalled. “I was just using the right words. I wasn’t trying to show off.”



LEFT: *Doing research for her Danish chapter in They Chose Minnesota in 1979, Ann Regan stands in a doorway in Askov next to a stylized Danish soldier.* (PHOTO BY DEBBIE MILLER)

ABOVE: *Patrick Coleman and Ann Regan at a gathering to celebrate the publication of The Nonpartisan League, 1915–22: An Annotated Bibliography, 1985.* (PHOTO FROM PATRICK COLEMAN)

Regan graduated from the University of Montana in 1977 with a double major in history and Russian language but without a clue of where life would take her next. She landed at her grandmother's house in Helena, Montana, and began working as a summer volunteer for the Montana Historical Society. Under the tutelage of Vivian Paladin, editor of the society's quarterly journal, *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, Regan discovered the magical intersection of history and story. She set her compass for Minnesota, where she lucked into a yearlong job as a research assistant, supported by a federal program, at MNHS Press.

Her trajectory at the press was steady and sure: from temporary research assistant to full-time researcher, assistant editor (responsible for the new Borealis Books reprint series), managing editor (1987), and editor in chief (2005). She has stepped up to lead the press more than once, serving as acting director. But it's as a hands-on editor where she's really made her mark.

"Her email correspondence is epic," said Shannon Pennefeather, managing editor at MNHS Press. "She knows just when to compliment or cajole or tease, with

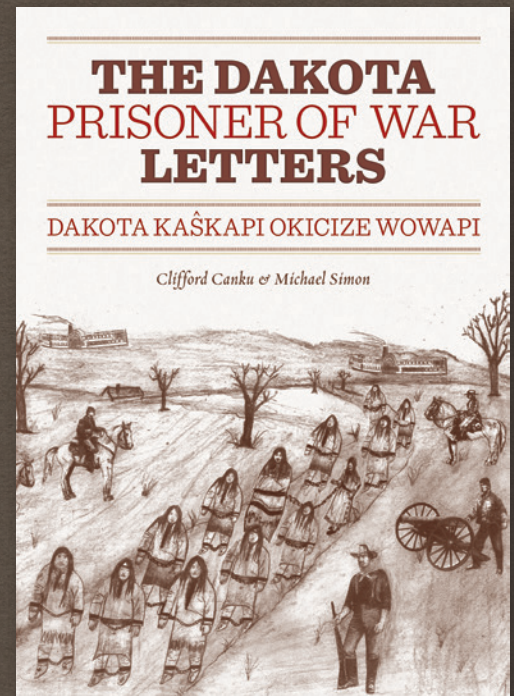
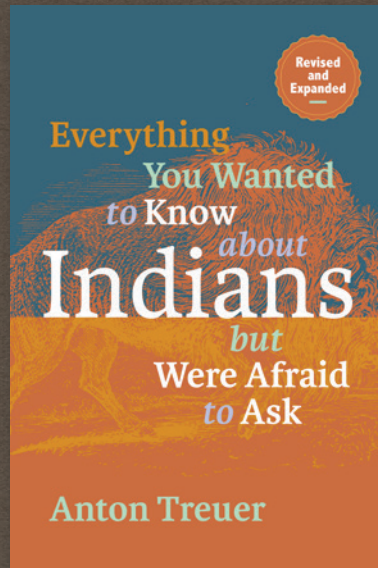
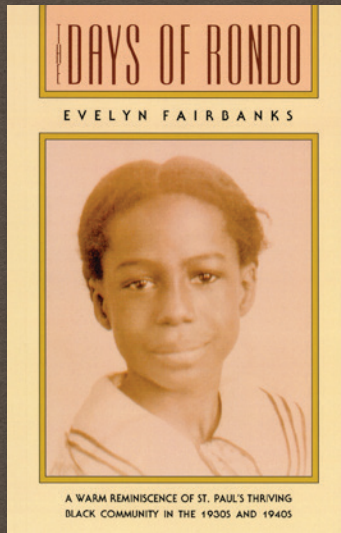
a characteristically gentle touch. These capsules of persuasive writing show authors that she's in their corner, and also inspire her colleagues to focus on making the best books we can."

More than an Editor

From the start, Regan was driven by a desire to bring forward the voices and stories that history has buried, silenced, or forgotten. She championed diversity, not because it was the fashion but because it was her passion.

"No one person has been more persistent in recognizing the value of the diverse voices that make the Upper Midwest unique," notes Greg Britton, editorial director of Johns Hopkins University Press and former director of MNHS Press. "Ann has been a quiet champion of those voices. As an editor, publisher, and author-whisperer, Ann's influence is everywhere. In her work, she has made those voices more clear, more honest, and more heard."

The original submission for *The Days of Rondo* was only 12 pages when author Evelyn Fairbanks mailed the



proposal of her memoir to MNHS Press in 1982. Regan was captivated by the vivid, descriptive stories of the vibrant Black community of St. Paul's Rondo neighborhood from the 1930s through the 1950s. She was assigned to work with Fairbanks, Regan's first role as coach.

Immediately, Regan recognized that she had as much to learn as to teach: "I was the age of her daughter. She was a 50-something African American woman whose experience was so different from mine. And I was aware of my naivete. That self-awareness helped me."

For seven years, Regan and Fairbanks toiled and tinkered, mostly corresponding through snail mail. The result was a coming-of-age story, 192 pages of rich description that captivated readers, received praise from reviewers, and even became a play at History Theatre in its 1992–93 season. *The Days of Rondo* played a major part in Regan's development as an editor.

"The book gave me the skill set, the voice, the perspective on how an editor/author relationship can evolve and change," Regan said. "[Fairbanks] often said that I made her a writer. To which I responded in all sincerity: You made me an editor."

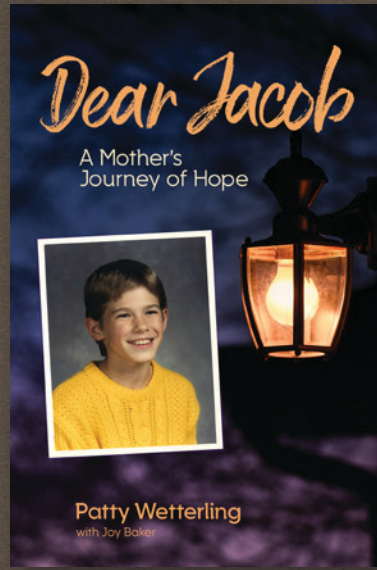
Their working relationship blossomed into a friendship so strong that when Fairbanks passed away, her children invited Regan to give a eulogy at her memorial service.

The Untold Stories

During her tenure, Regan developed an especially prolific working relationship with Anton Treuer, professor of Ojibwe at Bemidji State University and the author of more than a dozen books on Ojibwe history and language. Regan was the primary editor for many of Treuer's books, including the perennial bestseller *Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians but Were Afraid to Ask*; *The Cultural Toolbox: Traditional Ojibwe Living in the Modern World*; and *Warrior Nation: A History of the Red Lake Ojibwe*.

According to Treuer, Regan's work has had statewide and nationwide impact:

I have watched Ann Regan's career for decades. When she started at the Minnesota Historical Society Press, the organization had inherited a sometimes-troubled past, especially with . . . Native American stakeholders. I watched her solicit, edit, and publish manuscripts consistently for decades until the MNHS Press emerged as the best state historical press in the country with the deepest and broadest list of Native American history. Her leadership in this effort transformed our understanding of Minnesota and Native American history. It elevated many often-marginalized voices. And it helped heal Native relationships with the press, MNHS, and



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many people and organizations across the state. Few people in the editorial universe have impact like this.

Regan’s influence was also personal, Treuer acknowledged:

At various points in my own academic career and aspirations as an author, Regan had to stand up to me and tell me that my work was not ready to publish, stand up for me when my work was doubted, and also encourage, support, and advise my work. I became a better author through all of this. My books became better. And they had stronger impact and visibility.

A Sacred Responsibility

A sense of responsibility weighed heavily on Regan throughout the translation and editing of *Dakota Prisoner of War Letters: Dakota Kaşkapi Okicize Wowapi*—a book that contains previously untold personal accounts of one of the most difficult chapters in Minnesota history: the US–Dakota War of 1862. While imprisoned at Camp McClellan in Davenport, Iowa, the men wrote to missionary Stephen Riggs. They detailed the camp’s desperate conditions and asked Riggs for help and for news about their loved ones. Dakota elders Clifford Canku and Michael

Simon, both fluent in Dakota, translated 50 of these letters to be included in the book.

Regan recalled the hours she spent listening to the tick of the grandfather clock in the conference room as she examined the manuscript line by line, word by word, character by character. “These letters are sacred. That responsibility was a big deal,” she said.

Regan built her relationships with the authors with the simple but powerful act of going to visit them. “I realized however uncomfortable I might feel stepping out of my comfort zone, that is exactly what people who are not part of the majority culture experience every day,” she emphasized. “And I needed to have that feeling to begin to be a little bit of the person who could help this story get told to a broader public.”

Dakota Prisoner of War Letters was published in 2012, 150 years after the US–Dakota War. It has become a vital primary resource for historians and has shaped a more inclusive interpretation of the war.

Regan further explained: “For many years, the titles on our list told the history of this place pretty much only from the perspective of the whites, the invaders. So the books naturally touted the hard work of immigrants and celebrated economic growth. The stories we’ve been able to publish more recently are more complicated, interesting, and compelling—and they explain today’s Minnesota

more helpfully—because Indigenous authors and Indigenous sources are writing and speaking about their lives.”

A True Partnership

Some books on Regan’s list will be remembered not only for their content but also for their place in history. *A Good Time for the Truth: Race in Minnesota*, for example, sought to uncover what it is like to be a person of color in Minnesota. Sixteen writers of different backgrounds wrote of their experiences with race and racism. Regan acquired the project and served as the in-house editor.

Throughout the project, Regan said she battled with her own insecurities as a white person dealing with the groundbreaking and challenging content. Nonetheless, she felt compelled to do her best not just for the authors but for all Minnesotans.

“Ann was enthusiastic about my idea and went to bat for this project at the press,” said Sun Yung Shin, author/editor of *A Good Time for the Truth*. “She is one of the rare white people I’ve worked with who welcomed my frank input regarding white supremacy in the literary ecosystem and how it showed up on the page, in marketing, on bookshelves, in readerships, etc. It felt to me like a true partnership, and it’s one that I will treasure for the rest of my life.”

A Good Time for the Truth was published in 2016, three months before Philando Castile was shot and killed by a St. Anthony, Minnesota, police officer during a traffic stop. The book instantly became a resource for book clubs, library groups, and classrooms as readers, teachers, and students wrestled with difficult issues of race. And its authors were invited to speak across the Twin Cities and beyond.

Much-Needed Epilogue

The kidnapping of 11-year-old Jacob Wetterling in October 1989 reverberated across Minnesota and the country. In the decades that followed, his mother, Patty Wetterling, never gave up hope as she advocated for her son and missing and exploited children across the country. The case went unsolved for more than 27 years, coming to a heart-breaking conclusion with a confession and the discovery of Jacob’s body in 2016.

Despite her grief, Patty Wetterling sought to comfort others by sharing her family’s journey and their resilience, determination, and unbroken hope. Together with blogger Joy Baker, Wetterling wrote *Dear Jacob: A Mother’s Journey*

of Hope. Regan acquired the book for MNHS Press and served as its editor.

At the MNHS Annual Meeting in November 2023, Wetterling was asked why she chose MNHS Press over other publishers. “Jacob changed Minnesota history. Everybody in this state lived through this in their own stories,” she said. “When we got the call from the Minnesota Historical Society Press, Joy was at her house and I was at mine, and we were dancing, literally. We trusted the integrity. We’ve worked with Ann Regan; she had helped us along the way.”

For Regan, working on *Dear Jacob* near the end of her career was a powerful experience. “It’s a very important Minnesota story that was so unresolved, and people carried this sort of post-traumatic stress on it,” she reflected. “It’s a book that people needed.”

“She Means Business”

As Regan honed her skills, many authors came to know and appreciate her humorous, candid, patient approach—one that lifted their works to a higher level.

“Ann Regan doesn’t take any nonsense and she means business,” said Karen E. Cooper, winner of a 2023 Minnesota Book Award for *When Minnehaha Flowed with Whiskey: A Spirited History of the Falls*. “Ann’s interest, encouragement, and superlative editing is the reason my book exists at all, and I treasured that working relationship with her.”

Diane Wilson, author of *Spirit Car: Journey to a Dakota Past*, also cherishes her relationship with Regan: “As the editor for my project, Ann was unfailingly kind, patient, and deeply interested in the questions raised by the themes in my book. . . . One of Ann’s gifts is her ability to ask difficult thematic questions in a straightforward, humorous way that keeps fragile author egos from imploding.”

Said MNHS Director Emerita Archabal: “She is beloved for her friendly, even teasing, directness with her authors, and for her own honesty about herself. She is thanked by name in author’s notes for countless books published by MNHS Press as well as by many other publishers.”

“A Team Sport”

Regan’s collaborative spirit also extends to her colleagues at MNHS Press. “Ann is much more than a gifted editor. I admire the deep relationships that she builds both internally and externally,” said MNHS Director and CEO Kent Whitworth. “She is mission oriented and dedicated to a fault—she’s deferred her retirement to stand in the gap.



Regan consults with colleagues Shannon Pennefeather (left) and Lizzie Ehrenhalt (far right), with the infamous regulator clock in the background. (MNHS/PHOTO BY FRANCIS SAMPAN)

I am inspired by her career-long commitment to the Minnesota Historical Society.”

“Ann often uses the word ‘collegial’ to describe the atmosphere of MNHS Press, and it’s the perfect word for Ann, too,” said Lizzie Ehrenhalt, editor and program manager of MNopedia. “She is unfailingly generous with her time, guidance, empathy, advice, and knowledge of Minnesota history, which is so vast it’s dizzying. When I come up against an editing problem, I think to myself, ‘Ann will know what to do about this.’ And then she does.”

Alison Aten, marketing and communications manager of Llewellyn Worldwide and former publicity manager of MNHS Press, remembers well her years with Regan. “As a colleague, Ann is equally supportive and collaborative, and a font of institutional knowledge and lore. She also has an educator’s ability to share her enthusiasm for and knowledge of Minnesota history and the people who live here.”

Regan hands it right back, true to her habit of deflecting praise and dodging the spotlight: “Publishing is a team sport,” she said. “I work really hard on a manuscript to make it the best it can be, and then I turn it over to my colleagues. It’s a collection of digits, and they make it into a book that is beautiful, where the design helps push the message and improves the reading experience. And then

they find ways to sell it to the right readers . . . I get to sit back and watch it bloom.”

The Next Chapter

In Regan’s 45 years, MNHS Press has seen extraordinary change. Back in her days as a research assistant, six authors received royalty statements; that number is now well over 400. “We’ve gone from being what I see now as a bunch of people figuring out how to publish to full publishing professionals,” she said.

Regan’s hope for the future of the press is plain and simple: “a continued stream of interesting books by talented writers that people want to read. I’m convinced that knowing our history makes us better citizens.” She’s not sure what’s next for herself, but she promised that she has recruited someone to keep the old clock running. For all those who have worked with her, each tick will be a reminder of Regan’s contributions to Minnesota letters, and each tock a reminder of her character. □

The author thanks editor Sarah T. Williams for collaborating on this article.



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