



## THE ATKINSON AT 30

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Turning 30 used to be personally traumatic. But 30 years ago this year, the Atkinson Foundation, the Honderich family and the *Toronto Star* created the richest and now the most prestigious award in Canadian journalism — the Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy. It's known now simply as "The Atkinson." We should all celebrate its success.

**T**hey call it "going deep." Whenever you talk to Atkinson Fellows, one of the first things they rave about is the opportunity "to go deep" — to have the time and resources to spend a full year studying and writing on a topic of their own choice.

They seldom mention the bears.

But they are there too.

Paul McKay, who won the second Atkinson Journalism Fellowship in Public Policy in 1989, elected to spend a year studying the ways Canadian political institutions develop environmental policy. He ended up writing an environmental manifesto that predicted pending ecological disaster and demanded urgent and radical change.

Joseph Atkinson's life and times were captured in a graphic novella in 2017 — the 75th anniversary of his foundation. Read more about him at <https://atkinsonfoundation.ca/about/>

GRAPHIC ILLUSTRATION BY WILLOW DAWSON

“After decades of polluting their environment, Canadians have concluded that the scale and pace of global industrialism has endangered the planet and that a new kind of economics — based on ecological principles — is the only hope for survival,” McKay wrote in his six-part series, *Plundering the Future*.

To research his series, McKay travelled extensively in Canada: canoeing the full length of the Mackenzie River; visiting a remote region of Kluane National Park, in southwest Yukon, that was threatened by a proposed open-pit copper mine; rafting six days through British Columbia’s Tatshenshini-Alsek Wilderness and flying north of the Arctic Circle to work with a falcon biologist near Old Crow.

But it was his encounter with a hungry grizzly bear in the Barren Lands along the Mackenzie River in the Northwest Territories that still sticks with him 29 years later.

“At one point, I was walking in the Barren Lands by myself,” McKay says with a chuckle, “and a grizzly bear came over this little ridge, chasing a ground squirrel. The ground squirrel was running for its life, down the hill towards me in a zig-zag pattern and the grizzly bear, which was at least seven feet tall, followed it and caught up to it and impaled it at full speed. Then it stopped in a flurry of dust and sand and looked up and saw me standing there about 40 yards away. I figured I was dead.”

The standoff seemed to last forever, as the nearsighted grizzly tried to determine if McKay was a threat or possibly his next meal.

“This grizzly looked at the squirrel impaled on its claws and it looked at me and it definitely saw me,” says McKay. “Then it looked at the squirrel again and it looked at me and then it looked at the squirrel one more time and then it disappeared over the ridge.”

“That’s the most vivid memory I have of being out in the field,” he adds. “It was a wonderful summer.”

Ed Struzik, the 23rd Atkinson Fellow, selected in 2006 for his series *Arctic Peril: The New Cold War*, made nine trips to the Arctic during his Atkinson Fellowship as he sought first-hand evidence of the impact of global warming on Canada’s Far North. He made a six-week voyage through the Northwest Passage aboard a Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker, skied for five days across the Brintnell Icefield in the Northwest Territories’ Nahanni National Park and travelled by plane, icebreaker, snowmobile and dog sled to places as remote as Ellesmere Island, Repulse Bay, Greenland and Norway.

“It was wonderful,” he says now. “It was so much fun to have a year to work on one project with basically all the resources I needed to do it and there was nobody looking over my shoulder.”

Struzik’s strongest memory of his Atkinson was catching and tagging polar bears with two veteran scientists in the Beaufort Sea.

“That was pretty cool,” he says. “I’d been involved in the capture of wolves and grizzly bears,

“It was so much fun to have a year to work on one project with basically all the resources I needed to do it and there was nobody looking over my shoulder.” — Ed Struzik

beluga whales and narwhal, but I'd never been out catching polar bears. That was surreal. Just seeing a big animal like that — a thousand-pound animal, 100 kilometres away from shore in -25 degree weather."

Struzik and the scientists tracked the bears from a small helicopter. When they spotted a bear on an ice flow, they would land quickly nearby and unload all their extra baggage to make the aircraft light enough to manoeuvre safely during a chase.

"I was some of the extraneous baggage," Struzik says.

When they spotted a polar bear, the scientists would land the helicopter, Struzik would hop out and quickly unload a spare fuel drum and all the expedition's survival gear. Then the helicopter would take off to chase the bear and shoot it with a tranquilizing dart.

As part of the routine, the scientists insisted Struzik should always have a loaded hunting rifle with him in case the bear they were tracking should suddenly come after him while he was alone on the ice.

On one expedition, things went wrong. Struzik had trouble getting all the gear out of the helicopter. A fuel drum got stuck in the back hatch and he had to wrestle with it for a few minutes.

"I was thinking 'Time is passing: time is passing,' " he says. "I was afraid the bear was running away. Finally I got it out and I was so relieved, I gave them the fingers up and they took off and I watched as the helicopter went over the horizon, following the bear."

Suddenly, the bear turned and started running back towards Struzik.

"And that's when I realized I didn't have the gun out," he says.

He'd left it on the helicopter.

"Unbeknownst to me, because I couldn't actually hear, they had put a dart into the bear," he explains.

The helicopter was chasing the drugged polar bear away from open water, so it wouldn't try to escape by swimming and risk drowning.

In the end, both the bear and Struzik survived. Though Canada's polar bears haven't fared well since and remain endangered.

Struzik's Atkinson warned that climate change in the far north is advancing so quickly it threatens to transform fully half of Canada's real estate.

In 2006, climatologists told Struzik most of the Arctic could, for the first time in a million years, be free of summer ice sometime in the next 15 to 60 years.

"We're rushing towards a tipping point, where sea ice becomes so thin and vulnerable that winter's deep freeze will no longer be able to manufacture enough ice to offset the melting that occurs in summer," Struzik wrote in his Atkinson series.

Now, he is even more pessimistic.

"The old Arctic that we all grew up with is disappearing and in many places has disappeared," says Struzik, who has travelled in the Arctic every year for the last 39 years. "A new Arctic is unfolding. The invasive species that I talked about in my (Atkinson) series are just increasing in number and variety and are taking over the Arctic. We are now seeing the potential for polar bears, the King of the Arctic, being replaced by killer whales that are moving into the area."

"A lot of what I wrote in that series has essentially come true," he said. "In fact, the changes

have come a lot faster than even I and others I quoted were predicting. It's really astonishing."

When Struzik skied across the Brintnell Glacier during his Atkinson, the scientists he was travelling with calculated that a metre of ice had melted off the glacier in six weeks of summer.

Now, Struzik, who has been back to the same area three times since his Atkinson trip and published four books on the Arctic, says "We are seeing the glacier lose as much as 10 metres in height."

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The warming of the Arctic raises all sorts of problems – from open shipping lanes in as yet uncharted seas to sovereignty and security issues and serious challenges to the culture and lifestyles of the region's Indigenous peoples.

Those same concerns originally led to the creation of the Atkinson Fellowship.

John Honderich, the former publisher of the *Toronto Star* and current Chair of Torstar's Board of Directors, was the inspiration behind his father, Beland Honderich's decision in 1986 to create a journalism fellowship in public policy.

From 1985 to 1986, John took a leave of absence from his job as the Star's Business Editor and went to London to study at the London School of Economics. During that period, he wrote a book, *Arctic Imperative: Is Canada Losing the North?*, which analyzed the growing strategic importance of the Far North to Canada. He urged Canada to take steps to assert its sovereignty in the region by making the Arctic an integral part of Canadian foreign policy.

At the time, Honderich's father opposed his son's plans.

"My father thought this was the craziest thing that I'd ever done," John Honderich says. "To sort of get out of the line and not continue on with your career as everyone else does upset him."

"To be fair, in my father's life — you know, being a high school dropout — taking a year off to study was just not part of the tradition; not part of what he considered important."

"But then, when he saw what I was able to do, he became a convert. When I came back, he was so impressed by what had happened with the book and the year in terms of what it meant to me, he said: 'I think we should set up a fellowship.' "

Minutes of an Atkinson Foundation Board of Directors meeting from December 1986, tentatively float the idea of a "University of Toronto Journalism Project."

"Mr. (Beland) Honderich raised the subject of a special fellowship project for Ontario journalists which he expects to have commence in 1987," the minutes read. "The project would involve an expenditure of \$50,000 a year for five years and would be in conjunction with the University of Toronto."

By late 1987, the proposal had evolved. The project was opened to journalists from all over Canada and while the University of Toronto wasn't involved, Economics Professor Abe Rotstein, a friend of Beland Honderich and a co-founder of the Committee for an Independent Canada, served as an academic adviser for the first 10 years of the fellowship.

The value of the fellowship was initially set at \$50,000 plus an additional \$25,000 for expenses, (it now stands at \$75,000 and \$25,000), with the costs divided three ways, between the Atkinson Foundation, the *Toronto Star* and the Honderich family.

“From the beginning, we decided to make it handsome enough that people would not have to suffer,” John Honderich said. “They would be able to take a full year and do it properly. It hit a different level and that was very intentional. We wanted to make it significant.”

“You know there are fellowships set up in people’s names for various things, but I don’t think there is anything quite like the Atkinson,” he adds. “I think it stands very much by itself and I think it has earned its reputation as one of the big ones in the pantheon of Canadian journalism.”

From the outset, the fellowship was tied tightly to the memory of Joseph E. Atkinson, who served nearly 50 years as the publisher of the *Toronto Star*, from 1899 to 1948.

Atkinson held strong views on the role of a large city newspaper and he advocated a set of journalistic principles that laid special emphasis on social, economic, political, legal and racial justice.

His newspaper’s crusades frequently outlined social reforms in other countries and laid the groundwork in Canada for mothers’ allowances, unemployment insurance, old age pensions and the first phases of a national health care plan. He was also a champion of minimum wages and the rights of labour unions.

In the official announcement of the Atkinson Fellowship in December 1987, Beland Honderich said:

“The fellowship will recognize Mr. Atkinson’s unique contribution to Canadian journalism and encourage young journalists to follow in his footsteps. The fellowship will enable worthy young journalists to spend a year researching some matter of current public policy from a small ‘l’ liberal point of view and publishing his/her conclusions in a small book or a series of newspaper articles.”

Six months later, (Beland) Honderich announced that 39 journalists had applied for the fellowship and Toronto freelance broadcaster and magazine writer Ann Pappert was selected to serve as the first Atkinson Fellow in Public Policy, researching the social policy implications of reproductive technology.

The elder Mr. Honderich was shocked by the selection committee’s decision.

“My father just about flipped,” is the way John Honderich, who has sat on every fellowship selection committee, recalls it. “‘What’s Atkinsonian about that?’ he demanded.”

John Miller, a former chairman of the Journalism Department at Ryerson University, served on the first six selection committees for the Atkinson Fellowship and he remembers the committee members were enthusiastic about their first choice.

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— John Honderich

“Beland was surprised by the topic though,” he admits. “He asked the selection committee in for lunch and was obviously baffled. Why were we choosing something weird like reproductive technology? How does that square with the Atkinson principles? Aren’t you getting any proposals for guaranteed annual income and so on?”

“We said no. We’re taking a very broad view,” Miller recalled. “And Beland sort of took that under advisement and backed off and let us do what we wanted to do.”

Pappert’s fellowship looked at the brave new world of baby making, 10 years after the birth of the first test-tube baby and a full eight years before the world was introduced to Dolly, the first cloned sheep.

Her series raised moral and legal issues involved with in-vitro-fertilization; examined debates over who should pay for the treatments; and discussed suggestions that doctors might soon grow embryos to create spare tissue and organs.

“Embryo screening, sex selection and a wide range of other new reproductive techniques will make it possible to produce a healthier population, control health expenditures and allocate resources, all of benefit to the state,” Pappert wrote.

“In the future,” she warned, “governments may demand the right to intervene before birth by requiring the use of reproductive techniques such as embryo screening and genetic engineering to regulate who will be born and with what traits.”

Pappert’s work was so riveting she was summoned to address a parliamentary committee in Ottawa just days after her stories were published in the *Toronto Star*. She was later hired as a research director for a 1994 Royal Commission on New Reproductive Technologies.

“I thought that first fellowship was amazing,” John Honderich says now. “It was a topic that was very much cutting edge.”

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As dramatic technological changes transformed reproductive science, modern events also shifted the boundaries of traditional “liberalism.”

In 1995, when called upon to review the first years of the Atkinson Fellowship, John Honderich specifically addressed the fellowship’s aims in relation to the “Atkinson Principles.”

“While the fellowship selection committee was charged with looking for proposals that fit within the tradition of liberal journalism, the committee was not limited to only those subjects dealt with by Atkinson,” he wrote in a report. “In other words, we felt we had to be relevant in our choice. Consequently, most of the winning entries reflect modern-day concerns rather than traditional ‘liberal’ topics.”

Reproductive technology, environmental policy, health campaigns to fight AIDS, self-government for Indigenous peoples, the impact of budget cuts on Canada’s social safety net and a review of Canada’s immigration policies, were all subjects of the first Atkinson Journalism Fellowships.

“I would argue such topics fit comfortably within a general liberal tradition and thus were appropriate for the fellowship,” Honderich said in his report.

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Over the years, the fellowship has remained on the cutting edge of the news, as journalists scramble to outline projects that will remain timely and relevant 18 months later, when they are finally published.

Victoria journalist Anne Mullens wrote about euthanasia and assisted suicide in her fellowship, *Dying for Leadership* in 1993. She says she burst into tears 22 years later when the Supreme Court of Canada unanimously overturned laws preventing physician-assisted suicide.

Before she won her fellowship, Mullens had spent two years covering Sue Rodriguez's attempts to overturn laws banning euthanasia and assisted suicide.

Rodriguez, a 43-year-old Vancouver Island resident suffered from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and was determined to control her own death.

In 1993 she lost her case in the Supreme Court, but months later took her own life with the assistance of an anonymous physician and former NDP MP Svend Robinson.

As Mullens followed the Rodriguez case and dug deeper into the issue of assisted-suicide, she felt frustrated by the time and space limitations of daily journalism.

"I needed more time, more space, more context, more colour and nuance," she says.

She applied for an Atkinson Fellowship with a proposal to examine, in depth, medical decisions to end life.

"The Atkinson Fellowship was one of the most extraordinary years of my life," she says now. "I am forever grateful to the program for giving me the financial support, time and space to delve so deeply into a complex topic. I felt at the time that this issue — choice in death — would become one of the most important social policy issues of the next three decades, as boomers aged. It needed a much deeper exploration than what I could do in a daily newspaper."

Mullens documented a number of heart-wrenching Canadian traumas involving assisted suicide and travelled to the Netherlands, England, Germany and the United States to report on how those countries dealt with the issue.

"The issue was to become the defining focus of my working life for the next five years," she says. She produced a book, *Timely Death*, in 1996 that was based largely on her Atkinson research.

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— Anne Mullens

Marci McDonald had worked as *Maclean's* magazine's Washington Bureau Chief for eight years before she applied for her Atkinson in 1992.

During her stint in the United States, she had interviewed U.S. President Ronald Reagan and covered Canadian-American relations through the turbulent Free Trade Agreement and NAFTA negotiations.



So it wasn't surprising when she told the Atkinson selection committee she wanted to study Canada-U.S. relations during the stewardship of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

"If journalism is the first draft of history, the Atkinson Fellowship gave me a stab at nailing a second much more nuanced draft," she says. "Winning it gave me a year-long chance to step back and make sense of it all, chronicling both the bigger picture and the backstage personalities who wrestled our national fate into binding contractual prose."

Today, she says it is ironic to look at that period in the light of U.S. President Donald Trump's "staged rants about Canada-U.S. relations."

"Contrary to the triumphal tone of former Canadian negotiators at the time — and Donald Trump now — I found the American team covertly gloating at how they had us over a barrel — and literally so on the key continental energy file — all because then-Prime Minister Brian Mulroney had staked his political career on landing a deal."

"For me, that opportunity to examine a story in greater depth — and length — was a welcome relief from the weekly précis of events demanded by newsmagazines," she says.

Her Atkinson work became the basis of a best-selling book, *Yankee Doodle Dandy: Brian Mulroney and the American Agenda*.

"If journalism is the first draft of history, the Atkinson Fellowship gave me a stab at nailing a second much more nuanced draft"

— Marci McDonald

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Scott Simmie says simply his Atkinson Fellowship was "the most satisfying and useful piece of journalism that I have ever done." The *Toronto Star* has a Michener Award for excellence in public-service journalism to prove the point.

Simmie's 1997 Atkinson series, *Out of Mind: A Study of Canada's Mental Health Care System*, was a searing and finely nuanced study of a mental health care system in crisis.

Insightful and immediate, it drew on Simmie's own personal experience with mental illness to tell the stories of the one in five Canadians who will someday encounter a disease that bears a stigma almost worse than the illness.

While he wrote his series, Simmie had a photograph of Edmund Yu taped to the side of his computer. Yu, a former university pre-med student, was a homeless, paranoid schizophrenic who was shot and killed by police on a Toronto streetcar on the morning of Feb. 20, 1997.

"I think the story of Edmund Yu and his death was the catalyst or trigger for me for wanting to pursue this topic," Simmie says. "Along with the fact that I had discovered, because of my own experience, that I was being treated as a different kind of human being than I had been prior to that. I knew there was something there that was worth trying to understand and grapple with."

Simmie says his initial response to Yu's death and his original intention was to write a series that looked at how a process of budget cuts and de-institutionalization had failed the mentally ill.

"My initial response was simply: 'Oh my goodness, what a terrible thing. We have closed all



these hospital beds and put people out in the community, and really, a lot of these people belong in hospital,” he said.

“After I had the opportunity to really understand the situation, I realized the mistake wasn’t in bringing these people out of hospital. Most of them should have been out much sooner. But it was not having the appropriate supports in the community — and by that I don’t just mean doctors coming along and giving them medication. I mean giving them meaningful roles and giving them work and giving them a sense of belonging to the community. That was truly our failure.”

Simmie was eloquent in his condemnation.

“We have in place a system, and a mindset, that places little value on a person who’s been labelled with a mental illness,” he wrote in his series. “Our system dumps vast numbers of people in a very dark hole, and lets them glimpse, only rarely, the shadow of a ladder. For many, it’s a strategy guaranteed to keep them unwell.”

Simmie says his Atkinson was “a voyage of discovery.” If he had been a reporter working with the pressures of daily deadlines, he would never have been able to make that transition.

“The Atkinson allowed me to take a super deep dive and to try my best to understand a really, really, complex topic,” he says. “The world of mental health is an exceedingly complicated one because there are many, many, people who have very different viewpoints and all those people are right. All those people have very legitimate reasons to hold those viewpoints and it took me quite some time — the better part of a year — to actually understand that.”

The public reaction to Simmie’s Atkinson series was overwhelming. Hundreds of readers responded. Professionals praised him for his balanced insights, his courage and his truthfulness. Some people recommended Simmie be given the Order of Canada for his work and others turned to him personally for encouragement and advice.

One reader sent a letter to the editor of the *Toronto Star* that summed the series up saying: “All of a sudden it was no longer somebody else’s problem.”

Joseph E. Atkinson would have been pleased.

“The Atkinson allowed me to take a super deep dive and to try my best to understand a really, really, complex topic.”

— Scott Simmie

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Ann Dowsett Johnston turned an under-the-radar story, women’s drinking habits in Canada, into front-page news with her Atkinson Fellowship in 2010.

In the process, her groundbreaking research uncovered the messy realities of Canada’s risky drinking habits and exposed an issue that begs for public policy leadership.

More than 80 per cent of Canadians drink alcohol and we drink more than 50 per cent above the world average, Johnston reported.

She noted a single drink-a-day increases a woman’s odds of breast cancer by 10 per cent and

that women who consume four or more alcoholic beverages a-day quadruple their risk of dying of heart disease.

“Why are we aware of the dangers related to trans fats and tanning beds, yet blissfully unaware of the more serious side effects associated with our favourite drug,” she asked.

Johnston went on to document how women in Canada, spurred on by massively successful marketing campaigns that urge them to fit in, are driving an unprecedented surge in alcohol consumption. And she wrote movingly of the stigma and sorrow of alcoholism.

The public reaction was stunning.

“A lot of people responded personally,” Johnston says. “It was as if I had opened a lid on something that had remained shut for so long.”

“I’ll never forget a webinar that we did on a Monday at noon. Only one person spoke through the entire program and when it was over I said to the technical person: ‘That was a real bust.’ And he said to me: ‘Are you kidding? We had 1,500 people listening!’”

Following her Atkinson, Johnston went on to turn her research into a book, *Drink: The Intimate Relationship Between Women and Alcohol*. It was named one of the Top 10 books of 2013 by the Washington Post.

When Johnston’s Atkinson series was published in the *Toronto Star*, the Yukon’s Department of Health and Social Services asked permission to produce the entire series as a newspaper insert for distribution throughout the territory.

The Atkinson effected Johnston personally as well. She has become an activist, and more recently a therapist, for people with addictions.

“I’m putting my money where my mouth is in terms of trying to help others,” she says.

“I think we are in the middle of a recovery revolution, where, much like we saw with mental health, we are seeing people really de-stigmatize addiction. We don’t see it as a moral failing, but we see it as a health issue where we can do something.”

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When the Atkinson Fellowship was established in 1988, Canada’s print media were enjoying an economic boom. Newspaper revenues reached their highest levels ever in 1988 and 1989.

Times have changed.

Now all media are struggling to cope with the impact of new technology.

Kate Taylor, an arts columnist with the *Globe and Mail* and an award-winning novelist, won the 2009 Atkinson Fellowship with a proposal to examine challenges to Canada’s cultural sovereignty in the new digital age.

Her series, entitled *Northern Lights: Keeping Canadian Culture Ablaze*, examined the role of public policy in film, television and new media at a time when broadcaster CTV was selling a local TV station in Brandon, Manitoba for \$1, and the federal broadcast regulator had decided not to subsidize Canadian content on the Internet.

“As far as I know, it’s the only instance where the fellowship has been used to look at an arts or culture topic,” she says.

But her timing was spectacular.

“Just as Netflix was signing up its first million subscribers in Canada, the landscape seemed to be changing so fast,” she explains. “I thought my research would rapidly become obsolete. And yet, eight years later, many of the issues I raised then are now making regular headlines. (Netflix tax anyone?)”

She says the fellowship was invaluable in her later career.

“The fellowship allowed me to carve out a new area of expertise that, over the years, my home publication, the *Globe and Mail*, came to appreciate greatly. Eight years later, I use the background knowledge I gained almost every week in my job and still write a half dozen columns every year that directly depend on it.”

“In short,” she says, “the fellowship was a career-making opportunity.”

“The fellowship allowed me to carve out a new area of expertise.”

— Kate Taylor

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While Joseph Atkinson, like nearly everyone else in today’s media, might struggle with the challenges of a new digital age, he wouldn’t have any trouble recognizing the stories that Atkinson Fellows tell.

Dan Smith, a former editor at the *Toronto Star*, won the third Atkinson Fellowship in 1990 and produced a series on Indigenous Canadians struggle for self-rule.

Writing eight years after the 1982 Constitution Act first affirmed native peoples’ rights to self-government but nine years before the creation of Nunavut, Smith highlighted the pitfalls of what would become a decades-long constitutional struggle. He is the author of the 1993 book, of *The Seventh Fire: the Struggle for Aboriginal Government*.

Twenty-eight years later, *Toronto Star* reporter Tanya Talaga is presenting the results of her 2017 - 2018 Atkinson Fellowship in this year’s Massey Lectures, a series of five public lectures, created in honour of former Governor General Vincent Massey, that are intended to “enable distinguished authorities to communicate the results of original study on important subjects of contemporary interest.”

In Talaga’s case, the subject is the stunning rate of suicide among Indigenous young people in Canada.

Building upon her best-selling book, *Seven Fallen Feathers*, which documented the tragic deaths of seven Indigenous teenagers in Thunder Bay, Ont., between 2000 and 2011, Talaga’s Atkinson examines the Indigenous experience in colonized nations — an experience marked by a violent separation from the land, families, and traditional ways of life, resulting in a spiritual separation with devastating consequences for generations of Indigenous children and their communities.

“Sadly, when it comes to Indigenous people, Canada’s history is a massive history of lost opportunities,” she says. “We’ve been telling the same story for years and it is still with us.”

In 30 years there have been four Atkinson Fellowships on Indigenous issues. Two other fellowships, Linda Goyette in 2000 and Marie Wadden in 2005, dealt with the topic. Goyette

wrote about attempts by western Canadians to seek reconciliation with their Indigenous neighbours, while Wadden wrote of Canadian public policy and Aboriginal addictions.

“I don’t think solutions are going to be created until the federal government is more willing to sit down with Indigenous leaders and do it equally,” Talaga says. “We’ve always had a top-down approach here. You know we still have the Indian Act in place. It’s an absolutely racist piece of legislation that was created in 1876 and is still there. Until you remove all these things, you are still going to have the same issues moving forward.”

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The Atkinson Fellowship regularly tackles issues Joseph Atkinson would have been interested in — health, housing, welfare reform, unemployment, and resource development and working conditions are just a few.

In 1990, freelance journalist Andrew Nikiforuk was granted a second fellowship for the same year, in addition to Dan Smith, for a groundbreaking study on how early public health warnings and policies failed miserably to cope with an exploding AIDS crisis in the 1980s.

He showed how the disease discriminates ruthlessly by targeting people based on sexual orientation, lack of housing, income, and addiction. And he stirred controversy by saying that early on in the AIDS epidemic, public health officials wrongly gave Canadians “the impression that AIDS is a universal health risk.”

“Although the virus has affected all Canadians financially, socially or politically, it has never imperilled all Canadians equally,” he said. “To say so is not just bad science, but a lie.”

His series was harsh, brutally honest and unflinching.

He criticized government for failing to provide prison inmates with condoms and insisted that traditional public health tools, such as testing, partner notification and disease surveillance had been tempered by concerns about civil rights and confidentiality.

The public health response, he concluded, remained inconsistent, erratic, slow and reactive.

In 1998, Vancouver journalist Frances Bula wrote about an emerging crisis in housing and homelessness across Canada.

She catalogued the dreary record of Canadian communities that regularly fight attempts to create housing for the poor by objecting to the establishment of rooming houses, shelters, basement apartments or group homes in their neighbourhoods.

She looked at the impact of government funding cuts for low-rent housing and studied international success stories, like the Netherlands, where 40 per cent of apartment households live in buildings owned by non-profit corporations.

Linda McQuaig, a crusading freelancer who campaigns for an egalitarian distribution of power and wealth, won the 1991 fellowship and produced a 51-page booklet, titled *Canada’s Social Programs: Under Attack*. In it, she argued Canadian politicians and the business community misled the public by claiming a rising national deficit required deep spending cuts to social programs. She urged Canadians to look to Europe, where social spending is seen as essential to establish a base for a strong economy.

In 2011, Neil Sandell, a CBC radio producer, researched joblessness among young people in Canada and Europe and documented what appeared to be a lost generation.

Statistics suggested as many as 200,000 fewer people in their 20s were employed in Canada after the 2008 recession. In Spain, statistics showed an astounding 40 per cent of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 were unemployed.

Gillian Steward, a former editor of the *Calgary Herald* and now a regular columnist with the *Toronto Star*, took a close look at the dramatic development of the Alberta's oil sands in her 2014 fellowship.

In the process she described the plight of oil sands workers who earn their livings in boom times. More than 40,000 people live in Northern Alberta's oil camps, working 12 hour days, in 14-days-on-14-days-off shifts.

Even though they earn very good wages, they resent the monotony of their existence.

"There is no such thing as a weekend," one worker told Steward. "Every day is Monday morning."

"Everything in your life is taken from you," complained another. "It's just like living in jail, only you're getting paid."

Steward, like the disgruntled oil workers, asked if the trade-offs Canada has made to develop the tar sands are something we might come to regret.

"Large swaths of land have been deforested," she wrote. "Toxic tailing ponds are swelling; greenhouse gasses are mushrooming. Aboriginal people have been ambushed by huge industrial projects in what they thought was their backyard."

"My series ran at a key time," says Steward. "Just after the Alberta election which saw the NDP take over government and just before the federal election that resulted in a win for Justin Trudeau. Since oil sands policy had been an important part of Stephen Harper's legacy, I was glad that I could bring those issues to the forefront."

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In the last six years, Canada has lost a third of its journalists to job cuts and newspaper closures.

Media revenues have been slashed; readers and viewers habits have been transformed by a digital revolution that has changed how and what we consume as "news."

Catherine Wallace, a former managing editor of the *Montreal Gazette* and now a senior editor at the *Toronto Star*, received the 2016 Atkinson Fellowship to examine the state of Canada's news industry and to search for proposals to help it adapt to change.

She said she wants to build a more diverse and vibrant public square.

"A new ecosystem is evolving and it's changing the way we think about news; what it is, who creates it, who gets to tell the story," she wrote.

Just 20 years ago the news industry was the gatekeeper of information and opinion, she argued. There was a clear and firm division between the creators and the audience.

But that's changed in our new digital age.

"While news organizations struggle with business models, communities and institutions are learning to produce and distribute information without going through the traditional media gatekeepers," she said.

The downside of that is a drop in local news coverage and a weakening of quality journalism. In her study, Wallace sought ways to build partnerships and collaboration with community institutions and groups who she says “don’t have to be part of the newsroom to be part of the storytelling.”

She said her Atkinson Fellowship allowed her to “go deeper, to go further and to go places that people couldn’t go to otherwise.”

At one point, her research took her to a workshop sponsored by Google in Oslo, Norway and she found herself working with someone else from the United Kingdom on an experiment she was trying to launch in Hamilton, Ont.

“Just the weirdness of that,” she says. “I was based in Montreal, working as an editor in Toronto, trying to set up an experiment in Hamilton and hearing from someone in London, while getting to go to a workshop in Oslo. It was just crazy. But it was wonderful.”

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In an age of digital disruption, when a technological revolution has rapidly become an existential crisis for most traditional news media, the Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy is a bit of a lifesaver.

It can’t be expected to resolve the crisis Canadian journalism finds itself snarled in. But it can offer hope and guidance towards an eventual solution.

When trash talk and Twitter and the trivial selfies of social media dominate much of the news cycle, the studied, analytical, certainties of a good Atkinson Fellowship are a soothing antidote.

It provides a model for the future of journalism by persisting in presenting readers with deep, reflective studies that have the potential to spark change.

At 30, the fellowship now has a reassuring maturity and a long track record of accomplishment. It oozes a seasoned professionalism.

Too often “news” can be merely the new, the dramatic or the unusual. But to be good journalism, it also needs to answer the question “why?”

Good journalism has a mission to witness but also to explain.

And that requires patience, resources and “going deep.”

“Too often ‘news’ can be merely the new, the dramatic or the unusual. But to be good journalism, it also needs to answer the question ‘why?’.”

— Peter Goodspeed



PETER GOODSPEED was an Atkinson Fellow in 2013-2014 and studied Canada’s refugee policy in relation to the Syrian refugee crisis. Goodspeed has been a foreign correspondent, a war reporter, an editor, a bureau chief, a feature writer, and a political reporter for the *Toronto Star* and the *National Post*. He has reported from 63 different countries, while covering 22 different conflicts, including the Falklands War, the U.S. invasion of Grenada, the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, wars in Africa, Central America, the Middle East and Asia and the Second Gulf War in Iraq.