Suggested Guidelines for Selection of Books Related to Aboriginal Peoples

The purpose of the following guidelines is to assist in assembling useful and accurate information about specific groups of Aboriginal peoples as well as material on issues that pertain to Indigenous peoples generally and point to topics of possible importance in the future. It is crucial that books in a collection should convey the diversity of the different First Nations in Canada so they are seen as separate and distinct entities and not fused together into a single amalgam.

Other factors come into play with regard to a library’s collection. Its constituent pieces will vary depending upon whether it is a public library or if it serves an academic institution like a school or university, in which case the curriculum it supports will be an additional consideration. As well, if the library has an archival component the question of discarding older materials becomes a matter for discussion.

For this piece, books will be the main focus, but depending on the mandate of the library, other materials such as academic theses, journals, articles, and of course, electronic media will form a sizable part of any collection. It is hoped the following examples will provide the basis for a discussion of what constitutes a meaningful collection.

**Collection Development**

As our case study, we are focussing on the Mi’kmaq, an Algonquian group whose territory covers the Maritime Provinces, Quebec, Newfoundland, and part of Maine. The following questions refer to a collection specifically pertaining to the Mi’kmaq First Nation, but they can be applied to other Aboriginal groups. There are many elements to consider when building a collection of books and materials:

1. Does the author identify as Mi’kmaw?
2. Is Mi’kmaw (the language) used in the book?
3. Is the book a seminal piece, often referenced in subsequent works?
4. Does the book examine an important aspect of Mi’kmaw cultural experience?
5. Does the volume feature a well-known or important Mi’kmaw historical, political, or artistic figure or group? In conjunction with this, does a book add to the body of knowledge on a Mi’kmaw community?
6. Does the book contain new or significant material on Mi’kmaw issues?
7. Does the book discuss ideas or a philosophy that should be made available to a wider audience?
8. Is a newly published book likely to be available for an extended period or is there a limited window of time during which it can be acquired?
9. If a book is critical of theories of indigenization, does it do so in a measured way?
10. If a book is obviously racist, or exemplifies outmoded or historically prejudiced attitudes to the Mi’kmaq or Aboriginal peoples, should it be included in a collection?
11. What do Mi’kmaw or Aboriginal peoples (e.g. Elders) themselves recommend or cite as topics of interest and concern?

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1. If a book is written by a Mi’kmaw author it should be included in the collection. Having a piece that brings Mi’kmaw worldview and ways of knowing to the forefront is intrinsically valuable. For example, any of the volumes written by Dr. Marie Battiste, a renowned Mi’kmaw educator of international eminence, would be highly desirable. Work that portrays Mi’kmaw sensibilities in areas of art, poetry, or fiction would be included in this grouping. Material that presents the Mi’kmaw perspective on history and on science should be a key element in the library’s collection development:


2. Books with content in Mi’kmaw work on two levels - both in the preservation and in the promotion of the language, so must necessarily find a place within an assemblage of books on the Mi’kmaw people. This would include dictionaries, lexicons, books on linguistics, and books where part of the text is in Mi’kmaw:


3. Sometimes a book is so comprehensive and valuable it is constantly referenced in the work of other authors, researchers, and academics. Indeed, if these titles do not appear in bibliographies their omission casts doubt on the thoroughness of the overall research. And of course, once an author has a proven track record of influential work, it is a given that subsequent material he or she produces should be collected. There are good examples of seminal works related to the Mi’kmaq and they include:


Sable, T. and Francis, B. 2012. *The Language of This Land, Mi’kma’ki*. Sydney: Cape Breton University Press.

4. Some titles provide significant background information on various aspects of a people’s culture and must therefore be included in any comprehensive collection. In the case of the Mi’kmaq there are a number of resources that go toward an understanding of both material and intangible culture. The subject of material culture would include books on artifacts like knives, costume and adornment, basketry, or porcupine quillwork. If there is a particular item or skill that is specific to an Aboriginal group it should feature in the collection. For example, the game of *waltes* consisting of a wooden bowl, dice, and sticks is specific to the Mi’kmaq so any information on it would be integral. The far-reaching concept of intangible culture would include books on legends, mythology, religious life and customs, and those that express components of Mi’kmaw worldview such as *netukulimk*, the idea of taking only what is needed from the natural environment.

5. Works that provide biographical information on significant Mi’kmaw leaders or on Mi’kmaw individuals who deserve wider recognition for their contributions to societal advancement should be included in collections. In this way the achievements of those who might inspire others can be acknowledged and preserved:
Additionally, because of the long standing and venerable tradition of oral history among Aboriginal groups in Canada, actual written histories of communities can often be difficult to find. For the well-rounded library works that chronicle the stories of Aboriginal bands, reserves, and land are essential:


6. In light of court verdicts such as the Marshall Decision, findings of commissions like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, and other processes that advance the forward momentum of Aboriginal and Mi’kmaw concerns like the Idle No More Movement, books that address, examine, and explore these phenomena add to the scope of a collection. Today’s topical narratives might one day be powerful records of historically important events:


7. Occasionally a book is published that doesn’t fit into a specific category but spans a variety of topics in a philosophical and ideological way. It is necessary to incorporate these works because they may portend a coming trend, frame and identify the cultural Zeitgeist, or point to a
significant aspect of Mi’kmaw endeavor or traditional knowledge. Some books just naturally fit into collections because they expand the conversation:


8. Over the years a noticeable trend in titles pertaining to Aboriginal peoples is that these books may sell out quickly or go out of print entirely. When that occurs the price of any remaining volumes becomes very high and therefore beyond the reach of a modest library budget. When possible it is better to obtain books just after publication while they are still available at reasonable cost. For example, Mi’kmaw author John Joe Sark doesn’t have a copy of his own book, *Micmac Legends of Prince Edward Island!* Some other examples of titles that are out of print, difficult to locate, or prohibitively expensive include:


9. When an author does an analysis of concepts such as decolonization, indigenization, the significance of oral history, or the fundamentals of the Aboriginal political movement it is necessary to represent such work in the library’s holdings, whether or not the content supports the First Nations stance on these issues. Academics and pundits whose assessments are highly critical or even diametrically opposed to received wisdom on Aboriginal matters such as governance, rights, environmental management, education, health, and welfare also need to be part of a fair and even-handed collection:


____ (Eds.). 2013. *Approaches to Aboriginal Education in Canada.* Edmonton: Brush Education Inc.
10. If a book presents a negative portrayal of the Mi’kmaw or of Aboriginal peoples either because it is a reflection of the time in which it was written, or, if contemporary, is based on stereotypical or biased viewpoints, it is still necessary to have it in a collection. Such a title provides a good counterpoint, a means of comparison of attitudinal change, or a concrete example of prejudiced thinking, and is useful in showing how public positions have evolved or still need to evolve. There is a place for books that express the manifestations of colonization or how else can colonization be identified and deconstructed?


11. If library staff members are not themselves Aboriginal, additions should be made to a library based on consultation with Mi’kmaw/Aboriginal peoples. Ask what is of interest or concern. What is seen as an important topic, theme, or significant trend? For example, in a conversation with respected Mi’kmaw Elder Lillian Marshall of Potlotek a few years ago, she expressed the opinion that water – its environmental aspects, relation to Aboriginal peoples, and water rights themselves – would be major topics in the future. To this end, titles were purchased on the theme of water, and they have seen great use in the intervening years:


As well, as new technologies emerge, the Aboriginal viewpoint on how they are used is worthy of inclusion in a library. When relevant topics are covered for the first time they should be added. For example, Cape Breton University Press recently published a book on Aboriginal business practices across Canada in response to a stated need for material on business principles specifically dealing with indigenous peoples. Edited by members of the Purdy Crawford Chair in Aboriginal Business Studies at CBU, the book includes sections on taxation, land claims, marketing, the impact of the TRC, and case studies on native communities including the Mi’kmaw reserve of Membertou in Nova Scotia, all from an Aboriginal business perspective:


Conclusion

To sum up, then, how can appropriate books for a collection be chosen? It requires vigilance and commitment and curiosity and doing the research. Ask people. Check new catalogues released by publishers. Find out what is being published – do searches of First Nation names, concepts, and even generic terms (like “native peoples” or “Aboriginal”) at on-line bookselling sites. Discover what other academic and public libraries are buying and what university presses are publishing. Review listings of publishing houses that specifically deal in Aboriginal titles or examine the native studies sections of publishers’ catalogues. See what Aboriginal writers are reading and recommending (people like Thomas King, James Youngblood Henderson, and Taiaiake Alfred immediately come to mind). Follow the news to ascertain what contemporary issues may become important – court decisions such as the William Decision of 2014, Two Eyed Seeing, the Idle No More Movement – all are recent events or concepts that have made their way into new writing. Become familiar with doctoral theses which may in turn form the basis of new books (e.g. Pamela Palmater’s 2009 Ph.D. thesis “Beyond Blood: Rethinking Aboriginal Identity and Belonging” was published in 2011 as Beyond Blood: Rethinking Indigenous Identity; “A Landscape of Left-overs” a 2001 Ph.D. dissertation by Anne-Christine Hornborg was published as Mi’kmq Landscapes in 2008). A book collection is almost a living entity and requires constant maintenance, thought, and nourishing if it is to become and remain meaningful.

It is hoped that the suggestions provided may go some way toward helping in the creation of nascent collections or the expansion of existing collections. The goal must always be the promotion and preservation of Aboriginal knowledge.