

Alice Street: A Memoir By Richard Valerioté

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Volume 103, Number 1, Spring 2011

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065490ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065490ar>

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Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Hope, L. (2011). Review of [*Alice Street: A Memoir* By Richard Valerioté]. *Ontario History*, 103(1), 118–119. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065490ar>

Alice Street: A Memoir

By Richard Valeriotte. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010.
119 pages. \$32.95 hardcover. ISBN 978-0-7735-3654-8 <www.mqup.ca>

*"Like an ant trying to climb a set of stairs,
I had fallen many times but kept at it un-
til I finally reached the top step."* (p. 102)

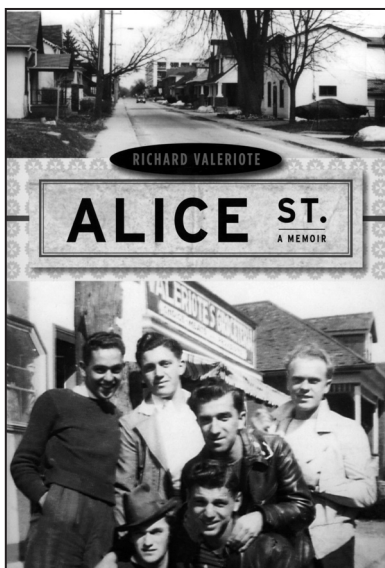
This one sentence describes the challenging journey made by Richard Valeriotte, born in 1929 to Italian immigrant parents. *Alice Street* is the autobiography of one man's climb from an underprivileged childhood, often fraught with ethnic tension, in the eclectic neighbourhood of Alice Street, Guelph. Valeriotte describes his early life, his family's trying times through the Great Depression and Second World War, and how by determination and resourcefulness he graduated from McGill University Medical School in Montreal. The book contains every emotion, from humour to despair and grief. Seventeen photographs help authenticate the characters who come alive in its pages. *Alice Street* is the twelfth in the Footprints Series, published by McGill-Queen's University Press, introducing extraordinary Canadians. Pierre Trudeau and Donald Savoie are among other subjects in the series.

Alice Street itself will remind many readers of their own neighbourhoods during their childhood years: modest homes with wide porches, a corner grocery store, and working class people proud of their varied ethnic backgrounds. Richard's father, Michael, was a passionate and generous man and had become a successful

merchant, owner of that grocery store. His mother, Elisabetta, was a deeply religious woman. His brothers were old enough to be his father, and his father was old enough to be his grandfather! Richard was barely born when the Depression struck, and the lives of this successful family soon changed.

Richard Valeriotte jolted his way through childhood and teen years exposed to hard work, sickness, death, heartache and despair, yet his large family was always loving and supportive of each other. He endured the harsh discipline of the nuns at Sacred Heart Roman Catholic School. He became painfully aware that he was considered a charity case when he was invited to attend Camp Brébeuf, a Catholic summer camp for boys near Guelph. He soon found he was paying his way in hard labour for this "free" camp. Richard tackled his jobs diligently but his childish idea of short cuts sometimes led to disaster. He once accidentally burned down the family garage with the car inside, plus a neighbour's barn. He fled to the attic "fearing the guillotine" but to his amazement was not punished. Years later a family member told him of the timely insurance settlement. "You did a wonderful thing for both the families." (p. 22)

Richard's brother, Silvio, brought distinction to the family by earning a medical degree from Western University and becoming a respected physician in Guelph.



Inspired by Silvio's example, Richard was determined to follow. He had become familiar with Montreal, where another brother had offered him work, and so it was not strange that this bright Guelph lad should enroll in medicine at McGill. Financing his education was a continual problem, and even after he married Polly, the daughter of an American diplomat from Texas, Richard hitch-hiked each weekend back to Guelph in order to approach various businessmen seeking loans. *Alice Street* includes a number of heart-warming stories of the people, many from the Italian community, who showed faith in him with their support. In 1955, during his last year at McGill, Richard contracted tuberculosis meningitis and spent a year recuperating in the Freeport Sanatorium in Kitchener. His experiences in "the San" and the people he met there are carefully recounted in the book. Once recovered and back in Montreal, and with a growing family in tow, Richard's dream of being a graduate of a world-class medical school became a reality in 1957.

Following his internship, Dr. Valeriotte and Polly decided they wanted to settle in a warm climate. They chose Fairfield, California, where he established a flourishing

practice and also built up a second business as developer of apartments for senior citizens. In 1989, at age 60, Dr. Valeriotte retired from his medical practice and turned his business interests over to his five children. Now he had the time to fish and write. Reminiscing frequently took him back to Guelph and the old neighbourhood where many memories came to mind. *Alice Street* is the outcome of these return trips to his childhood haunts.

Richard Valeriotte's story helps one understand the obstacles many Canadians faced during the time of his youth. *Alice Street* gives a view from behind the closed doors of one family as it struggled to hold onto a normal life through turbulent times. Dr. Valeriotte's experience is proof that with sheer determination one can achieve success. The book demonstrates that no matter how difficult the situation, anything is possible. I particularly encourage young people to read *Alice Street*; it could help them understand, as well as value and appreciate, the times and lives of their forebears. I found *Alice Street* to be a poignant and charming little book.

Linda Hope
Peterborough

Places to Grow: Public Libraries and Communities in Ontario, 1930-2000

By Lorne D. Bruce. Guelph: The Author, 2010. v + 490 pages. Softcover. ISBN 978-0-9866666-0-5

In *Free Books for All* (1994), Lorne Bruce—librarian at the University of Guelph and library history enthusiast—chronicled the public library movement in Ontario from 1850 to 1930. *Places to Grow*, his newest publication, is a companion piece to this earlier work. This book is an ambitious 490-page survey of public libraries in Ontario from 1930 to 2000

and serves as an important insight into the development of the public library system in Ontario. Within this time period the public library became part of the social fabric of the community. As Bruce writes, "Canada was gradually developing a national identity with shared responsibilities, a common purpose, and recognition of diversity that transcended English-Canadian