

The Labour Historian and Public History

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PRESENTATIONS / PRÉSENTATIONS

The Labour Historian and Public History

Craig Heron

HISTORIANS OF THE WORKING CLASS in Canada have seldom been comfortable in an ivory tower. Lurking within even the most dedicated scholars in the field is the popular educator who wants to participate in a wider dissemination of knowledge than academic channels normally allow. Their goals combine their training and their social and political commitments. They want more people, especially working people, to share their understanding of the past and to be able to use that knowledge creatively and effectively in confronting the challenges of modern capitalist society. For some, this is part of the struggle to reconcile their own working-class backgrounds and their new middle-class professional jobs. Many also get inspiration from their involvement in social movements outside the university¹ and from the "History Workshop" movement in Britain.² Whatever the reason, labour historians

¹For reflections by one such labour historian, see Michael Piva, "Labour Historians and Unions: Assessing the Interaction," *Labour/Le Travail*, 27 (Spring 1991), 209-11. The emergence of a new generation of labour historians is traced in Gregory S. Kealey, "Writing About Labour," in John Schultz, ed., *Writing About Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History* (Scarborough: 1990), 145-74. For reflections on the difficulties of reconciling a working-class background with intellectual work, see Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London 1957); Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York 1972); Janet Zandy, ed., *Liberating Memory: Our Work and Our Working-Class Consciousness* (New Brunswick, N.J. 1995).

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find their way into non-academic settings to give lectures, teach courses or workshops,³ and write short popular accounts of workers' history.⁴

These opportunities have generally been limited for people whose professional lives are so strictly defined by university and college teaching and the circuit of academic conferences — especially in a country with less well developed programs in workers' education than those offered through the Workers Educational Association in Britain or the long-established labour studies programs in the United States.⁵ Yet, during the 1980s, labour historians found growing numbers of people outside academia who shared their interest in the workers' past. More teachers were trying to introduce this story into their classrooms.⁶ Archivists and librarians were

²History Workshop began in 1966 in Ruskin College at Oxford University. It involved a new, more participatory approach to adult education for working-class students, in which they researched and wrote their own history within a framework of collective support and critique. In 1975 a new journal, *History Workshop*, appeared, and a large conference was convened at Ruskin each year. This new approach to history also brought into being many local working-class history groups known as "history workshops." In addition to the journal itself, see, Raphael Samuel, "History Workshop, 1966-80," in Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London 1981), 410-17.

³Probably the most high-profile example has been the Labour College of Canada, which has included academically trained labour historians in its teaching staff for many years. See Max Swerdlow, *Brother Max: Labour Organizer and Educator* (St. John's 1990); Piva, "Labour Historians and Unions"; John Bullen, "Rewarding Your Enemies, Punishing Your Friends: The Labour College Strike of 1983," *Labour/Le Travail*, 27 (Spring 1991), 163-74.

⁴For example, Ian McKay, *The Craft Transformed: An Essay on the Carpenters of Halifax, 1885-1985* (Halifax 1985); Craig Heron, Shea Hoffmitz, Wayne Roberts, Robert Storey, *All That Our Hands Have Done: A Pictorial History of the Hamilton Workers* (Oakville 1981); Working Lives Collective, *Working Lives: Vancouver, 1886-1986* (Vancouver 1985); Mercedes Steedman, Peter Suschnigg, Dieter Buse, eds., *Hard Lessons: the Mine Mill Union in the Canadian Labour Movement* (Toronto 1995); Wayne Lewchuk and the CAW Local 525 Retirees, *Working and Motoring in a Steeltown: The History of CAW Local 525: 1948-1998* (Hamilton 1998).

⁵See Bruce Spencer, "Industrial Studies for Trade Unionists," *Labour/Le Travail*, 30 (Fall 1992), 261-75; Elaine Bernard, "Labour Programmes: A Challenging Partnership," *Labour/Le Travail*, 27 (Spring 1991), 199-209; Joel Denker, *Unions and Universities: The Rise of the New Labour Leader* (Montclair, N.J. 1981). Since the late 1970s, several Canadian universities (Athabaska, Brock, Manitoba, McMaster, Saskatchewan, Simon Fraser, Windsor, York, among others) have belatedly begun offering Labour Studies programs. On the decline of the Workers Educational Association in Canada, see Ian Radforth and Joan Sangster, "'A Link Between Labour and Learning': The Workers Educational Association in Ontario, 1917-1951," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 8/9 (Autumn 1981/Spring 1982), 41-78.

⁶See Myer Siemiatycki and Gail Benick, *Labour Studies in the Classroom: An Introduction* (Toronto 1984); Peter Seixas, "Teaching Working Class History in B.C.," *Labour/Le Travail*, 27 (Spring 1991), 195-99; Myra Novogrodsky, "Putting Workers' History into the Schools," *Worklines*, (Spring 1994), 8. Novogrodsky was hired by the Toronto Board of

more eager to preserve the records of this experience.⁷ Artists, musicians, and playwrights were not only making workers and their history a theme in their art, but also creating projects to encourage working-class artistic expression.⁸ Unionists and union staff were slowly developing enough interest in workers' history to recognize that it was not being well enough preserved.⁹ Gradually these distinct strands began to coalesce into coalitions to organize public programs to preserve and celebrate workers' history and culture. Labour historians often played major roles in pulling together these new projects as part of their search for a new definition of the intellectual's social role that breached the walls around academia more effectively.

*What follows here are my own reflections on collaborative work with a variety of people, for the most part from outside academic life, in several different projects in workers' history in southern Ontario over the past fifteen years.*¹⁰ These comments are intended both to highlight the challenges facing labour historians in this kind of engagement outside the academy and to suggest possible ways to negotiate them. The emphasis on problems in this discussion should not overshadow the enormous personal rewards that this work brings — the ongoing, humbling process

Education as its Women's Studies and Labour Studies Co-ordinator, and later headed its Equity Studies department.

⁷See *Archivaria's* "Special Issue on Documenting Labour," 27 (Winter 1988-89); and the Association of Canadian Archivists, *Labour Archives Bulletin*.

⁸The most important forms were the Mayworks Festival, which began in Toronto in 1986 and emerged in a few other Canadian cities in subsequent years, and the Artist and the Workplace Program, sponsored by the Ontario Arts Council. See Catherine McLeod, *Mayworks: Ten Good Years* (Toronto 1996); Karl Beveridge, "Working Partners: The Arts and the Labour Movement," in Steedman *et al.*, eds., *Hard Lessons*, 251-68; "Programme Links Unions and Artists," *Worklines* (Spring 1994), 10-11; and Karl Beveridge and Jude Johnston, *Making Our Mark: Labour Arts and Heritage in Ontario* (Toronto 1999). Rosemary Donegan has curated several exhibitions with work and workers as the central theme; see, in particular, *Spudina Avenue* (Vancouver and Toronto 1985); and *Industrial Images/Images industrielles* (Hamilton 1989).

⁹See, in particular, D'Arcy Martin, "The Ontario Workers' Museum" (initial discussion draft prepared for the Arts and Labour Subcommittee, Ontario Federation of Labour, 7 June 1988).

¹⁰These include a photographic history project through the McMaster Labour Studies Program, presentations to three Ontario Museum Association conferences (one of which I co-chaired), a term on the Toronto Board of Education's Labour Education Committee, a curriculum development project for that board using historical photographs, three historical presentations at plaque unveilings for the Ontario Heritage Foundation (on whose board I was vice-chair for three years), guest lectures to teachers' conferences, labour-arts events, historical societies, and unions, and twelve years on the board of the Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, as administrator, lobbyist, fundraiser, historical advisor, curator, and much more.

of learning, the new scope for creativity, the deep attachments among co-workers, the warmth of appreciative audiences. It has always been worth the effort.

Workers' Heritage

Launching new programs in workers' history brought the various participants in this new movement into the rapidly expanding realm of historical reconstruction known as "public history." This term is now used to refer to a diverse range of public programming undertaken through museums, historic sites, historical societies, architectural conservancy associations, and government agencies, all run with a mixture of government and private funding. It can take the form of monuments and plaques, restored buildings, exhibitions and displays, speeches and lectures, films and videos, special events, festivals, pageants, and other celebrations — all intended to preserve and interpret particular elements of the past as embodiments of shared values and aspirations — our "heritage." Public-history projects have multiplied rapidly in Canada since the early 1970s — a doubling of the number of museums, for example, from about 1,000 in 1972 to over 2,000 by the early 1990s (some 600 of them in Ontario).¹¹ For the most part, the dominant modes of cultivating public memory have been highly selective in their form and content, and have conveyed implicit (and sometimes overt) élitist lessons about hierarchy, social and civic harmony, ideological consensus, and cultural cohesion. Public history, for example, has fed the well-cultivated myths of Ontario society as one steeped in benign paternalism, popular deference, and other manifestations of deeply rooted conservatism. Until the 1980s, only a few museums, historical societies, or historic sites acknowledged that workers were part of the national, provincial, or local "heritage." Most simply ignored workers' past in their programming.¹²

The 1970s and 1980s did see some soul-searching in heritage institutions and some effort to recognize greater diversity in the past. The strongest pressures came from the blossoming "multiculturalism" of ethnic groups not drawn from the British

¹¹J. Lynne Teather, "Museum-Making in Canada (to 1972)," *Muse* (Summer/Fall 1992), 29; Greg Baeker, Margaret May, and Mary Tivy, "Ontario Museums in the 1990s," *Muse* (Summer/Fall 1992), 120.

¹²Mary Tivy, "Museums, Visitors, and the Reconstruction of the Past in Ontario," *Material History Review*, 37 (Spring 1993), 35-51; Chris Miller-Marti, "Local Museums and the Creation of 'The Past,'" *Muse* (Summer 1987), 36-9; Lovat Dickson, *The Museum Makers: The Story of the Royal Ontario Museum* (Toronto 1986); C.J. Taylor, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Canada's National Historical Parks and Sites* (Montréal and Kingston 1990); Daniel Francis, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History* (Vancouver 1997); Michael Wallace, "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States," in Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public* (Philadelphia 1986), 137-61; Michael Bommers and Patrick Wright, "'Charms of Residence': The Public and the Past," in Richard Johnson *et al.*, eds., *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics* (London 1982), 252-302.

Isles¹³ and, to a lesser extent, from the diffusion of feminist critiques throughout the culture generally.¹⁴ The emergence of new state funding to support the history of women and ethnic and racial groups helped to make them a higher priority in heritage planning. As the staff in some of these institutions became more professionalized and more sensitive to the new developments in Canadian social history, some workers' history ultimately found its way inside as well. A few large museums (especially in Western Canada) and a growing number of local museums have made serious efforts to address working-class experience.¹⁵ Yet, these new initiatives remained limited: they rarely involved consultation with the labour movement, and,

¹³See, for example, "The Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village," *Muse* (Summer 1987), 8; Laurence Grant (with Mary Smith and Pat Zimmer), "Cultural Pluralism in Three Ontario Community Museums," *Muse* (Winter 1992), 54-6; Sandra Morton Weizman, "Multiculturalism in Museums: *A Coat of Many Colours*, A Case Study," *Muse* (Spring 1992), 60-2.

¹⁴For critiques of the treatment of women in public history, see Sharon Reilly, "Setting an Agenda for Women in Museums: The Presentation of Women in Museum Exhibits and Collections," *Muse* (Spring 1989), 47-51; Jane R. Glaser and Artemis A. Zenetou, eds., *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums* (Washington 1994); and Thomas Dublin, Nancy Grey Osterud, and Joy Parr, eds., "Special Issue on Public History," *Gender and History*, 6, 3 (November 1994), including Laurence Grant's discussion of developing an exhibition on the history of women at the Windsor Community Museum. See also Tina Bates and Helen Knibb, "The Museum as a Teaching Resource for Women's History," in Bettina Bradbury et al., eds., *Teaching Women's History: Challenges and Solutions* (Athabaska 1995), 245-54.

¹⁵In January 1983, the Ontario Museum Association sponsored a large conference on the history of work, "Industrious in Their Habits: Rediscovering the World of Work," but the long-term impact on the Ontario heritage community seems to have been negligible. There is no consistent inventory of exhibitions relating to working-class history in Canada. The Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature has had a series of exhibitions beginning with "Concerning Work" in 1982 (which travelled across the country) and including a recent display on "Winnipeg 1919"; see Alan F.J. Artibise and Wendelina A. Fraser, "Concerning Work: Change in the Work Process in Canada, 1850-2000," *Muse* (Summer 1984), 34-6. The Vancouver Museum organized a large exhibit on "Making a Living, Making a Life" in 1992. In Ontario, the Woodlands Cultural Centre in Brantford presented an exhibition on native iron workers entitled "Skywalkers" in 1987, the Welland Museum has presented several exhibits on workers' lives, and the Windsor Community Museum opened an exhibition on autoworkers and auto production in 1998. Women's work was featured in exhibits in Welland, Brant County, Chatham-Kent, Peterborough, and Raleigh. Miners' history has had plenty of ongoing attention at the Miners' Museum in Glace Bay, NS, and the Cumberland Museum in Cumberland, BC, among others. The Beaton Institute at the University College of Cape Breton has undertaken a many-faceted "Steel Project," which included the production of a video on the history of steelworkers and steel-making. For a review of similar and even more widespread developments in the United States, see Mike Wallace, "Razor Ribbons, History Museums, and Civic Salvation," *Radical History Review*, 57 (Fall 1993), 221-41.

across the broad canvass of mainstream heritage programming, workers still remained invisible or marginalized.

In response, the clusters of labour historians and others interested in workers' history and culture consciously appropriated the term "heritage" and declared that the neglect of "workers' heritage" had to stop. They meant that not only did workers have a right to pass on to their children the collective memory of their particular history, but also that all Canadians should know about workers' contribution to the larger society. In the face of widespread indifference in mainstream heritage institutions, much of the new public programming of workers' heritage was organized outside the established institutional frameworks. Distinct organizations were formed that drew together a variety of people and groups. Labour historians have worked with the local labour movement in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Sudbury, Toronto, Hamilton, Sydney, and New Waterford to develop walking tours of working-class history.¹⁶ Ottawa and Kingston now have active workers' heritage committees connected to the local labour councils.¹⁷ Since 1980 the Ecomusée du Fier Monde in Montréal has been constantly evolving into a fascinating community-based project in the preservation of working-class history.¹⁸ And new projects keep emerging.¹⁹ Most of the comments that follow are based on my work with what is probably the most ambitious of these projects to date — the Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, an eleven-year-old collaboration among representatives of organized labour, artists and curators, teachers, archivists, community activists, and academics. After many years of planning and fund-raising, the Centre was able to open a permanent headquarters in Hamilton in November 1996, where it now runs an extensive range of programming.²⁰

For labour historians, these new projects in workers' public history involve extending their professional skills as scholars and teachers.²¹ They apply their accumulated knowledge about the conditions of working-class life, workers' strategies of coping, and their struggles to change their world, or use their research

¹⁶Peter Steven, "Time Tripping: Cross Country Check-Up on Labour History Tours," *Our Times*, September-October 1996, 24-8.

¹⁷Peter Boyle, "Project Highlights Kingston Workers," *Worklines* (Spring 1994), 7; Ken Clavette, "Giving a Voice to Ottawa's Disappearing Industrial Workers - Preserving our Heritage: An Oral History Project," *Worklines*, Fall 1996/Winter 1997, 17-19.

¹⁸"L'Ecomusée de la maison du fier monde," *Muse* (Winter 1991), 8-9; "Innovation Marks Montreal Museum," *Worklines* (Spring 1994), 9.

¹⁹In the United States, this kind of collaboration has resulted in the publication of a glossy, well-illustrated magazine, *Labor's Heritage*, by the AFL-CIO's George Meany Centre.

²⁰The evolution of the Centre since 1994 and the range of its activities can be traced through the pages of its newsletter, *Worklines*, which is published twice a year. See also the first annual report issued in November 1997.

²¹Herve Gagnon explores some of these issues in "Education and the History Museum: Change or Tradition?" *Muse* (Summer 1989), 54-7.



The Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre (formerly Hamilton's Custom House, built in 1860).

skills to dig deeper into a specific subject.²² They also recognize the need to communicate to the less well-informed, just as in their undergraduate classrooms or their talks to labour audiences. From its earliest 19th-century forms, the museum was always seen as an educational tool that paralleled other forms of cultural diffusion such as public schools, and, however much museum practices have changed, the didactic, educational role remains predominant. Yet, for the historian, in many ways, the move into public history has meant stepping onto a stage where the script and stage directions are much less familiar. A few historians have worked sporadically with local history societies and museums, and some have begun to teach courses in public history to undergraduate and graduate students. But most university-based historians have never done this kind of work, nor been trained to undertake it. Moreover, it is not highly valued within the academic reward system of tenure and promotion, nor supported by most agencies of scholarly funding.²³

²²In two OWAHC exhibitions that I worked on, for example, I simply incorporated my previous scholarship, but a third required a great deal of new research.

²³In 1988, the Ontario Heritage Policy Review's *Summary of Public Submissions* (Toronto 1988) included only six people (out of 247 presenters) who gave a university address. I was virtually the only academic historian to show up at its large public meeting at Toronto's Harbourfront to discuss the issues (my invitation to this event resulted from some work I had done with the Ontario Museum Association a few years earlier). At the same time, it must be said that the discussion at that meeting proceeded as though university history

The historian who crosses the great divide between academic and public history will first be shocked at the devastation that a decade of government budget-slashing has accomplished in the cultural sector. Starved of public funds, administrators of museums and other public-history institutions are scrambling to organize volunteer labour, to raise funds from the community, and to compete for extremely limited "partnerships" in the private sector to run their programs. They may also have to shape their programming to fit the priorities of state bureaucracies — towards multiculturalism, for example, rather than class-based history. In this context, it is not surprising that workers' heritage projects have had to rely heavily on financial support from unions.

Above and beyond these constraints, the labour historian who enters public history is confronted with at least four other major adjustments: competing for attention with other voices of historical interpretation; learning to work with artifacts; finding new ways to communicate ideas; and coping with diverse audiences. These are dilemmas for any historian but particular challenges for the labour historian.

Competing Interpretations

Any historian drawn into public history is probably first forced to confront the fact that he or she has no monopoly on historical interpretation within the project team. In fact, a new humility will no doubt be necessary in agreeing to work with non-academics who are glad to have his or her expertise on board, but may not accept the historian's right to set the agenda for the project.²⁴ As many as three other kinds of historical interpretation and communication compete with academic history (and can have much larger audiences).

The first comes from what is often termed the "heritage community" — a loose assortment of people who run local museums, historical societies, and historic sites. In most provinces their interests are promoted by some kind of province-wide historical society of "history buffs," as well as the more professionally oriented

departments did not exist. On this heritage review, see Backer, May, and Tivy, "Ontario Museums," 122-3. For discussions of the importance of contact between academic historians and public history, see Thierry Ruddel, "The Museum's Need for a Critical Conscience: A Role for Universities," *Muse* (November 1989), 52-3; Adrienne D. Hood, "The Practice of [American] History: A Canadian Curator's Perspective," *Journal of American History*, 81, 1 (December 1994), 1011-19; and Hood, "Toward Collaboration? Museums, Universities and Material Culture Studies in Canada," *Journal of American History* (February 1998), 37-40; Alan Brinkley, "Historians and Their Publics," *Journal of American History*, 81, 1 (December 1994), 1027-30.

²⁴For a strong statement of independence from a "city historian," see Cary Carson, "City Museums as Historians," *Journal of Urban History*, 18,2 (February 1992), 183-91.

Canadian Museums Association and its provincial counterparts.²⁵ Most of these people have little or no training in academic history (though, since the 1970s, a small but growing percentage may have both history degrees and some professional training in museology or archives studies²⁶). Most are volunteers who devote a great deal of time to preserving local heritage, especially old buildings, cemeteries, and the remnants of pioneer life.

The work of these local history enthusiasts is heavily empirical. They amass artifacts and great quantities of information about people and events in a community, which they often publish far outside the orbit of university presses. But their empiricism masks some unmistakable assumptions. As some critics have argued, the heritage community tends to have a nostalgic, relatively uncritical view of the past — one that emphasizes harmony and such solid virtues as hard work and determination and one that assumes the past is closed and shut off from the present. For them, touching the past through public history should be a feel-good experience, a retreat from the disruptions of modernism into a simpler, less troubling world. The rapid proliferation of all these heritage projects after 1970 suggests that many white, Anglo-Celtic, middle-class, and middle-aged Canadians were looking for a cultural anchor in the face of the devastation of familiar urban landscapes, a rapidly changing population mix, rising social conflict, and a steady erosion of local control.²⁷

Within this heritage community, an important competitor to workers' heritage is the industrial museum, usually run by the enterprise that worked on the site, such as Redpath Sugar in Toronto, Hiram Walker in Windsor, and, until 1997, Seagram in Waterloo. Here the machinery and technical processes of production loom large in the public programming. So do the products made there and the popular culture within which they circulated, including product advertising (Toronto's recently opened Bata Shoe Museum is a striking example). These are invariably up-beat

²⁵There may also be state heritage agencies. The Ontario Heritage Foundation, for example, was charged with a modest, ambiguous role of heritage programming, mostly maintaining a network of historical plaques, providing funds for other heritage and archaeological activities, and operating a string of stately rural mansions as local museums and the historic Elgin-Winter Garden Theatre in Toronto.

²⁶The Ontario Museum Association began offering certificate courses in "museum studies" in 1979; Baeker, May, and Tivy, "Ontario Museums," 121. See also Hood, "Toward Collaboration?"

²⁷Mary Tivy, "Museums, Visitors, and the Reconstruction of the Past in Ontario," *Material History Review*, 37 (Spring 1993), 35-51; Jean Friesen, "Introduction: Heritage Futures," *Prairie Forum*, 15, 2 (Fall 1990), 194. The antimodernist impulse is also explored brilliantly in Ian McKay, "Tartanism Triumphant: The Construction of Scottishness in Nova Scotia, 1933-1954," *Acadiensis*, 21, 2 (Spring 1992), 5-47; and *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montréal and Kingston 1994). See also T.J. Jackson Leers, *No Place of Grace: Anti-Modernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York 1981).

places, celebrating the "progress" represented in industrial transformation and presenting a sanitized version of the past. Workers generally appear as embodiments of technical expertise or as machine tenders. If the social relations of the workplace are acknowledged, they are presented in a glow of "we-were-all-one-happy-family" corporate paternalism. None of the serious accidents or diseases of the workplace, the harsh indignities inflicted by supervisors, the paltry wages, the sexist and racist hiring policies, or the flashes of bitter labour-management conflict — all of which labour historians have documented repeatedly — find their way into the exhibitions. Even where local communities undertake to revive this industrial history in an old mill or plant, the same emphasis may prevail.²⁸ There have been important exceptions, such as the handful of miners' museums in Canada.²⁹

In practice, labour historians may find most of the heritage community more of an impediment (or at least a silent or indifferent onlooker) than a direct competitor in programming workers' heritage. With the exception of the heritage work in a few single-industry towns, especially mining communities, workers have not often figured in the reconstructed past in local museums and historical societies. The buildings that heritage groups thought were worth preserving were either the earliest "pioneer" structures (including military fortifications), or the grand public buildings and lavish homes of the wealthy.³⁰ The events or social institutions worth remembering were almost never strikes, unions, socialist parties, or anything else smacking of conflict and confrontation. Until the early 1990s, the government-run Ontario Heritage Foundation had only one commemorative plaque devoted to workers' protest out of more than one thousand across the province — and the one group of workers remembered was the "Tolpuddle Martyrs," British labour organizers who had been exiled in the 1830s.³¹

²⁸For descriptions of Canadian examples, see *The Seagram Museum* (Don Mills 1992); Janet Homewood, "The Canadian Railway Museum," *Muse* (Spring 1991), 10-11; Jean Mackintosh, "The Alberni Valley Museum," *Muse* (Summer/Fall 1991), 14-15; Kris Anderson, "The British Columbia Forest Museum," *Muse* (Spring 1992), 8; Michelle Audet, "The Muse minéralogique et miner de Thetford Mines," *Muse* (November 1997), 52-3. For critical discussions of industrial museums in Britain and North America, see Bob West, "The Making of the English Working Past: A Critical View of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum," in Robert Lumley, ed., *The Museum Time-Machine: Putting Cultures on Display* (London and New York 1988), 36-62; Tony Bennet, "Museums and 'The People,'" in *The Museum Time-Machine*, 63-85; Wallace, "Visiting the Past."

²⁹See, for example, "Miners' Museum," *Muse* (Autumn 1983), 4-5.

³⁰See, for example, Stephen Barber, "Conserving Winnipeg's Built Heritage, 1974-1985," *Prarie Forum*, 15, 2 (Fall 1990), 301-27. For a discussion of the biases of the "preservationist" movement in the United States, see Michael Wallace, "Reflections on the History of Historic Preservation," in Benson, Brier and Rosenzweig, eds., *Presenting the Past*, 165-99; on the British experience, see Bommers and Wright, "Charms of Residence."

³¹Mary Ellen Perkins, comp., *A Guide to Provincial Plaques in Ontario* (Toronto: Ontario Heritage Foundation 1989). During the 1990s, OHF plaques were unveiled in honour of

Not surprisingly, the labour movement has had little contact with the heritage community. Occasionally local heritage activists turned their pens to chronicling local labour history, but more often that writing came from inside the "House of Labour" itself.³² For the most part, the Canadian labour movement had no interest in a plunge back into sepia-toned nostalgia.³³ In fact, until the 1980s, the labour movement's interest in its own history was limited. Outside the national Canadian Labour College, few unions included labour history in their education programs, and few sponsored the writing of their own histories.³⁴ In part, it was the gradual retirement of a whole generation of labour activists who originally got involved in the 1930s and 1940s that prompted a renewed interest in labour history and labour

Hamilton's labour MLA Allan Studholme, the 1872 printers' strike in Toronto, and the Nine-Hour movement in Hamilton. *Worklines* (Fall 1995), 5-7. The lack of interest in workers' heritage was evident in the fact that OWAHC had been open for eighteen months before Hamilton's local history society held a meeting there, and that apparently none of the members had previously visited the Centre on their own.

³² For example, Thomas Melville Bailey, *They Knew What They Wanted: A History of Local 18, United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada* (Hamilton 1983). Labour's home-grown historians included Morden Lazarus in Ontario, who wrote *Years of Hard Labour: An Account of the Canadian Workingman, His Organizations, and Tribulations Over a Period of More Than A Hundred Years* (Don Mills 1974); *Up From the Ranks* (Don Mills 1977); and *The Long Winding Road: Canadian Labour in Politics* (Vancouver 1977); also Edward E. Seymour, whose *Illustrated History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1974* (Ottawa 1976) sold thousands of copies in labour-education courses throughout the labour movement. Sometimes unions turned to academically trained people for this work — Eugene Forsey, Paul Phillips, Greg Kealey, or Ian McKay, for example.

³³ In the "Popular Front" period of the late 1930s, the Communist Party of Canada resurrected some popular history to give some roots to their contemporary struggles against fascism. In this vein, the party's leading intellectual, Stanley Ryerson, produced *1837: The Birth of Canadian Democracy* (Toronto 1937). In the early 1950s the party also sponsored a project in workers' history to be entitled "With Our Own Hands," under the editorship of Margaret Fairley. It was never completed. See Gregory S. Kealey, *Workers and Canadian History* (Montréal and Kingston 1995), 52; David Kimmel and Gregory S. Kealey, "With Our Own Hands: Margaret Fairley and the 'Real Makers' of Canada," *Labour/Le Travail*, 31 (Spring 1993), 253-85.

³⁴ See, for example, A.L. Hepworth, "Education Activities of Congress Affiliates," *Canadian Labour*, (November 1960), 25-7. On the Canadian Labour College, see Swerdlow, *Brother Max*. At a workshop of the Canadian Committee on Labour History in 1990, New Brunswick unionist Raymond Léger argued that "the labour movement in general has not used labour history as an educational tool as it should have"; see "The New Brunswick Experience," *Labour/Le Travail*, 27 (Spring 1991), 211-12. For a discussion of the limited interest in local workers' history among some American unions, see James R. Green, "Workers, Unions, and the Politics of Public History," *Public Historian*, 11, 4 (Fall 1989), 15-19.

biography.³⁵ In part too, that turn resulted from the greater availability of academic labour historians willing to work with labour. In large part, though, a slowly emerging historical consciousness reflected a growing concern among unionists about the attacks on unions and on their hard-won gains.³⁶

When labour leaders began to articulate the need for heritage preservation, they certainly did not use the antimodernist arguments that still animate so much of the rank and file in the heritage community. A central thrust of the labour movement's participation in workers' heritage projects is to make the past relevant to the current situation of working people. Unionists look to the past for validation of their contemporary concerns and for the threads of a tradition of resistance and struggle. That too can be a selective use of the past, focusing on organized workers and on successful confrontations, rather than the full range of working-class experience. Specifically, they tend to put their financial resources behind history projects that focus on their own unions or branches of the labour movement. Women, people of colour, the homeless, the unorganized generally lack that kind of sponsorship. So, while labour historians may find the older heritage community ignoring them, they may also find that the public history desired by the labour movement may engage only part of their expertise and interests.

Whether in a community museum or a labour hall, this kind of public history also involves a great deal more commemoration, celebration, and myth-making than most academics are accustomed to. Many may identify strongly with their subjects (business historians and biographers are often particularly committed), but hard-boiled social and cultural historians may squirm uncomfortably in this new "public" arena. This is particularly true when exhibit themes directly address the labour movement. There is scope here for critical history, but it is constrained by

³⁵Labour biographies began to blossom in the 1970s and 1980s; see, for example, Joe Davidson and John Deverell, *Joe Davidson* (Toronto 1978); Kent Rowley, *The Organizer: A Canadian Union Life* (Toronto 1980); Howard White, *A Hard Man to Beat: The Story of Bill White, Labour Leader, Historian, Shipyard Worker, Raconteur* (Vancouver 1983); Gerard Fortin and Boyce Richardson, *Life of the Party* (Montréal 1984); George MacEachern, *George MacEachern: An Autobiography*, eds. David Frank and Don MacGillivray (Sydney 1987); Jack Munro and Jane O'Hara, *Union Jack: Labour Leader Jack Munro* (Vancouver 1988); Jack Scott, *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers' Movement, 1927-1985*, ed. Bryan D. Palmer (St John's 1988); Milan (Mike) Bosnich, *One Man's War: Reflections of a Rough Diamond* (Toronto 1989); Swerdlow, *Brother Max*; Nicholas Fillmore, *Maritime Radical: The Life and Times of Roscoe Fillmore* (Toronto 1992); Susan Crean, *Grace Hartman: A Woman For Her Time* (Vancouver 1995); Doug Smith, *Cold Warrior: C.S. Jackson and the United Electrical Workers* (St John's 1997); Frank Colantonio, *From the Ground Up: An Italian Immigrant's Story* (Toronto 1997).

³⁶The changing context for unions in Canada is discussed in Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, *The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms: From Wage Controls to Social Contract* (Toronto 1993).

the inevitable expectation of the organizers or sponsors of exhibitions that "we did great things together in the past." So far it has fairly easy to inject criticisms of sexism and racism within working-class experience, largely because activists within working-class communities are raising those issues today. Other subjects must be treated gently or avoided, however — bureaucratization, communism, or battles between unions within the "House of Labour," for example. This dilemma is deepened by the need for union money, as other sources of funding disappear. There is no need, however, for labour historians to be simply uncritical tools of narrow union agendas. It is possible to find ways to encourage current union members to consider their own history in a different light. Historians can use their critical lenses to play an active role in helping to shape popular "myths" among working people, to strengthen an appreciation of the diversity of working-class experience.

The second form of historical reconstruction that academic historians will find themselves up against is the mass media, which, independent of any official mandate, regularly infuse popular consciousness with their versions of history (or project those produced elsewhere). Newspapers have considerable impact here, as do mass-produced novels and popular histories (such as those produced by Pierre Berton or Heather Robertson). But, these days, these media have much less impact than historical films, television mini-series, or the whole cable channel devoted to "History." Film and video have taken on an immensely powerful role in influencing perceptions of the past.³⁷ Some workers' history has been finding its way into these visual media over the past 15-20 years, and some film-makers certainly see themselves as loosely part of the workers' heritage movement. Films dealing with workers may be fictional works, non-fiction documentaries, or a hybrid known as "docudrama."³⁸ Recently, for example, television viewers in Ontario have had access to a CBC drama on children in Cape Breton coal mines (*Pit Ponies*), a documentary on the 1946 steelworkers' strike in Hamilton (*Defying the Law*), and another on the lives of workers in Toronto's Inglis plant (*Working Days*). They have also had the chance to see a major feature film about a Cape Breton mining community (*Margaret's Museum*).³⁹

For labour historians, the problem is that even documentaries follow cinematic conventions that are different from the historian's craft. These visual reconstruc-

³⁷The interaction of working-class audiences and feature films is explored in Peter Stead, *Film and the Working Class: The Feature Film in British and American Society* (London 1989).

³⁸The development of the docudrama is traced in Eric Breitbart, "The Painted Mirror: Historical Re-creation from the Panorama to the Docudrama," in Benson, Brier, and Rosenzweig, eds., *Presenting the Past*, 105-17.

³⁹For a guide to American (and a few Canadian) films about workers, see Tom Zaniello, *Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds, and Riffraff: An Organized Guide to Films About Labor* (Ithaca 1996).

tions are most often produced by film-makers with little or no historical training, who typically consult with historians but still write their scripts independently. Nuancing of interpretation almost inevitably succumbs to the emphasis on narrative or character development. The conventions of film-making also put a premium on high-quality visuals and tight editing. So academic historians may find themselves battling with film-makers over historical accuracy and interpretation.⁴⁰ Given the power of the visual in contemporary culture, this is a medium that we can expect will continue to be influential in conveying historical messages to large audiences (although films about working-class experience are hard to fund and will probably remain small in number⁴¹). It is a medium that labour historians must be prepared to struggle with to get their expertise respected and integrated, even if the price may be frustration.

Historians have had to compete with a third form of constructing history that is much less public but undoubtedly has a much wider basis in the working class. That is the oral culture that passes on the memory of local events, colourful people, or daily routines, usually in the form of story-telling. These versions of the past are communicated over the family dinner table, the backyard fence, the cafeteria table at work, the beer glasses in a tavern, and countless other informal settings. Generally they have few public outlets, although they may be part of the public culture of after-dinner speeches or occasionally may carry over into the local print and broadcast media (little is passed on through ballads or other popular music as in earlier societies). The historical experience of women is largely relegated to these channels.⁴²

⁴⁰The best-known recent example of tension between documentary film-makers and academic historians in Canada is addressed in David J. Bercuson and S.F. Wise, eds., *The Valour and the Horror Revisited* (Montréal and Kingston 1994). For a revealing interview with American film-maker Ken Burns, who has made several historical documentaries, see "The Movie-Maker as Historian: Conversations with Ken Burns," *Journal of American History*, 81, 2 (December 1994), 1031-50.

⁴¹Norflicks Productions is currently organizing a major series of 39 hour-long documentary films for television, under the rubric of "The People's History of Canada: Working People's Contributions to Canadian Life." The first, *Defying the Law*, is an excellent presentation of the 1946 steel strike in Hamilton. The company has assembled an advisory board of academics, unionists, and cultural workers.

⁴²The Center on History-Making in America found through surveys that respondents to the question "Where do you turn for information about the past?" listed, in order of frequency, "books; family members or relatives; primary sources, such as letters or archival material; professionals including scholars and teachers; and television." In subsequent interviews, "grandparents were seen as the most trustworthy sources for information about family and human experiences, while teachers as well as TV were perceived as biased." Barbara Franco, "The Communication Conundrum: What is the Message? Who is Listening?" *Journal of American History*, 81, 1 (June 1994), 157.

This kind of popular memory is not necessarily a static view of the past, and can bring a critical perspective — say, a parent's memory of a son's death in a war that contains little of the heroism of official renditions on Remembrance Day.⁴³ Researchers engaged in oral history of workers may actually discover a deep contempt for other sources of historical reconstruction ("they don't really understand what happened"). Of course, popular story-telling can be problematic for the historian. The stories tend to be narrowly focused on the most immediate personal relationships within families, neighbourhoods, and workplaces, rather than on broader social dynamics. Indeed, they are often seen consciously as a transmission belt of memories to the next generation within kinship circles or within a particular workplace. They can be full of stoicism in the face of adversity, but, overall, optimistic, as befits a process intended to promote dignity and respect. The popularly related stories of the Great Depression of the 1930s, for example, are generally about survival in the face of chronic economic insecurity (rather than unrelenting defiance through strikes or demonstrations).⁴⁴ Nor are these memories innocent or pristine. Memories change — not just through erosion but also through unconscious revision (since such stories almost invariably involve reflection on the ever-changing contemporary world). In fact, popular memory is imbedded in that complex ideological amalgam known as "common sense." Story-telling may not have much direct connection to academic or popular writing on history, but it is filtered through a variety of dominant social, cultural, and political discourses — in schools, the mass media, and public commemoration, in particular. The rhetoric and imagery of the Cold War, for example, shaped popular memories of labour struggles in crucial ways. Sometimes, moreover, the collective working-class memories of a community can be compressed and reintegrated into a more expansive, though factually less certain, tale with the status of "legend."⁴⁵ Many Canadian labour historians have grappled with these limitations in their academic scholarship, and, therefore, can bring a sensitivity to the use of oral history.⁴⁶ In public-history work, they will feel more pressure to respect the process of story-telling, but they can nonetheless interrogate and contextualize the content as

⁴³ John Bodnar explores this difference in *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton 1992).

⁴⁴ See, for example, W. Peter Archibald, "Distress, Dissent, and Alienation: Hamilton Workers in the Great Depression," *Urban History Review*, 21, 1 (October 1992), 3-32.

⁴⁵ Larry Peterson develops this fascinating perspective on working-class memory in "Workers' Memory as Legend and Myth: Reconstructing Labor Conflicts at Pullman". Paper presented to the North American Labor History Conference, Detroit 1996.

⁴⁶ See, in particular, Joan Sangster, "Telling our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," *Women's History Review*, 3, 1 (1994), 5-28.

carefully as any other sources. This can be a major challenge when the story-teller is a respected, elderly worker.⁴⁷

Bringing workers' stories into public history work can be simply the vacuum cleaner approach of the oral historian — accumulating information as the raw material for exhibitions, just as academic historians gather oral evidence for their scholarly writing. But that process and the resulting product are generally controlled by the interviewer and may simply take the familiar academic shape. We are typically too insensitive to notice and appreciate the particular cultural form of the working-class story — its narrative structure, its cadences, its ethical power. In workers' heritage programming, the challenge is to recognize that the mode of story-telling (rather than the didactic text panel) is central to the way in which most workers understand the past. The use of video-taped interviews within exhibitions and of elderly workers as tour guides can help. It is also important to recognize that humour is a central force in working-class story-telling, rather than the earnest preachiness or melodrama that middle-class writers tend to adopt in their accounts of working-class life. If the labour historian working in public history has no sense of humour, or at least irony, he or she is doomed.

The Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre also used personal reminiscences as the basis for two of its published walking tours, which include oral cassettes with recorded voices to be used in a tape recorder during the tour. A 1997 display on women in northern-Ontario mining communities used transcribed interviews as text, and a 1998 exhibition on Ontario autoworkers presented the actual voices of Studebaker workers. But, on the whole, the Centre's exhibitions have reflected the academic's more abstract conceptualization of the past and have not been structured around story-telling. We still have much to learn about how to link our analytical insights to this popular mode of communication, especially through first-person narrative.⁴⁸

The Centre has discovered, however, that story-telling makes superb theatre. Several times since late 1996, OWAHC has staged *Cu Fu*, a one-man show performed by Charlie Chiarelli, a professional story-teller-turned-actor, who grew up in the Italian neighbourhood around the Centre. The performance is a brilliant pastiche of personal stories that brings to life more powerfully than any text panel the nature of Hamilton's postwar immigrant working-class experience. It has been extremely popular with audiences.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method," in Johnston *et al.*, ed., *Making Histories*, 205-52; David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge 1985), 193-210.

⁴⁸For descriptions of two successful exhibitions based on oral history, see Judith Coake and Susan Pointe, "Voices from Memory: A Community-Made Exhibition," *Muse* (August 1997), 45-7; Roberta Kremer, "Spoken Memories: The Use of Oral History in Exhibitions," *Muse* (December 1998), 36-9.

⁴⁹For a discussion of the many uses of museum theatre, see Sherry Anne Chapman, "Forward Through the Past: Reminiscence Theatre and Museums," *Muse* (December 1998), 12-14.

Academically trained labour historians, then, must manoeuvre among these competing claims to historical interpretation by heritage enthusiasts, film-makers, and community story-tellers. They soon discover the need to work out a fine balance between their claims to professional expertise and their respect for the insights and perspectives of other kinds of practitioners. Frequently they will find that they have the most critical voice in the project team and will have to negotiate recurrent tendencies to commemorate and glorify — a difficult but not impossible task. Fortunately there are many people employed in public history who share this concern.⁵⁰

Confronting the Artifact

Once labour historians have come to terms with the competing methods and goals of “doing” history, they are confronted with a second major adjustment — the importance of the artifact as both a source of interpretation and a medium of communication with the past. For the most part, other than those studying native peoples, academic historians make little use of artifacts in their research. They may glean some insights from material-culture researchers, but most remain firmly rooted in archival paper.⁵¹ It is therefore a new research challenge to set off in search of objects to be used in an exhibition and to interpret history through them.⁵² Furthermore, historians are not accustomed to foregrounding their primary sources. They usually bury most of them in their footnotes, dropping only the juiciest tidbits into their texts. In contrast, public history usually assumes that visitors will get much of the message from their own direct appreciation of objects from the past. Our written analysis on a text panel or an exhibition catalogue may have much less immediate impact than the material objects themselves.

For historians of the working class, this reliance on the artifact poses particular problems. Just as workers left behind relatively few pieces of paper for us to sift through in researching our books, so too most of their material culture has not been well preserved. Museums and historical societies have seldom been as interested as we might like in the tools of working-class housewives and wage-earners, the clothing workers wore, and the objects they surrounded themselves with on a daily basis. What they have may be poorly or inaccurately identified.⁵³ That neglect is

⁵⁰On this dialogue, see, for example, Edward T. Linenthal, “Committing History in Public,” *Journal of American History*, 81, 1 (December 1994), 986-91.

⁵¹Joy Parr has been a significant exception; see her “Shopping for a Good Stove: A Parable About Gender, Design, and the Market,” in Parr, ed., *A Diversity of Women: Ontario, 1945-1980* (Toronto 1995), 75-97.

⁵²Most museums have a permanent collection of artifacts around which they structure their exhibitions. OWAHC has chosen not to build up such a collection, but rather to remain an “interpretive centre,” gathering material for exhibitions as needed.

⁵³Mary Tivy, “The Quality of Research is Definitely Strained: Collections Research in Ontario Community Museums,” *Material History Review*, 27 (Spring 1988), 61-8.

not surprising since documenting the material culture of working-class life is extremely difficult.⁵⁴ Where can museum staff turn for descriptions of a workers' kitchen or bedroom, a factory lunchroom, a local tavern, or even the inside of a union hall? Fortunately, for the 20th century at least, many answers lie in the memories of elderly workers. Along with the historian's careful research in newspapers, public-health reports, social surveys, and so on, interviews can help to clarify what to look for. Often, it turns out that much of this material culture is still to be found on the walls and shelves and in the basements and attics of many working-class families. The challenge is to get people to bring forth objects that they have rarely thought of as having any historical value outside their own family history. A bigger dilemma is how to portray the world of work in gargantuan workplaces — such as the open-hearth department of a steel mill or the assembly line of an auto plant. No one makes much effort to save large industrial machinery. Owners often sell it off for scrap.⁵⁵

For the labour-historian-turned-public-historian, the material culture of the formal organizations of the working class ought to be more accessible. But the banners, placards, floats, charters, photographs, pins, ribbons, regalia, posters, commemorative booklets, union labels, and so much more have not been well looked after over the years. Much was intended to be ephemeral (including the colourful floats, costumes, and effigies from labour parades), and much was pitched

⁵⁴For one stimulating study, see Lizabeth A. Cohen, "Embellishing a Life of Labor: An Interpretation of the Material Culture of American Working-Class Homes, 1885-1915," in Dirk Hoerder, ed., *Labor Migration in the Atlantic Economies: The European and North American Working Classes During the Period of Industrialization* (Westport, Conn. 1985), 321-52. Some work on working-class housing in Canada is also suggestive; see Richard MacKinnon, "Company Housing in Wabana, Bell Island, Newfoundland," *Material History Bulletin*, 14 (Spring 1982), 67-71; "Tompkinsville, Cape Breton Island: Co-operativism and Vernacular Architecture," *Material History Bulletin*, 44 (Fall 1996), 45-63; and "Making a House a Home: Company Housing in Cape Breton Island," *Material History Bulletin*, 47 (Spring 1998), 46-56; JoAnn Latremouille, *Pride of Home: The Working Class Housing Tradition in Nova Scotia, 1949-1949* (Halifax 1986). Domestic technology is discussed in Suzanne Marchand, "L'impact des innovations technologiques sur la vie quotidienne des Québécoises du début du XXe siècle (1910-1940)," *Material History Bulletin*, 28 (Fall 1988), 1-14; Parr, "Shopping for a Good Stove."

⁵⁵For a survey of industrial history in Canada, see Louise Trotter, "Preserving Canada's Industrial Heritage: Studies and Achievements, 1987-1992," *Machines* (Summer 1993), 9-15; on the challenges in preserving industrial heritage, see John Weiler, *Our Working Past: Conserving Industrial Relics for Recreation and Tourism* (n.p. 1982); Thomas E. Leary, "Shadows in the Cave: Industrial Ecology and Museum Practice," *Public Historian*, 11, 4 (Fall 1989), 39-60; and Laurence F. Gross, "Problems in Exhibiting Labor in Museums and a Technological Fix," *Technology and Culture* (1993), 392-400. One of the more successful industrial-history projects in the United States is at the Youngstown Historical Centre of Industry and Labor in Ohio; see Curtis Miner, "Review of 'By the Sweat of their Brows: Forging the Steel Valley'," *Journal of American History*, 80, 1 (December 1993), 1019-24.

out or passed into private hands as unions dissolved or officers changed. Unions are busy organizations with limited time, money, or inclination to devote to careful preservation of their artifacts. Recent efforts to locate this kind of material in southern-Ontario union offices for an OWAHC exhibition on labour parades was depressingly unrewarding. More efforts to promote preservation within unions and labour centrals will be necessary.

Public historians interested in workers' heritage have wisely responded to the challenge of bringing working-class history back to life by extending their programming out beyond the walls of heritage institutions to use working-class neighbourhoods as living artifacts and as an active resource for portraying workers' heritage. The results have been impressive, if limited so far. Walking tours, community-sponsored exhibitions, installations, workshops, commemorative events, and so on have made it possible to use the architectural heritage of these older neighbourhoods and the oral traditions still alive and well within them to bring to life an earlier period of working-class history (though obviously this tends to be limited to the 20th-century experience). At this point, academic historians may well find themselves drawn to fascinating new historiographical questions about spatial dimensions of history and the uses of memory that can enrich their scholarship immensely.⁵⁶

Unfortunately, the ability to use these neighbourhoods as an "ecomuseum" is increasingly constrained by four new forces that have emerged over the past thirty years in many larger cities: the devastation of so-called urban renewal projects, the dispersion of so many of these older working-class communities to the suburbs, the colonizing of the older neighbourhoods by middle-class renovators (or new working-class immigrants), and the steady, long-term de-industrialization of so many old industrial areas, which has often led to the abandonment and eventual destruction of both workers' housing and important old industrial buildings. The demolition of Toronto's Inglis factory was a striking case in point.⁵⁷ The heritage agencies with power to designate historically significant buildings rarely raise a ruckus about industrial heritage, despite the fact that community life may have revolved around these sites for decades. Hardly any factories or mills have been preserved as heritage

⁵⁶See Robert Kristofferson, "The Past Is At Our Feet: The Workers' City Project in Hamilton, Ontario," *Labour/Le Travail*, 41 (Spring 1998), 181-97; Delores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, Mass. 1995); Binette, "L'Ecomusée de la Maison du Fier Monde"; Wilma Wood, "The Cowichan and Chemains Valleys Ecomuseum: The Ecomuseum Concept as a Successful Planning Tool for Government and the Governed," *Muse*, 10-11; R. Peter Heron, "Museums: Cultural Institutions and Islands of Hope," *Muse* (Autumn 1990), 53-6; Koke and Pointe, "Voices from Memory."

⁵⁷See David Sobel and Susan Meurer, *Working at Inglis: The Life and Death of a Canadian Factory* (Toronto 1994). In 1992 the Bostonian Society made this process of working-class dislocation the subject of an engaging exhibition; see James R. Green, "Review of 'The Last Tenement: Confronting Community and Urban Renewal in Boston's West End,'" *Journal of American History*, 80, 1 (December 1993), 1025-30.

sites, and those that have tend to be 19th-century mills situated in picturesque river valleys.⁵⁸

So, for all these reasons, labour historians will find themselves in a scramble for artifacts. As in our scholarly endeavours, we may find ourselves heavily dependent on sources generated outside the working class — temperance literature, public-health posters, or commercial advertising aimed at working-class housewives, for example. Above all, however, we are drawn to photographs. The most common visual display of working-class history is a photographic exhibition. There are, of course, a multitude of problems with seeing these as the unfiltered windows on workers' past. Most of the photos taken at the time and almost all those that have survived were produced by people from outside the working class who found workers quaint, exotic, pathetic, heroic, or, in the case of professional studio photographers, simply respectable customers. Many historians have used photographs in their books and articles far too uncritically — as merely illustrations, without questioning the assumptions and conventions that lay behind the photographer's eye. In heritage work, labour historians can bring that sensitivity to the use of photographs in heritage presentations and can try to encourage visitors to examine the biases in this kind of artifact. They don't always do so.⁵⁹

Modes of Communicating

The third adjustment that historians have to make in moving into public history is to the new modes of communication that we must learn to work with (and for which they are generally completely untrained). They typically get far less room to put their thoughts into writing in public history than in academic work. They may get

⁵⁸The Canadian Society for Industrial Heritage was founded only in 1990. For a review of recent developments, see Trotter, "Preserving Canada's Industrial Heritage." For examples of efforts to preserve local industrial heritage in four American industrial centres, see Brian O'Donnell, "Memory and Hope: Four Local Museums in the Mill Towns of the Industrial Northeast," *Technology and Culture*, 37, 4 (October 1996), 817-27.

⁵⁹For stimulating discussion of the biases of photographs of workers, see Allan Sekula, "Photography Between Capital and Labour," in Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Robert Wilkie, eds., *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures, 1948-1968: Photographs by Leslie Shedden, A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton* (Halifax and Sydney 1983), 193-268; Eric Margolis, "Mining Photographs: Unearthing the Meanings of Historical Photos," *Radical History Review*, 40 (Spring 1988), 33-48; Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York 1989); Lawrence W. Levine, "The Historian and the Icon: Photography and the History of the American People in the 1930s and 1940s," in Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan, eds., *Documenting America, 1935-1943* (Berkeley 1988), 15-42; Alan Trachtenberg, "From Image to Story: Reading the File," *Documenting America*, 43-73; Ken Cruikshank and Nancy B. Bouchier, "'The Pictures Are Great But the Text is a Bit of a Downer': Ways of Seeing and the Challenge of Exhibiting Critical History," *Canadian Historical Review*, 80, 1 (March 1999), 96-113.



A turn-of-the-century saloon in the 1998 OWAHC exhibition "Booze: Work, Pleasure, and Controversy."

the chance to contribute to a catalogue or handout, but the space is limited, and the prose must be sparse. They are exhorted not to write out their books on the wall, since visitors to heritage installations have little tolerance for excessive wordiness.⁶⁰ Most of their written contributions to public history are short paragraphs mounted on text panels alongside or embedded within a display. Far more of their analysis must be communicated visually (or perhaps orally) through the selection and presentation of artifacts, the arrangement of space within the exhibition, and the use of lighting and sound. Museum installations are also increasingly interactive, involving hands-on contact with displays and access to CD-ROMs, interactive videos, and motion-activated lighting and sound. Historians' expertise rarely extends to these media. As an American museum administrator has suggested, "an exhibition or a historic site is much more than the written text of labels and conveys much more complex information through spatial relationships, visual images, real things, and social interactions in a three-dimensional environment that is social, multisensory, and largely self-directed."⁶¹

Preparing this public-history material involves forms of team-work that contrast sharply with the individualism of most academic scholarship. In some cases, historians have to work with museologically trained staff and professional design-

⁶⁰Some museums that have attempted to keep up with the social history produced in academia have gone overboard in producing lengthy, nuanced text panels, which do become fairly dense "books on the wall."

⁶¹Franco, "Communication Conundrum," 158.

ers. Many museums and historical societies, however, cannot afford such professionalism, and the historian and the local heritage enthusiasts have to make their own judgments. In this process they may fall back on the unquestioned formalities of the museums in their youth, with little understanding of new developments in museology.

Academics, nonetheless, generally do have a lot of experience in trying to communicate ideas in a learning process, and have been getting a lot more experimental in classroom techniques. Feminist influences on pedagogy⁶² have been at the forefront of a wave of new concern to take account of students' social backgrounds in curriculum development, to engage them more actively in the learning process (with debates, role playing, or dramatizations), to stimulate small-group teamwork in classroom discussion, and to encourage projects that connect with the world beyond the university (for example, with oral-history projects). Many labour historians have learned that helping students understand what workers faced in the past, how they managed to survive, and how they rallied to change their world requires a good deal more than giving them information. They encourage them to look critically at primary historical sources and at the way history is written. They send them off to conduct interviews with seniors. All of these development in university teaching can be good experience to bring to bear on public history.

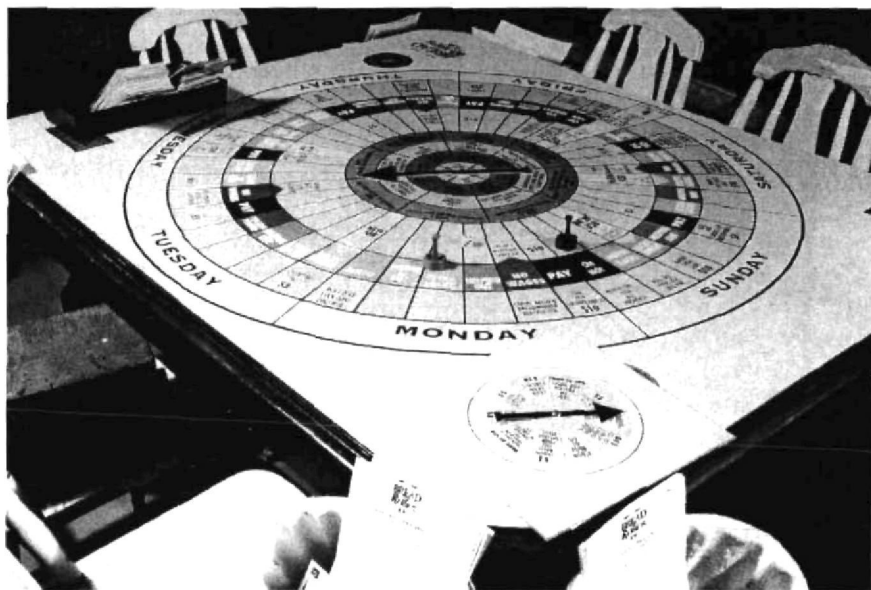
There are counter-pressures, however. What historians discover soon after their plunge into public history is that heritage presentations are competing with lavish "theme-park" approaches to public culture for patrons' attention and tourist dollars — a trend that, regrettably, turns the past into a contained, definable commodity to be consumed in leisure time, outside the "real" world of modern society.⁶³ There is a growing assumption that museums have always been too earnest and that they cannot compete for the public's leisure time unless they become some kind of entertainment. The drying-up of stable state funding at all levels for heritage projects means that non-profit heritage institutions are desperate to attract admission fees (and to promote gift-shop sales). And the theme parks have set the pace in terms of expensive interactive technology and entertaining exhibits. Ultimately, few heritage institutions beyond such giants as the Royal Ontario Museum or the National Museum of Civilization can ever hope to compete head to head with Canada's Wonderland. There is unlikely to be a marked shift in cultural consumerism towards small heritage projects and institutions.

Historians of the working class may find this pressure to inject excitement into exhibitions particularly daunting since they have no experience in turning their research into entertainment (beyond classroom showmanship), they may have so few artifacts or images to work with, and, typically, the tight finances of their heritage projects prevent the use of expensive interactive toys. At OWAHC, several

⁶²See Bradbury *et al.*, *Teaching Women's History*.

⁶³Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*.

exhibitions have ended up as flat displays attached to walls, with only limited three-dimensionality and even more limited interactivity. Yet smaller projects can still make an impact if imaginatively conceived. It is possible to have active exhibitions about working-class history without CD-ROMs or interactive videos. Visitors can be “entertained” by doing as much as by watching. Keeping the exhibits as accessible and hands-on as possible is a starting point. Labour historians are well aware of the importance of manual labour in the working-class home or the paid workplace, and can use their knowledge of labour processes to help make visitor-friendly tools (original or reproductions) central to displays about the household, the factory, or the construction site. Dioramas of particular work settings need not be fenced off with ropes or plexi-glass and can allow visitors to examine or try their hand at washing clothes by hand, shaping wood with a plane, or whatever.⁶⁴ In a stab at a different mode of presentation, I designed a large board game to demonstrate the pre-welfare-state family economy for a working-class kitchen in the 1930s, which, I am told, many children and adults have found as engaging as any computer simulation. Theatre and music can also enhance exhibitions (Jackie Washington, a well-known Hamilton African-Canadian blues musician who grew up in the working-class North End, has performed several times at



This “Bread and Roses” board game was developed as an interactive element in an OWAHC exhibition on working-class Hamilton in the 1930s and 1940s.

⁶⁴It must be said that OWAHC has yet to make full use of this possibility. Moreover, it has real limitations for mass-production work processes.

OWAHC, for example). In the process of conceptualizing, labour historians invariably find themselves stretched in creative new directions by their interaction with the designers and artists who have been hired to make the exhibitions visually compelling.

Audiences

The fourth adjustment that academic historians have to make is to different audiences. Many aspire to write their books for a wide, educated readership and succeed to varying degrees. In reality, their scholarly production most often reaches few beyond the specialists in the field who share their fascination with the subject, a slightly wider circle of graduate students, and, if they are lucky, some undergraduates who are compelled to read their work. In contrast, public history assumes from the start that the potential audience is wide, diverse, and unspecialized, ranging from the half-interested school children herded through local museums, to vacationing tourists (with or without children) checking out local attractions, to seniors seeking the nostalgia of past experience, to citizens seriously interested in deepening their knowledge of history and culture. One researcher found local museums in Ontario aiming at the comprehension level of a thirteen-year old,⁶⁵ but, in reality, it is risky to assume a single homogeneous audience. The diversity of audiences confronts the historian with the need to find a level of interpretation and a mode of communication that takes into account the ignorance and misconceptions, as well as the deep reservoirs of knowledge about a subject, that visitors might bring with them.

In the case of workers' heritage, there are two special problems. The first is that museums are not particularly popular with most working people. Or, perhaps more fairly, workers tend to prefer to spend their time in other ways. There are plenty of workers who are fascinated with history and participate in local history societies and heritage events, but they tend to be exceptional and most often elderly. Like most of us, workers' first contact with museums was probably on compulsory school trips, where many must have found the serious, didactic tone of the grand halls filled with glass cases to be an extension of the class biases they were facing in their classrooms. Most did not find anything much relevant to their own lives in the institutions they were compelled to visit and had little inclination to come back. It is ironic that, while the Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre chose to locate in Hamilton as a city with a rich working-class history, workers do not arrive spontaneously at our doors in large numbers. In July 1997, when a huge summer festival drew thousands of people to a waterfront park about half a mile away, perhaps a hundred walked up the hill to see the Centre's highly relevant exhibition on the social uses of the harbour entitled "The People and the Bay." Avoiding the word "museum" in favour of "arts and heritage centre" has not helped much since

⁶⁵Tivy, "Quality of Research," 66.

the word "heritage" still has official connotations and is not one that many working people use (at least not in this way).

The labour historian will probably also find that few workers want to fill their leisure hours immersed in the grim reality of slum life or exploitation in the workplace that runs through so much of the social history that we write. In their leisure time, they might understandably prefer not to confront experiences that are not so far from their own daily lives — jobs that are still unrewarding or unfulfilling, economic insecurity in their own families, general feelings of powerlessness, and so on. Why should we expect people to spend a Sunday afternoon getting depressed about their lot when they can find more fun almost anywhere else? What they seem to respond to best are the suggestions in exhibitions that workers were active agents in the past — that a wage-earner could take pride in his or her production, that a housewife strategized creatively against poverty, that a group of workers fought back against low wages, that a well-known local politician supported working people's struggles, and so on. Labour historians therefore may find themselves tailoring their contributions to public history to tone down the bleak and discouraging parts of workers' heritage.

One promising way to try bridging the gulf between a heritage centre and its working-class audiences is to involve working people themselves in the planning, development, and organization of an exhibition, so that a heritage display is not simply a professional product seeking a passive audience. The Ecomusée in Montréal has pioneered this work in Canada and has had considerable success.⁶⁶ OWAHC has had several exhibitions to which specific unions have been convinced to contribute, although involving members in the planning and production has proved difficult to organize. Two projects integrated unionists: members of two CUPE locals in Hamilton collaborated with artist Jim Miller on a project called "Making Time," and a group of retired Studebaker workers helped create an exhibition on their working lives in the Hamilton plant. Three projects did grow out of other bases in the community — residents of Hamilton's North End contributed to the walking-tour project known as "The Workers' City," a local centre for immigrant women worked with a number of local artists, and a group of high-school history students developed a small exhibition known as "Working Family Treasures" aimed at displaying the story behind some familiar object in an elderly relative's household.⁶⁷ The Centre's limited experience with this kind of community-based exhibition suggests that there are rich rewards but also large practical problems. Working people have to be convinced that their histories have any relevance, and also have to be encouraged to shed their deference to professional

⁶⁶The Power of Place group has been quite active as well; see Hayden, *Power of Place*.

⁶⁷Kristofferson, "The Past is at our Feet"; Robert Yates, "It's About Time: A Review of 'Making Time,'" *Worklines* (Spring/Summer 1997), 3-4; Renee Johnston, "Spinning Yarns: Stories of Women's Work in North End Hamilton," *Worklines* (Fall/Winter 1997-98), 7-8; Shawn Shoemith, "Working Family Treasures," *Worklines* (Spring/Summer 1998), 10.

direction. They may too easily assume that the existence of the Centre means that we will organize the project for them.

Labour historians and their collaborators in workers' public history may soon discover, moreover, that they have to confront some conventional assumptions about historical exhibitions among working people. Even the key supporters of workers' heritage inside the labour movement have surprisingly old-fashioned notions about what they want in their museum. To a great extent, they seem to expect a fairly traditional exhibition with formal glass cases, only this time they want to see them filled with labour memorabilia. They are delighted with the grand architecture of the old Custom House that OWAHC inhabits — in spite of all the museological debates about avoiding the museum as "temple."⁶⁸ It is not hard to see that these assumptions among working people are based not only on their limited contact with museums, but also with their deep concern about respectability. Just as they believe that union photographs should be carefully posed portraits, and public occasions should maintain a basic decorum,⁶⁹ so too, museums or heritage centres devoted to workers's history should be proper, respectable places — even if that means being formal and stuffy.

Ultimately, the labour historian and his or her collaborators in workers' heritage projects may want to question the very notion of an "audience." Perhaps the greatest conceptual hurdle to get over is that heritage programming should be a cultural package ready and waiting to be appreciated by visitors (much as we imagine our books in relation to our readership). In practice, OWAHC has learned that after a splashy opening night, an exhibition may have little life unless it connects with ongoing community activism. Off-the-street visits may be minimal, but group visits from schools, unions, seniors' organizations, and so on are always more successful. The Centre is also attracting growing numbers of labour, arts, women's, and other community groups who are eager to use the space for meetings, events, and celebrations. The exhibitions then tend to be appreciated as historical or artistic links with the present, rather than merely abstracted cultural products waiting for an audience. Labour historians can also bring their sensitivity to the flow of working-class life to suggest many ways to carry programming outside central locations (like Hamilton's Custom House) into shopping malls, unemployment offices, community centers, union halls, churches, and a variety of locations where working people regularly gather.⁷⁰

⁶⁸Duncan Cameron, "The Museum, Temple or Forum," *Curator*, 14, 1 (1971), 11-24.

⁶⁹Rumour has it that there are CAW members who have never forgiven Bob White for allowing himself to be shown on national television, in the NFB film *Final Offer*, using disreputable four-letter words, despite the fact that most of them use the same spicy vocabulary every day.

⁷⁰For discussions of some of these dilemmas in programming community history, see Linda Stopes, "Oral History and Community Involvement: The Baltimore Neighbourhood Heritage Project," in Benson, Brier, and Rosenczweig, eds., *Presenting the Past*, 249-63; Jeremy

The public history of working-class experience can be enlightening (“I didn’t know that happened!”), challenging (“How could people be treated so badly?”), reassuring (“We’ve done some great things together!”), or ennobling (“They really were the salt of the earth!”). Yet it should also be at least somewhat empowering — the knowledge or inspiration working people get from “workers’ heritage” should give them some critical tools for assessing and confronting their present situations. As labour historians have discovered in their classrooms and their own research projects, the link between the past and the present can be a powerful force.⁷¹

None of these comments should be interpreted as a suggestion that labour historians involved in public history have to abandon their intellectual integrity to some kind of pop-culture pablum. People want us involved in these projects for what we do best — researching and interpreting the past. We are simply developing a new role for the “public intellectual,” which has traditionally included intervention into the formation of public opinion and can now take on new dimensions. The difficult learning curve for us is how and where to communicate our knowledge beyond the classroom, the academic conference, and the scholarly publication. If we are prepared to work collectively and respectfully with other non-academic practitioners of historical reconstruction, to learn new visual and oral modes of communicating, and to reorient our thinking away from creating a cultural product for cultural consumption towards a more dynamic development of public history programs within the daily lives of working people, then we can be extremely effective in helping to make workers’ heritage a fuller part of Canada’s cultural legacy. In the process we will help to build a more democratic culture.

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Brecher, “A Report on Doing History from Below: The Brass Workers’ History Project,” in *Presenting the Past*, 267-77; James Green, “Engaging in People’s History: The Massachusetts History Workshop,” in *Presenting the Past*, 339-59.

⁷¹For parallel reflections, see John E. Fleming, “African-American Museums, History, and the American Ideal,” *Journal of American History*, 81, 1 (December 1994), 1021-6.

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