

Who Matters? Public History and the Invention of the Canadian Past

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Who Matters? Public History and the Invention of the Canadian Past

THERE IS NO LONGER ANY REAL DISPUTE that the past, as distinct from traditions, is an invention based on a careful selection of apparently empirical evidence. Historians now accept that there is no “ultimate” truth; there are many perspectives or narratives, all valid and all exploring new realities and new truths. The current multi-streamed discourse in history, however, is fraught with impossible challenges for public historians. Some narratives focus on a heritage of achievement and triumph. Others will focus on exploitation and marginalization, which will in turn be denied by the narratives of the exploiters. Not all narratives can be accommodated equally without creating problems of imbalance or a diet of pabulum. Such is the conundrum of the Canadian historian who would like to achieve that pleasant Canadian nirvana — consensus.

The “invention” of the past has been the explicit subject of a significant body of work in recent years, much of it in the British or American context. The two most frequently cited books have provocative titles: *The Invention of Tradition* and *Mickey Mouse History*.¹ Until recently, little similar work had been undertaken in the Canadian context, with the exception of excellent reviews of Canadian museums in the *Journal of American History* and some articles in journals such as *Acadiensis*.² Recently several books have paid attention to this topic in a uniquely Canadian way. These include Donald B. Smith, *From the Land of Shadows: The Making of Grey Owl* (Saskatoon, Western Producer Prairie Books, 1990), Barbara Lawson, *Collected Curios: Missionary Tales from the South Seas* (Montreal, McGill University Libraries, 1994), Norman Knowles, *Inventing the Loyalists: The Ontario Loyalist Tradition and the Creation of Usable Pasts* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1997) and Sarah Carter, *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada's Prairie West* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997). There are also two useful collections of essays and statements relevant to the field: Beverly Boutilier and Alison Prentice, eds., *Creating Historical Memory: English-Canadian Women and the Work of History* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 1997) and Thomas H.B. Symons ed., *The Place of History: Commemorating Canada's Past Proceedings of the National Symposium held on the Occasion of the 75th Anniversary*

1 Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983); Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia, 1996).

2 See for example, Richard W. Slatta, “The Canadian Cowboy”, *Journal of American History*, 85, 1 (June 1988), pp. 176-9; Adrienne D. Hood, “The Practice of [American] History: A Canadian Curator's Perspective”, *Journal of American History*, 81, 3 (December 1994), pp. 1011-9; P.D. Clarke, “A la recherche de La Petite-Rochelle: Memory and Identity in Restigouche”, *Acadiensis*, XXVIII, 2 (Spring 1999), pp. 3-40; D.A. Muise, “Who Owns History Anyway? Reinventing Atlantic Canada for Pleasure and Profit”, *Acadiensis* XXVII, 2 (Spring 1998), pp. 124-34; Ian McKay, “History and the Tourist Gaze: The Politics of Commemoration in Nova Scotia, 1935-1964”, *Acadiensis*, XXII, 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 102-38; Stephen Hornsby and Graeme Wynn, “Walking Through the Past”, *Acadiensis*, X, 2 (Spring 1981), pp. 152-9.

of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (Ottawa, The Royal Society of Canada, 1997).

Two books reviewed in this article are concerned with the “invention” of the past by historical figures themselves — Grey Owl, the Englishman who for so many years successfully posed as an Aboriginal and, on the other extreme, Theresa Delaney and Theresa Gowanlock, who were constrained by the conventions of Victorian society to create an acceptable version of their experiences as captives of “Rebel Indians” during the Frog Lake “massacre” of 1885. Equally intriguing are the ideas concerning the creation of tradition through public commemoration at monuments, historic sites and museums provided by Norman Knowles, Barbara Lawson and the authors who contributed to the National Historic Sites anniversary volume. To some degree all these authors deal with how historical truth, arising from the Canadian male-dominated narrative, has been managed and manipulated by Canada’s social elites, intellectual elites and public institutions such as museums and heritage agencies. All emphasize that history has been used as a vehicle to reinforce the values of Euro-Canadian culture, which has always seized the threads of its “usable” past to justify a culture of progress that masks Canada’s capitalist and imperialist system of inequity.

Recently the narratives of the marginalized have come more clearly into focus with the work of historians such as Judith Fingard, Wendy Mitchinson, Bettina Bradbury and Jane Ursel.³ The elites, at least those who are shaping the Euro-North American past, have conceded that there are parallel narratives, or that the narratives of the marginalized are sub-themes of the national narrative. This development was probably just a matter of time, given the tendency towards consensus in Canada’s for the most part intellectually liberal academies. Minimally, the marginalized have won specialty volumes or footnotes in the dominant narrative, but in only very few instances have the basic chronology or milestone events, such as the 1837 rebellions, Confederation or the Riel Rebellions, changed. In this intellectualized environment, it is surprising that all the volumes under review still reveal a strong belief that if history is carefully and thoroughly researched it will generate a greater truth, and that this truth should form the foundation for a community’s or nation’s fundamental beliefs. All of the authors seem to rail at those historians who have invented the mythical past, not admitting, at least in their books, that they are inventing one as well and that in due time it too will be re-invented again.

A second major issue that is woven through most of these volumes involves public history and commemoration. There are some observers, such as Jeff Keshen and Paul Voisey, who believe that any history undertaken through a public agency must be suspect since the motives of the paymaster are questionable.⁴ So much for the evaluation of scholarship on its own merits. The frightening observation from reading these books, particularly the essays in *The Place of History*, is that Keshen and Voisey might have a point. Even more frightening to them should be the possibility that

3 The historiography of the marginalized can be gleaned from notes in volumes one and two of Alvin Finkel, Margaret Conrad and Veronica Strong-Boag, *History of the Canadian Peoples* (Toronto, 1993).

4 Jeff Keshen and Paul Voisey, “The Piper’s Tune? The Scholarly Housing Boom”, *Acadiensis*, XXIII, 2 (Spring 1994), pp. 189-90.

“academic” or “university appointed” historians will themselves have to accept a preponderance of the guilt for the state of “public history”. They have after all constructed, or at least reinforced, the underpinnings of all public commemoration. National agencies such as the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, composed for the most part of leading scholars with a sprinkling of concerned lay folk, are conservative in their reflections and follow historiographical trends set by the academy. The unauthored short history of the Board in *The Place of History* notes that “recently the Board has taken initiatives in areas of history which have become prominent in Canadian historiography and society — the histories of Aboriginal Peoples, women, and cultural communities” (p. 336). The Board is following not leading. The essays in *The Place of History* should cause all Canadians, and particularly those engaged in the creation or sustenance of the national narrative, to reflect. Does the state in Canada react to “citizen” pressures? Does it react to pressures from the academic community? Or does the state consciously engage in social engineering when it makes commemorative decisions? Recognizing the need for a national identity in a fragile new country, are the government and its agencies consciously manufacturing a “useful” past?

Possibly the most conservative history in Canada is that sustained by the cautious intellectual bureaucracy employed by Parks Canada’s National Historic Sites, who advise the Historic Sites and Monuments Board. And could it be otherwise? To some, public history and historic site agencies are government’s attempt to stem the “covetness” of heritage interests through “bureaucratic revelation”, by tying the control of spaces and land to “the limiting ideas” of heritage and current taste. This approach will lead to conservatism since the historian’s job is inevitably to defend previous selections, especially those involving large dollars, and to guard the agency’s authority as evidenced by these budgets. Its historical researchers emphasize that they are there to find the truth, not to enrich the country’s historiography, although some rebel historians in that agency, such as Walter Hildebrandt and Diane Payment, have done so. Yet, they too would agree that the role of the modern state and its interrelationship with community is critical in the creation and sustenance of national identity.

The current minister responsible for Parks Canada’s National Historic Sites, Sheila Copps, claims that “the Board draws attention to the set of signs, symbols and characteristics that allow each of us to recognize himself or herself as an individual that is part of a nation”. Furthermore, lest individuals find themselves marginalized in that nation, the minister is clear that “the history of our country is full of examples of understanding, open-mindedness, co-operation, commitment and respect” (pp. 3-4). These platitudes, undoubtedly crafted by a sagacious speech writer, can be interpreted as meaning that each one of us, regardless of gender, age, class, occupation or ethnicity should be able to find him or herself in the commemorations of the Board, and that it should be the purpose of the Board to ensure that this is so. At the same time, the subtext of the minister’s comments suggests that “stories” of exploitation, marginalization and criminalization⁵ are not the ones the minister wants Canadians to

5 For an excellent examination of the criminalization of the Métis following Batoche, see Mike Brogden, “The Rise and Fall of the Western Métis in the Criminal Justice Process”, in Samuel W. Corrigan and Lawrence J. Barkwell, eds., *The Struggle for Recognition: Canadian Justice and the Métis Nation* (Winnipeg, 1991), pp. 39-61. Batoche marked the beginning of that process, and perhaps that should be a key point in the Batoche national narrative.

experience. History in her opinion should be a servant to the state.

Thomas Symons, who both acted as editor of *The Place of History* and is chair of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board, phrased his introductory comments in ways that suggest he too is tied to the progressive model of historical interpretation, at least insofar as public history is concerned: “Heritage is . . . the aspirations of the people who made it, and one might add, the aspirations of the people who have chosen to preserve it” (p. 15). Public commemoration in Symons’s mind is based less on scholarly research than on “aspirations”, that is the use of the past to justify the present. National narratives must be “useful” and justify the current hegemony of interests.

Christina Cameron, director general of National Historic Sites, and secretary to the Board, acknowledges in her contribution “Commemoration: A Moving Target?” that “politically correct revisions creep into our presentation materials” (p. 30), although she is unclear as to what these might be.⁶ To her, political correctness includes seeing the past through community eyes, or through the eyes of the marginalized. Cameron sees “political correctness”, or what others might see as giving voice to the marginalized, as just “substituting one version of history for another”. She uses Batoche as an example. Given that the original Historic Sites and Monuments Board’s commemorative intent was to highlight the Battle of Batoche, Cameron has concluded that the current interpretation at the site inappropriately celebrates the survival of the Métis. She points out that the national significance of Batoche as determined by the Board is derived only from its association with the battle. If social history appears at the site, it must reinforce that theme and not the theme that is important to the Métis. I am not certain the Métis would agree with Cameron. The site may be important because of a “battle”, but its greater meaning is its role as a symbol to the Métis. They were not defeated by the imperial forces from the East — they survived and persisted. Surely the survival of a people who have contributed so much to the character of Canada deserves national commemoration.

The greatest contribution made by Parks Canada’s Batoche development efforts is not its contribution to “politically correct” cultural tourism at the interpretation centre, but rather Diane Payment’s study, *“The Free People - Otipemisiwak”: Batoche, Saskatchewan 1870-1930* (Ottawa, Supply and Services, 1990), which offers a new interpretation of Batoche and reinforces its importance as symbol to the Métis people. Possibly this is the kind of research Cameron is referring to when she suggests that Batoche has strayed from the original commemorative intention of the Board. Walter Hildebrandt’s radical interpretation of the narrower military campaign, *Battle of Batoche: British Small Warfare and the Entrenched Métis* (Regina, Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1985), probably pleases her more. His *Views from Fort Battleford: Constructed Visions of an Anglo-Canadian West* (Regina, Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1994), however, would not. It is a direct repudiation of the commemorative intention rule that is increasingly tightening its vise-like grip on Canada’s National Historic Sites. In his conclusions, which clearly distinguish between myth and history, Hildebrandt argues that National Historic Sites will always have pressures to sustain

6 A considerable amount of space is devoted to Cameron’s remarks because of her position and her ability to influence the direction of commemoration, probably more than anyone else in Canada.

whatever “myth” may serve the nation best at any one time. His solution, which will find favour with the “new” postmodernist historians, is to have a dynamic environment that allows and encourages a number of narratives so that visitors can choose those that resonate with their experiences. The mere presence of your story at a National Historic Site can serve to validate your heritage.⁷ In short, you matter.

What *The Place of History* does not address is the role of national boards in reinforcing “national or imperial” narratives and the extent to which their decisions reflect the dynamics within the Board. Hildebrandt proves, at least with regard to Battleford, that the social and political context in which the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board made its decisions, rather than any academic research, governed commemorative intent there. Decisions were based on the interaction of Board members and shaped by their own prejudices, rather than by careful and deliberate consideration of current and future historiographical implications, which would be impossible in any case. There is no absolute in public commemoration any more than there is any absolute in the work of the academy.⁸

The Place of History also acknowledges that public consultations have influenced interpretations at historic sites. Indeed, community partnership rather than public consultations should be mandatory for any historical commemoration. The underlying assumption, however, is that these consultations have caused National Historic Sites to deviate from the “truth” as pronounced by the Board. What matters is the degree to which community considerations mutate “the ability of the site to communicate national significance”. Cannot communities be aware of their contribution to nation? Can this only be seen from Ottawa? The national narrative is a sum total of community pasts, not a vision dictated by the Board, which once pronounced cannot change.

Possibly the most disturbing essay in *The Place of History* is that by John Herd Thompson. He argues that professional historians, particularly the social historians who dominate Parks Canada’s research stables, must work together to create a single national narrative. Although he concedes that the national narrative should contain the multiple voices of class, ethnicity and region, he still wishes for a national consensus. Yet, even if this were possible, is it desirable? In a country built on diversity, perhaps diversity is our national narrative. Today we are a land of many narratives, many voices, rather than a land of a single voice. Whatever the outcome of the debate, tomorrow will write its own national narrative.

Most of the essays in *The Place of History* deal with the issue of “truth” in public history in terms of education, or are simply “how we did it” narratives. “Truth”, the essays argue, can be achieved, and when it is achieved there will be a national epiphany. And history is to be used in the public context to justify and bolster what is best about our society — that it is progressive, tolerant, etc. Some essays do, however, make one take note. For example, Fil Fraser, former chair of the Alberta

7 See also Gordon Bennett, “Commemorative Integrity: Monitoring the State of Canada’s National Historic Sites”, *ICOMOS Canada Bulletin*, 4, 5 (1995), pp. 6-8.

8 I have found Beverley Southgate, *History: What and Why? Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern Perspectives* (London, 1996) particularly useful, especially the sections on Marxism, feminism and post-colonialism.

Human Rights Commission, noted the absence of Blacks in Canadian commemoration and at the conference celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Board. It is equally interesting that the presentation by Dolores Hayden, "The Power of Place: Claiming Women's History in the Urban Landscape", draws its examples from the United States, particularly Los Angeles, rather than from Canada. Does not Canada have a point of reference? There is also a polite "Canadian" plea by Barbara Wyss for meaningful commemoration by the National Historic Sites Board of the contribution of aboriginal women to Canadian history. The tone of supplication of this particular essay should make the Board reflect on the issue.

In general *The Place of History* is a disappointing celebration. Of the six sections of the book, those on "Politics, Society and Commemoration" and "Education, Communication and Heritage" are particularly weak and do not reflect the current debates in the field as evidenced by various articles in publications such as the *Theatre Journal*, *American Anthropologist*, *Journal of American History* or *Museum Anthropology*.⁹

Most disappointing of all is the reluctance of *The Place of History* to query the role of the state — and particularly its politically appointed boards — in the commemoration, and thereby the creation, of the national past. In Alberta, a provincial historic sites board used to fulfil this function; now it only hears appeals from decisions of Crown agencies. The interpretations that result from this approach have been more inclusive than those offered by federal agencies such as National Historic Sites or the Museum of Civilization. The Alberta approach, under the guidance of a minister, encourages historians in the employ of the Historic Sites Service to work directly with communities, and not in consultation but rather in full partnership. Once they are operational, sites are managed in conjunction with the community through "friends" associations and advisory boards. Do "professional" boards serve a useful purpose? Should they be abolished in favour of citizen-driven initiatives? How can the state be more effective in the formation of national identity? What is the intersection of academic and public interest? Not one of these issues is examined. And perhaps it could not be otherwise in a national system that discourages criticism and worships consensus. As Cameron, the most influential public historian in the public employ today, states in her conclusions: we must respect the original commemorative intent; we should not hold them in contempt.

The Place of History may be problematic, but Barbara Lawson's *Collected Curios: Missionary Tales from the South Seas* ranks as one of the most insightful contributions to the museum/heritage field in years. Curatorial work in history museums has generally not mattered to the debates that have fuelled academic discourse. In part this is because curators rarely partake in the discourse, but as well

9 Peter Merrington, "Masques, Monuments, and Masons: The 1910 Pageant of the Union of South Africa", *Theatre Journal*, 49, 1 (1997), pp. 1-14, provides a model for the analysis of national celebrations. For inclusive, questioning and radical observations on the commemoration of complex subjects that have an impact on national identities, see Marguerite S. Shaffer, "Selling the Past Co-opting History: Colonial Williamsburg as Republican Disneyland", *American Quarterly*, 50, 4 (1998), pp. 875-84, William S. Pretzer, "Reviewing Public History in Light of the Enola Gay", *Technology and Culture*, 39, 3 (1998), pp. 457-61 and Timothy J. Meagher, "Exhibition Review Not Hell, Home", *American Quarterly*, 50, 1 (1998), pp. 130-48.

it is because the academy tends to ignore their contributions.¹⁰ The current permanent gallery storyline in the Canadian Museum of Civilization is the nadir of curatorship in Canada, reflecting more the national narrative of the 1950s than current scholarship. The Museum of Civilization exhibits are somewhat bereft of objects and the insight they might offer. The curators, one suspects, had difficulty coming to terms with the nation's vast collections and their mnemonic function in achieving the national narrative. Lawson's insights might help.

Lawson has examined 122 objects collected by H.A. Robertson and his wife, a Nova Scotia missionary couple, who went to Vanuatu (the New Hebrides) in the 19th century. Their collections were deposited in McGill's Redpath Museum. Lawson notes that objects in themselves cannot speak the "truth" — each object can only be fully understood in its complete context. She argues, as some curators now do, that the collection tells us more about the concerns of the collector than about the owners of the items or the functions of the items, but she notes as well that the objects collected were often those that could be transported or those that were being replaced by the new goods of the industrial revolution. These are hardly revolutionary concepts, but nevertheless ones that I have not seen widely or aggressively applied to museum collections in my 25-year career in the heritage field.

It is possible to apply Lawson's observations to in situ resources. Sites too make their way into the public domain because they are "surplus" to commercial requirements (York Factory in Manitoba), or are being replaced by newer technology (Medalta Potteries in Medicine Hat, Alberta) or because they were donated (an early part of Head Smashed In Buffalo Jump near Brockett, Alberta), rather than because of their heritage value. Lawson also relates Redpath's Vanuatu collection to the social structure and interests of the Montreal elite. Again, the same could be done for the national collection of properties collectively known as National Historic Sites. Any collection must be understood in its context before any other research or commemoration is undertaken. As Lawson indicates, "Collecting is not a neutral process . . . because it permanently transforms objects with certain cultural identities into other ones, fixes cultural identities that are dynamic, and imposes identities on objects that have none" (p. 155). Using this observation, other questions could be asked of, for example, Batoche National Historic Site, which emerges several times as a reference point in *The Place of History*. What was the cultural value of Batoche to the Métis people before it became a National Historic Site? How has National Historic Site status, which commemorates the battle, transformed the cultural identity of the place and its people? All I can say is that in the instance of Head Smashed In Buffalo Jump, both a World Heritage Site, a National Historic Site and a Provincial Historic Resource, the designations and development transformed place, people and

10 In *The Place of History*, Thompson argues that the division between government historians and historians in the academy is probably a result of government historians' focus on social history (p. 61). I would further argue, and this will be borne out by a perusal of the National Historic Sites Manuscript Report titles, that the inability to communicate is probably due to the fact that government historians have to focus on detail for restoration. This also tends to mitigate against postmodern relativism. There is a greater tendency within National Historic Sites for historians to believe that they have discovered "the truth" rather than "a" truth. Historiographical contribution is not a primary consideration.

possibly even culture. The transformative power of the process, and the act of recognition of cultures by the state, or for that matter by any heritage institution, should not be ignored. Few plans for the development of heritage facilities discuss in any depth the impact the facility will have on the resident culture. There are those who complain that architects and planners often have greater influence on heritage developments than historians. If one accepts that they can control the shape of the building, the texture of the exhibits and the inter-relationship of the development with the landscape, this claim is probably right.

The academy has not been silent in this debate over myth and identity which is so much the concern of public historians and curators. A key recent volume in the study of the formation of national mythologies is Norman Knowles, *Inventing the Loyalists: The Ontario Loyalist Tradition and the Creation of Usable Pasts*. Using methodologies enunciated by Hobsbawm and Ranger, Knowles clearly documents how a national myth based on a Loyalist past was negotiated, and continues to be negotiated, by conflicting elites attempting to create usable pasts for themselves within the overarching national past.¹¹ Despite its value, this study does not provide the model that public historians have been seeking. Nor does Knowles marshal the evidence to sustain some of his most important points. In discussing the creation of a founding myth in Canada, Knowles notes an important theme:

The forces transforming Canada West gave birth of a growing historical consciousness among the province's political and social leaders. This development was not unique. A sense of continuity and identity with a national past, reverence for national heroes, and the commemoration of great national events were becoming commonplace in both Europe and the United States by the middle of the nineteenth century. . . . The result was a determined effort on the part of the state and other power groups to create what Benedict Anderson has termed "imagined political communities." According to Anderson, the creation of such "imagined communities" required the active mobilization of periphery by culture centre in order to create a shared history upon which a national identity could be erected (p. 28).

The selection involved in creating a founding myth is of particular importance here, but Knowles offers little insight concerning how this happened in Canada, and he provides little real evidence to support his claims concerning the context that led the elite to re-evaluate the past for the purposes of the state. According to Knowles, "The search for the elusive Canadian identity, the quest for stability and security during a period of social change and upheaval, and the commodification of the past by the tourist industry combined to maintain an active interest in Ontario's history by the state and the public during the postwar period" (p. 170). This may be true, but he does not substantiate it in any way. Perhaps it is the possibilities that exist today for viewing many Loyalist sites that were once isolated and subject only to community interest that has led to a belief that Loyalists were deeply important to every

11 Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*; David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985).

community. If the modern state through National Historic Sites had been involved in the commemoration of Loyalists, there would have been one site, and no other. The creation of national mythologies through the commemoration of in situ resources is extremely complex. The method of assemblage of the site and the reality that “three dimensional” evidence provides has also created an impetus for the continued emphasis on Loyalists as founding peoples of Canada.

The tone of Knowles’s chapter “The Loyalist Reality”, suggests that he believes that those who mutated reality to construct the Loyalist myth were either fools or knaves purposely manipulating history for their own less than noble purposes. He does not seem to understand the legitimate needs all people have for a usable past. The pursuit of ultimate truth appears to be the only purpose for historical inquiry. The public’s interest in re-examining the past in the light of current problems should not be so flippantly censured. Any national or regional narrative that legitimizes the present through reference to the past will highlight some elements of the past to the exclusion of others. National narratives rarely focus on the poor, the marginalized or the desperate, and they generally justify the dominance of the incumbent elite. To do otherwise would diminish current authority. Is Knowles saying anything more than that every generation will see the past on its own terms?

There is a convergence in Knowles, *Inventing the Loyalists*, Lawson, *Collected Curios* and Cameron’s contribution to *The Place of History*. Lawson would argue that we should understand why assemblages of objects or sites were collected and commemorated in the past. Cameron would go even further and argue that the original statement of commemorative intent must retain an immutable integrity. Public history, as Knowles points out, is subject to an organic process; it will be constantly transformed. But the matter is not as simple as Knowles may lead us to believe. Since public history is a collaborative, rather than individualist, endeavour (as distinct from historical research in the academy) and involves expenditures often in the millions of dollars for a particular exhibit, there is a vested interest in the maintenance of these facilities and their stories. As a consequence, bureaucracies tend to want to preserve the status quo. It is not surprising that people marginalized in the dominant narrative — women, children, the poor and Natives — are still struggling to find soul and resonance in national and provincial historic sites. Where new interpretations that include marginalized groups have been presented, they have generally been layered onto the dominant narrative and have remained subservient to it. Living history seems to offer the best opportunity for inclusion, as the voiceless can begin to be heard simply by re-educating guides or refocusing interpretative activity. Living villages can give voice to any element of the society they are portraying simply by undertaking thorough research, which all too few do. But that would require a careful, considered and well-articulated interpretation programme with real and deliberate choices as to narratives.

As the experience of Colonial Williamsburg has shown, the culture of the bureaucracy administering the facility and the interventions of the community being portrayed can frustrate the best intentions. Often the interpretative staff at historic sites themselves are convinced that there is a fixed or real past that can be determined once the facts are known. Richard Handler and Eric Gable have observed that the selected facts and interpretations that guides learn in their week or two of training

become objective facts.¹² The difficult issues of social history, some of which do not appear to be grounded in supporting “facts”, seem less real to them.

Women, while evident in our national historic sites, have only recently been recognized through sites relating to them. None of the sites concerning the older national narratives have been interpreted exclusively through the voice of women, although it would not necessarily diminish the narrative to do so. In the case of Batoche, Diane Payment’s research suggests exciting new possibilities in this regard.¹³ The site might continue to focus on the 1885 events of Batoche, but provide an understanding of them from a women’s perspective. Why not have a major audiovisual programme at the interpretation centre telling the story of Batoche through female eyes? This would be a bold step, and it would give all Canadians much insight into the Métis community through the one site that has come to symbolize so much to them.¹⁴

Sarah Carter, *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada’s Prairie West* demonstrates the possibilities of such new interpretations as well. Carter examines the Frog Lake Massacre of 1885 and its place in the national mythology, with particular concern for the narrative surrounding the capture of two white women — Theresa Delaney and Theresa Gowanlock — by Native people. Carter situates their story in Euro-Canadian, Euro-American and Euro-Australian literature on captured white women. The ability of these women to shape their own story was circumscribed, Carter argues, by a male-dominated, white narrative concerned with preserving and extending empire. Within this narrative, white women were cast as frail missionaries of civilization. Delaney and Gowanlock were not molested or deprived during their captivity, but it suited the dominant narrative of the day to believe that this must not have been so. Carter argues that this dominant narrative also marginalized aboriginal women; indeed, they were seen as a threat to “civilization” as well.

Carter’s study raises two questions, both identified by the subtitle, “The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada’s Prairie West”. The first concerns where the manipulation of imagery took place. The subtitle would have been more accurate had it spoken of the manipulation “of” Canada’s Prairie West, as this largely happened outside of the West, although the manipulated tales found resonance within it as well. The second and more important question concerns Carter’s use of the word “manipulation”. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as to “manage by dextrous (esp unfair) use of influence”. A manipulation has to be a conscious effort to suppress the truth. Carter’s argument that women were marginalized in the historical narrative and that aboriginal women in particular were marginalized is unassailable, but her evidence for purposeful “manipulation” is not overwhelming. That authors in the past chose to select one set of events over another is not in dispute, but was it part of a conscious intent to marginalize? Or were those responsible for articulating the national and regional narratives simply seeing events through the eyes of their times,

12 Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham, 1997).

13 Diane Payment, “La Vie En Rose? Métis Women at Batoche, 1870-1920”, in Patricia Chuchryk et al., eds., *Women of the First Nations* (Winnipeg, forthcoming).

14 It would also be consistent with Jennifer Brown’s thesis that Métis Society was matrifocal. See *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver, 1980).

and is Carter not doing the same? This is not to denigrate the contribution Carter's work makes in placing the narrative of Canadian captured women within an international context, but the word "manipulate", particularly in the international context, claims too much. Rather I would suggest, as Edward Said does in his *Culture and Imperialism*, that the cult of imperialism was so overwhelming that many authors of the day found themselves blinded by its appeal.¹⁵

Carter has not only traced the contortions of the narrative of the captured white women, but she has done so within the context of the historiography of 1885. This historiography, as Carter suggests, criminalizes Métis. In particular, it depersonalizes Métis women and subordinates them to the needs of a national imperial narrative. Carter also does a great service by cautioning us not to accept uncritically the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board's commemorative pronouncements on the Frog Lake Massacre. These statements have focused on a "massacre", a term that has imperial and racist connotations that marginalize aboriginal peoples and justify suppression. Those who would argue that the commemorative statements of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board should be honoured fail to understand the power of the state in validating experience. The people who live at Frog Lake are convinced that the plaque at the site and the false memories of the massacre amongst Euro-Canadian bureaucrats have caused the Frog Lake Band to be denied the benefits that are common to other reserves. They have spent a lifetime proclaiming non-involvement in the massacre. They want to be on the "winning" side of the national narrative.

The essays in Boutilier and Prentice, eds., *Creating Historical Memory* argue that women have been participating in the creation of the national narrative since the beginning of Canada. Agnes Maule Machar (1837-1927) reinforced the dominant male narrative of her day. Sarah Ann Curzon "historicized" all women through the exemplary virtues of "service and sacrifice" embodied by Laura Secord and, as Boutilier notes, encouraged "women to see themselves as historical agents and to understand the full scope of their duties as female citizens" (p. 70). Secord's virtues as a homemaker and as a sacrificing patriot signified the role that women should play in society alongside men. Linda M. Ambrose, "Ontario Women's Institutes and the Work of Local History" and Elizabeth Smyth, "'Writing Teaches Us our Mysteries': Women Religious Recording and Writing History", suggest that women, because of their work in nurturing community history, may have had a greater role in creating tradition than has previously been recognized. For those of us working in public history at the community level, it has long been apparent that women are the "keepers" of tradition, and more often than not they are the moving force behind the construction of local histories and community museums. The "professoriate" may have been dominated by men, but community history has been dominated by women. This, I think, helps to explain the dismissal of local history by many in the academy.¹⁶

Given that the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board has been dominated by professional male historians who are concerned with the national narrative, and

15 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993).

16 Paul Voisey, "Rural Local History and the Prairie West", *Prairie Forum*, 10, 2 (Autumn 1985), pp. 327-38 explores the tension, but is dismissive of community and local history and does not consider the gender dimension of the dynamic.

that community narratives have been largely the purview of women, the current debate between the two might usefully be analyzed from a gender perspective. Certainly there have been very few women on the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board. In its 75-year history the chairs have always been white males. The plea on the part of the National Historic Sites Secretariat to maintain the “commemorative” integrity of the Board’s decisions should be considered in this light. Does this mean that the “national” male narrative will be preserved at the cost of female-generated, community narratives? Will the many distinctive voices that could add breadth to the national narrative ever be articulated? Or, going back to the Batoche case, does this mean that the poignant stories of Métis women that Diane Payment has brought to light will go no further?

Deborah Gorham’s essay “Making History: Women’s History in Canadian Universities in the 1970s”, indicates that for the most part professional women historians maintained “the traditional canons of historical scholarship”. She argues for more activism on the part of her colleagues “in defense not only of women’s history, but of feminist scholarship and of women historians”. *Creating Historical Memory* illustrates more than anything the largely unsuccessful attempt to date to have women become part of the national narrative. The simple fact that the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board had to invite an American luminary to address the subject is suggestive. How many homes of “males” or locations with “male stories” dominate the National Historic Sites system? If the “commemorative” intent is to preserve male national narratives, then women can only, according to the director general, Christina Cameron, play a supportive, contextual role. The essays in *Creating Historical Memory* explain how and why the male-dominated profession created the national narrative and marginalized women in the process. While valiant attempts have been made to alter that, the essays provide little evidence of meaningful changes in the narrative. The title of the collection of essays suggests the solution: women must create their own “historical memory”, and the volume indicates that women have taken steps to do so by creating a sense of immediate community. Public history, which grew out of community history, might well provide the vehicle, provided the field does not become “recreated” by the “professions”, as Voisey has suggested.¹⁷

Although women may well have been instrumental in the creation of community history, the rise of professionalism in heritage preservation in the 1960s and 1970s marginalized, and continues to marginalize, community voices. People who live their culture apparently are no longer qualified to interpret that culture unless they have professional qualifications.¹⁸ The implications are serious. Professionals require a university education, and universities tend to perpetuate class and gender hierarchies. Those who have cultural values that are not those of the dominant class, or whose values are based on informally-acquired knowledge, will need to hire degree-holders to validate their knowledge, which will in turn reinforce Euro-American cultural systems of validation and significance. The National Historic Sites and Monuments Board applauds itself for listening to community narratives, but why should the professionals

17 Voisey, “Rural Local History”.

18 For a fuller discussion, see Frits Pannekoek, “The Rise of the Heritage Priesthood or The Decline of Community Based Heritage”, in Michael A. Tomlan, ed., *Preservation of What for Whom? A Critical Look at Historical Significance* (Ithaca, 1998), pp. 29-36.

who advise them and who are educated by the dominant culture have the most important voice? The impact of professionals on communities where higher education is revered can be problematic. In a culture that cares about external validation by professions, the determination of heritage value by outsiders can either reinforce or denigrate the social and economic position of groups within the community. At Batoche, for example, the Board's validation of the "soldier's" experience and its silence on that of Métis merchants validates one group's experiences while negating another's.

When nations and individuals reflect on their past, they often delude themselves. Canada, it would seem, has been involved in a great deal of self-delusion about its tolerance, its accepting nature, the importance of the North and a number of other things. Donald B. Smith, *From the Land of Shadows: The Making of Grey Owl* documents Canada's pre-eminent conservationist, Archie Belaney, and his creation of a delusional character who came to symbolize Canada, its aboriginal peoples and its North to much of the world. Smith's exhaustive biography will be the definitive work on Belaney for the foreseeable future. Smith chooses to focus on Belaney's contribution to the Canadian conservation movement and sees his real legacy in these terms. He says little, though, about why Grey Owl's books resonated with audiences in Europe and Canada. Nor does Smith explore what Canada's aboriginal people thought of Belaney, or for that matter what other Euro-Canadians who have found "identity" with them thought. To what degree did Grey Owl's writings find resonance because they stereotyped native attitudes towards the wilderness? And in the longer run, to what extent did Grey Owl's writing influence the conservation spirit of aboriginal peoples? Perhaps in the end Grey Owl was deluded by the myth of Canada, and in turn further deluded Canadians by extending the myth of the great northern wilderness. And maybe even when we know it is all a delusion, after having accepted the message, the delusion becomes real. Such may be the case with our national myth as well: having accepted a single delusional narrative, we will fondly continue to look for it.

All of the books reviewed here attempt to understand the "creation of pasts"; they look at landscape and space, home and hearth and the symbolic interconnections that motivate and shape humankind. And all are, in many ways, traditional in their perspective. In the end, for instance, does Carter not define native women in terms of Euro-Canadian universals with women as providers, homemakers and nurturers? Is this not a case of transferring a stereotype from one culture to another? And are not all these historians seeking to determine who will be part of the "main" narrative? All, it would seem, want the groups they champion to be recognized as having a meaningful and useful past — which is itself a very whiggish, and indeed Protestant, enterprise.

The challenges of inventing a past are not unique to Canada. Countries where the process was never very subtle, such as the United States and South Africa, leave us with a lot to learn. Colonial Williamsburg recently underwent a careful process of re-inventing its past, but the corporate culture of the organization — its people — resisted real change. That I think will be true of Canadian museums and historic sites as well. There is a complex bureaucracy that will focus on "protecting" tradition and the existing physical plant. A strong national appetite for a postmodern adventure does not exist at this time.