Document généré le 19 avr. 2024 18:08

Acadiensis
Journal of the History of the Atlantic Region
Revue d’histoire de la région Atlantique

ACADIENSIS

New Brunswick’s Mural Legacy: Some Reflections

Andrew Nurse

Volume 43, numéro 2, été–automne 2014

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1062195ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)
1712-7432 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce document

Nurse, A. (2014). New Brunswick’s Mural Legacy: Some Reflections. *Acadiensis*, *43*(2).

All Rights Reserved © Andrew Nurse, 2014

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d’auteur. L’utilisation des services d’Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d’utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l’Université de Montréal, l’Université Laval et l’Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

https://www.erudit.org/fr/

New Brunswick's Mural Legacy: Some Reflections

NEW BRUNSWICK'S MURAL LEGACY – the way surviving murals are conserved, interpreted, understood, and valued – is connected to our relationship to the past. What sense can we make of it? How do we mark it? In short, the legacy is about ways of remembering and this, as a result, raises two questions: what story do we tell about this art and how do we connect this story to others? One of the interesting – and heuristically important – characteristics of the "New Brunswick's Mural Legacy" symposium was the way in which a number of themes wove their way through the papers. Four recurrent themes, it seemed to me, were humanism, interdisciplinarity, understanding history as a process of forgetting as well as remembering, and the decentering of meaning. I will reflect briefly on each of these themes.

First, humanism in relation to these murals is a term that could be used in two ways. It describes the perspective of the art itself – at least in the case of Ross and Brittain – but it could also refer to the kinds of human connections and interactions that creating (or re-creating), celebrating, interpreting, and conserving these works can produce. It is touching that neglected or forgotten artworks can be recovered, revitalized, and re-visioned. The fact that Ross was alive at the time when his war memorial was re-created, allowing scholars to discuss it with him, suggests how humanism works on two interconnected levels: it involves recognition of a common humanity that spans time and social divisions and it is the basis upon which empathy develops and is, in its own way, inherently connected to this artwork. It seems consistent that we celebrate and explore the work of artists who celebrated and explored the potential of humanity and asked their audiences to see "the other" (who may, in fact, have been the self for the artist, but who also included, for example, the urban poor, the hospitalized, and refugees) from an empathetic perspective. It is important to remember New Brunswick's mural legacy in a way that accepts human foibles and understands the need for empathy as part of its remembering process. Indeed, this kind of remembering (as opposed, say, to the structuralist forms of remembering so popular with scholars like Foucault) was evident in the emotions diverse presentations at the symposium elicited.

Second, interdisciplinarity is important because it allows for a deeper scholarly and political understanding of this legacy. On one level, the story of New Brunswick's muralists is a story of mobility and influences, of artistic ideals, styles, and perspectives that move across borders but are also, then, localized in place to create public artistic expressions. This seems to be an interesting and profitable way to approach the fraught issue of regionalism in Canadian historiography.[1] It establishes the "regional" not as a set of characteristics (or, historical processes), but as a tension evident in cultural production between the local and broader influences (cultural, artistic, ideological, etc.). The merit of this approach is that regional

1 Ian McKay, "After Canada: On Amnesia and Apocalypse in the Contemporary Crisis," *Acadiensis* XXVIII, no. 1 (Autumn 1998): 76-97.

Andrew Nurse, "New Brunswick's Mural Legacy: Some Reflections," *Acadiensis* XLIII, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2014): 143-146.

culture functions in place and speaks to local audiences (who might also speak to it), but it is not isolated from broader social, political, military, medical, religious, and other processes. In this sense, the process of remembering New Brunswick's mural legacy serves regional historiography well if it recovers that tension and allows us to draw it to the centre of cultural and historical analyses.

Third, this symposium also allowed for reflection on other processes of remembering – both intentional and unintentional. There are, for instance, some key questions. What happened to the murals? Why have they gone "out of vogue"? What triggered the decline in public commissions for murals after the immediate post-war period? At the symposium, keynote speaker Sylvia Rhor described a case of overt censorship in the US, where a mural was painted over. This was a clearly politicized form of forced forgetting: an effort to blot specific images and ideas from the public record. Other processes may be as political, but their politics take on different forms. For instance, a specific artistic tradition may be overcome by time; public and patron interests move in different directions. Art is (re)taken indoors (to galleries or homes) and thus monumental forms of art decline in popularity by virtue of their size. Different aesthetics enter into fashion and displace established aesthetics or past traditions. In this instance, the issue is not simply that society has "moved on" but what does "moved on" mean? It involves a re-valuation of works of art whereby, as in the instance of the original Ross FHS mural, works are held to have no value whatsoever and so are repurposed as construction materials. In others, it involves economic calculations: what will it cost to preserve this work of art and who should pay for its preservation?[2] In yet others, it may involve audiences not wanting to face certain disturbing elements – such as war – that served as the context for much early mural work in New Brunswick.[3] And, in still others, an audience that has lost the context that gave meaning to a work of art (one thinks of Miller Brittain's *A Place of Healing*) looked to remove that work from its public position because of changing institutional contexts (in this case, appealing to children hospital visitors rather than war veterans). There is clearly no one process of forgetting and no singular politics that adheres to forgetting. Some forms of forgetting are guided by overt political considerations that serve, it seems, to reinforce the marginalization of already-marginalized people or artistic movements. Others are guided by different calculations. For example, it is easy to condemn the hospital workers who looked to, in effect, censor artwork. It might be another matter, however, to realize that they were acting to ease the fears of already frightened children.

From these diverse processes of forgetting, this forum – like the symposium from which it emerged – seeks to recover an understanding of the social power of art. Putting it differently, this tradition was animated by a sense that another world was possible and that artwork could play a role in creating, nurturing, and sustaining this other – and better – world. As a form of cultural expression, changes in art could be

2 In this sense, one might speak of the "economics of forgetting."

3 In *Warrior Nation: Rebranding Canada in an Age of Anxiety* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2012), Ian McKay and Jamie Swift quite rightly point out, I think, that the ideal of peace (evident in the pan-Canadian commitment to peacekeeping) gained a new popularity in the post-Second World War era as a generation that had actually fought a war made the clear statement that war was something to be avoided.

equated with changes in culture; the vitality and creative potential of art, in this sense, marked a commitment to a new and deeper democracy, equality, and humanism. Such a commitment, I speculate, might have a wider Canadian resonance. It might connect backwards across time and space to the Workers Unity League of the 1930s[4] and then forward in time to the point where it was challenged by other forms of expression (such as abstraction or magic realism).[5] This tradition marks out, then, a period of aspiration that is both antedated and postdated by other conceptions of art and its role in culture.

The idea of a period of aspiration creates further questions that seem to require attention. For whom was this new world possible? Who found this language meaningful and animating? What did it entail in a cultural and artistic sense? What are the strengths of using art or culture as politics? What are the weaknesses and what are its limits? One appreciable merit of a focused consideration of New Brunswick's mural legacy is that these questions can be addressed in something other than a speculative manner, instead asking and answering these questions in a real-world context. I speculate again, but might not Colville be a transitional figure in this regard? He emerges out of the realist tradition, as evidenced in his first large mural, but then moves his art in other directions. It remains connected to society but in more abstract ways that focus on individual achievement or the geometry of the body, as opposed to groups of individuals participating in the construction of a new society.

Fourth, answering the above questions may create complicated answers. A final important consideration emerging from this forum is that it shows how meaning changes over time. Meaning emerges in context and the process of recontextualizing works necessarily attaches different meanings to the same piece of art. New trajectories in post-colonial criticism, for example, might suggest different ways of reading these works as signs that mark the meaning and importance of public space. One could, for example, explore how different institutions worked both to mark public space as a popular space and yet, through the neglect of murals, also to re-mark it as something else. A perspective attuned to this approach might look at how space is racialized, how it is opened up to specific groups, or how it is construed as heteronormative.

There are other considerations as well. How does the meaning of a given work of art change once it is moved from a public space? Does it change its meaning, moving from a form of social and cultural critique – embodying the aspirations for a better world – to part of the national patrimony that speaks about the nation, its

4 John Manley, "Canadian Communists, Revolutionary Unionism, and the 'Third Period': The Workers' Unity League, 1929-1935," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 5, no. 1 (1994): 167-94.

5 At different points in time, these different traditions entered into complex relationships with each other, creating hybrid forms of expression that mixed aestheticized developments in artistic expression with social and cultural commentary. The work of Ted Pulford – who trained artistically and taught at Mount Allison – might serve as a case in point. For instance, *The Future of Engineering* (1948) – which carries with it a similar type of utopian commitment to progressive planning – or later watercolours such as *Abandoned* from 1972 (suggestive of a flight from the land) might be profitably examined, in addition to the work of Colville discussed in this collection, to highlight the character of these complicated developments.

history, and its art history in different ways? If critical art is moved from its public space to, say, a private space, does its meaning change? Could it become aestheticized, for example, in a way that subverts the engaged social potential of art by transforming that work into an aesthetic object to be appreciated on those grounds? Is it possible to re-inscribe the radical potential of art that has been aestheticized or nationalized?[6]

There are no easy answers to these questions. They require further careful study. But this forum makes a good start. It has situated the development of muralism in its broader context, provided a point of comparison with other mural traditions, highlighted the revival of one important mural, and explicated the complicated history of muralists and their work. It seems to me that another purpose has also been well served by the authors and their diverse approaches. The convergence of scholars, conservators, museum officials, and others establishes that there is a critical public interested in these artists, these murals, and their legacy. One might be tempted to say "it is about time," but such a remark is too flippant. What the contributions to this forum illustrate is that a range of publics are interested in exploring a different approach to regional cultural history and its implications for the present. It might be difficult to generalize from a limited number of murals and artists to wider dynamics. Yet, one might also contend that this was not the point of this symposium. Indeed, the various studies of this collection make it amply clear that easy generalizations are to be avoided if we are to re-present the dynamism of this tradition. Moreover, we know this concern is not isolated to Atlantic Canada. Yet, its recovery adds an important element to regional history and to a consideration of regionalized artistic production. The murals discussed here are, if nothing else, strong public statements about the value of art and its place in an evolving political-economic order. New Brunswick's mural legacy shows the richly politicized character of regional artistic culture. Its recovery demonstrates, I think, that this tradition remains meaningful today.

ANDREW NURSE

6 Scholars might also ask questions about what Paul Rabinow has called "micro politics" of scholarship. How do scholars benefit from artistic revivals? Do they, for example, create new spheres of cultural authority that are mobilized for their own reasons and not that of a more generalized political engagement with history or region? See Rabinow, *Essays on the Anthropology of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 51.