

ON-GOING RESEARCH

## Getting it right? An Historian among the Actors

By **David Dean**, Department of History, Carleton University

As an early modernist who also works in the field of public history, I am fascinated with attempts to recapture the past whether in living history re-enactments, films, early music concerts or on the stage. To find relevance for our present lives by exploring the way things were seems to me to be an important pursuit and so I get excited by well-researched period performances. So I happily accepted a chance to work with the National Art Centre's English Theatre Company on its 2008 production of *Macbeth*. The Scottish Play is of great interest to early modern British historians like me because it marks the accession of the Stewart James VI to the English throne as James I. *Macbeth's* murder of King Duncan echoes an earlier attempt on James's own life, the play's obsession with equivocation speaks to the Gunpowder Plot and James's belief in divine right theory is a constant reference point.

The play also features witches who held a particular fascination for contemporaries and for James himself. This is a play that says volumes about "my" period and by offering my expertise I would help the Company shape their performance. Little did I know that my experience would leave me questioning whether a period production is the best way of conveying contemporary meaning to a modern audience.

I realised something wasn't quite right as soon as I entered the rehearsal room. There were more pictures of Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson than James VI/I on the walls. The rehearsal schedule revealed time dedicated to handling rifles. Obviously this wasn't going to be a period production. My role was to help the actors discover what the play meant for its Jacobean audience before they offered their own take on it in the tensions and terrors of the 1930s and 1940s.

I spoke about the play's life and times, chipping in now and then when a question arose as the actors collectively read through the scenes while sitting around the table for the first time. What did Shakespeare think about divine right monarchy? What made a good marriage in Jacobean England? What did contemporaries

think about witches? The actors sought the play's meaning in its own time but as they moved from the rehearsal table onto the floor, 'blocking' the play into sections and adding movement and gesture, they also moved away from my expertise and the play's épopée.

Relocating the play required a few cuts to the text and a few changes. I was especially concerned that the witches weren't going to be witches at all but children. Yet it struck me that my desire for accuracy – requiring the witches to be, well, witches – was problematic because the problem with witches is that few of us take them seriously. Halloween, *Bewitched* for one generation, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* for another, have seen to that. How to give a modern audience the sense of the real power and revelatory authority witches had for contemporaries yet also convey the minor malignancy and mischievousness that were particular to English witches?

As I watched three outstanding young actors terrorize *Macbeth* with all the spitefulness, playfulness and awfulness that children can muster, I realized that what I was watching might not be an accurate realization of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* but it had an undeniable authenticity. Perhaps this was because we see children as speaking truths ("out of the mouth of babes") or perhaps because in modern horror films (*Poltergeist*, *Children of the Corn*, *The Sixth Sense*) supernatural forces access our world through children. However it worked, it did, and I understood that the inspired director, Peter Hinton, had found a way for modern audiences to engage with all that witchcraft meant for Jacobeans.

Accuracy (as in being exact and correct) and authenticity (as in being authoritative) are so much part of the quest for good public history performances that it seems odd to distinguish between them. Yet I found myself doing precisely that throughout the rehearsals. And on opening night I could only admire how the

Company had found new things to say about the play while striving to stay true to the original. This Macbeth was out of time and out of place yet what I thought the play meant for contemporaries had been conveyed to a modern audience in an undeniably authoritative way. I realised that this would have been much more difficult, and perhaps impossible, to achieve in a determinedly accurate period production and this was an uncomfortable but very exciting discovery.

*David Dean is Professor of History at Carleton University, Director of the Carleton Centre for Public History and coordinates Carleton's MA in Public History. Thanks to Janet Siltanen, James Opp, John Walsh and students in the programme for listening to my theatrical musings and especially to Peter Hinton, the English National Theatre and all involved in Macbeth for inviting me into their world.*

## **Francine Lelièvre, reçoit la récompense de l'Ordre National du Mérite français**

Francine Lelièvre, directrice générale de Pointe-à-Callière, musée d'archéologie et d'histoire de Montréal, a été reçue, le 12 juillet 2008, dans l'Ordre National du Mérite lors d'une cérémonie au Salon rouge de l'Assemblée nationale. Le gouvernement français a exprimé sa fraternité avec le Québec en distinguant une quinzaine d'hommes et de femmes ayant excellé dans leurs domaines respectifs. La France a aussi voulu souligner leur contribution importante à la relation franco-québécoise ou à la francophonie.

Deuxième Ordre National après celui de la Légion d'honneur, il est destiné à récompenser les mérites distingués. Ceux-ci doivent être acquis dans l'exercice d'une fonction soit publique, civile ou militaire, soit privée. Le mérite est décerné en considération de la personnalité ou des services rendus.

## **CHA Podcasts now available!**

Podcasts of the environmental history sessions from the CHA annual meeting are now available on the Network in Canadian History & Environment (NiCHE) website. Currently, we have 16 presentations posted with more to come. Follow the link below to access the recordings and leave your own comments and questions for the presenters. <http://niche.uwo.ca/node/381>

## **Les séances Podcast disponibles**

Les séances Podcast en histoire environnementale de la réunion annuelle de la SHC sont maintenant disponible sur le site web de la Nouvelle initiative canadienne en histoire de l'environnement (NiCHE). Il y a présentement 16 présentations disponibles et d'autres s'ajouteront. Suivez simplement le lien: <http://niche.uwo.ca/node/381>

## **J.B. Tyrrell Historical Medal**

At the June meeting of the Council of the Royal Society of Canada it was announced that there were no nominations for the 2008 award of its J.B. Tyrrell Historical Medal.

The Tyrrell Medal is awarded biennially "for outstanding work in the history of Canada." Nominations require three sponsors, one of whom must be a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. The next deadline is 1 December 2009.

More information on the J.B. Tyrrell Historical Medal and other Royal Society awards is available on the Society's website: [www.rsc.ca](http://www.rsc.ca)

## **Corey Prize 2008**

Announcement of the Corey Prize for 2008 has been delayed. The prize committee anticipates announcing the winner of the prize in the Fall Bulletin of the CHA.