

World of Museums / Monde des musées

The History of Living History

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The middle decades of the 20th century saw a proliferation in Canada of rebuilt pioneer villages and historic forts. Such living-history museums quickly became among the most important tools for education about Canada's past. Between the legions of school children who annually trekked through their gates, and summer tourists in search of entertaining attractions, they presented history to more people than academic historians could ever hope to reach. Yet, such sites are often not taken seriously by academic historians. Scholars sometimes belittle living history museums as happy history or as a "Disneyfication" of the past. This form of history has been crucial in the construction of historical memory in Canada in the post-war period. Addressing the context of the ongoing growth of memory studies, these sites offer us the most popular place where everyday Canadians have engaged formally with history and memory.

Supported by a SSHRC Standard Research Grant, my research is not only a study of the production of memory at living history museums across Canada, but of the reception and adaptation of memory by various publics. The purpose of this research is not merely to trace the history of these many museums or of the elites who built them, but rather to examine the contexts of their creation and the historical understandings they produced. These understandings, often produced in informal environments, offered wide latitudes for audiences to adapt and then internalize them. This process strikes at the heart of questions of collective memory.

One cannot escape the basic fact that these museums were the products of the cultural and administrative milieu in which they were created. They appeared suddenly and multiplied rapidly across the country from the 1950s to the 1970s, reflecting a particular moment in Canada's past. Early proponents of living history museums often stressed the educational value of interacting with the past. Living history was at root a reaction against a perceived dryness of information in textbooks. More than simple reconstructions, living museums attempted to capture the sights, sounds, smells, and even tastes of the past. Rooted in contemporary assumptions about education, living history practitioners regularly argued that individuals learn best in a hands-on environment. Many museums therefore emphasized crafts and trades, often stressing a highly gendered and implicitly normalized division of labour. School children, in particular, learned about history as they were taught how to perform

obsolete domestic tasks such as spinning wool and churning butter. Museum programs were often integrated into provincial school curriculums through departments of education and a preliminary examination of attendance figures suggests that school visits typically comprised at least fifteen to twenty per cent of admissions. A second educational imperative was civic education. Many of the justifications behind the creation of living history museums revolved around improving the quality of citizenship and national unity through an awareness of a common history. At the Fortress of Louisbourg, and again at Sainte-Marie-among-the-Hurons, planners emphasized the role of strengthening the federal project of building a bilingual and bicultural citizenship. From this angle, the past was seen sometimes crassly as justification for policy goals, but more crucially as a means to educate Canadians old and new about certain Canadian values. Here one encounters most clearly the give and take between the production of values and the adoption or adaptation of them by the various publics, as these values were contested, debated, and assimilated.

A major focus of this project consists of the real world imperatives that drove the development of individual museums. Living history museums are more than theoretical displays of the past. They were built according to economic factors such as regional development, employment creation, unemployment relief, and economic viability. Such imperatives may skew public memories of the past by emphasizing convenient or marketable aspects of history. Perhaps the most famous living history museum in Canada, the Fortress of Louisbourg, saw its origins in the Rand Commission's recommendations for economic diversification in Nova Scotia as a means of offsetting the decline of the coal industry in the late 1950s. Unemployment relief was a concern right from the beginnings of living history in Canada. During the Great Depression, the federal and Ontario governments agreed to repair Fort Henry, a neglected structure near Kingston, as a means of relief. Fort Henry became a living reconstruction with the introduction of the Fort Henry Guard, a student honour guard mimicking 19th century soldiers, for its official opening. But the most important economic imperative behind living history museums was the attraction of tourists. The growth of tourism in the 20th century has been a major cultural development in Canada. The fluid nature of tourist traffic and the tourist trade led governments to take an active role in promoting tourism, sometimes with living history museums. There is a growing

body of scholarship on the role of tourism in Canadian cultural development to which this study speaks. This existing literature suggests that an anticipation of tourist tastes affected the production of historic sites. My preliminary research suggests that this effect was never as straightforward as much of the literature would lead us to believe.

My study has a twofold purpose. I aim to examine the interplay of competing imperatives for the development of historical museums and to uncover the multiple ways in which they influenced historical understanding amongst the general public. It is an historiographical approach of a sort. I am particularly interested in following the transmission of ideas about history, both across geographical space and across time, and at examining how they develop and are

adapted to new circumstances to become common sense ideas about the past. This awareness of history was itself central to shaping how Canadians understood and shaped their national identities. In the process, the history of living history touches on many aspects of Canada's political and cultural development in the middle decades of the twentieth century. For these reasons, one can argue that these sites are not only a stimulating object of study, but should not escape scholarly attention.

À venir / Things to Come

2007

22 mars / 22 March: Jeudis d'histoire de Montréal. Danielle Gauvreau (Concordia), « Jeunes et mobilité sociale à Montréal à la fin du 19^e siècle ». McGill University, New Chancellor Day Hall, room 520, 17 h.

22-23 mars / 22-23 March: Military History Symposium/ Colloque d'histoire militaire. "Strategic Planning and the Origins of World War I: New Perspectives for the Centenary of the July Crisis".

Info: B.J. Mc Kercher (mckercher-b@rmc.ca) or/ou R.A. Prete (prete-rd@rmc.ca)

5 avril / 5 April: Jeudis d'histoire de Montréal. Simon Gunn (University of Leicester), « The lost world of British urban modernism: Bradford, c. 1945-1970 ». Université de Montréal, Pavillon Lionel-Groulx, pièce C-6121, 17 h.

17-18 May: Rethinking Canadian History. International Conference at the Institute for the Study of the Americas, University of London, UK. <http://americas.sas.ac.uk/events/rethinkingcanadianhistory.php>

2-5 June: Business History Division of the Administrative Sciences Association of Canada (ASAC), Ottawa, Ontario. Program Chair: Paul D. Earl, earlpd@ms.umanitoba.ca

18-21 juin / 18-21 June: 7^e Rencontre internationale sur la géologie et la géographie militaires / 7th International Conference on Military Geology and Geography. « Contacts et contrastes : les activités militaires dans leur interaction avec l'environnement / Contact and Contrast: Military Activities in their Interaction with the Earth Environment » Québec, Université Laval.

Info : <http://icmkgg2007.géographie.ulaval.ca> (icmkgg2007@ggr.ulaval.ca)

28-30 June: "Slavery, Anti-Slavery and the Road to Freedom" Conference to mark the 200th anniversary of the end of slave trade.

Info: info@commemoration2007.ca

11-13 July 2007: First International Public Knowledge Project (PKP) Conference, Vancouver, BC. <http://ocs.sfu.ca/pkp2007/callforpapers.php>

2008

May 2008: First Conference of the Western Association of Women Historians. University of British Columbia. www.wawh.org