

## **“Navigating Historical Controversies with Integrity”**

At a session held on June 3<sup>rd</sup> at the Canadian Historical Association meetings in Vancouver -- following directly on the Annual Meeting of our CHA Public History Group -- a packed audience heard four presentations dealing with aspects of recent controversies that have wracked Canadian historians. A particular focus was on the Canadian War Museum’s controversial Bomber Command issue, but there was also a discussion of the controversy surrounding the positioning of the Japanese Flag on the floor of the museum, as well as a most opportune discussion of the “Historical” Murals depicting the development of B.C. at the British Columbia Legislature. Peter Seixas summarized the results of an earlier survey of B.C. high school students regarding the appropriateness of the murals’ depiction of the contact between whites and First Nations. It transpired that on the very afternoon of our discussions the final stage of that decade long controversy was being acted out in Victoria, where the British Columbia government was bricking over the offensive murals, to be replaced a few days later by a series of historic photos of the legislators of the province, news of which was relayed to the audience during the session.

The Canadian War Museum’s entanglement with veterans associations constituted the meat of the discussion, which had to be truncated much too early as a result of the time constraints of the meeting. CMC President and Executive Director Victor Rabinovitch presented a very succinct history and defence of the activities of various players within the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the parent corporation of the CWM. His assessment was that officers of the corporation did everything in their power to guarantee the freedom of expression of the CWM curators, while negotiating the difficult terrain brought on by the politicization of the controversial “Bombing” exhibit. Lyle Dick rehearsed similar issues concerning a somewhat less public controversy about the Japanese soldiers’ treatment in the exhibit. The fact that these issues were so readily resolved through a form of arbitration and compromise gave Margaret Conrad an opening to suggest that some mechanism had to be found for resolving such disputes, or we are condemned to continue publicly disputing the interpretation of the past which duelling historians can never hope to win against the power of public opinion.

One attendee at the session was overheard to say that the “real” controversy in the event was that there was so little time to air the various opinions being presented. Many more hands were raised than could be acknowledged. On behalf of the Public History Group of the CHA, which had fortunately been constituted at the meeting just prior to this session, I immediately sought permission to reproduce the papers as they were given at the conference as a way to launch our new web-site. We hope to use the occasion of these presentations to launch the discussion board of our new website. All four presenters that afternoon were and continue to be committed to continuing the discussion initiated that afternoon. The papers are posted in this location in the hope that they will inspire responses from those who were there and did not get a chance to speak, as well as providing those who could not be in Vancouver the opportunity to read what was presented and to comment. We welcome discussion both directly on the web-site as well as through the ongoing list-serve that is being maintained by Carleton University’s Centre for Public History on behalf of the CHA Public History Group.