“Dialogue: Learning from Historical Controversies”

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Recent public and scholarly historical practice has prompted numerous controversies in Canada, triggering contentious debates but offering little resolution. Within academic history, the history wars of the 1990s were often framed as pitched battles between exponents of military and social history. These debates have now moved from the academy to museums, where texts generated by professional public historians have been challenged by various constituencies. The museums’ critics have taken issue with perceived inaccuracies, imbalances, or omissions of the historical roles of particular groups. The one point of convergence seems to be that all contending parties have arrived at historical truth, however incompatible it might be with other verities.

For this discussion, I would like to pose a few philosophical questions. When historical events encapsulate both controversial content and diverging perspectives, is it realistic not to expect controversy? Is controversy in history necessarily a bad thing? To what degree might institutions have invited controversy through the approaches they have taken to representing history? Are there other models for engaging historical controversies that might enable museums or professional historians to navigate these sensitive matters more effectively? Might controversy be viewed less as a problem than a learning opportunity, a point at which different trajectories of knowledge and interpretation intersect, where attention is focussed on important issues rich with potential for engaging the public in thinking seriously about history?

I had not intended to wade into the recent controversies at the Canadian War Museum but decided they offer some useful material, so permit me to dip into these turbulent waters. By way of context, the museum was one of a series of projects approved during the tenure of the Honourable Sheila Copps, former Minister of Canadian Heritage between 1997 and 2003. She assumed her portfolio less than two years after the traumatic referendum on sovereignty in Quebec and her tenure was characterized by a promotion of pan-Canadianism in all aspects of cultural production, including projects on Canadian history.[1]

In retrospect, we can see that notions of applying history to promote pan-Canadian identity influenced the form and content of various cultural products flowing from the government's agenda. Elsewhere, in articles on the CBC's TV series *Canada: A People's History*, I argued that this production displayed a nationalistic focus throughout.[2] Similarly, Dan Gallacher recently observed that the storyline of the Canadian War Museum, is "nationalistic."[3] Both *Canada: A People's History* and the museum's permanent exhibition presented Canadian history through overriding storylines focusing on the nation-state and its evolution.

The implications of the narrative approach chosen for the Canadian War Museum's storyline can be illustrated by a single summary statement presented near the front of the exhibition. Under the title "CONFLICT AND CONFEDERATION," the narrative states: "Canada's emergence as a self-governing transcontinental country was partly the result of nineteenth-century wars," offering as examples various internal military conflicts, including the following:

1837-1838 Rebellions in Lower Canada.

1850-1877 First Peoples' resistance to the Royal Navy on the Coast.

1866-1871 Fenian Raids.

1870 Resistance.

1885 Resistance.

That the storyline required the characterization of these conflicts as wars was confirmed by the summary assertion, quoted above, that these confrontations were responsible for "Canada's emergence as a self-governing transcontinental country," that is, the modern nation-state. This interpretation was further re-inscribed by the title of the exhibition – "Conflict and Confederation" – implying that the nation-state owes its existence to "war."

The *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* defines war as "1a(1)**:** a state of usually open and declared armed hostile conflict between states or nations."[4] Whether or not the assorted internal conflicts referenced in this segment of the war museum's permanent exhibition actually meet this definition of war, a more significant issue may be that the contrary proposition could also be advanced with comparable plausibility, that is, that Canadian expansion *caused* these conflicts instead of resulting from them. My intention is not to belabour the matter but simply to suggest that if one particular historical proposition is advanced while a contrary, no less plausible interpretation is omitted, it becomes a problem of science as well as interpretation, whether in museum storylines or scholarly discourse. Under such circumstances, might it not be more prudent to present competing versions of history, acknowledge that they are interpretations and not proven facts, and enlist the audience's involvement in weighing the evidence and coming to its own conclusions?

A philosopher whose writings bear on this discussion is the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, whose philosophy of dialogism holds that human consciousness is a dynamic

process rooted in the dialectical clash of voices embedded in interactions between people and within the individual psyche. Since the production of meaning is itself historical and subject to change, there is no final word on any issues in history, which are continuously being reinterpreted in relation to the dialogical imperatives of any given reader, community, or era. Hence, meaning cannot be captured in a definitive sense but must always be revisited by individuals in response to questions posed in the present. Meaning, like the world itself, is "unfinalizable," that is, provisional, contingent, and open-ended.[5]

In recent years, Bakhtin has become god-father to some very exciting developments in museum philosophy and practice centred around notions of civic dialogue, in particular the Animating Democracy initiative in the United States. Adherents of this new school have sought to move away from a focus on didactic and non-interactive museum interpretation to approaches more aligned with notions of dialogue and civic engagement.[6] To quote the authors of one of the project's major monographs: "Open and meaningful public dialogue is a critical means to any and all democratic ends. In the myriad and interrelated dimensions of civic life – social, cultural, political – the flow of conversation back and forth is essential to understanding, decision-making, and accountability."[7] The projects staged under the auspices of the Animating Democracy rubric are quite diverse but what they share in common is a concern to use different media in visual art and historical museums contexts to spark civic dialogue, invite a broad base of constituencies to participate, provide a space for civic dialogue, and offer art and history as alternative forms of dialogue. Often, these projects have featured exhibitions, films, and lectures followed by open forums bringing together artists, historians, curators, and members of a spectrum of groups for interactive programming, discussion, and mutual learning. In these

contexts history becomes less a product than a process animated by direct engagement and dialogue.

Other theoretical rationales could also be usefully added to the mix, including concepts of communicative rationality, deliberative pluralism, and discursive democracy as elaborated by such noted thinkers as Jürgen Habermas, James Bohman, and John S. Dryzek. Related concerns were earlier elaborated by Harold Innis in various studies in communications theory.[8] Here, I will not elaborate these concepts, which would require a more lengthy discussion. What can be said is that in the increasingly compartmentalized and hierarchical contexts of knowledge production and dissemination, each of these theorists has been concerned with questions as to how to extend concepts of democracy to a broad range of discourses in the public sphere, underscoring a widely-felt need to find alternatives to top-down models of one-way communication.

I want to refer to some of these notions in relation to two recent controversies at the Canadian War Museum – the Bomber Command affair, and concerns of the National Association of Japanese Canadians regarding the treatment of their history in the permanent exhibition. The Bomber Command controversy has been much debated and I do not intend to revisit the different positions. Briefly summarized, when a number of military veterans complained about panels devoted to the bombing campaign that targeted German cities in the Second World War, the museum engaged four senior Canadian historians to review these texts. The panel's conclusions did not satisfy the critics, whose continuing complaints prompted a debate by a committee of the Canadian Senate, which requested that the museum revise the panels in question, a step the museum has now taken.

While several academic historians have criticized the museum’s decision to revise the panels, I feel the museum had no choice but to comply once the Senate weighed in and requested changes to the text. However, by privileging academic judgement over civic engagement, we might ask whether the museum inadvertently set up a situation in which it was obliged to rewrite its interpretive texts. Its approach was in keeping with the notion that, in matters of interpretation, it is best to defer to the experts. Yet, surviving eye-witnesses to history had already expressed disagreement with texts prepared by the museum’s specialists. Was it reasonable to expect that these participants would be willing to be overruled by an arm’s length panel of historians? Might a different approach have enabled the museum to navigate more effectively between the shoals of scholarly detachment and partisan engagement?

A second controversy at the Canadian War Museum that emerged in the last year arose over concerns expressed by the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC) relating to the treatment of Japanese Canadian history in the museum’s permanent exhibition. Among the issues raised by Japanese Canadian leaders was the museum’s perceived treatment of members of their ethnocultural community as victims rather than agents in history. An example was a panel and accompanying text on Sergeant Masumi Mitsui, a decorated veteran of the First World War, who was interned during the Second World War and his family’s farm seized and sold off, accompanied by a photographic image of Mitsui in old age. The NAJC complained that Mitsui had demonstrated agency, not only on the battlefield but in grass-roots politics, having led a campaign that secured the right to vote for Japanese Canadian veterans in 1931, a constitutional milestone. In fairness, the museums’ storyline did acknowledge Mitsui’s role in the struggle for the franchise, but in the NAJC’s view, Mitsui should have been represented as in his prime,

rather than as an elderly victim. His treatment contrasted with the treatment of Private Filip Konowal, a Ukrainian Canadian soldier decorated, like Mitsui, for bravery in the Battle of Hill 70 in 1917. In Konowal's case, the museum displayed an image of this soldier in uniform during the war.

Why these two soldiers with similar stories were treated differently is not immediately apparent. The treatment of Japanese Canadians is certainly more balanced than is evident in various publications by J.L. Grantastein, the new museum's first director, who came close to justifying the internment on the basis of war-time contexts in 1941-42.[9] Generally, Canadian historians have struggled in dealing with the internment and dispossession of Japanese Canadians. The stripping of an entire group of human rights during and after the Second World War is a historical fact that does not comfortably conform to nation-building narratives. The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights was approved by the General Assembly on 10 December 1948, three months prior to Canada's belated restoration of rights of citizenship to Japanese Canadians, and three and one half years after the end of the war. It remains a shameful stain on Canada's human rights record that no nation-building narrative can wipe away. There is no ready measure of the relative weighting that should be accorded the different components of this problematic story but empowering Japanese Canadians and other constituencies to express their own unfiltered perspectives in the exhibition might be a step in the right direction.

A further expression of concern by the NAJC related to the display on imperial Japan's involvement in the Second World War as Canada's enemy. Specifically, the NAJC leaders took issue with the museum's projection of the Japanese flag on the exhibition floor where museum visitors might tread on it, a placement they regarded as disrespectful. It seems likely that the

decision to project the flag onto the floor reflected efforts to save display space rather than any intent to dishonour the Japanese. Nevertheless, both controversies underscore the limitations of developing museum storylines and displays prior to a comprehensive process of public consultation and engagement.

The war museum seems to be responding and learning from these controversies. In a recent message, NAJC President Grace Eiko Thomson reported that the museum has indicated its intention to make changes to accommodate their concerns. The first step – the removal of the offending projection of the Japanese flag – was accomplished easily by pulling an electrical cord out of its plug. Other matters will require more work, but it is encouraging that the museum seems to be showing a sincere responsiveness to issues that have been raised by the public.

We can also learn quite a bit from the experience of other countries, in particular from the well-known controversy over the 1995 Enola Gay exhibit at the United States National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. There is an extensive literature but I would like to refer to just one work that seems to possess great educational value, the 1998 book *Hiroshima's Shadow*. This book considered the atomic bombing of Hiroshima from the perspectives of numerous observers on both sides of the conflict in different historical eras, including the dialectic between Hiroshima myths and modern scholarship, early controversies after the bombing, the Smithsonian affair of the 1990s, Japanese perspectives on Hiroshima, ethical arguments by noted thinkers, diary entries of President Truman and his advisors, and a summary article on the World Court's Opinion on Nuclear Weapons and Humanitarian Law.[10]

What is more important than the perspective of its editors is their assemblage of a representative sampling of texts bearing on many dimensions of this catastrophic event, in the unfiltered words of diverse observers, positioning readers to delve more deeply into it, weigh the evidence and arguments, and then deliberate and draw their own conclusions. *Hiroshima's Shadow* is consistent with a spirit of civic dialogue, wherein heritage professionals refrain from arrogating to themselves the role of arbiters of history in favour of framing historical issues to assist members of the public in coming to their own determinations about the past and its significance. It is representative of a revolutionary new paradigm for the practice of history, and could be a building block in advancing notions of democratic citizenship in Canada and elsewhere. For museums and professional historians, civic dialogue offers an approach rich in potential for the past to inform the present and future, and one that might better position us to navigate historical controversies with integrity.

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Notes

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1 As Minister Copps stated: "And everyone – government, business, the not-for-profit sector, schools, libraries, museums and heritage institutions – all Canadians have a role to play in finding the solutions – solutions that turn on pan-Canadian ideas and pan-Canadian partnership." See: "Designing a Strategy for a Canadian Knowledge Nation: The Canadian Heritage Perspective," Address by the Honourable Sheila Copps, Minister of Canadian Heritage, Canada by Design Visionary Speaker Series, The McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology, Toronto, 26 March 1998. <http://www.canada-bydesign.net/copps.html>

2 Lyle Dick, "Representing National History on Television: The Case of *Canada: A People's History,*" in Zöe Druick and Patsy Kotsopoulos, eds., *Programming Reality: Perspectives on English Canadian Television* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), 31-

49; "'A New History for the New Millennium': *Canada: A People's History*," " CHR Forum," *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (March 2004), 85-109; "Nationalism and Visual Media in Canada: the Case of Thomas Scott's Execution," *Manitoba History*, No. 48 (Fall / Winter 2004), 1-18.

3 Dan Gallacher, "World of Museums: The Bomber Command Controversy – A Promising New Method of Historical Interpretation," *Canadian Historian Association Bulletin*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2008), 14-15.

4 *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, "War." <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/war>

5 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (ed., Michael Holquist; trans., Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist) (Austin, Texas,: University of Texas Press, 1981); Michael Holquist, *Bakhtin and His World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 20-21; Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1990), 36; and Michael Mayerfeld Bell and Michael Gardiner, *Bakhtin and the Human Sciences: No Last Words* (London: Sage Publications, 1998).

6 See the essays in Pam Korza, Barbara Schaffer Bacon, and Andrea Assaf, eds., *Civic Dialogue, Arts and Culture*: *Findings from Animating Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Americans for the Arts, 2005); and Pam Korza and Barbara Schaffer Bacon, *Museums and Civic Dialogue: Case Studies from Animating Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Americans for the Arts, 2005); Pam Korza and Barbara Schaffer Bacon, *History as Catalyst for Civic Dialogue*: *Case Studies from Animating Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Americans for the Arts, 2005).

7 Pam Korza, Barbara Schaffer Bacon, and Andrea Assaf, *eds., Civic Dialogue, Arts and Culture*, p. 3.

8 Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (ed., Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Greif) (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998); James Bohman, *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity, and Democracy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996); and John S. Dryzek, *Discursive Democracy: Politics, Polity, and Political Science* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and *Deliberative Global Politics: Discourse and Democracy in a Divided World* (Cambridge, U.K: Polity Press, 2006). On Innis, see Harold A. Innis, "The Oral Tradition and Greek Civilization," in *Empire and Communications* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2007), 75-105; and Judith Stamps, *Unthinking Modernity: Innis, McLuhan, and the Frankfurt School* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 82-90.

9 J.L. Granatstein and Gregory A. Johnson, "The Evacuation of the Japanese Canadians, 1942: A Realist Critique of the Received Version," in Norman Hillmer, Bohdan Kordan, and Lubomyr Luciuk, eds., *On Guard for Thee: War, Ethnicity, and the Canadian State, 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Canadian Committee for the History of the Second World War, 1988), 101-129; and Patricia E.

Roy, J.L. Granatstein, Masako Iino, and Hiroko Takamura, *Mutual Hostages: Canadians and Japanese during the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

10 Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifshultz, *Hiroshima's Shadow: Writings on the Denial of History and the Smithsonian Controversy* (Stony Creek, Connecticut: Pamphleteer's Press, 1998).