

Towards a Participatory Historical Culture
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As the papers in this session amply document, your panelists have all been close observers, as academics, public servants, and teachers, of the recent round of “history wars.” Controversy over how to represent the past to the present in monuments, museums, and textbooks is not new, of course. Studies by Alan Gordon, Viv Nelles, Ken Osborne, Ron Rudin, and others remind us that history-making has long been a contested terrain in Canada as elsewhere, and differences of opinion are an inevitable part of the process of identity formation in families, communities, and nations.¹

I was prompted to think about how conflicts over public representations of the past might be mediated when called upon in my official capacity as president of the Canadian Historical Association to make a formal presentation to the 2007 Senate Committee, chaired by Liberal Senator Joseph Day, investigating the representation of Bomber Command in the new Canadian War Museum. Since the request came from Victor Rabinovitch when I was especially busy, I was not eager to carve out several days to undertake this mission. I was tired of the whole damn lot – Bomber Command, the Senate, the Veterans, *and* the Canadian War Museum. This was not

¹Alan Gordon, *Making Public Pasts: The Contested Terrain of Montreal's Public Memories, 1891-1930* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); H.V. Nelles, *The Art of Nation-Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec's Tercentenary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Ronald Rudin, *Founding Fathers: The Celebration of Champlain and Laval in the Streets of Quebec, 1878-1908* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Kenneth Osborne, *Education: A guide to the Canadian school debate, or, who wants what and why?* (Toronto: Penguin, 1999).

the first time that I had been called upon to serve as a referee in controversies surrounding public history. Margaret Gardiner's crusade against the misrepresentation of her grandfather in the docudrama *Prairie Giant: The Tommy Douglas Story*, aired on CBC in 2006, had dragged on for months and left me deeply discouraged.² Nevertheless, I called Senator Day's office, only to be told that the time was fully booked for making presentations before the Senate Committee. I could make a written submission, if I wished. "What were the terms of reference of the committee hearings?" I asked. I was told there were none. With a lot of help from Lyle Dick, whom I had cleverly chosen the previous year to chair the CHA's new advocacy committee, I crafted a two page letter to the Senate, which was never acknowledged, thus confirming my initial hunch that it was all a waste of my good time.

A lot of time and money has been wasted on conflicts over the interpretation of Bomber Command. The earlier controversy following the airing of *The Valour and the Horror* in 1992 consumed even more time than the hearings on the Canadian War Museum's 87-word panel on the "Enduring Controversy." The former contretemps was also more costly. Not only was there a Senate Committee hearing, this time prompted by Progressive Conservative senators, but well-paid lawyers also entered the fray when the aggrieved veterans slapped the film's director Brian McKenna and his associates with a \$500 million law suit. Although the case was eventually settled out of court, it took a terrible toll on those involved. Senate committees and court cases determining historical accuracy – how had it come to this? Is there not a better way to deal with such matters, one that is cheaper, less time-consuming, less damaging to the reputations of

² I address this and other controversies in my 2007 presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association: **Error! Main Document Only.** "Public History and its Discontents, or History in the Age of Wikipedia," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 2007,

everyone involved, and more in keeping with the spirit of historical inquiry?

In my letter to the Senate Committee, I stressed the CHA's concern, less with the content of the Canadian War Museum's Bomber Command panel, than with the process by which the integrity of the Museum was being called into question. I noted that "the Canadian Historical Association does not usually take positions for or against historical interpretations put forward by public or private institutions, and we will not do so here." But we did, I argued,

insist on the principle that public institutions such as the Canadian War Museum be free to present Canada's past for the education and benefit of their diverse audiences without fear of government interference. While individual Senators and, indeed, the public at large, have every right to find fault with historical interpretations at the Canadian War Museum, this kind of inquiry sends a "chill" of the kind that free countries claim to abhor.³

In retrospect, I could have made a better argument. Desmond Morton, a member of the blue ribbon committee created to pronounce on the accuracy of the War Museum's panel, advised me against criticizing the Senate process itself. "The Senate can do whatever it likes," he snapped. And, of course, he is right. Moreover, I had offered the senators no advice on what alternative processes might better serve the veterans in their quest to be the arbiters in telling the Bomber Command story.

The controversy over the interpretation of the Allied bombing offensive against Germany exposed the gap between the detached historical voice and the commemorative voice and raised the question of whether the Canadian War Museum was an institution authorized to ask hard questions about historical events or a memorial designed to glorify the past. It also prompted a re-examination of questions that arise whenever the past becomes a subject of public

forthcoming

³Margaret Conrad to the Honourable Joseph Day, Senator, 25 April 2007.

controversy: Who has the authority to interpret the past and what is the role of the public in general, and the participants in an event in particular, in determining how the past is represented?

Academic thinking on such matters is not as thin as one might expect. It is nearly two decades since Michael Frisch published *Sharing Authority*, a collection of essays that has had an enormous impact on the processes by which history is represented to the public.⁴ In February 2008 Stephen High and his colleagues at Concordia hosted a conference, which displayed shared authority on matters historical in all its wonderful diversity, and included an address by Frisch who is now working on digital software for indexing and annotating audio and video documentation. Examples now abound of historians, both public and private, working with communities to represent the past in ways that often, though not always, seem to satisfy both. Of course, the claims for history as a civic enterprise have broadened well beyond narrow nation-building agendas, as two of my favourite books, Robert Archibald's *A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community*, and James Green's *Taking History to Heart: The Power of the Past in Building Social Movements*, attest.⁵

But how does an institution such as the Canadian War Museum, funded by taxpayers' money, fit into the world of shared authority? Are its curators required to negotiate every panel in its exhibitions with Canadian citizens? What happens when museum curators and the public disagree? In the case of Bomber Command, the Museum's curators did everything that academic historians would have suggested. In a few well-chosen words and several dramatic images, they

⁴Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

⁵Robert R. Archibald, *A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1999); James Green, *Taking History to Heart: The Power of the Past in Building Social Movements* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000).

outlined the “enduring controversy” that surrounded Bomber Command, rather than just stating the facts of the wartime mission. How enlightened. The veterans were not impressed by such detachment. Galvanized by their earlier campaign against the *Valour and the Horror*, they were determined to make the Canadian War Museum respond to their concerns. And, here, it must be said, that the Canadian War Museum was a victim of its own success. In the campaign to make military history a stronger theme in public celebrations of Canada’s past, some professional historians and politicians had deliberately forged the veterans into a formidable pressure group to support the cause. The victory in securing public funding for this venture was, therefore, seen as the veterans’ victory, and the spectacular museum that appeared on the low-lying banks of the Ottawa River was *their* museum.

Facing mounting criticism from one of their own stakeholders, the CMA’s administrators established a blue ribbon committee made up of academic historians to pronounce on the accuracy of the panel. Their choice of academic experts – David Bercuson, Serge Bernier, Margaret MacMillan, and Des Morton – could not be faulted, but accuracy was not really the issue here. Taking a detached position on historical events such as the Acadian expulsion, the Holocaust, or Bomber Command makes some people, especially those directly associated with these events, extremely uncomfortable. Could the controversy have unfolded differently? Was another outcome possible? My short answer to the first question is “Yes” and to the second “Probably no.”

In an exceptionally thoughtful article on the controversy surrounding *The Valour and the Horror*, Graham Carr argues that in postmodern society, public history is cued to ‘symbolic politics’ that plays to a mass public unable to explore or understand fully the issues involved in

the politics of knowledge, but which is now quite skilled in the art of projecting narrative authority. Ultimately, the debate revolved around who had the authority to tell the Bomber Command story in the public domain. Throughout the controversy, Carr noted, there was a curious lack of genuine debate. “Rather than talking to each other or attempting to grasp opinions different from their own, many participants in the controversy elected to talk ‘past each other,’ transforming the debate into a kind of echo chamber where snippets of conversation bounced aimlessly back and forth.”⁶ Carr made a timely plea for new “rules of engagement,” in the struggle for narrative control over the nation’s past. Unfortunately, the rules were not in place in time to deal with the second round of controversy over Bomber Command.

The gulf between professional historians and the general public on the nature of historical inquiry was one of the most significant findings of a national survey undertaken by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen on how Americans engage the past. In their ground-breaking study, *The Presence of the Past*, published in 1998,⁷ they found that most people trusted artefacts and eye-witness accounts more than they did history professors or high school teachers as sources of historical knowledge. Academic historians would be quick to point out that artefacts do not speak for themselves and that eye-witnesses often have a limited sense of the larger context of events. Not to put too a fine point on it, the general public has less understanding of

⁶Graham Carr, “Rules of Engagement: Public History and the Drama of Legitimation,” *Canadian Historical Review* 86 2 (June 2005): 317-354. There is a somewhat different tack taken on this in another article by Carr “War, History, and the Education of (Canadian) Memory in **Memory, History, Nation: Contested Pasts**, ed. Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (New Brunswick NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2006): 57-78.

⁷Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

higher order historical thinking than most professional historians.⁸ Moreover, the survey revealed that, contrary to what the pundits were saying, Americans had not abandoned interest in the past but that many people were not particularly interested in the national narratives that commanded the allegiance of politicians and educators. History was being put to different civic uses, most notably to establish identity, morality, immortality, and agency. As a resource for shoring up imperilled imagined communities in a period of great change,⁹ history can be used for good or ill, but there is a tendency to use it as the raw material of nationalistic, ethnic, and fundamentalist ideologies.¹⁰ This situation is unlikely to change any time soon.

In an essay reflecting on the implications of their findings for history's traditional civic mission of connecting individuals to a shared national past, Rosenzweig expressed his unease about "the presence of a privatized and parochial past," among many of the respondents.

The most significant news of the study is that we have interested, active, and thoughtful audiences for what we want to talk about. The deeper challenge is finding out how we can talk to – and especially with – those audiences. History professionals need to work harder at listening to and respecting the many ways popular historymakers traverse the terrain of the past that is so present for us all.¹¹

Thelen was characteristically more optimistic, seeing evidence of common ground in the widespread interest in the past, which, he argued, offered many points of access for a more "participatory historical culture."¹² Although Thelen did not elaborate on how such a

⁸Peter Seixas, "What is Historical Consciousness?" in *To the Past: History Education, Public Memory, and Citizenship in Canada*, ed. Ruth Sandwell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 11-22.

⁹Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *The Past Within Us: Media, Memory, History* (London: Verso, 2005), 7.

¹⁰Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), 5.

¹¹Roy Rosenzweig, "Everyone a Historian," *The Presence of the Past*, 189.

¹²David Thelen, "A Participatory Historical Culture," *The Presence of the Past*, 177-207.

participatory culture might work, his own interest in recent years has drifted toward historical re-enactments. The likelihood of finding common ground, I argue here, is more likely if we follow Carr's advice, and develop mutually accepted rules of engagement when the organizing principle of a shared authority between professionals and the public breaks down.

My thinking on this matter is informed by recent literature on truth commissions,¹³ and my own experience as president of the Acadia University Faculty Association in the early 1990s, when tension between the Board and Faculty Association ran particularly high. Mediation and arbitration are useful processes to consider in disagreements about the past. Instead of having a blue ribbon committee and a senate committee each talking past each other, would it not have been better to have a two-step process in place whereby both sides agree to air their differences before a mediator and, if that failed, putting the question to arbitration. Arbitration has the great benefit of taking the issue away from those deeply entrenched in their positions and putting it in the hands of people with less ego-involvement.

As far as I can tell, there was no attempt during the second Bomber Command controversy to bring together representatives from the academic community and representatives of the veterans together to air the issues and discuss possible ways of addressing them. We need processes in place to encourage dialogue between professional historians and those who disagree with them *and* we also need appeal processes if the dialogue fails to secure a mutually accepted resolution. The outcome in the Bomber Command 2007 round may well have been the same – the retirement of a museum curator and a rewording of the panel – but we would have at least

¹³Annie E. Coombes, *History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); K. Bilbija et al., eds., *The Art of Truth-Telling About Authoritarian Rule* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

been spared the spectacle of a senate committee inquiry on 87 words and accompanying images in a museum exhibition. While arbitration panels have limitations, they are useful ways of taking issues out of the hands of people who have simply “had it” with their adversaries and of bringing closure to tempests in teapots.

I put this recommendation forward as potentially a best practice for future controversies over Canadian history, recognizing that professional historians are not going to like it very much. Most academic historians would argue that, at some level, history is not negotiable. Yet, each and every one of us negotiates the past whenever we submit a manuscript for publication. Which one of us has not gritted our teeth and made changes to our perfect prose because some anonymous peer reviewer said so and the press editor agreed? For administrators and curators of museums, it means taking seriously their consultations with both university-based historians and the general public. This is time-consuming and potentially costly to be sure but so is the alternative.¹⁴ While the public’s view of the goals of history may differ from ours, it is our responsibility to argue our case and thus contribute to a better informed dialogue about the purpose of history in society.

A few years ago I was contracted to reflect on the plans for the Canadian War Museum, and wrote what I thought was a good report. My main suggestion for revision was for more space to be devoted to the five seventeenth- and eighteenth-century wars, all of which were fought on what became Canadian soil, and, arguably, were as significant, if not more so, than the First and Second World Wars to which the lion’s share of the CMA’s space is devoted. My advice was,

¹⁴On this matter see James B. Gardner’s 2004 presidential address to the US National Council on Public History, “Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public,” *The Public Historian*, 26, 4 (2004): 11-21.

not surprisingly, ignored. The Canadian War Museum is about the role of the military in Canadian political life and historical narrative in the twenty-first century, not about an academic ranking of historical significance. At stake in the Bomber Command controversy was, among other things, the processes by which museum administrators of a publicly-funded institution engage stakeholders at all levels. The larger issue, one on which the majority of Canadians had little say – whether to build a Canadian War Museum rather than some other museum representing Canada’s past, such as a Portrait Gallery, a Canadian Democracy Museum, or a Women’s History Museum – was never at issue. Such a debate may well have generated a real history war.