In Search of Authenticity: Public Memory, Living History, and Folk Art in Modern Canada

IN THE SPRING OF 2017, WITH THE TEN EPISODES of the historical mini-series *Canada: The Story of Us* annoying CBC viewers from coast to coast, the feature film about Nova Scotian artist Maud Lewis, *Maudie,* became a surprise hit in theatres. With these evocations of the past on screens small and large, and with "Canada 150" commemorations of the sesquicentennial ubiquitous in the public sphere, it seems a fortuitous time to be reading books that deal with Canadians' attempts to connect authentically with their history. Yet, as the three books reviewed here might remind us – Cecilia Morgan's *Commemorating Canada*, Alan Gordon's *Time Travels*, and Erin Morton's *For Folk's Sake* – there have been many times over the last 150 years that would have been equally fortuitous.[1] If dramatic changes have unfolded in the territory known as Canada in the modern era, turning to the past – for affirmation, justification, consolation, a sense of belonging, or, more crassly, to make a buck – has been one element of continuity.

To have been an actor in a significant historical event is relatively uncommon, but to have participated in the commemoration, preservation, and dissemination of the past in the modern era must be nearly universal. Certainly, this is what my grade school class was engaged in when, among hundreds of others, we were trooped off to the local hockey rink to sing in celebration of Ontario's bicentennial in 1984. Why this was an anniversary (when 1791 seems a more likely origin year), and what singing *It's a long way to Tipperary* had to do with it remain mysteries to me, but at the time we obliviously sang as instructed. And, of course, there were the annual Remembrance Day ceremonies, exposure to various history textbooks, and, at the time of the Meech Lake debate, our teachers directed us in a kind of historical play for Anglo Ontarian parents that included dramatized notable events drawn from the history of French Canada (I recall wearing a fake beard and being a member of the "Order of Good Cheer"). There were class trips to the local museum as well as to a pioneer village where, in the case of the latter, costumed interpreters showed us how people lived in the olden times. For someone who was ten years old, the distance of a century in the past might as well have been time immemorial.

Was my central Canadian childhood typical? Certainly, in other places and other times, the events and the historical narratives were differently accented. But, as Cecilia Morgan points out in *Commemorating Canada: History, Heritage, and Memory, 1850s-1990s*, children have long been an important group both as "participants in and targets of commemoration" (158). This indicates the degree to

1 Alan Gordon, *Time Travel: Tourism and the Rise of the Living History Museum in Mid-Twentieth-Century Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016); Cecilia Morgan, *Commemorating Canada: History, Heritage, and Memory, 1850s-1990s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016); Erin Morton, *For Folk's Sake: Art and Economy in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016).

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which the multifaceted framing of the past in the present – the combination, Morgan suggests in her subtitle, of history, heritage, and memory – aims to influence the future. Sometimes literally carved in stone, commemorative practices select, highlight, bracket, and attempt to fix ideas about the past that, as each of these authors show, are rarely far removed from contemporary political, social, and economic agendas and aims.

Morgan's slim yet wide-ranging survey begins and ends by asking when, why, and for whom particular understandings of the past have been important. First Nations people created and transmitted narratives of the past – orally or materially through wampum or pictographs – long before the arrival of Europeans in North America. By the mid-19th century, Indigenous historians such as Kahkewaquonaby and Kahgegagahbowh wrote and published histories of their peoples.[2] These and other First Nations histories, Morgan argues, tend to focus on "survival and persistence in the face of dislocation and upheaval" (19). These narratives did not feature much (or at all!) in the histories written from the perspective of the settler societies that had caused the dislocation. By the middle of the 19th century, these, too, had produced written histories tracing the origins of different "national" identities. French Canadian historians, notably F.X. Garneau, focused on the history of New France and the *survivance* of French Canada post-conquest. Anglo writers saw history differently, with the happy calamity of British invasion saving French Canadians from the rule of despotic elites and a domineering church. Different areas of English Canada looked to different heroes – be they Loyalists, employees of the Hudson's Bay Company, or soldiers of the war of 1812 – but the common theme was the British tie that the colonies shared. These 19th-century histories, Morgan notes, should not be seen in isolation from other contemporary public engagements with the past, such as the mid-century emergence of museums, exhibitions, parades, and historical novels and poetry (notably the American Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1847 poem *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie*).

It was the half-century after Confederation that Morgan identifies as the "heyday" of public commemoration in Canada. From coast to coast, Morgan writes, Canadians "erected monuments, staged historical pageants and formed historical societies in efforts to remember and mark specific events and individuals" (44). This enthusiasm for the past emerged and was facilitated by changes associated with modernity: transportation and industrial developments, for example, enabled mass-spectacles of commemoration and the creation of large-scale monuments. This was also a moment of expansion for the Canadian state as it stretched its sovereignty across the prairie west and integrated millions of new immigrants. Commemorative narratives, whether they featured Champlain, Isaac Brock, Laura Secord, Joseph Brant, or another of those selected for memorialization, served a useful nation-building purpose.

The state, clearly, was interested and involved in "monument mania," but Morgan points out that most monuments were not spurred by government action.

2 Kahkewaquonaby (Peter Jones), *History of the Ojebway Indians; With Especial Reference To Their Conversion to Christianity* (London: A.W. Bennett, 1861); Kahgegagahbowh (G. Copway), *Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of the Ojibway Nation* (London: C. Gilpin, 1850).

Instead, government involvement usually came in response to pressure from voluntary groups such as historical societies or United Empire Loyalist associations. The class of people involved in these societies – affluent, civic-minded, and sufficiently well connected to ultimately enlist state support – was another product of modernity.

If the proliferating commemorations of Victorian- and Edwardian-era Canada amounted to a zenith in what H.V. Nelles calls the "art of nation building,"[3] the industrialized slaughter of the Great War and the profound divisions left in its wake also spurred a wave of public spectacles that purported to preserve memories and honour heroes. War memorials were not new to Canada. The war of 1812, as a myth of national origin, had been widely commemorated, and memorials had been erected to other conflicts such as the North West Rebellion and the South African war. Many of the tropes and forms of these memorials continued following the First World War, when "creating a memory both of the war itself and those Canadians who had served in it became almost an obsession for many Canadians" (81).

If Morgan offers readers examples of atypical memorials, her general observations follow the analysis of Jonathan Vance's *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (1997).[4] In spite of the "hideousness" of the First World War, Canadians expressed little scepticism or cynicism and "focused . . . relentlessly on the First World War as a noble and worthy sacrifice" (90-1). As Morgan notes, this pattern extended to Newfoundland as well: "Newfoundlanders worked hard to promote the memory of wartime participation as emblematic of the strength of Newfoundland nationalism and imperial dedication" (94). The public memory of the war in Newfoundland changed as Newfoundland's political independence changed, first with the end of responsible government in 1934 and then with Confederation in 1949. Coincident with and following these changes, the portrayal of Newfoundland's war effort became more tragic, paralleling a "long decline in Newfoundland's fortunes" (94). Morgan's argument here might be pushed to suggest that, had Newfoundland persisted as a self-governing dominion, the nationalist memorial narrative of the war would also have persisted. This counterfactual hypothesis is, of course, untestable, and is not one ventured by Morgan; but it is worth considering that in other dominions, namely New Zealand and Australia, a bloody disaster (Gallipoli) has remained a touchstone in nation-building mythology.[5] Given that *objectively* an event such as Beaumont Hamel *was* a tragedy, the trajectory of public memory in Newfoundland is suggestive of the power of the nation state in framing commemoration; without the nation, in other words, the need for the heroic national narrative disappears and what remains to remember is the unredemptive mass murder of the First World War.

Morgan resists this kind of analysis. Following Vance, she emphasizes that "the eagerness with which many Canadians acted on a voluntary basis to erect

3 H.V. Nelles, *The Art of Nation Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec's Tercentenary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

4 Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997).

5 See, for example, several of the essays in Jenny Macleod, ed., *Gallipoli: Making History* (New York: Frank Cass, 2004).

monuments, plant trees, purchase souvenirs, and turn out for Remembrance Day services suggests that these acts of commemorations were not directed by the state" (104). These acts are juxtaposed against less-widespread expressions of opposition to the war, "whether on the part of French-Canadian nationalists, the left or pacifists" (104). This juxtaposition conflates remembering the war with supporting the war effort, and implies that opponents of the war would likewise oppose commemoration of those killed in the conflict. But this was not necessarily the case. It is also worth considering the degree to which we can assess the relative power of the state in shaping commemorative practices by looking for it only in the *direct* action of government. Hegemonic ideology functions obliquely as well as directly, diffusely shaping the vernacular of appropriate memorialization. The available language and rituals that people might use to reconcile with grief, horror, and loss evolved in dialogue between dominant and subordinate groups, in which the former spoke with much greater volume and power. The latter – including, as Morgan notes in the context of the First World War, First Nations and Japanese Canadian veterans – might be memorialized by their own communities, signifying an equally "noble sacrifice" to support claims of equality or citizenship rights. These parallel, "us too" memorials do not question or undermine the dominant narrative of the war or the forms of commemoration used to frame it.

War memorials could be powerfully affecting for ordinary people. Morgan documents the case of Nova Scotian veteran Frank Ferguson, who travelled to the 1936 unveiling of the Vimy memorial with plenty of scepticism and even a little cynicism. What a "grand sight," he thought, to see so many returning to the "scene of their 'crimes'," when 20 years earlier they would have given anything to be "some other place" (86). What was most striking to Ferguson about France, in comparison to his previous experience, was the conspicuous absence of "MUD." Yet, at the unveiling of Walter Allward's elaborate monument, Ferguson thought it was the "most impressive thing I have ever witnessed" and he experienced a moment of "great pride" (86).[6]

One wonders what Ferguson might have thought when, three years after his Vimy pilgrimage, Canadians were again engaged in a world war. Morgan notes the relative paucity of monuments commemorating the Second World War. Most frequently, communities added the names of those killed to existing First World War monuments. It is possible, Morgan posits, "that the much smaller number of Canadians who died in the Second World War was the reason for this practice; higher casualty rates might have led to communities building separate monuments" (96). Given that there were 45,000 Canadians killed, this hypothesis suggests that communities must have had fairly exacting standards about the number of casualties that might merit a stand-alone monument. But, in fairness, Morgan is clear that this is only speculation and notes that the "history of the commemoration and collective memory of Canadian participation in the Second World War and Korea awaits its

6 For more on the politics of the Vimy memorial, see Ian McKay and Jamie Swift, *The Vimy Trap: Or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Great War* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016) and Dennis Duffy, "An Ideal Solution: Sculptural Politics, Canada's Vimy Memorial, and the Rhetoric of Nationalism," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 43, no. 2 (June 2010): 167-84.

historian" (96). This future historian might look to the number of "Memorial" arenas, theatres, and community centres across the country and to evidence such as the opinion poll cited by musician Marcus Adeney in 1945 showing that 90 per cent of Canadians favoured "useful" memorials over the statuary monuments of the Great War.[7] Meaningful commemoration meant building a peaceful postwar world for many veterans and citizens alike.[8] Articulating this hope became challenging with the onset of the Cold War, when "peace" became a concept associated with the new Communist enemy – in 1953, for instance, a drawing of a dove at an exhibition of the Canadian Society for Graphic Art led to public accusations of a Communist conspiracy – and the prospect of nuclear war threatened catastrophe on an unprecedented scale.[9]

It was during the Cold War that the Canadian government expanded its role in public history. While the origins of museums, archives, and state agencies (such as the Historic Sites and Monuments Board) date to an earlier era, the range and scale of state investment in heritage and preservation grew significantly in the postwar years and this coincided with a growing mass tourist industry. This confluence led to a proliferation of living history museums from coast to coast – pioneer villages, re-built forts, fur trading posts, and gold rush towns – a phenomenon that is the subject of Alan Gordon's *Time Travels*. Occasionally, links between this kind of museum and the Cold War values of the era were explicit. In 1954, a governing MPP in Ontario explained to the provincial legislature that pioneer village museums would teach modern visitors how "people with faith in God, with vision, courage and initiative can lay the foundations for great developments" and that these lessons defended "our system of free enterprise" (114). As Gordon explains, the impulses that created living history museums were not all nostalgic or antimodern as "the pioneer myth sat at the head of a chain of history that led to the present" (114).

Time Travels studies living history museums as "artifacts of history" in and of themselves, dating largely from the mid-20th century and most popular during the 1960s and 1970s. What was it about these postwar decades that in so many places in English Canada led to the re-enactment of the past in real or simulated historic settings? For Gordon, the popularity of these sites was connected to the experience of life under conditions of modernity: "mass consumer society distanced people from one another and removed a pre-modern, face-to-face community of the past . . . . Consumer behaviour commodified culture, providing choices for consumers but

7 Marcus Adeney, "Community Centres in Canada," *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada* 22, no. 2 (February 1945): 22, cited in L.B. Kuffert, *A Great Duty: Canadian Responses to Modern Life and Mass Culture in Canada, 1939-1967* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 98.

8 A number of Canadian artists, including New Brunswick's Miller Brittain and Fred Ross, produced memorial murals along these lines. See Kirk Niergarth, "Memorial of War, Memorial of Hope: Contemplating the Creation, Destruction, and Re-creation of Fred Ross's Mural *The Destruction of War, Rebuilding the World Through Education*, 1948, 1954, and 2011," *Labour/Le Travail* 72 (Fall 2013): 149-75.

9 "Artist Charges Reds Rigged Show," *Toronto Telegram,* 18 March 1953. For the broader context and the public vilification faced by Canadians in organizations such as the Peace Congress, see Ian McKay and Jamie Swift, *Warrior Nation: Rebranding Canada in an Age of Anxiety* (Toronto: BTL, 2012), 127-31.

depriving them of intrinsic value" (15). Authenticity was what was sought at living history museums, an authenticity that was felt as much as known. Citing David Lowenthal, Gordon observes that heritage "*feels* true" because it "confirms what people want to believe." History at living history museums "felt authentic because it supplemented the construction and, more importantly, the affirmation of collective identities by contributing to the plotted narrative of the community's formation" (13).[10]

One of the largest of the many ironies Gordon explores in *Time Travels* is the fact that living museums were not only a response to postwar modernity but also materially a product of it. Efforts to preserve the past "relied utterly on the technology and systems of modernity to recreate it and on the modern tourist industry to sustain it" (15). By the late 1950s, history was an important part of national and provincial tourist promotion. Large-scale reconstructions, such as the Halifax Citadel and Fort Henry, "provided models for many of the smaller museums that sprang up across the landscape" (103). At the same time, urban expansion and development, highway construction, and flood and waterways management threatened many historic buildings and offered opportunities for their relocation into new "authentic" living museum settings. The development of King's Landing near Fredericton, New Brunswick, for example, was spurred by the construction of the Mactaquac Dam in the mid-1960s. Proximity to the Trans-Canada highway was the deciding factor in choosing a location for the relocated and newly constructed buildings that would emulate a "typical," if artificial, 19th-century settlement (143-6).

Re-creating the past required considerable modern expertise, and a new class of museum professionals emerged to provide it. Of these, Ronald Way was certainly the most exceptional. Way graduated with a history degree from Queen's University and planned to write a master's thesis on fortifications on the Niagara frontier when he was hired to supervise the reconstruction of Fort Henry in 1935 (64). This job proved a springboard into a decades-long career as Canada's leading expert on historical restoration that would see Way influence the development of living history museums from Fort William, to Upper Canada Village, to Louisbourg – with many stops in between. Professionals such as Way – liaisons between the academy, the bureaucracy, and tourism industry – took leadership positions in the heritage and museum field in the postwar period that had previously been performed by women, often as volunteers. This gender dynamic is also explored by Andrea Terry in the case of historic home museums in Canada.[11]

Those experts charged with re-creating the past in living history museums faced a number of challenges. None was more prevalent than the challenge of balancing educative functions and commercial imperatives. Fears about the "Disneyfication" of history run like a refrain through *Time Travels*. Ronald Way insisted on the use of some original cut stones in the reconstruction of Louisbourg because they would signify for visitors the difference "between a true restoration and the Disneyland

10 Italics in original; see David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

11 See Andrea Terry, "Gender, Canadian Nationhood and 'Keeping House': The Cultural Bureaucratisation of Dundurn Castle in Hamilton, Ontario, 1900-1960s," *Gender & History* 25, no. 1 (April 2013): 47-64 and Andrea Terry, *Family Ties: Living History in Canadian House Museums* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015).

approach" (174). As Gordon points out, Way's recommendations amounted to a "mish-mash of historic structures scattered across the length and breadth of France but sprinkled with materials salvaged from the archaeological site" (175). Way must have felt well justified when journalists emphasized the original stones as evidence of the accuracy of the restoration (175).

Given that it was re-created on its original site and supported by a remarkably well-educated (and generously funded) research team, Louisbourg had stronger claims to authenticity than many of Canada's living history museums. Gordon calls it the "most sophisticated example of the genre." Yet even here, Gordon finds, visitors "expected the past to be entertaining and to conform to their values" (190). And crass concessions to "Disneyfied" commercialism were evident in other historic sites, such as the stereotyped frontier, gold rush town of Barkerville in British Columbia or Heritage Park in Calgary in which allegedly pre-1914 waitress uniforms in the Wainwright Hotel were based on those seen in a 1946 Hollywood musical starring Judy Garland and Angela Lansbury (129).

While Gordon does point out a number of anachronisms and inaccuracies in the re-created past at living history museums, the focus of the book is on the choices and selections made at these sites that reflected the social, cultural, political and intellectual values of mid-20th-century Canada. The re-created world of postwar pioneer villages was "far from the norm of nineteenth-century British North America" (150). Most featured pioneer self-sufficiency linked to agriculture, but many re-created villages were "remarkably commercial." Doon, for example, "was more of a shopping district than a village": it had more shops than homes (150). Property ownership was emphasized over tenancy. And, since few museums had banks or law offices, there could be "no mortgages, no bankruptcies, and therefore no foreclosures" (151). There were railways and canals, but "no navvies and consequently, no strikes" (151). Nearly every museum had a church, but usually only one so that there could be no sectarian violence.

Male interpreters played roles associated with commerce or artisan labour while their female counterparts were in the home performing domestic labour. Visiting school children would study in a one-room school. As Gordon observes, this pattern "reinforced traditional gender roles that would be easily recognizable to post-war middle-class suburbanites" (154). With few exceptions, living history museums imagined a past without conflict that resonated with the conservatism and consumerism of the post-war present.

Gordon shows how more specific currents of the era influenced living history museums. As the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism conducted its research and hearings, the idea of two founding peoples – French and English – manifested itself in the recognition of French Canadian history at various living history sites in English Canada, such as Sainte-Marie among the Hurons. French and English Canadians worked together in the reimagined fur trade at museums such as Fort William – museums that adapted the Laurentian thesis to suit burgeoning 1960s-era Canadian nationalism. The idea that the French presence and influence continued into the present day, however, was less thoroughly embraced. Gordon writes that outside of Quebec the "overwhelming message that living history museums teach about French Canada is one of loss" and of "conflict, not cohabitation" (258).

Ethnic minorities complicated the discourse of biculturalism, and as the Canadian state moved to adopt multiculturalism as national policy some ethnic communities turned to living history museums to celebrate their own heritage and culture. Both the Ukrainian and Mennonite heritage villages, in Alberta and Manitoba respectively, and the Highland Village Museum in Nova Scotia, were intended to express distinctive community identities. But they were also, as Gordon points out, signs of integration. The settler stories told in these museums were basically akin to bland, populist versions of the past at other pioneer museums. Churning butter looks much the same in Steinbach, Manitoba, as it does in Upper Canada Village or Kings Landing. Simultaneously "othering" by locating the historical development of a cultural group in an isolated enclave and closely resembling "mainstream" pioneer fantasies, these museums "reflected the spirit and aspirations of modern multiculturalism as much as they represented the histories of Ukrainian, Mennonite and Scottish Canadians" (277).

Living history museums belatedly confronted another challenge to Canadian unity. By the late 1960s, the pushback of Canada's Indigenous people against colonial historical narratives became increasingly difficult to ignore. In response, some living history museums attempted to modify programs that had largely been premised on the myth of the "vanishing Indian" doomed to post-contact extinction. In keeping with this myth, some museums had included replica "Indian villages" or displays of artifacts but these were not animated with living interpreters. Common practice, Gordon writes, was to create an "Aboriginal ghost town" (278). In at least one case, even this kind of inclusion was a step too far: remarkably, Kings Landing, a settlement entirely invented, rejected the idea of a re-created "Indian encampment" because it would be "anachronistic" (278).

At Fort Steele, where the relations between settlers and Indigenous people should have been an obvious focus of interpretation – "after all," Gordon points out, "confrontation between the Ktunaxa and settlers . . . brought Sam Steele to British Columbia" – the displays and attractions focused on subsequent settler culture (292). Fort Steele's founding moment was addressed in a 1979 museum pamphlet in a "manner that conformed to Hollywood ideas about savage Indians," pitting the heroic Mountie Steele upholding "white man's law" against "lawless and even murderous" Indigenous people (292-3). At other living history museums during the 1970s, more positive efforts were made to incorporate First Nations stories into their recreation of the past. At Fort William, for example, First Nations were acknowledged as a central component of fur trade society. In spite of these efforts, in Gordon's judgement, "living history museums continued to stress stories that reinforced colonialism and reflected mainstream beliefs" (291). At fur-trade-themed museums, the depiction of contact between cultures "implicitly relegated First Nations to supporting roles in the development of European Canada" (291). Since most living history museums were built expressly to celebrate European settlement, their very structure made the incorporation of First Nations histories challenging if not "doomed to tokenism" (294). Attempts in this direction, if well meaning, "continued the colonization of Aboriginal culture in many ways. . . . The addition of Aboriginal stories simply inserted one more culture into the narrative of the national march toward the modern incarnation of multicultural Canada" (293).

Gordon discusses one significant exception to colonizing depictions of Indigenous histories at living history museums: the ‘Ksan Historical Village and Museum. Emerging, ironically, out of a salvage anthropology paradigm that sought to preserve the material culture of the Gitx̱an people, the Skeena Treasure House was expanded to become a re-created Native village in 1970. Crucially, ‘Ksan was opened as *both* a museum to preserve artifacts *and* a cultural centre that served contemporary artists and the Gitx̱an community (300-1). At ‘Ksan, Gordon writes, “traditional ceremonies and art forms maintain their social and cultural content because they remain potent in the culture of the Gitx̱an” (294). In this way, ‘Ksan was fundamentally unlike other living history museums in Canada. It suggests “ways to change how communities and museums might tell stories” by drawing together the past with the “lived experience of the present.” This kind of dialogue seems difficult to imagine in the simulated or reconstructed landscapes of living history museums that “evoke a journey back in time,” offering tourists a respite from modernity and a satisfying experience, however artificially manufactured, of “authenticity” (302).

As Ian McKay has amply demonstrated, the quest for authenticity does not necessarily require the time travel simulated in living history museums. Alternatively, the feeling of authenticity can be found through engagement with the “folk” still living a “simple life” – people who personify the culture of the past in the present. In his *Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia*, McKay documents the way in which antimodernists sought out the songs, stories, and homespun products of the “folk” living on the outskirts of modernity in rural Nova Scotia.[12] The appeal of these encounters was eminently marketable and became tied to the development of the Nova Scotian tourism industry, an industry in which, as McKay and Robin Bates have shown elsewhere, history and heritage was a particularly significant part of the provincial brand.[13] If antimodern in sentiment, cultural brokers such as Helen Creighton and Mary Black helped to bring folk song collections and hooked rugs, respectively, to market in clearly modern and modernizing ways.

To a degree, Erin Morton’s *For Folk’s Sake: Art and Economy in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* continues the story of *Quest of the Folk* through to the end of the 20th century. If McKay shows, through Creighton’s bowdlerized folksongs or Black’s standardized hooked rugs, the production of “the folk” being tailored or appropriated for the masses, Morton highlights, from the 1960s through the 1990s, how folk art in Nova Scotia became celebrated as an aesthetic category worthy of collection and display in fine art contexts. This process provided cultural intermediaries and institutions with an alternative method of creating value through the artistic labour of untrained “folk” creators. In the fine art economy, instead of an essentialized and undifferentiated folk creating typical souvenir art for tourists, still-

12 Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994).

13 Ian McKay and Robin Bates, *In the Province of History: The Making of the Public Past in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010).

essentialized but differentiated individual folk artists produced atypical works that were exhibited in gallery settings and sought after by wealthy collectors. Collins Eisenhauer, for example, carved dozens of swans for sale, which were clearly folk art intended for tourists, but carvings such as *Woman and Swan* (c. 1975) in which a swan appears to be performing oral sex on a seated naked woman: this was folk *art*!

Chris Huntington, a key collector and promoter in Morton's study, was akin to Helen Creighton in that he, too, travelled to "discover" the folk in their natural environment in rural Nova Scotia. Unlike Creighton, he was not seeking their versions of venerable traditions, songs, and legends. Rather, Huntington sought out folk producing original or creative, yet still rustic and unsophisticated, art. He supported the artists he discovered both financially and psychologically, and coached them to produce works destined to appeal to collectors or galleries. As in Gordon's account of living history museums, ironies abound in Morton's history of "fine" folk art. The cover image of Morton's book, *Blue Jay* (1968) by Ralph Boutilier, was one of Huntington's discoveries, one that Huntington believed was responsible for launching Boutilier's career as a folk artist (50). In 1997 it was discovered that Boutilier's blue jay whirligig was based on plans found in a home mechanics magazine. This definitely detracted from the originality, and hence the value, of Boutilier's creation. Huntington's expert interventions and advice to artists, as in 1976 when he convinced Bubby Mooers to turn a carving of a life-sized man into a woman, then to reduce the size of its breasts, then to paint it white, seem to have had no negative impact on the perceived authenticity of "naively" created works of folk art (59-60).

Huntington's work was highly influential in the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's (AGNS) acquisition of a folk art collection and in its inaugural 1976 exhibition, *Folk Art of Nova Scotia*. Morton explains the relationship between federal and regional cultural policy and the relatively late emergence of this institution in the 20th century. This context influenced the degree to which folk art became an integral part of its collection. What Morton labels "historical presentism" – the "discourse that places folk art in a rapidly passing historical moment . . . even while the category continues to be an important conceptual marker for the future of a regional economy and cultural sector" (12) – led institutions such as the AGNS to present contemporary folk art as central to Nova Scotian tradition and culture.

The "fine" folk art tradition celebrated by the AGNS during the 1970s was an invented one, or at least a selective one, insofar as it occluded the history of more conventional fine art production in early 20th century Nova Scotia. Painters and sculptors producing for gallery exhibition were drawn from or patronized by the province's elites and middle class. Training and production was centred most obviously in its largest urban centre. In Halifax artists studied at the Victoria School of Art and Design, where Arthur Lismer was principal from 1916 to 1919 and Elizabeth Nutt, another English-born landscape painter, succeeded him and ran the school until 1943. As early as 1908, local volunteers and enthusiasts formed the Nova Scotia Museum of Fine Arts to collect historic and modern works of art and began lobbying government to construct a dedicated building as an art gallery to display what was a conventional fine art – as opposed to folk art – collection (63-73). Such a gallery, given the cultural production of its proponents, was surely

intended to demonstrate that Nova Scotia was sophisticated, urbane, and peer to other centres with art museums elsewhere in Canada and beyond.[14]

The goal of a provincial gallery in Halifax was not realized for more than half a century, and it is this timing, related to the more general regional economic marginalization over the same timeframe, that put the AGNS on a different trajectory than public galleries in other urban settings. In 1968, federal money, linked to the centennial, was granted to the province to promote local culture and create a gallery. By this time, the art of Lismer's generation was long out of fashion and what had been claimed to be a progressive evolution of modern art – from the social realism of the 1930s, through abstract expressionism, to post-painterly abstraction – seemed to be progressing to nowhere, save to irony. The advantage of folk art as a cornerstone of the new AGNS collection was that, aside from being local, it was also economical. It was far cheaper to collect Collins Eisenhauer than Pablo Picasso or even Arthur Lismer (75).

At the same time as the AGNS was born, with a folk art focus that would most likely have appalled Elizabeth Nutt, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) was being reinvented as an avant garde fine arts institution specializing in conceptual art, where the idea rather than the material form of art was emphasized. The highly material practice of folk artists would seem antithetical to this trend. But, in practice, as Morton explains, the narrative of Nova Scotia as a cultural "blank slate," with no fine arts tradition but where nevertheless original creative work was possible, was one that suited both NSCAD professors and folk art promoters alike. Gerald Ferguson, professor and promoter both, was a conceptual artist who collected the work of Nova Scotian folk artists including Collins Eisenhauer. Ferguson's intellectual understanding of art provided legitimacy for the celebration of works such as Eisenhauer's life-size carving of Kentucky Fried Chicken's Colonel Sanders. "*The Colonel*," Ferguson observed, "is an idiosyncratic expression to satisfy Eisenhauer's' creative energies . . . and in this respect, is very close to the individualistic spirit in much of contemporary art" (94). There was a certain symbiosis between the stories sustaining both a conceptual art future and a folk art past: both needed to imagine that Nova Scotia was a cultural backwater, unburdened by a history of modernism or of modernity.

Like Marxism, folk art's death has been announced many times. As Morton documents, one of the consistent themes in discourse surrounding contemporary folk artists in Nova Scotia was the trope that they were one of the last of a dying breed. Akin to the "Vanishing Indian," the folk artist, eking out a living in rural labour but expressing creativity through original art, was an endangered species doomed to extinction in the late capitalist present: these pronouncements were repeated from the 1970s through the 1990s.

Despite being always near death, government cultural programs of the late 1960s and 1970s sponsored regional efforts to preserve and promote cultural production,

14 This intention was evident in other Canadian contexts where art galleries and museums were created in the first half of the 20th century. For cases in Western Canada, see Anne Whitelaw, *Spaces and Places for Art: Making Art Institutions in Western Canada, 1912-1990* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

particularly in places such as Nova Scotia that were, in the eyes Gerard Pelletier, federal minister of Cultural Affairs from 1968 to 1975, "cultural deserts" (135). These programs, supporting institutions such as the AGNS, spurred what Huntington regarded in retrospect as a "golden age of contemporary folk art" (134). This kind of funding began to disappear in the neoliberal 1980s and 1990s, and so new corporate sponsorship and revenue-generating strategies were required to make up the shortfall. Morton illustrates this trend in the second part of her book, which studies the case of Maud Lewis (1903-1970) and the way in which the AGNS has and continues to capitalize on the legacy of her life and work.

In the wake of the film *Maudie*, the broad strokes of Lewis's biography are perhaps now better known than ever; but even during the last few years of her life her story was circulated widely by print journalists, the CBC, and the NFB. Hers was a story of uplift. In the public version of her life, Lewis "seemed to triumph over obstacles such as disability, gendered economic marginalization, and rurality through the joyful optimism of her small painted panel board landscapes" (176). Living with her marginally employed husband Everett beside a highway in a tiny house without running water or electricity, Lewis was content, telling an interviewer in 1964 "I don't need anything much more than I've got" (184).

Early biographical narratives stressed this optimism: even if her life was an obvious anachronism and even if she, like many other rural Nova Scotians, lived with economic insecurity, she was, after all, *happy* and, through her art, modestly self-sufficient. After Maude's and Everett's deaths, biographies took on more tragic tones, acknowledging her social isolation, and questioning the degree to which Maud was supported by Everett. But the upshot of the narrative was still to celebrate Lewis's success in overcoming adversity and creating through her paintings a "world without shadows" (177). By the late 1990s, the AGNS was presenting Lewis as "Canada's best loved folk artist" – a status achieved through several decades of promotion and collection by the AGNS among other state and private cultural intermediaries.

After her death, efforts began to preserve the house she had lived in and decoratively painted both inside and out. These efforts originated in the local Digby community, but ultimately AGNS took possession of the house. With the significant corporate sponsorship of Scotiabank, it ultimately came to be displayed in a newly expanded gallery space in Halifax. The house display followed a touring retrospective of her work, *The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis* (1997), also sponsored by Scotiabank, that AGNS CEO (note the job title) Bernard Riordan hoped would make Lewis the "Anne of Green Gables of Nova Scotia in terms of tourism and cultural industry" (248). As Morton observes: "By the neoliberal 1990s, it was clear that folk art promised an expanded source of revenue for both the gallery and the province as a whole and, at the same time, offered branding benefits for corporate sponsors" (252). Maud Lewis as a brand had become valuable in ways that Maud Lewis as a person selling paintings at the roadside for $5 each could never have imagined.

Lewis was in some ways a piece worker. On a daily basis she produced paintings for sale – sometimes made-to-order, sometimes reproducing her own work. In the era of mechanical reproduction, however, control over the copyright of Lewis's images, which the AGNS obtained, allowed for the mass production of souvenirs,

calendars, and postcards while the originals – and possibly fakes (282-3) – in the gallery's collection increased in value astronomically through the broad international propagation of the Lewis brand. By the late 1990s, Morton asserts, "even if visitors to Nova Scotia could no longer purchase original works directly from the Lewises' painted house in Marshalltown, the marketing team at the AGNS had made it possible for them to purchase branded reproductions from her restored home in the Halifax gallery." Thus, the gallery "confidently tapped into the Lewis past to find potential for the present" in a neoliberal economic context (291).

Sentimental attachment to folk art continues in Nova Scotia and shows little sign of abating. "As the present continues to deliver anxieties," Morton writes, "successive pasts will always offer refuge and comforting mythology" (301). Taken together, these books by Morgan, Gordon, and Morton offer much reason for scepticism about such comforts. The quest for authenticity is not only quixotic, but the questors actually inscribe their myths of the past upon the present. As Gordon writes of living history museums, "By building three dimensional representations of past environments and by populating them with costumed actors, they not only shaped understandings of life in the past, they also manufactured the material evidence that supported those understandings" (103). Likewise, memorials or gallery collections materially shape and delimit future understandings of the past.

Cecilia Morgan's work acknowledges the politics of cultural selection and the patterns of discrimination that have left marginalized groups underrepresented in the commemorative landscape. And yet *Commemorating Canada* ends with the somewhat optimistic observation that in the 21st century a diverse array of groups – in terms of gender, sexuality, race, and class – are engaged in forms of commemoration and public history. Certainly these examples reflect a more diverse and tolerant 21st-century Canada, but do they not also map the aspirations, politics, and values of the present onto the past just as selectively as previous generations? For Gordon, it will not be enough for living history museums to simply "graft" more inclusive attitudes onto their artificial environments: "They must reveal history as a process and must also insert themselves into that process" (312).

As both the Stephen Harper- and Justin Trudeau-led federal governments have shown, the Canadian state and its institutions remain interested in shaping public memory through spectacles, symbolic gestures, and heritage promotion (especially through the recent "Canada 150" celebrations). If 21st-century national narratives are less nativist than their predecessors, even a progressive liberal nationalism results, ultimately, in a conception of "us" and "them." As Morgan notes, we must continue to critically examine why particular pasts get remembered while others are obscured. Certainly, when invited to see a tiny house in an urban art gallery as a symbol of the optimism and ultimate triumph of a rural folk-artist heroine, we ought, following Morton, to ask many critical questions indeed.

The impulse to use history to construct notions of identity is so ubiquitous and so apparently popular that it might be, as Morgan calls it in her concluding paragraph, a "need" (184). Intellectual interrogation of the commemorative landscape hardly undermines its sway over popular conceptions of the past. As Carl Becker famously warned American historians in 1931, "Berate him as we will for not reading our books, Mr. Everyman is stronger than we are, and sooner or later we must adapt our knowledge to his necessities. Otherwise he will leave us to . . . cultivate a species of

dry professional arrogance growing out of the thin soil of antiquarian research."[15] For academic historians to successfully intervene in public history will require more than participating in what have become normal practices of commemoration: I am thinking here of the expert consultant, verifying the accuracy of this plaque or that documentary. After all, as Gordon shows, the accumulation of many realistic details can still produce extraordinarily misleading interpretations. What is required instead are alternative forms: 'Ksan is one promising example, *activehistory.ca* might be another. The experience of the past in the present can never *be* authentic, but the desire for an experience that *feels* authentic and the perception that this kind of engagement with the past can provide a momentary respite from inauthentic present-day life are real phenomena that can be understood historically in relation to social and economic processes. Forms of public memory that confront, rather than nostalgically retreat from, the realities of life under conditions of modernity would provide a very different living history to that on offer in pioneer museums of the 20th century.

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15 Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (1932): 234.