

REMARKS AT THE OPENING SESSION OF CANADA'S MATERIAL HISTORY: A FORUM

by F.J. Thorpe

When I first thought about what I might say on this occasion I had not yet read Gregg Finley's cogent article in the Canadian Museums Association *Gazette* for Spring 1978, "The Museum and the Historian: Toward a New Partnership." Fortunately for me a colleague has drawn it to my attention. Before going on with a few words of my own, I would like to express my agreement with much of what Finley has written. That, of course, does not commit him to what I am going to say!

Since at least the mid 1960s, two significant trends in the presentation and interpretation of Canadian history have been apparent: first, in Canadian universities there has been a growing preference in teaching and research for social over political and constitutional history; second, there has been a remarkable blossoming of history museums and of history components within the major Canadian museums. Although the roots of both these trends can be traced to earlier decades, they represent significant departures from tradition and, to a considerable extent, they have developed independently of one another.

For the first three or four decades of this century, university historians emphasized political and constitutional history. They researched Canadian society "from the top down," from the leaders, who created the most accessible documentary sources, to the followers, who were chiefly of interest to local antiquarians and amateur genealogists. "History," for both French- and English-speaking scholars, comprised great deeds performed by great men (and very few women). To many of them, particularly the English-speaking historians, the history of Canada was essentially her constitutional evolution, "progressing" from authoritarianism through the stages of representative government, responsible government, Confederation, and Dominion status, down to twentieth-century political democracy.

To the extent that museums in Canada were interested in Canadian history at all, they reflected the same preoccupation. With the exception of military museums, which were less elitist, these institutions collected memorabilia from the great and the almost-great, together with decorative objects from the socially prominent. But these collections were, by and large, adjuncts to archives or departments of the decorative arts. With some marked exceptions, they were not consciously "historical" in the sense of attempting to portray history. And given the climate of opinion at the time, it is not in the least surprising that few real "history" museums of

any size existed in Canada. (Perhaps it is fortunate for the curators of historical museums today that this was so. History museums in some countries tended to be showcases for state propaganda, extolling the virtues of a monarchy, republic, or totalitarian régime. Canadians of earlier decades had little compulsion to glorify their past in that particular way.)

Two museum traditions predominated: (1) the art gallery, and its junior partner the museum of the decorative arts, and (2) the museum of natural science. The archaeological and ethnographic studies of native peoples in museums were usually an outgrowth of natural science rather than of social studies. For example, the National Museum of Canada was an offspring of the Geological Survey of Canada whose scientists collected palaeontological, zoological, botanical, ethnological, and archaeological specimens — approximately in that order. The legitimate, scientific thirst for a knowledge of our native peoples so dominated whatever interest there was in "human history" for many decades that there was little place for historical studies *per se*.

History museums today may depart from the practice of both kinds of traditional museum by juxtaposing objects (artifacts, replicas, pictures, maps, documents, etc.) and other historical data in order to illustrate a particular social phenomenon or situation. At the same time, in universities and elsewhere, the historical study of social structure and social change goes hand in hand with a comparable analysis of scientific and technological history. In order to illustrate this, one has only to think of the increased knowledge of Canada's architectural heritage and of the vigorous movement to preserve its best examples. In Canada, as in the United States, the study of preservation technology in the architectural sense parallels and often overlaps the study of the conservation of artifacts and works of art. Thus, the presentation of Canadian social history in museums is limited only by available resources — including the combined ingenuity of the specialists in various disciplines — and certainly not by the mere availability of "originals" in museum collections. Objects have become (or are becoming) not so much ends in themselves as the means of illustration and explanation.

If the priority of history over objects makes it imperative for museum staff to participate in research on Canadian social history, it is no less imperative for historians outside the museums to support vigorously the unique contribution museums are in a position to make to the discipline. Social history is quite incomplete without the study and presentation of its material aspect, and museums are doing this in conjunction with the collection, conservation, and classification of historical objects. While material history can only benefit from adapting the research methods of social history to its purposes, social history must similarly benefit from according full recognition to good museum studies in material history.