

# TOWARD A THREE-DIMENSIONAL VIEW OF THE CANADIAN PAST: CAN MATERIAL HISTORY TAKE US THERE?

by Robert D. Watt

In answer to the question raised in the title I would say — not by itself and not in the way it is often done. Despite considerable improvements in the quality of historical collections and historical exhibitions over the last fifteen years, too much material history activity is still uninformed by scholarship and unsupported by the right kind of purpose. Rather than provide specific examples I have tried to give an overview of certain results of this situation in the following poem:

## *The Plastic Canoe: or the Anatomy of a Restoration Revealed*

*They examined the future and what did they see  
But a chain of fur forts stretching from sea to sea,  
Their stones cut so well, their logs trimmed with care,  
In hope that Joe Tourist soon would be there.  
All levels of government, and private souls too,  
Had contributed heavily so as not to make do  
With a simple display, and a label or two.  
A Complete Restoration, nothing more, nothing less,  
Will suffice to show everyone we do it best.  
But wait, what is that we see right up close?  
It's a plastic canoe, with fur bales of brown shag  
And two paddles you'd swear were right out of a mag  
Titled, Frontier Canucks, Tales of the True North,  
And the truth slowly dawns,  
You've been well had, of course.*

*A Royal Commission with budget to match,  
Tackled the question with unusual dispatch.  
In three days the answer was ready for view,  
And the world learned, amazed, of mistakes none too few,  
Of plans far too costly, of ideas too grand,  
Of reports, endless studies, and chains of command.  
In the midst of this welter of talent so fine  
With everyone's reputation being laid on the line,  
They discovered the error, a serious blow,  
They should have known better, but didn't, you know.  
There were estimators, designers, conservators, too,  
Administrators, budgeters, hidden from view,  
And up front the guides, interpreters all,  
And for visitors Mondays, the belle of the ball;  
But back at the start, when they should have been asked,  
For their input, ideas, and thoughts on the past,  
The historians waited, in vain, and alone,  
For the jingling, jangling ring on their phone.*

*But there is still time to correct the mistakes,  
And material history need not be half-baked;  
We've a great role to play and a great job to do,  
And the success of it all will depend most on you.*

My concern is that we are moving toward a three-dimensional view of our past that is not as historically sound as it could be or should be. This

concern applies to what I would term the formal view, where artifacts are interpreted in exhibitions and publications, and the informal view, where artifacts are gathered together into collections without being presented to colleagues or the public in any organized way. The latter is as important as the former, since, in broad terms if not in specific detail, a history collection should be a historical essay in embryo, where well-considered principles of selection have gradually built up a group of the most significant objects from a particular part of the past. The collections become a resource for further study as well as a result of study.

Before suggesting certain reforms to current practices, I want to make one point. The term "three-dimensional view of the Canadian past" is used to denote the sum total of the impressions and statements conveyed by all the historical exhibitions, collections, and restorations wherever they occur in Canada, together with the published and unpublished documents arising from them. It is not in any way meant to suggest a unified view or a unity of views.

In suggesting ways in which the quality of material history activity in Canada could be improved, I also hope to make it clear that I believe material history and history are complementary parts of an overall effort to understand our past and preserve the significant parts of it. In the context of this discussion, history will sometimes be narrowly defined as studies of the past based on the forms of evidence traditionally preserved by archives. Material history refers to the development of collections of artifacts as well as the history that results from the study and exhibition of them.

As most of you know, Hugh McLennan's famous phrase, "Two Solitudes," could aptly describe the present state of relations between the groups which currently engage in these two kinds of historical activity. Private anguish over this state of affairs has become public, most recently in a very thoughtful article by Gregg Finley, "The Museum and the Historian: Toward a New Partnership."<sup>1</sup> What Finley and others have suggested is that there is mutual benefit to be gained by a closer collaboration between historians using documentary sources and those studying objects. In Finley's words, both groups have a common interest in achieving "a clearer perception of the past," and failure to cooperate results in lost opportunities for more "authentic and accurate" interpretations.<sup>2</sup>

Without suggesting that he is incorrect in challenging historians to "consider artifacts as a useful form of historical evidence,"<sup>3</sup> thereby giving added depth and richness to social histories in particular, I believe the opportunities and the need for reform are even greater as far as material history is concerned. In a nutshell, I would agree that material history should be considered a legitimate province of historical enquiry generally, as are political, economic, social, and intellectual history, and that we should spend most of our energies improving the quality of effort in that area, rather

than spending a lot of time worrying about the continued disregard for objects evinced by university and community college historians. If pressed, I would have to admit that I believe that it is possible to develop a coherent and defensible view of the Canadian past without studying collections of artifacts. By the same token, I do not believe it is possible to develop a coherent and defensible three-dimensional view of the Canadian past without historical research which is purposeful and scholarly. I feel university historians will continue to write without reference to artifacts, even though some of their work would be greatly enriched by studies of artifacts. I also feel that artifacts are in urgent need of in-depth historical enquiry if their true significance is to be realized and set forth for scholars and the general public alike.

For me, the most important part of the Finley article was the challenge issued to curators and other material historians to think more carefully about the nature of artifacts and in so doing create a more meaningful documentation of them, thereby permitting richer interpretations to be placed upon them.

At the core of this argument is a vital point set out by Steve Beckow<sup>4</sup> and reworked by Gregg Finley. For Beckow, artifacts must be described in terms of their function and in terms of the values their creators attached to that activity. "When we work with artifacts, we are not attempting to know them in their physical fullness, but in their cultural meaningfulness."<sup>5</sup>

It is not sufficient to describe something in physical terms; in fact such a description is positively misleading. Beckow goes on to state that "explaining artifacts exclusively by their composition and form has been termed by anthropologists the fallacy of reductionism. In committing it, we are saying that higher level reality (in this case, the culture) can be explained simply and fully in terms of lower-level reality (the physical). But this is clearly not so. A watch cannot be explained without references to ideas of time, converted motion, scheduling, and so on."<sup>6</sup>

Yet Finley emphasizes, and I agree entirely, that most documenting of historical artifacts finishes once a physical description has been set out. "The result is that most artifacts are documented in terms of physical characteristics and given a date to represent the period of manufacture and/or use, and here the process stops. Little time is spent considering the relationship the artifact may have had to its historical context."<sup>7</sup>

Both Finley and Beckow would assert that the work of the curator as material historian is just beginning once a physical description is complete. Beckow claims that "the function of the museum scholar or curator is to recover the ideas used by men to understand their world by preserving human artifacts and then by unlocking their meaning within its original context and with its original associations."<sup>8</sup>

A wholehearted acceptance of this view would greatly improve the quality of material history activity in this country. In the first place, any effort to analyze artifacts in the way outlined by Beckow must bring material historians into closer contact with the literary and archival sources being used to write history in universities and colleges. Although the use of such sources will undoubtedly assist in defining more exactly the physical and functional character of artifacts, the real benefit derived will be the insight these sources provide into the historical context and various associations that are essential for a complete documentation of the artifact. Far from suggesting that the material history object is unimportant, I am emphasizing what Finley and Beckow have already affirmed, that is, recognition of the vital importance of the artifact as historical evidence must be matched with an equal concern to identify both its physical *and* cultural values. The latter can rarely be discovered by examining only the physical properties of the individual object. Similar pieces must be studied, documentary evidence which will shed the light on its manufacture must be analyzed, and, above all, the object must be assessed in light of what is known about the society of which it is a part. In other words, the material historian in Canada, whether a curator, interpreter, or researcher, must have more than a passing acquaintance with the history of the periods and regions that produced the objects under consideration.

I do not believe, however, that a more correct, more complex view of the artifact and its historical significance is in itself sufficient to ensure a historically valid, three-dimensional view of the Canadian past. The other major requirement is that those responsible for the development of historical collections must take a more active role in this development, based on a clearer appreciation of the relationship of the collection to the history of their community. At present, too much collecting activity is too passive; the assessment of an object begins only when it is brought through the door and offered as a donation. Somewhat better is the situation where a curator actively seeks out objects or classes of objects. However, this effort is rarely rooted in an overall plan which has identified historically significant objects according to the study of a period or region. Too often the developer of the collection is object-centred and more of an expert in the physical and functional importance of an artifact than in its relationship to broad historical themes. We all know that there are pressing physical reasons for limiting the number of objects collected. Surely, however, scale and square metres of space are the wrong parameters here. All historical collections, held by whatever agency, should be developed according to an overall plan. This plan should be established and continually refined in relation to current historical research. In the long term, a historical collection should contain those artifacts which are the unique and representative expressions, in three-dimensional form, of some part of the Canadian past. This presupposes an active programme of acquisition, solidly rooted in research which automatically takes into account important historical themes and sub-

themes and which may well be set forth by historians working with non-artifactual evidence. Also presumed is a full acceptance by material historians of the dual nature of the artifact, where values are related to physical properties and cultural attributes. Only in this way can we ensure that we have saved the "right" things, in the sense of the historically significant artifacts, and avoid the "mathom-house" syndrome of amassing, like the hobbits in *Lord of the Rings*, heaps of unrelated and unsifted relics. A programme of collections development rooted in historical research is the best insurance against becoming the community attic.

In the same vein, material historians can use historical research in a direct way to identify the most historically significant objects. An excellent example of this in British Columbia has been Dan Gallacher's doctoral research on the history of coal mining on Vancouver Island.<sup>9</sup> This research programme has involved studying a very recognizable mix of sources: company papers, government records, private manuscripts, maps, and printed reports. From the outset an analysis of technological history was seen as an important aspect of the study. The work is nearing completion, and out of it has come a detailed guide to the various artifacts and related technical processes that were a part of the development of this resource industry. Such a guide can now be used to improve and refine existing collections or develop new ones.

In conclusion, I would agree with Finley that the great challenge facing material historians is to take "ourselves and our research seriously."<sup>10</sup> Having greater budgets and larger numbers of personnel is not going to help much if we are not approaching our work properly. There is a potential network of repositories now in every part of the country, and collections at these centres are increasing on a monthly basis. But the three-dimensional view of our past that is available there in galleries and in storage is often shallow and unrelated to an informed consideration about the ways in which the artifacts on display relate to the history of the community and the region. We could start by asking ourselves, at least every other day, have we got the right things and are we saying the right things about them?

#### NOTES

1. Canadian Museums Association *Gazette* 11 (Spring 1978): 6-9.
2. *Ibid.*, p.7.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Steve Beckow, "On the Nature of an Artifact," Canadian Museums Association *Gazette* 9 (Winter 1976): 24-27.
5. *Ibid.*, p.25.
6. *Ibid.*, p.26.
7. Finley, "Museum and the Historian," p.7.
8. Beckow, "Nature of an Artifact," p.26.
9. Daniel T. Gallacher, "Men, Money, Machines: Studies Comparing Colliery Operations and Factors of Production in British Columbia's Coal Industry 1849 to 1891" (Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia, 1979).
10. Finley, "Museum and the Historian," p. 9.