

tions management to look more critically at acquisitions policy, attempts being made to move into contemporary collecting of everyday goods, and efforts being made to provide better documentation of collections' provenance will all contribute to the reduction of limitations on material history and make collections a much more valuable resource.

NOTES

1. Daniel T. Gallacher, "The Numbers Game: Statistics and Experiments for Industrial History Acquisitions Strategy," *Canadian Museums Association Gazette* 13 (Spring 1980), pp. 20-30, and 13 (Summer/Fall 1980), p. 14-25.
2. Based on a preliminary survey of the catalogue cards in the Modern History Division, British Columbia Provincial Museum, and discussions with Zane Lewis, *Social History Curator*.
3. The Modern History Division has had an active programme to collect industrial clothing, work clothes, and the other types of apparel mentioned but has met with limited success. In some situations the only solution seems to be to collect contemporary materials so that at least in future our collections will be better balanced. Contemporary collection of industrial clothing has been an active programme of the History Division of the National Museum of Man as well.
4. See, for example, the inventory of preserved rolling stock in Canada by Raymond F. Corley, *Preserved Canadian Railway Equipment* (Montreal: Railfare Books, 1971).
5. This example and the table are condensed from Robert D. Turner, "Logging Railroads and Locomotives in British Columbia: A

- Background Summary and the Preservation Record," *Material History Bulletin* 13 (Fall 1981), pp. 3-20.
6. John Chavis, "The Artifact and the Study of History," *Curator* 7, no. 2 (1964), pp. 156-62.
 7. Bernard Ranson, *Some Thoughts on Museology and the Profession of Arms*, Report to the Canadian Museums Association's Head of Professional Development and Standards. Ms. 8 pp.
 8. See Robert G. Griffin, "The Shingle Sawing Machine in British Columbia, 1901-1915," *Material History Bulletin* 13 (Fall 1981), pp. 21-38, as an example of a study of machinery based primarily on documentary material but using both artifacts and interviews as further sources of data and information.
 9. Gallacher, "The Numbers Game," Part 2.
 10. John H. White, "John Bull: 150 Years," *Railfan and Railroad* 4 (January 1982), pp. 38-44, and see *Railroad History* no. 144 (Spring 1981).
 11. *Ibid.*
 12. Thomas J. Schlereth, *Artifacts and the American Past* (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1980).
 13. An example of this is a large fish-butchering machine (called an Iron Chink) on display in the Modern History Galleries of the British Columbia Provincial Museum. When the machine was first placed on display in 1972 some fittings were secured so tightly that they could not be loosened by a wrench. Over a decade later, with museum attendance averaging one million or more each year, including many school tours, some fittings have disappeared.
 14. Brian Dixon, Alice E. Courtney, and Robert H. Bailey, *The Museum and the Canadian Public* (Toronto: Arts and Culture Branch, Department of the Secretary of State, Government of Canada, Culturcan Publications, 1974).
 15. A.E. Parr, "The Arrogance of Artlessness," *Curator* 7, no. 2 (1963), pp. 240-43.

The Concrete Clio: Definition of a Field of History

Peter E. Rider

What is material history and how does one study it? The questions are easy enough to ask, but answers are harder to come by. It is certainly one of the plethora of "new" histories which have sprung up since the 1960s. Equally as clear is the absence of consensus of what this history is trying to do and how one goes about doing it. In some recently developed branches of history, practitioners are engaged in fervent debate over definitions of the field and the methodology to be used, while in others, such as urban history, a variety of approaches is tolerated as long as the field's chosen focus remains central to the topic being studied. Treatment of material history is lodged between these extremes. Although various avenues are used to address the subject, considerable awareness has been expressed at scholarly gatherings and in writings of the need for an appropriate analytical framework.¹

Folk wisdom suggests that knowledge of the tree lies in the nature of its fruit. Acting on that principle, some insight into material history can be gained through a

review of one of the chief Canadian forums for the field, *Material History Bulletin*. In selecting the *Bulletin* for scrutiny, no attempt is made to argue that it alone represents all that can be learned on the matter. Nevertheless the journal has matured with its subject, and its pages have welcomed contributions from all parts of the public having an interest in the field. As such it is an adequate device to gauge trends that may suggest answers to the questions posed above.

Of one fact, there is little doubt: the physical development of *Material History Bulletin* reflects growing professionalism. Starting as volumes in the National Museum of Man's Mercury series, the first two *Bulletins* were presented in a format resembling a typed essay. Generous use of photographs resulted in over ten additional pages of illustrations. With the third number, the *Bulletin* became a regularly published series offered for sale on a subscription basis. To mark the change, a two-toned brown cover colour was adopted and issues became fatter. *Bulletin*

number eight, a special issue presenting papers delivered at the 1979 Material History Forum, represented another advance by using typeset copy, an experiment which was made permanent with number thirteen. The efficient utilization of space means many more words per page, with the result that nine articles appear in issue sixteen whereas only one or two are found in some earlier numbers. Continued ample use of illustrations of substantial proportions enhances the text while providing supporting documentation. At six dollars per year for two issues, the *Bulletin* represents one of the best buys in scholarly journals today, judging the product on its physical qualities alone.

Of course, content is much more important for a publication and much harder to judge. To begin, each offering must be perused and then an attempt made to put the articles, notes, and reviews into some kind of perspective. Mention of individual items is almost impossible. Detail would be piled upon detail, obscuring overall patterns and colour, and the result would be as tedious as a rendition of several pages of a dictionary while being much less instructive. General impressions unconnected to the specific contents might appear unconvincing and abstract. A middle course is reference to some widely accepted analysis such as the structure recently proposed by Thomas J. Schlereth in his introduction to *Material Culture Studies in America*.² The issues of *Material History Bulletin* considered include all numbers from one to sixteen except for the special issues of conference papers, numbers eight and fifteen.

Schlereth in the above-mentioned introduction sets the systematic study of historical artifacts in the United States in a continuum of three periods, beginning with the "Age of Collection," passing through the "Age of Description," and finally reaching the "Age of Interpretation" in 1965. The current period is clearly the most intellectually productive and exhibits a variety of approaches, some of which pre-date it while others have their origins in present-day scholarship. Nine distinct trends are identified by Schlereth, and these are generally serviceable in the Canadian context without extensive modifications. While avoiding, one hopes, doing violence to the subtlety of Schlereth's analytical framework, these nine research trends in American material culture scholarship may be summarized as being:

- (1) art history, concerning itself with masterworks and documenting the biographies of artists and their works in order to sketch and assess the evolution of exquisite taste;
- (2) symbolist, in which the ideas reflected in popular monuments are articulated;
- (3) cultural history, exploring all evidence concerning artifacts to reconstruct past human surroundings;

(4) environmentalist, showing how our built, physical setting reflects cultural migration;

(5) functionalist, in which technological change is evidenced by alterations in all types of implements;

(6) structuralist, involving former, general modes of thought communicated through common dwellings, material possessions, and self-expression;

(7) behaviouralistic, or the phases of life and social mechanisms indicated by traditions and the physical evidence of such customs;

(8) national character, whereby the collective personality of a people is revealed by its material by-products;

(9) social history, concerning shared experiences of common folk documented by artifacts and by written evidence of material possessions.

A categorization of the articles found in *Material History Bulletin* establishes one fact clearly: by far the most popular approach to recent times is that of the cultural historian. Almost three times as many papers are in that tradition as in the next most-favoured, art history. Closely behind the runner-up are the environmentalist and the functionalist.³ Some interest is shown in the behaviouralistic approach, but significantly, for a nation constantly in search of its elusive identity, no one addresses their topic by examining our national character or symbols. An even more unfortunate failing is the scanty treatment of material history in the tradition of the social historian, a gap made especially noticeable by the widespread interest in the approach by practitioners in other fields of history. Some articles, of course, are not in any of the trends, including those which are essentially research notes or which deal with methodology, while others fall into more than one approach. It is, moreover, necessary to admit that the assignment of categories might be considered somewhat subjective. Nevertheless the tone of the *Bulletin* is undisputedly that of the cultural historian mustering his facts about our past material surroundings.

Despite the emphasis in one area, some of the more outstanding work is found elsewhere. "La Chaumière québécoise" by Pierre Rastoul, found in the second issue, is an able presentation of the origins and spread of thatching as a means of roofing.⁴ The interpretation of its frequency of use and its socio-economic significance is defended with appropriate documentary evidence, both written and photographic. The selection of tables appended to the article is particularly useful in explaining Rastoul's observation that thatched roofs conferred very little status upon their owners. Rastoul's article is in the environmentalist tradition, while another incisive contribution, that of R. Bruce Shepard on "The Mechanized Agricultural Frontier of the Canadian Plains," is

functionalist.⁵ In his article, Shepard describes the evolution of farm tractors, elaborating the socio-economic context of the changes and showing the impact of the changes on western agriculture. Again tables and photographs buttress the written evidence and help support the conclusion that mechanical power was one of the determinants of prairie farm life before 1920.

Quality in the dominant cultural history category varies considerably. Martha Eckmann Brent's helpful essay entitled "A Stitch in Time: The Sewing Machine Industry of Ontario, 1860-1897" places the industry in that province against its North American background and details the manufacturers and their products.⁶ While the conclusions are somewhat sparse, the reader should be able to make his own judgements from remarks spread throughout the text. Another useful piece, of its type, is the Getty and Klaimen description of the markings of Medalta pottery.⁷ Identified as a research note by the editors, the guide is similar to several articles except for its greater comprehensiveness. Collectors and interested curators will find the information of considerable help in their endeavours. Despite the merits of the work its technical nature and exhaustive detail will appeal to only a small sector of readers and it would be better placed in a specific technical report series, if one were available to disseminate specialized knowledge. Yet another worthwhile article is the study of "Shanty Life in the Kawarthas" by Chris Curtis.⁸ Interesting and well organized, it offers a vivid image of the living conditions enjoyed — or endured — by a sizeable portion of Canadian males in the last century. It comes close to social history, but, alas, there is very little in it to do with material history. The article certainly deserves to be published, but *Ontario History* or the *Journal of Canadian Studies* would have been more obvious venues.

Two fine articles appearing in *Bulletin* number 14 represent significant contributions to the diminutive social history category. George Bervin in "Espace physique et culture matérielle du marchand-négociant à Québec au début du XIX^e siècle (1820-1830)" outlines the homes and furnishings of the anglophone commercial community during their ascendancy. The feeble conclusion that the merchant-traders enjoyed a privileged status in the community fails to complement the evidence produced from inventories after death but does not detract from its significance. Anita Rush links changes in female clothing in the late nineteenth century to social pressures affecting the life of women generally. The use of magazines, such as the *Ladies Journal*, highlights the potential of such sources, the full dimension of which can be seen in the work of Gwendolyn Wright.⁹

At odds with the foregoing substantial offerings in the *Bulletin* are a number of articles which can be fairly accused of being pointless. Typically, they announce an intention to deal with some category of "thing" and pro-

ceed to do so. Readers have the type of artifact in question described in great detail with every variation noted. Once the description is achieved, the article ends abruptly, without any conclusion or any explanation of why the reader should be at all interested in the knowledge so painstakingly marshalled. Except for the lovers of that type of artifact, few may recollect any substantial portion of the essay, lacking any interpretative guidance on which to hang the details. There are still some who will argue that the only real facts are those derived from physical objects.¹⁰ This viewpoint, if accepted, would expose us all to the ill consequences of our history collections, the inadequacies of which were described recently by Robert Turner¹¹ and D.R. Richeson.¹² It would also limit us to the sort of tenuous conclusions often endured by archaeologists and anthropologists working in the absence of acceptable archival data.¹³ An opposite approach, which would harness traditional historical sources and techniques to the documentation of artifacts, hardly constitutes a "new" history at all, but merely conventional history applied to a different subject-matter. Salt shakers or brass bedsteads thereby displace Joseph Howe or the National Policy. Material history is obviously a new area of study, and basic data must be presented for consideration, but just as history differs from chronology, so material history differs from artifact documentation. An insistence upon a section in an article explaining what is meaningful about all the facts found in it would ensure that even the most straightforward documentary survey would contribute to a definition of the field.

The practice of assembling theme issues underlines the need for material reflecting analytical courage. Certain themes simply will not interest a proportion of the *Bulletin's* readership, but, if one can gain insights from the methodology utilized in articles or from general conclusions perhaps applicable to other types of artifacts or to different locales, a significant service to the field of material history will be served. The heavy emphasis on cultural history, and the frequent hesitation of authors to comment upon their data make the inclusion of a challenging interpretative piece, such as "The Archaeology of Canadian Potteries" by Lester A. Ross in the ceramics issue,¹⁴ particularly important.

Occasional disappointment with some of the articles, however, is counteracted by spicy notes and reviews which indicate active debate and evolving standards in the field. Critics regularly tackle the latest literary offerings with verve, sometimes cutting even the loftiest of authors off at the knees. An extended annotated review of publications on glass in Canada by Holmes and Jones¹⁵ is an excellent initiative, worthy of imitation from time to time for other subjects.¹⁶ Exhibit reviews are equally sharp, and offer curators a realistic forum before which their work can be judged and from which all can learn. There is a temptation to test exhibits more on their display techniques, labelling, and selection of objects, however, than on the ideas

which are meant to be conveyed. The editors also make excellent use of the notes section, which includes substantial reports on current research and detailed accounts of specific projects. A good example of the former is the inventory of material culture research in Atlantic Canada by Sheila Stevenson,¹⁷ while the outline of the computer-based archival research project undertaken in Newfoundland by Dickenson and Kolonel¹⁸ illustrates the latter. Shorter notes are also useful, although the editors are not able to attract much in the way of news bulletins or controversial letters. For this the editorial board, and the readers themselves, may be partly responsible, for ultimately a vigorous journal like the *Bulletin* must tap sources beyond the reach of any single individual or pair of individuals.

Overall, the contents of *Material History Bulletin* are improving with time. The tendency of authors to enumerate artifactual traits is giving way to greater analysis. More frequent occurrence of material in the environmentalist and functionalist traditions, combined with recent interest in social history, confirms the existence of more broadly based research strategies. Moreover, the general quality of scholarship is higher. Progress may be slow; nurturing a new field of study is never easy. Certain handicaps in addition may impede advances. Much of the material dealing with our large-scale material heritage finds a home in other heritage and urban history journals, while folklorists look to other platforms as well. A decision to broaden the editorial parameters of the *Bulletin* may enrich its content and offer new insights for material historians. Certainly the broad definition of material culture studies suggested by Schlereth implies a less fragmented understanding of our material past. The contributions made by folklorists in the two special issues clearly indicate that they have much to give in their methods of assimilating and interpreting material evidence.

As for the future, contributions can be expected to work within terms of either one of the two definitions of material history offered at different times in the *Bulletin*. In the first issue editors Riley and Watt declare that material history is the study of the artifacts produced or used throughout history.¹⁹ Research begins with the artifact, and the researcher, having examined it, looks at who made it and what the society of the maker was like. While anthropology is part of the inspiration of material history, it is apparent that traditional historical methodology is applied in documenting provenance. Archival research is, however, seen by the editors as being directed toward the artifact in the first instance and only after that at its context. By the autumn of 1981, guest editors Hardy and Wardrop had come to see material history as the application of artifact-related evidence to the interpretation of the past.²⁰ Although they maintain that artifacts may contain unique data, the importance of the traditional historical sources seems to be more significant for them. Moreover,

the centrality of the physical object appears to be in question. Readers are reminded that Marx viewed methods of production and the things produced as closely linked, and, we are told, Fernand Braudel widened the study of material life even further so that appreciation of the economy in which it existed was required. A reading of *Material History Bulletin*, then, establishes that the material historian depicts a broad image of society, an image which is in part reflective of the society's physical remains and in part explanatory of them.

These dissimilar definitions probably represent different understandings of what constitutes material history rather than a change in a generally accepted definition. They indicate the somewhat fragmented approach to the field itself. Indeed they suggest that there are two broad approaches to material history. Both place the artifact at the centre of the study but only one demands its actual physical presence. A methodology which proceeds without the object may define the significance of an item through examination of relevant information in diaries, works of literature, travellers' accounts, and other verifiably reliable sources. Once its significance is known, appropriate conclusions can be inferred about those who owned or worked with the object. This information can then be connected to particular individuals or groups through the identification of owners by examining probated wills, inventories of intestate estates, and chattel mortgages.²¹ A variant of this methodology uses these latter documents to establish the significance of certain artifacts, a process which is facilitated if knowledge about the owners is extensive. Historians employing these techniques are, in fact, documenting a set of cultural attributes which find part of their expression in objects. Thus material history can be seen as part of the wider interpretation of *mentalités* as understood by Philippe Ariès and Michel Foucault.²²

The physical presence of an object presents a different route of study, moving from the careful observation of physical characteristics to an evaluation of what these traits may mean. This approach, which is perhaps the most challenging one in *Material History Bulletin*, even though the most frequently used, comes naturally to curators of history collections. Unfortunately a good example of novel conclusions based upon objective assessment criteria is not found among the issues considered for the present report. The problem of establishing a consistent, workable methodology for this approach is already the subject of one doctoral dissertation in progress.²³ Several applications of any such method yet to be proposed will have to occur to ensure the viability of the concept, and in turn, by extrapolation, the belief that an artifact from recent historical times can tell us something that is not already known or which cannot be readily discovered without it. Yet partly upon that achievement hangs the justification of history collections as unique pools of information rather than samples of mankind's handiwork.

Involved in the definition of material history and the clarification of how one studies it, therefore, is the articulation of the purpose of human history museums. The museum may be seen as safeguarding evidence documenting our history in a singular fashion or as assembling an extensive array of common and rare objects exemplifying earlier life-styles which must be comprehended through reference to archival sources. An understanding of the ability of artifacts to contain and to render up irreplaceable knowledge could help to determine the appropriate weighting of our institutional responsibilities. In short, should the museum's custodial function be emphasized, like that of an archives, or should stress be placed upon its educational and public programming activities?

NOTES

1. A. Gregg Finley, "Unlocking the Curator's Cabinet: Toward a New Strategy for Artifact Research," unpublished paper, dated 22 December 1981.
2. Thomas J. Schlereth, "Material Culture Studies in America, 1876-1976," in *Material Culture Studies in America* (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1982), pp. 1-75.
3. Forty-seven articles and two very substantial research notes were assigned the categories defined by Schlereth. Included in the forty-seven were three that were methodological, one museological, three research reports, and four "other." The breakdown was as follows: art history, 7; symbolist, 0; cultural history, 17; environmentalist, 5; functionalist, 6; structuralist, 0; behaviouralistic, 1; national character, 0; social history, 2. Art history seems to be on the wane, and the appearance of social history is recent. Cultural history appears to attract the attention of museum and historic sites personnel while university-based historians are more likely to follow other approaches.
4. Pierre Rastoul, "La Chaumière québécoise," *Material History Bulletin* (hereafter *MHB*) 2 (1977), pp. 19-41.
5. R. Bruce Shepard, "The Mechanized Agricultural Frontier of the Canadian Plains," *MHB* 7 (Spring 1979), pp. 1-23.
6. Martha Eckmann Brent, "A Stitch in Time: The Sewing Machine Industry in Ontario, 1867-1897," *MHB* 10 (Spring 1980), pp. 1-30.
7. Ronald Getty and Ester Klaiman, "Identifying Medalta, 1916-1954: A Guide to Markings," *MHB* 12 (Spring 1981), pp. 17-60.
8. Chris Curtis, "Shanty Life in the Kawarthas, Ontario, 1850-1855," *MHB* 13 (Fall 1981), pp. 39-49.
9. George Bervin, "Espace physique et culture matérielle du marchand-négociant à Québec au début du XIX^e siècle (1820-1830)," *MHB* 14 (Spring 1982), pp. 1-18, and Anita Rush, "Changing Women's Fashion and Its Social Context, 1870-1905," *MHB* 14 (Spring 1982), pp. 37-46. On the basis of its articles, research reports, notes, and reviews, this issue is the clear favourite of the present commentator. Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home: Domestic Architecture and Cultural Conflict in Chicago, 1873-1913* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980).
10. Philip Ward, "The Artifact as a Source of Knowledge," *Echo*, house organ of the National Museums of Canada, 2, no. 1 (December 1981-January 1982), p. 6 and Ward, "Museums: Commitments to the Future," *Echo* 2, no. 2 (February 1982), p. 5.
11. See Robert D. Turner, "The Limitations of Material History: A Museological Perspective," in this issue but originally presented to the annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, Ottawa, 9 June 1982.
12. David R. Richeson, "Museum Collections: Distortions of Our Past," *Ontario Museum Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (Winter 1983), pp. 18-22.
13. For a spoof on archaeologists and archaeology, as it is usually not practised in Canada, see David Macaulay, *Motel of the Mysteries* (London: Hutchinson, 1979).
14. Lester Ross, "The Archaeology of Canadian Potteries: An Evaluation of Production Technology," *MHB* 16 (Winter 1982), pp. 3-20.
15. Janet Holmes and Olive Jones, "Glass in Canada: An Annotated Bibliography," *MHB* 6 (Fall 1978), pp. 115-48.
16. John McIntyre and Janet McIntyre followed this tradition effectively in the furniture issue (number 11), but similar pieces were unfortunately absent from the forest issue (number 13) and, more notably, the ceramics issue (number 16).
17. Sheila Stevenson, "An Inventory of Research and Researchers Concerned with Atlantic Canadian Material Culture," *MHB* 14 (Spring 1982), pp. 79-89.
18. Victoria Dickenson and Valerie Kolonel, "Computer-Based Archival Research Project: A Preliminary Report," *MHB* 10 (Spring 1980), pp. 31-61.
19. *MHB* 1 (1976), p. 3.
20. *MHB* 13 (Fall 1981), p. 2.
21. Julia Cornish, "The Legal Records of Atlantic Canada as a Resource for Material Historians," *MHB* 18 (Fall 1983), pp. 31-34; H.T. Holman, "Now this Indenture Witnesseth...: Some Comments on the Use of Chattel Mortgages in Material History Research," *MHB* 19 (Spring 1984), pp. 52-56.
22. Patrick H. Hutton, "The History of Mentalities: The New Map of Cultural History," *History and Theory* 20, no. 3 (October 1981), pp. 237-59.
23. See Gregg Finley, "Material History and Museums: A Curatorial Perspective in Doctoral Research" in this issue. The University of New Brunswick also offers a diploma programme in material history at the master's level.

A second appraisal of the status of material history appeared recently in *Acadiensis*. See Ann Gorman Condon, "What the Object Knew: Material History Studies in Canada," *Acadiensis* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1984), pp. 136-46. The present report was largely written before the appearance of the Condon review article and was completed without reference to it.