

# Notes and Comments/Notes et commentaires

## Federation of Nova Scotian Heritage Conference "Rum by Gum"

Report on conference held 23-26 October 1986 in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia.

Yarmouth was chosen to be the site for the Federation of Nova Scotian Heritage's fall conference, "Rum by Gum." Those who are familiar with this town, a picturesque port perched on the shores of the North Atlantic, at the mouth of the giant Bay of Fundy, will know that its remarkable seafaring past qualifies it well to host such a meeting. For Yarmouth, rum was an essential commodity. Aboard the vessels, at dockside and in the local taverns, the maritime enterprise of this, and scores of other port towns in the Atlantic Provinces, was flavoured by the reality of rum.

Among the latter-day enthusiasts who came to Yarmouth to participate in the "Rum by Gum" conference, there were only a few "old salts." While an undetermined number of the delegates may have known the wallop a shot of dark rum could deliver, most were confirmed landlubbers. Their interest in the conference theme was at least a generation or two removed from the West Indies trade or the days of rum running. Curators, archivists, museum volunteers, geographers, historians, folklorists and regional authors made up the bulk of the delegates. Certainly there was a retired rum runner or two, not to mention former law enforcement officers from the days of prohibition in the Dirty Thirties, but the majority who attended "Rum by Gum" came because of academic or museological interest in the story of rum – a most intriguing chapter in Canadian history.

From a distance, one might be tempted to dismiss the "Rum by Gum" meeting as an entirely local, somewhat superficial, autumn frolic by a bunch of "Bluenosers." Nothing could be further from the truth. For this reviewer, the conference was significant for a variety of reasons.

In the first place, its theme was very original. Most academic meetings are structured around a particular historical issue or event. Museum conferences, on the other hand, tend to be organized in reference to a burning question in museological philosophy or practice. The Federation of Nova Scotian Heritage conference in Yarmouth last October was animated by a rather different idea – rum as artifact.

The entire conference programme was anchored to this notion of rum as an artifact. Speakers elaborated upon the impact of this commodity by considering in turn, rum and early settlement, rum and the law, rum and the museum, rum and the economy, rum and folklore, rum and the navy and rum and temperance. This was a clever organizational device. It succeeded in attracting over a hundred individuals, representing both the museum and academic communities. By focusing on a single commodity, one whose role in regional history has been very real, both those who study the past using literary sources and those who quest after the meaning of artifacts appeared to find common ground for the exchange of information, research methods and interpretive approaches. But "Rum" was not an end in itself. Instead, "Rum" served as the means of access to a host of promising directions in regional material culture studies.

A second highlight of the "Rum by Gum" conference was tight organization. Federation of Nova Scotian Heritage Executive Director, Elizabeth Ross, her hard working staff, aided by Conference Co-ordinator, Carla Calhoun, and a select group of regional resource people, most notably, Alan Cash as Chairman of the Steering Committee, Professor Mark Davis from Mount Allison University and Eric Ruff, Curator of the Yarmouth County Museum, were responsible for the imaginative and well-managed conference programme. Through careful coordination and impressive attention to detail, and certainly not forgetting a generous National Museums of Canada, Museum Assistance Programmes grant, this reviewer is satisfied that, on balance, the Federation realized its objectives.

What were the conference objectives? The central aim of the meeting was to probe the research potential of museum collections and archival sources in an effort to better understand the history of rum in Atlantic Canada. The goals of the organizers were clearly indicated in the pre-conference literature. It was their intention to measure rum's effect on the social, political and economic development of the region. An additional explicit goal was to create the opportunity for museum and academic types to meet, interact and establish areas of dialogue over a topic of mutual interest. There was to be an inter-disciplinary orientation designed to appeal primarily to

individuals in the four Atlantic Provinces. The conference was dedicated to building better bridges between the academics who undertake pure research and the curators who desire to adapt that research through museum presentations. Thus the conference provided the opportunity for the museum community to be exposed to and challenged by the most recent scholarship on themes related to rum. At the same time, academics received first-hand commentary on the richly suggestive collections of rum-related source materials from curators and archivists. This two-way flow of data was extensive and it represented a promising and relatively recent kind of information exchange between the two constituencies. In this environment material culture studies can only flourish.

By now the call for better museum–university collaboration in the context of material culture studies is a well-known refrain. “Rum by Gum” demonstrated both the problems and the potential of this kind of cooperative effort. Typically, the museum curator is a consumer of the original historical research produced by the university scholar. From time to time, however, academics consume new sources of information or insight available from the museum, either in the form of published curatorial studies or from first-hand examination of the museum’s artifact collections. Ideally this dynamic research relationship should be a reciprocal process. Yet all too often this reciprocity does not occur. The academic can have difficulty finding scholarly applications for the object-related data that emerge from the museum, while the curator often has problems digesting and determining the museological relevance of the material in the academic journals. The organizers of “Rum by Gum” recognized this dilemma and sought to put together a conference programme that would build bridges between the two sectors. There is no question that some measure of success was realized in this important area. In addition to *A Burning Mercy: Rum in the Atlantic Provinces*, by James Moreira, an innovative and substantial resource book prepared as a sample exhibition catalogue on the rum theme, the published proceedings of the conference will soon be available from the Federation of Nova Scotian Heritage.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence of the conference’s achievement, both conceptually and organizationally, was the remarkable degree of audience participation. All too often at such events participants are typically frustrated by the lack of dialogue and debate over key issues that are raised in conference papers. Ample opportunities were provided in a full schedule for audience reaction to the various presentations. Indeed, this reviewer cannot recall attending a conference anywhere on any theme that featured a greater degree of audience involvement. Here one thinks of the marginal audience participation at events such as the International Material Culture conference in St. John’s, Newfoundland, last

June, or recent annual meetings of the Canadian Museums Association or the Canadian Historical Association. The organizers of “Rum by Gum” succeeded not only in bringing a diverse group of specialists and generalists to Yarmouth, but also, once they were gathered together, in establishing a format that encouraged extensive discussion after each session, stretching topics in a variety of intersecting directions.

Such dialogue was no doubt encouraged by a certain quality of spontaneity that characterized some of the sessions. Sandy Ives’ presentation on rum and popular culture, for example, was interspersed with his own expert rendition of regional folk tunes that spoke of the “rum mystique.” We also joined with the Yarmouth Shanty Men, led by Eric Ruff, to sing choruses such as:

Singing Old Molasses, Old New England Tea,  
It killed my Grandpa, killed my Pa,  
And it sure as hell is a killin’ me,  
Singing Old Molasses, Old Molasses Rum.

In spite of the overall achievement of “Rum by Gum,” the conference did have some problem areas. Perhaps the greatest difficulty was the lack of museological integration. There was not enough emphasis placed on the basic question of how museum participants might find practical applications for the flood of data presented in the various sessions. There was not enough effort made throughout the four days to locate the wealth of information and ideas on the multifaceted story of rum within a down-to-earth museum framework. Practical issues of artifact research techniques, collection management procedures, exhibit interpretation and museum educational applications received little coverage during the actual sessions. Only one session was formally designated to address this area. Entitled “Rum and the Museum,” the session featured just one presentation, a somewhat disappointing keynote address by Peter Swann, Director of the Seagram Museum. Dr. Swann’s remarks consisted of an eclectic discourse on themes emerging out of his work at the Seagram Museum, in Waterloo, Ontario. While entertaining in his own right, Swann failed to tackle the substantive museological questions that pervaded the conference. Unhappily, the provocative issues of theory and method alluded to in the preconference literature were never adequately addressed.

As if to compound the lack of museological focus, by far the most disappointing aspect of “Rum by Gum” was the absence of a major exhibition on the conference theme. Such a show was initially planned by conference organizers but had to be sacrificed, we are told, due to inadequate funding. This was a great pity. Insufficient exposure to actual artifacts, as a central thrust of the conference, seems to be a perennial problem with material culture events. Typically, those making presentations employ innu-

merable slides of artifacts and there is much stimulating discussion of the artifact and its record. Yet through it all, the historical objects, the vital centre of the meeting, are missing. Whatever the logistical, financial, conservation or curatorial constraints, it is high time the organizers of conferences devoted to material culture themes paid more attention to the artifacts. One would have thought, for example, that Yarmouth was chosen as the site for "Rum by Gum" because of the local availability of artifacts related to the rum trade. Those coming to this conference holding such an expectation would have been disappointed.

But after all, rum is earthy stuff. This critique must not take us too far from the spicy, suggestive core of the conference. There was a certain mood achieved by "Rum by Gum" – a sense of the good and the not-so-good effects of rum, of the warm nostalgia associated with a social drink or two on a special occasion, balanced by the hard cold facts of drunkenness, disorder and despair. This review will conclude with a short poem by Alden Nowlan.

This work was part of Ken MacKinnon's presentation on the literary responses to rum. It is a piece that captures and probes a part of the rum-drinking subculture, a tradition that was clearly identified, explored and reevaluated by those attending "Rum by Gum":

#### Homebrew

Molasses, orange and yeast  
purchased with promises and mixed at night,  
the keg buried in steaming dung  
to hasten fermentation, then the wait  
for some excuse to fork it out  
(a rainy day, the mill not running);  
the men in their sawdust-covered denims  
sitting on blocks of pressed hay in the barn  
and drinking from a single mug, their thumbs  
spooning out shreds of hay and frequently  
flies and then bolting it, holding their breath,  
and spitting afterwards, grunting their pleasure.

Gregg Finley

## Wallpaper in Canada

"Wallpaper in Canada, 1600s-1930s." Microfiche Report no. 208. Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1968.

Written by Felicity Leung as a stylistic tool for restorationists and for those attempting to date wallpaper found *in situ*, this unedited manuscript of 900 pages (10 microfiche pages) is in two parts. Part 1 describes chronologically the manufacture, styles, and use of wallpaper in Canada, most of it imported until the 1880s; information is organized by decade beginning with the 1760s. Part 2 includes histories of 12 Canadian wallpaper manufacturing firms and records the composition of paper and paint used by manufacturers. Glossaries are compiled for each

part. Appendices A to C list wallpaper collections in Canada, selvage marks on wallpaper in Canada, and wallpaper makers in Great Britain, France, the United States, and Canada. The bibliography includes over 200 articles on wallpaper from Canadian periodicals published between 1880 and the 1930s in addition to the usual sources. The report ends with 183 illustrations.

Copies of the report have been deposited with federal and provincial archives. Individual copies are available, while supplies last, by request from Bruce Fry, National Historic Parks and Sites, 1600 Liverpool Court, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 1G2, (613) 993-2470.