

Rapports de conférences

Canadian Maritime Museum Curators' Symposium, 28–31 March, 1990, Ottawa / Colloque des conservateurs de musées maritimes du Canada, 28-31 mars 1990, Ottawa

NIELS JANNASCH

Editor's Note :

Between March 29 and March 31, 1990 the National Museum of Science and Technology (NMST) sponsored a symposium of curators from maritime museums and museums with large maritime collections. This was the first time curators responsible for major collections of Canadian marine heritage had met together. A list of delegates follows the conference report.

The incentive for the meeting arose out of the coincidence of a number of events, including the establishment of marine transportation as an independent curatorial area at NMST, a major review of the collection management and development policy at NMST, and the devolution of NMST from the National Museums of Canada to assume a status as a separate Crown corporation. Most important, however, was the commonly-held opinion within the Canadian maritime museum community that such a gathering was much needed and long overdue.

In hosting the colloquium, NMST was fortunate in having the service of Niels Jannasch, Director Emeritus of the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, as chairman. Mr. Jannasch is without peer in the Canadian maritime museum community and is widely respected and admired within the International Congress of Maritime Museums, on whose executive he has served for many years. A personal report on the colloquium by Mr. Jannasch follows.

"If you can wait and not be tired by waiting..." So Kipling wrote, and I shall leave it at that. After 30 years of waiting it did finally happen—a meeting of Canadian maritime museum curators—and we are very grateful indeed to the new Director of NMST, Dr. Geneviève Sainte-Marie, and the newly-appointed Curator of Marine Transportation, Garth Wilson. Without their initiative and, I might add, their budget, this symposium would never have taken place.

Let me go back in time, to the 1960 Canadian Museums Association (CMA) meeting in Montreal, when the few curators of maritime museums and maritime collections who could then be found were pushed aside as a rather unimportant part of the Canadian museum community. This happened in spite of the fact

that without ships and seamen the Canada we now know would never have come into existence. CMA meetings in the following decade did not improve the lot of maritime museum curators who soon gave up their efforts to form a special interest group against the wishes of the CMA, which had, albeit grudgingly, allowed directors of art galleries to form their own splinter group. Without a national forum, the existing and newly-founded maritime museums developed and fought for their own place under the sun, helping each other sporadically within their budget limitations while separated by vast distances. A far-sighted attempt, inspired by then Member of Parliament for Halifax, Edmund Morris, to create a national Canadian maritime museum with branches on both coasts and at the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River did not get anywhere. The indiscriminate and competitive collection policy of the newly-created NMST under its first Director certainly did not help to create a spirit of co-operation among maritime museums in Canada, unless one considers a negative and unproductive anti-Ottawa sentiment as such. So it was a most pleasant surprise to be invited by the very same institution for a get together of Canadian maritime museum curators.

It was marvellous to meet the new Director of NMST and her friendly knowledgeable staff at an unpretentious but, for that reason, ever so much more effective gathering at NMST on the first night of the symposium. The give and take, the exchange of information, the feeling of belonging together in reaching an admittedly as-yet-unspecified goal, and the good fellowship was enjoyed by all. So much for history and the pleasant changes.

The working sessions of the symposium started with a lengthy "curatorial tour" of Canada's maritime museums, their histories, their collections, their financial problems and their

hopes for the future. After having been in the museum "business," as it were, for 26 years, I was impressed by the fact that all of our problems are just about the same—whether the institutions were under federal, provincial or municipal governments or a private organization. These included lack of financial support, lack of staff and the problems of suitable housing. But I was also impressed by the diligence and initiative shown by the maritime museums to overcome these difficulties. I think the delegates learned a lot from each other. Of great interest to all were Garth Wilson's remarks about the future role of NMST. In short he explained there were no intentions to create a national maritime museum in Ottawa, but that the Marine Transportation Section of NMST was aiming for breadth and not depth in its collections, giving it a synoptic overview of Canada's maritime heritage. The delegates welcomed this sensible and realistic attitude taken by the NMST. The necessity or desirability of a Canadian national maritime museum in Ottawa was never discussed. The delegates are only too aware of the problems and difficulties such a national institution would present; the lack of artifacts, the location far away from any sea, the diversity of the regions with their existing collections, the contentious situations of national maritime museums in other countries—all speak against the creation of yet another artificial national emporium full of replicas in Ottawa.

The delegates also had an opportunity to visit and observe the Collection Management Division and the storage facilities of NMST. Needless to say we were all much impressed by their facilities but, seeing the vast amount of machinery and technological gadgetry collected by NMST—most of which had nothing to do with Canada's maritime history—I for one could not help thinking of Francis Bacon who said sometime around 1600 that "antiquities are history defaced, or some remnants of history which have casually escaped the shipwreck of time." So much for indiscriminate collecting. A much more selective collection policy would definitely be in order.

A most interesting afternoon was spent at the Marine Archaeology Section of the Canadian Parks Service under the guidance of its Head, Robert Grenier. What joy to meet an historian and archaeologist so full of infectious enthusiasm and knowledge. We learned all about the section's work on the Basque wreck at Red Bay and, I hope, we also learned that marine or underwater archaeology is a very costly exercise and not one to be taken as

lightly as it is by some maritime museums and diving organizations.

Collecting, mandates, policies and approaches were topics aired on the last day. Again, the discussions proved to be interesting and illuminating. The question *Who* is entitled to collect *what?* was in the foreground. While there does not appear to be any difficulty along those lines in the Atlantic Provinces where we are accustomed to amicable relationships among maritime collections and museums, one individual from another region did not share this confidence and expressed his point of view forcefully. I regarded the arguments as petty and trust this person will come to his senses and see the overall picture.

Research and exhibitry were discussed at length. Again, the amicable relationship among museums have something to contribute as far as information about the past is concerned, and then there are the National Archives. So why squabble? An interesting proposal was brought forward—namely to get speakers from abroad onto a maritime museum circuit in Canada. Travelling exhibitions of nautical interest were also discussed, but there were also discussions of the problems of paying for them.

Merridy Bradley, Museum Consultant at the Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN) gave a talk on collection management, its systems and issues. This was followed by discussions about a valid authority list, an absolute necessity. A resolution to request assistance from CHIN in assembling such a national authority list was passed and has since then been accepted by them. Because the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic (MMA) already has a well-established relationship with CHIN and is very familiar with the problems and objectives of the process and has already created a workable list, it is hoped that the MMA will be chosen as a project centre.

The question whether to form a Canadian Maritime Heritage Conference was thoroughly aired, and I am glad to report that the delegates decided to seek affiliation with the Canadian Nautical Research Society (CNRS) as a special interest group instead of forming yet another organization with all of its bureaucratic claptrap. I might add that the CNRS has, in the meanwhile, approved the formation of a special museums group within its organization.

John MacFarlane of the Maritime Museum of British Columbia presented a most interesting proposal, namely the creation of a British Columbia Vintage Vessel Registry, which should do much to heighten general interest in our maritime heritage, without drawing too

heavily on the meagre resources of maritime museums, resources which are already being scattered to the limit.

In conclusion I am glad to say that the symposium was a great success. Again, thanks are due to Dr. Geneviève Sainte-Marie and

Garth Wilson, and also to Marc Bourgeois of the NMST staff, who was responsible for the flawless arrangements. I can only hope that Canadian maritime museum curators will have the chance to meet on a regular basis in the future despite of ever-tightening budgets.

List of Delegates

Sonia Chassé
Musée maritime Bernier

Robert Elliot
New Brunswick Museum

Robert Grenier (Guest)
Canadian Parks Service

Niels Jannasch, Director Emeritus
Maritime Museum of the Atlantic
Conference Chairman

John MacFarlane
Maritime Museum of British Columbia

Marven Moore
Maritime Museum of the Atlantic

Trude Oliver
Prince Edward Island Museum

Walter Peddle
Newfoundland Museum

Maurice Smith
Marine Museum of the Great Lakes

John Summers
Marine Museum of Upper Canada

Joan Thornley
Vancouver Maritime Museum

Guy Vadboncœur
Musée David M. Stewart

Garth Wilson
National Museum of Science and
Technology

VII International Congress of Maritime Museums

GARTH S. WILSON

*A report on the VII International Congress of
Maritime Museums, 26 August - 4 September
1990, Stockholm.*

The VII triennial conference of the International Congress of Maritime Museums, hosted by Sweden, was an organizational tour de force, a magnificent sea-going experience and, all in all, a truly memorable event. However, this fulsome praise, offered freely and in good faith, does not come without some serious reservations as to the museological value and general philosophical tenure of the congress. For this delegate, attending his first ICMM conference, the joy of taking part in this event, in such invigorating company and circumstances, was

offset by a sense of philosophical and intellectual inertia and of general museological decline.

The conference, attended by some 200 delegates, ran from August 26 to September 4 and was preceded by a two-day preconference tour in Denmark. This year's gathering was greatly enhanced by the wonderfully appropriate use of a charter cruise ship, the Finnish-registered MV *Kristina Regina*, as accommodation and, more importantly, as a means of conveying the delegates around to various cities and maritime museums in the eastern Baltic. The Baltic cruise, which followed three days of formal sessions at the new Vasa Museum, complemented