

# Reviews

## Comptes rendus

Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier,  
and Roy Rosenzweig, eds.,

*Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*

Michael Frisch,

*A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral  
and Public History*

GERRY BERKOWSKI

Benson, Susan Porter, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig, eds. *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986. 424 pp., ill. Cloth \$37.95, ISBN 0-87722-406-4. Paper \$16.95, ISBN 0-87722-413-7.

Frisch, Michael. *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990. 273 pp., ill. Cloth \$57.50, ISBN 0-7914-0132-4. Paper \$18.95, ISBN 0-7914-0133-2.

These two books are devoted to public history rather than to such specific areas as the material heritage. However, they are useful to material historians who want to understand the role and meaning of public history and probe more deeply into the relationship between historians and the public. *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public* is a collection of 18 essays intended to promote "a new kind of history – one that explores long-neglected subjects like women, blacks, peasants, and workers; one that examines the centres of power and authority around the world; one that reaches beyond the confines of academe" (p. xi). By examining a wide variety of projects, from those of museums to community history projects and history workshops, the editors argue that public history "can be used to teach people that the social, political, economic, and cultural institutions that delimit contemporary

life are not timeless but rather the products of human agency and historical choices" (p. xxiv).

The book is divided into three sections. One describes the most prevalent form of history which is created for palatable consumption by mass audiences; a second explores "professional" public history as it is applied in museums and other public institutions. The third reflects on a more critical variety, a people's history, which is rooted historically in the student and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and whose purpose is to unite in partnership "those with historical expertise and those with historical experience" (p. xvii).

One of the most important contributions of this collection is the unravelling of the political economy of American museums and the exposure of their role in contemporary society. "Reflections on the History of Historic Preservation," by Michael Wallace, for instance, is an overview of the heritage movement which analyses the complex relationships and foundations that have influenced the history of museums in the United States. Wallace argues that pluralism has been abandoned in museum programming, particularly in recent years. The reversal has come not only from changes in corporate and governmental attitudes to museums, but from the willingness of the heritage movement to adopt slick "marketing techniques, management" and "real-estate oriented approaches" (pp. 193–194).

Wallace's article (among others) points to the need for public historians to develop different approaches and strategies towards the public's heritage. In "Exhibiting Women's History" Barbara Melosh and Christina Simmons examine the assumptions beneath the representation of women in museum exhibits, and argue that women ought to be presented as active historical agents while gender should be recognized as a valid historical category. "An ideal public history of women would present women fully as actors in economic, domestic, social, and political life; it would be sensitive to divisions among women by class, race ethnicity, sexual orientation, and marital status; above all it would treat gender as a significant category and acknowledge the relationships of power and inequality that have constrained women's lives" (p. 221). In "A Faithful Witness" Jeffrey Stewart and Fath Ruffins trace black public history from its origins in white philanthropy to the rich cultural institutions of the 1960s and 1970s, and offer advice for pursuing a more publicly accountable people's history. "The strength of the Afro-American museums and cultural organizations founded during the 1960s and 1970s lay in their redefinition of what a museum was supposed to be" (p. 331). They were not "holders of precious artifacts, stored and exhibited in isolated splendour..." Instead, "Afro-American historical museums became cultural centres, providing outlets for many separate and sometimes contradictory impulses in local black communities" (p. 331). This serves as a bold statement about the role of human decision-making in museums at the community level, reminding us of the need for communities to develop their own popular forms and venues for the presentation of their heritage in conjunction with professionals.

Since one of the major goals of the book is to explore ways of presenting history in ways that are more accessible to a wider audience, it should be noted that the editors' imaginative use of illustrations and typefaces makes for a user-friendly approach that reinforces their arguments about presentation in public history.

*A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* begins from the same assumptions as *Presenting the Past*, but takes off from a different perspective – that of oral history. Michael Frisch is concerned about the nature and transmission of intellectual power and authority in the presentation of oral and public history. He argues that professional, applied history tends to rein-

force dominant power and knowledge structures in society. In opposition, 'bottom up' popular and public history strives to give history back to ordinary people, but this approach is often pretentious, patronizing, and can be "romantically exaggerated." Frisch's search for a synthesis between these extremes leads to his argument for a shared authority, which should "redefine and redistribute intellectual authority, so that this might be shared more broadly in historical research and communication..." (p. xx).

The book consists of 18 essays, most of which were previously published throughout Frisch's career as an urban and activist community historian. As in *Presenting the Past*, the articles are arranged in three categories. In the first, "Memory, History, and Cultural Authority," Frisch describes the way in which history is marketed and mythologized and shows how it functions as a reinforcement to dominant, officially-transmitted perceptions of the past. Some of these articles should be read as investigations into the meaning of cultural artifacts – posters, artwork, and films.

In the second part, "Interpretive Authority in Oral History," he investigates the "relationship between craft and meaning in oral history" (p. 55). One of the book's greatest strengths is that Frisch successfully unites theory and practice; there are instructive examples, for instance, of the uses of oral history transcripts in museum settings. In "Preparing Interview Transcripts for Documentary Publication: A Line By Line Illustration of the Editing Process," he reprints one of his edited and unedited transcripts and argues persuasively for the aggressive intervention of the interviewer to produce a transcript that both shares the authority and transforms the dialogue on memory into a usable text for books or displays.

Frisch also looks at the larger social and political dynamics of displays, projects, and museums and explores the mechanics of public presentation and interaction within these contexts. "Oral History and the Presentation of Class Consciousness: The New York Times v. The Buffalo Unemployed" is a revealing case study of the interplay between the researchers and sponsors of a local history project, and how inherent class assumptions are interwoven and played out in the editing and design process.

The final six essays, organized around the theme of "A Shared Authority: Scholarship, Audience, and Public Presentation," are evaluations of various urban history, public history,

museum-based projects. Here Frisch assesses the limitations and strengths of traditional and consumer-oriented museum programs, suggesting that they should be studied closely for their value in revealing inventive ideas for public presentation. There are plenty of examples of exhibits which actively engage the visitor's imagination in the presentation of history. Of one project he says that "the exhibit closes by ... asking visitors to think about their own family history of work, tools, and neighbourhoods, businesses and industry and to think of things the exhibit might have missed – things that might actually be in their own attic" (p. 255). The idea was not so much to acquire donations as to make the link between past and present.

From his observations of American museums and their audiences, Frisch points out that history appears to be enormously popular in the American public consciousness. If this is true, the "issue for museums and historians who care about them," he argues, "would seem to be less a matter of generating interest than of learning more about what drives an existing

interest, and thereby finding ways of meeting it with historical interpretation on mutually meaningful common ground" (p. 262). Readers are thus invited to question the effectiveness of museums that cater solely to entertainment, and consequently dismiss the ability (and willingness) of their audiences to understand complex historical concepts. In one museum, curators refused to "see imported academic concepts and dazzling design techniques as ends in their own right..." They "consciously used them for resuscitation" and "deliberately sought a topic that would require them to collect new artifacts, intending to show how 'exhibit-driven collecting' could be used as a way 'to refocus and reenergize the collecting process'" (p. 256).

In their theoretical and practical orientation *A Shared Authority* and *Presenting the Past* are welcome contributions to an old debate about the nature and role of historical interpretation in public institutions. Both books promise to broaden our appreciation for the presentation of history in museums, and will no doubt enrich future heritage-based programs in the process.

**Leslie Maitland,**

## ***The Queen Anne Revival Style in Canadian Architecture***

**ANNMARIE ADAMS**

Maitland, Leslie. *The Queen Anne Revival Style in Canadian Architecture*. Ottawa: Minister of the Environment 1990. 303 pp., 136 ills. Paper \$19.95, ISBN 0-660-13599-X. (Disponible en français sous le titre *Le style néo-Queen Anne dans l'architecture au Canada*. Paper \$19.95, ISBN 0-660-92969-4.)

In 1876, a paper on the Queen Anne style of architecture was read to a group of British architects. As the lecturer finished, according to decorators Agnes and Rhoda Garrett, an irate professor asked the speaker where one might find examples of the so-called style, "with a sneer in the pronunciation of the last word which it is not possible to express by any form of print." Toronto, Charlottetown, or Kamloops might have satisfied the professor's curiosity, according to Leslie Maitland's *The Queen Anne Revival Style in Canadian Architecture*, although he probably expected directions to Chelsea or South Kensington.

The professor's hesitation to call Queen Anne buildings a style was typical of the period;

architects practicing in that mode often found themselves under fierce attack from their colleagues. As Maitland notes, the buildings had little to do with Queen Anne, the seventeenth-century British monarch. Rather, the architects of the large brick houses of the late nineteenth century – with crisp white window frames, turrets, porches, and rambling, open plans – actually combined aspects of many other styles, particularly motifs from the Gothic Revival and the Arts and Crafts Movements. It was this absence of stylistic "purity" to which the professor, and many others, objected.

Maitland's *The Queen Anne Revival Style in Canadian Architecture* is a significant contribution to the scholarship on this international movement. Although there are relatively few studies of Queen Anne buildings, the two major works are both deservedly classics in the field of architectural history. Mark Girouard's *Sweetness and Light: The Queen Anne Movement 1860–1900* (1977) and *The Shingle Style and*