

Conference Report

Rapport de colloque

History and the Public Interest

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A review of the 1996 Conference of the National Council on Public History, "History and the Public Interest," 11-14 April 1996, Seattle, Washington.

In these days of shrinking budgets, disappearing jobs and growing daily work demands, conference attendance has become a luxury that few institutions and individuals can afford. Those of us lucky enough to find support for participation in professional associations must, it seems to me, think long and hard about what these groups really have to offer and whether they actually help us to do our jobs more effectively. Based on my own experience and that of colleagues at the National Museum of Science and Technology and elsewhere in the public history, heritage and academic communities, many would not stand up to close, critical scrutiny.

The Canadian Historical Association meeting, for example, is a purely academic conference. If you can find a session related to your research field, it may be worthwhile, but there is unlikely to be any sustained discussion of, or insight into, public or material history in any form. More importantly, the organization shows little interest in the present place and future role of history outside the academy. The same can be said of the newly formed Organization for the Study of the National History of Canada — its membership and its priorities are overwhelmingly academic though its focus is on national topics. The Canadian Science and Technology Historical Association (CSTHA), a small, university-based group, at one time included a sizeable number of public historians of science and technology. Unfortunately, there has been little useful interaction or co-operation between them and the academic members. The quality

of the CSTHA's conferences and its publications was often uneven at best and in recent years has declined. As a result, many public historians have just stopped participating in this organization.

At the other end of the spectrum is the Canadian Museums Association (CMA), which is increasingly preoccupied with heritage policy and management issues — spread sheets, visitor surveys, facilities and programs — rather than the basic issues of why and how we preserve, study and document our material past. Its conference programs, meetings and publications reveal the growing influence of museum directors, senior managers, marketing professionals and interpretive programmers, and the steady eclipse of curators (who collect, document and analyze artifacts) and historians. Those curators who still take part in the CMA have been relegated to the status of a special interest group that has a marginal presence on conference programs and limited influence on the policies and priorities of the organization as a whole. This is apparently also true of other national and international museum associations.

Fortunately, there are still a few groups devoted to the serious study and discussion of public history and heritage issues. These organizations tend to be formed and dominated by practising historians, curators, archaeologists and other heritage professionals. One example is the Society for Industrial Archeology (SIA) which brings together practitioners from a variety of backgrounds "to promote the identification, interpretation, preservation, and re-use of historic industrial and engineering sites, structures, and equipment."¹ Though this is a relatively small, specialized and non-traditional field of study, it is both interdisciplinary in approach and international in its

focus. The SIA plays a critical role in facilitating communication and co-ordinating scholarly and other activities among a widely dispersed and eclectic group of enthusiasts.

The National Council on Public History (NCPH) is another organization run by and for historians and heritage professionals. Though U.S.-based, the Council's goals are general enough to appeal to almost any working public historian or teacher of public history. On the most general level, it is devoted to promoting "the utility of history in society through professional practice." More specifically, the NCPH works to foster public awareness of "the value, uses and pleasures of history." It also advises "historians about their public responsibilities," helps "students prepare for careers in public history" and provides "a forum for historians engaged in historical activities in the public realm."²

Like most professional associations, the NCPH uses a combination of formal and informal tools to accomplish its goals. It publishes a newsletter, *Public History News*, and a journal, *The Public Historian*, both of which facilitate communication about what is being done in the field and promote scholarship and intellectual interaction across disciplines, regions and countries. The NCPH's committees coordinate the organization's many different activities — from collecting and disseminating information on public history programs at universities to lobbying governments at all levels on history and heritage issues. The annual conference reinforces and expands on this work and, at the same time, allows participants — members and non-members alike — to make valuable informal connections that provide a framework for the exchange of ideas and collective action on important issues throughout the year.

The Council's 1996 conference was held in Seattle, Washington, and was co-sponsored by the Pacific Northwest Historians Guild and the Northwest Oral History Association, with strong program and other support from the U.S. National Park Service. The theme was "History and the Public Interest" and the program committee (of which I was a member) put together 27 sessions that ran concurrently in six time slots. There were also six workshops, a round table discussion and a series of tours.

The papers and sessions covered a wide range of topics and approaches to public history. Some presenters gave scholarly research papers on the history of public institutions and policies, not unlike the papers given at a more

conventional academic history conference. For example, there were sessions on "Federal Policy Formation in an Age of Social Change," "Federal Agencies in Alaska" and "The Expansion of the National Park Service in the 1960s and 1970s." A large number of the sessions, though, dealt mainly with the special concerns of historians working outside of the academy. From "The Application of Archival Resources to Community Studies" and "Protecting Linear Landscapes," to "Women's History at Civil War Sites" and "Parks, Scholarship, and the Public: Connecting Research to Education and Resource Management," these sessions stressed the practical problems facing many heritage professionals.

Over the course of the three-day conference, I moderated a workshop and attended five sessions, one of which I chaired. The sessions covered a wide range of subject matter, from the evolution of historical research in the U.S. national park system, to lessons learned working with minority and community groups on heritage projects, to the application of multimedia techniques to historical interpretation. The workshop was about museums — collecting, documenting and interpreting artifacts and the process of developing a major new exhibit. Overall, the quality of the presentations was very good. A few provided me with information or contacts related to my current field of research, while others offered practical advice on how to use the latest communications technologies to tell stories about the past.

It was not the specific content of the papers, however, that had the greatest impact on me. What made this conference worthwhile was a common commitment to the critical re-evaluation and improvement of public history — its purpose, premises and methods. In their wide-ranging discussions, participants repeatedly identified three important problem areas and suggested ways to improve them. Various speakers focussed on the need to enhance the overall quality of historical scholarship. Others called on public historians to re-think how they translate that scholarship into exhibits and other interpretive programs. And finally, many touched on the issue of community relations.

On the topic of scholarship, there seemed to be a consensus that too much public history is written in isolation. Public historians often know a great deal about specific sites, objects and events, but given the restrictions of time, budget and mandate, there is seldom time to do the research necessary to put these places and

things into a meaningful context. Presenters offered a variety of approaches — both institutional and individual — to help broaden the scope of historical scholarship done outside of the academy.

The U.S. National Park Service (NPS), according to its chief historian Dwight Pitcaithley, is developing a national strategy for enhancing the quality of its historical research. A newly implemented thematic framework allows historians to base their research and analysis on eight interlocking themes, instead of requiring them to choose one or two from an established list. James Oliver Horton, an academic with extensive NPS experience, suggested that research on specific sites should be broadened to include more national and international context and to allow thematic connections between different, and geographically separate, sites to be effectively drawn. To help facilitate this ambitious approach to writing history, the NPS intends to put greater emphasis on the professional development of its historians and other heritage professionals and to establish stronger ties with the academy. For Pitcaithley, this means encouraging and supporting such things as conference participation, publications and continuing education, as well as actively promoting academic interest in and recognition of NPS projects.

Other participants offered less sweeping proposals for improving public history. Edward Yarbrough, of Keweenaw National Historical Park in northern Michigan, suggested that material culture studies help him look beyond the obvious technical theme and significance of the two mining communities within the park to place them in a meaningful social, commercial and political context. Using this approach, the structures, equipment and processes can tell historians a great deal about life and work in American mining towns and may also help unravel the complex relationships between people and technology.

In the same session, Ann Deines, of Dayton Aviation National Historical Park, outlined a different method for broadening the historical perspective on the site where the Wright brothers conducted their early experiments. Lacking any significant material resources, she had to use more traditional written documents and photographs. Instead of concentrating on the brothers' achievement, though, she chose to look at the family and community context in which it was made and tried to identify some of the factors that helped them to succeed where others had failed. She argued that this would help to

show that invention is a social as well as a scientific and technological process.

The debate surrounding these proposals for enhancing historical research and writing was lively. While acknowledging the value of broad contextual research, several participants reminded its promoters that it requires a greater commitment of time and resources than site or object specific work. Similarly, professional development, if done properly, can be a costly business. And, as Alan Kraut of American University pointed out, although there are examples of heritage projects — his experience was with the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island sites — where academics have been an integral part of the research and interpretation process, many will not participate in these projects because the universities they work for do not recognize, let alone reward such efforts.

The limitations of the specific approaches advocated by Yarbrough and Deines were also noted. Larry Lankton of Michigan Technological University pointed out that material culture study is not very useful when there is little or no material evidence to analyze, as is the case at Dayton. As well, even when there are objects and sites to study, to understand how people lived, we still need to know about things that are no longer at the site, such as household goods and personal effects. Historians then have to rely on store accounts, catalogues and photographs rather than the objects themselves. On the other hand, he argued, traditional written records, like family letters, diaries and photographs, provide only a partial picture of reality, one based on personal and private interpretations of events and people. To begin to understand why the Wright brothers were successful inventors, it is not enough to know the details of their family life. We must also be able to suggest how their environment differed from that of other, less successful innovators.

In raising these issues, the commentators and questioners were not suggesting that these were not valuable proposals for change and improvement. On the contrary, much of what was said implied a recognition that there was not one best approach to enhancing our historical understanding, but many. Different analytical tools and sources will help us answer different questions about the past, and only by using a variety of them can historians hope to create an accurate picture of the past.

A second major issue that preoccupied participants was how to translate historical research into more effective forms of interpretation. Recent controversies over historical interpretation and

the generally low level of historical awareness in society have persuaded many historians that they are not communicating well with the public. According to several presenters, problems often originate at the conceptualization stage of projects, but they can also arise from the team process commonly used to create exhibits and interpretive centres, and from the many attractive and technologically sophisticated media available to deliver the messages.

At the concept stage, historians and the institutions they work for sometimes fail to recognize the special characteristics of sites, subjects and collections of objects, and thus fail to consider non-traditional methods of interpretation. Speaking about the NPS's plans for interpretation at Gettysburg, John Patterson questioned whether this was the right place to teach people about the battle and its political and strategic significance. If, as Lincoln intended, it is primarily a shrine and place of remembrance, then perhaps this is how it should be interpreted. Using this conceptual approach, he and others suggested, historians can outline what happened there and why, but they can also talk about what a shrine is, why they exist and how they differ from other historic sites, museums and monuments.

Historians also must think more about balance in the presentation of content, especially when it is potentially controversial. Representatives of the Washington State Museum and Philadelphia's Constitution Museum agreed on the need to present contentious content — labour strife, wartime internment, abortion, gun control — but argued that this could be done in a non-partisan fashion. Rather than conceptualizing their exhibits to lead visitors to answers about right and wrong, to preach to them, in other words, their goal is to give them enough information to encourage them to reflect and make their own judgements. Not only are people more likely to learn this way, they may also become aware of just how complex history and human relations are.

Unfortunately, neither of these projects was completed at the time of the conference and some delegates were naturally sceptical about how effective this approach will be in practice, especially given the strict limitations routinely placed on the quantity and level of text. One delegate went further and argued that it is impossible for historians to be completely non-partisan and, rather than struggling to attain the unattainable, they should search for ways to explain to the public what history is, how it is shaped by the values of society and of

individual historians, and how dramatically interpretations change over time.

After the conceptualization stage, new challenges emerge from the dynamics of team work. Virtually all the projects described involved multi-disciplinary teams of academic and public historians, designers, writers, managers, computer experts and others. Though experiences varied, everyone agreed that historians ought to be active participants from the beginning of a project until its completion to maintain the integrity of the story, a role that requires much more than checking the facts. While presenters from Washington State, the Constitution Museum and New York University (NYU) provided their audiences with the usual catalogue of disagreements and disputes between historians, writers, designers and managers, they also pointed out how they benefitted from interaction with other team members who constantly forced them to express their goals and ideas more clearly and to think of the content in three-dimensional and visual terms.

The NYU presenters also talked at length about tools and choosing the appropriate one to transform their research papers into successful interpretive packages. Lori Finkelstein chose a low-tech walking tour format to convey the story of ethnic interaction on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Rather than focussing on the built environment, as many such tours do, she concentrated on the places between buildings, the streets where different ethnic groups met during festivals, and used these actual places along with photographs to help communicate the story of life in this district between 1890 and 1950.

Her colleagues chose a more sophisticated medium, the CD-ROM, to tell their stories about art and housing on the Lower East Side. Their products not only looked very polished and professional, but also conveyed difficult content — the life and work of artists and an ethnically divisive battle over housing — in an interesting and intelligent manner. But they recounted the struggles they had with their technical advisors/partners to keep the medium from overwhelming and burying the message. A similar warning was issued by Stephanie Grauman Wolf of the Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies in her commentary on Gettysburg and the Constitution Museum. The planners, she said, will have to be careful to ensure that the interpretive centres and exhibits they have proposed to engage and inspire people do not become the focal point at the expense of the sites themselves.

The third common concern that informed many of the discussions at this conference was community relations. Public historians, unlike most of their academic colleagues, often have to work with, in or near communities that do not fully understand or support their projects. Yet the goodwill and co-operation of these communities is frequently essential to the successful completion and ongoing maintenance of the work. Two negative examples, one from Gettysburg and the other from the excavation of an African-American cemetery in New York City, pointed out what ought to be obvious: when communities or groups feel left out of the planning and implementation of heritage projects, they are unlikely to support and may even actively oppose them. Thus the NPS cannot count on the support of the people of Gettysburg in its struggles with a private developer, and John McCarthy of the Institute for Minnesota Archaeology still cannot tell the whole story of the cemetery project because of ongoing litigation.

By way of contrast, McCarthy and David Neufeld, of Parks Canada, described two much more positive and healthy experiences with community-based projects. For McCarthy, the hard lessons learned in New York served him well in Philadelphia, where the concerns, wishes and interests of the descendant community of the First African Baptist Church were fully integrated into the planning and implementation of this excavation. As a result, the researchers not only got what they needed with little or no acrimony, but also were given additional, unsolicited help, advice and information.

Similarly, when Parks Canada set out to identify some First Nations historic sites in the Yukon for commemoration, they discovered that these communities had an entirely different view of history and commemoration from that of the government. They were not prepared to participate in the process as it had been conceived. Parks Canada could have gone

ahead on its own to identify sites based on its own well-established standards and guidelines, but instead decided to let the First Nations develop their own "commemoration" program with the assistance and support of Parks staff and resources. According to Neufeld, the communities are now actively pursuing a variety of heritage projects unlike any that have been conceived before.

Admittedly, the jury is still out on whether any of these schemes to enhance the way we research, write and convey history will work. A few of the papers and sessions, I was told, did not meet the high standards of scholarship and interpretation talked about in others. And I am somewhat sceptical that efforts to broaden historical context will include consideration of major non-American events, themes and trends, or that many academics will ever be persuaded of the value and importance of public history. These criticisms and misgivings are minor, however, in comparison to what I, and many others, gained from the conference.

The discussions were remarkably open, honest and inclusive and, most of the time, uninhibited by the presence of directors and other high-ranking officials. Most participants were genuinely concerned about and determined to remedy past failures to communicate the complexities of history to the public. Moreover, when professional arrogance threatened to rear its ugly head, there always seemed to be someone there to remind delegates that even when historians are convinced that they know the truth about an event, an object, a person or a place, there will always be someone out there — another historian, a relative, a participant — to question their interpretation and ascribe totally different meanings to them.

History, after all, is a work in progress and this conference, while it motivated participants to keep fighting the good fight, faithfully reflected this humbling reality.

NOTES

1. Society for Industrial Archeology, *Newsletter*. This description of the SIA appears in the membership and editorial information section on the back page of each issue.
2. This description is quoted from a membership application and information brochure produced by the NCPH.