

A NEW INDIAN HISTORY FOR MUSEUMS¹

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The way Indian history is presented in Canadian museums is going to change. This change is already taking place in some institutions, in fact, and it will spread to others. Those museums that do not modify their views of Indian history are likely themselves to become museum pieces. The way White or pioneer history is presented in our museums will also change because of these developments.

What is happening is simple in intent and profound in consequence: Indian people are taking control of their own histories. They are claiming the right to present themselves, in school texts, in university programs, in the public media, and in museum displays, to correct what they consider to be incomplete, stereotypical, and incorrect interpretations. They are claiming for themselves a right that White people have taken for granted ever since they came to the new world, the right to construct for themselves and for outsiders their own version of who they are, where they came from, and what they wish to become. The result will be for the rest of us a "new Indian history," though Indians may consider it their old one long suppressed.

How will this new Indian view of history influence our understanding of the past? It challenges the very foundations of anthropology and museums, including especially the beliefs in the principle of scientific freedom and the validity of knowledge derived from scientific research, and the rights assumed by anthropologists and their museums to represent other cultures.

A better understanding of the situation may be obtained by considering for a moment how non-Indian history is presented in our local history museums. In British Columbia, at least, most local history museums seem to focus on the turn of the century, from around the 1870s to the 1920s, and the life and times of pioneer European settlers in the area. You probably all have seen the same little kitchen, sitting room and bedroom settings

carefully constructed by these museums: wood stoves, pots and pans, export China dishes and tarnished silver, butter churns and automatic apple peelers, tin washtubs and their scrubbing boards, small and uncomfortable-looking beds, straight back wooden chairs, and oddments of tattered clothing including a wedding gown here, a Sunday dress there, and a few pieces of woolen underwear hanging from clothes lines, that the brave and long suffering pioneers brought with them from Victorian England.

Now imagine what would happen if a couple of those turn-of-the-century pioneers came back to life and visited one of these history exhibitions. Would they recognize themselves? Would they be pleased with how their life style was being represented? Would the lady of the house really want that faded old dress and worn out underwear displayed in public, to everyone? Would she be pleased about the rusty pots and tarnished silverware? What about the man of the house: would he like being represented by a pair of ragged boots, worn out trousers, a few tools, and an old chewed up pipe?

Historical geographer David Lowenthal, in a paper he delivered to the First World Congress on Heritage Presentation and Interpretation held at Banff almost exactly one year ago (1986), made an interesting point about history museums. Our interpretations of history, he said, are designed more for the visitor than for the people being exhibited, and may often therefore emphasize what the curators think visitors will find to be quaint, curious, and romantic. We construct our views of the past to suit our needs today, to magnify self-esteem by supplying ourselves with a more interesting heritage than our forebears left us. History, Lowenthal reminds us, is an interpretation of the past rather than an objective recording of what happened, the interpretations representing a compromise between what the curators think was the case and what they think their visitors want to see.

He gives an example of an Indiana frontier replica community of the early nineteenth-century called "Conner Prairie Pioneer Village" (Lowenthal n.d.; Ronsheim 1981). People had visited the

Conner Village year after year to enjoy an old fashioned Christmas, until the curators realized that back in 1836, when this village was supposed to have existed, no such Christmas events had taken place. So they eliminated the Christmas display and confined special seasonal activities to butchering a hog. However, as a result of this change,

Visitors were dismayed, protested at the loss, and stayed away in droves. The drop in receipts forced Conner Prairie to revise the past yet again: the staff readjusted settlers' biographies to permit more Christmas talk and activity, shifting the origins of a New York State Methodist family toward the Hudson River "to acquire sufficient Dutch influence to have come across. . . St. Nicholas," and converting the doctor's wife from Presbyterian to Episcopalian to enable "more Christmas greens to slip into their house." (Quotations from Ronsheim)

Authenticity in museum displays, Lowenthal concludes, "is seldom the bottom line."

Fort Steele in British Columbia may be taken as another example. It presents to the visitor a reconstruction of a fort and railway where neither existed in the past. Burnaby Heritage Village, next to Vancouver, also displays a small turn-of-the-century town and railway station where neither existed before. And other illustrations could be given.

Together, these examples suggest two points relevant to our discussion. First, Museums interpret history according to the perspectives of the curators and for the benefit of their visitors more than for those whose history is being represented, though they may claim authenticity. Second, there is a growing willingness among academic historians and anthropologists to admit, frequently in private and begrudgingly in public, that our understanding of the past is more uncertain and our historical interpretations more subjective than we lead outsiders to believe. All history is a production, "a deliberate selection, ordering and evaluation of past events, experiences, and processes" (Wallace 1981: 88). Museums incorporate both selections and silences, pointing to some facts and encouraging us not to see others. History, then, is an exercise in relativity designed to serve the

present, though once history is translated into a museum display it still tends to be presented as authoritative fact. The relativity admitted by the researchers is still not always reflected in the exhibit work of the curators.

With that as an introductory context, I will return to the topic of this paper, the new Indian history and its impact on anthropology museums. Anthropology museums and anthropology departments in larger human history museums are being confronted by the return of the Native, somewhat like our imaginary example of the pioneer family that comes to life and is surprised by what it sees in the local history museum. In the case of anthropology it is not nineteenth-century Indians coming back to life, however, but their descendants who are critically examining their own histories as reconstructed and presented by museums. On the whole, they do not like what they see. Anthropology displays are designed to communicate the anthropologist's interpretation of Indians and Whites, along with the usual lessons about the importance of such anthropological inventions as culture, kinship, ecology and ritual. Indians do not find these interpretations meaningful.

Indian attitudes toward museums are evolving, and different people hold to different ideas about how their own Indian histories should be defined and presented. It is not possible for an outsider to fully characterize these views. I can only talk about what we have seen and heard around the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, and what one of our graduate students, Claudia Haagan, is discovering during her study of Indian cultural movements. On the basis of these various observations, both informal and systematic, one can identify at least six points concerning museums and the presentation of Indian history around which a growing Indian consensus appears to be occurring:

1. Indians appreciate the fact that museums have preserved artifacts and archival records which otherwise would no longer be available to anyone, but they want access to these materials, including those locked away in museum storerooms, so they may

study them. They also would prefer the collections to be moved closer to where they live.

2. They disagree with the standard museum description of Indian history and culture, which depicts Indians as locked into the past as "first peoples," described as they might have been when Whites first came to this land. "We are a living people, not a dead culture," they say. Indian society has continued to evolve since first contact, but museums rarely document this evolution, except for brief references to "acculturation" which suggest that Indians have lost their culture and are becoming more like Whites. Indians, as contemporary "living peoples" with their own historically rooted identities, aspirations and values are rarely represented in museum exhibitions. One reason for this distortion of Indian history and culture is the failure of museums to recruit Natives as consultants and instructors for programmes dealing with Native topics.

3. The museum habit of focussing on material culture and technology conveys a narrow view of Indian life, limiting it to the objects of the past and favouring those societies (such as the North West Coast tribes) with decorative plastic arts. Language, oral traditions, value orientations, and the vitality of contemporary Indian life are mostly ignored. Since museums cater mostly to non-Indians they must bear a major responsibility for perpetuating this popular but narrow stereotype of Indians.

4. Museum and anthropological interpretations are not accepted as the sole source of evidence or truth about the past. Truth is to be determined through a process whereby the elders draw upon their experience and wisdom to verify and complete ethnographic and archaeological reports which, considered alone, would be fragmentary and misguided. The "traditional" knowledge of the elders is also valued because it combines moral guidance with factual accounts. A proper history is a moral history.

5. The established museums seem like mausoleums to Indians because little of any relevance to them ever happens there. Receptions, lecture series and exhibitions all cater to White upper middle class audiences. What Indians want is a community-based

cultural centre that offers lively cultural, social and political programmes and performances drawing upon the knowledge of the elders and providing educational experiences for the youth. The established museums also should become more responsive to the living descendants of those who are represented in their collections, rather than cater only to the wealthy sponsors. (It is interesting to note that the call for "ecomuseums" to serve the general population appears to be based on similar sentiments.)

6. As Indians take over responsibility of their own histories and develop their own cultural centres, they will want to make more extensive use of the archives and collections of existing museums, and will also ask for the return of collections to serve as inspirations for their own people. Repatriation thus will be a growing issue, though the pursuit of land claims and educational reforms are higher priorities among most Native peoples.

What are the implications of these developments for anthropologists and their museums? The rise of a "new Indian history" need not mean the decline and fall of museum anthropology, providing the situation is recognized and responded to positively. As Julia Harrison pointed out in her recent (1986) paper on repatriation, museum anthropologists can draw upon their traditional understanding of diverse cultural perspectives and their ethnographic skills to mediate between their institutions and Indian critics, helping each side to obtain a better understanding of the interests and points of view of the other while also proposing more productive exchanges between the two. The ethnology sections of museums thus could serve as "neutral grounds" for "the exchange of ideas and information," as well as artifacts (Harrison 1986: 178). Specific responses include the following:

1. Anthropology curators will need to recognize more clearly, and publicly, the limitations and biases of their own interpretations of Indian history, and especially of their tendency to confine Indians to a distant, exotic and somewhat imaginary past we like to call "the ethnographic present." For example, they could include in their displays more prominent references to the

fact that Indians are living peoples with continuing histories and cultures that are more than technology and decorative arts.

2. Museums could try to make their resources more accessible and useful to Indians by providing easier access to storage areas, making long term loans to Indian cultural centres, arranging programmes oriented to the interests of Indian people, etcetera.

3. Museums can also explore ways of collaborating with Indian individuals and organizations as equal partners. They could be recruited as consultants or co-curators. The traditional role of the museum acting as patron to Indians as clients or informants is increasingly likely to be seen as patronizing. "That we are different but equal partners in this relationship and that we can learn from each other," Gitksan artist Doreen Jensen writes (1986) in her review of a Museum of Anthropology exhibition, "is where continuing dialogue begins." (emphasis added)

4. At some point anthropologists will have to renounce their traditional claim to serve as the principal spokespeople for Indian history and culture. Not only have Indians started to read what we write about them, but they are also now speaking out and writing back. They are publicly rejecting the anthropological claim to priority, substituting their own in its place. Indians are claiming back their history and asserting their right to its interpretation and presentation. This reassertion of their own history will be a "new history" for the rest of us.

Historians and their history museums also will be affected by these changes. History museums will find it increasingly difficult to justify limiting their reference to Indians as "first peoples," significant only as a record of what existed before the White man. Indians are still around and they are not likely to disappear. In fact, the Indian population has steadily increased since the early part of this century and Indians are determined to continue as separate elements in Canadian society. They therefore should be included as a continuing part of Canadian history, and not relegated just to anthropological displays. Moreover, once the relativity of anthropological interpretations is accepted, attention

will be drawn to the limitations and biases of historians' interpretations of non-Indian history. Think about the pioneer couple returning to inspect the museum's representation of their lives. The questions Indians ask of anthropologists thus can be asked of everyone: Whose version of history does a museum present, and who does that history serve?

One might look to the future for the construction of a composite history linking Indian and non-Indian interpretations in a more complex whole, a history that will need to be continually rewritten as it continues to be made. A new Indian history thus can mean a new history for us all, and along with it a revitalized and redirected anthropology.

NOTES

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