Toward a New Past

Interpretation of Native History within Parks Canada

A.J.B. Johnston

"Dr Battiste, I'm working on a Native history project and I'd like to get together with you to talk about how Parks Canada …"

A.J.B. Johnston to begin a telephone conversation

"…has obliterated our history?"

Marie Battiste, former Mi'kmaq Cultural Curriculum Co-ordinator for Eskasoni Schools, Cape Breton

Dr. Battiste's interjection succinctly expresses the bitterness many Native Canadians feel toward "official" or "mainstream" history. Few would dispute the essence of what she says. Parks Canada, like school texts and the many provincial and municipal historic sites and museums, has major oversights and omissions in its presentation of First Nations history.

Parks' weaknesses are hardly surprising. Until recently, much of Canadian society overlooked the roles Aboriginal peoples played in the nation's evolution. The standard historical approach highlighted the activities and achievements of Europeans and their Eurocanadian descendants. The indigenous peoples who aided or resisted the newcomers' advance were treated like bit players in an essentially European drama, the basic story line being a "master narrative of European progress and Indian retreat."[1] But Canadian society seems at last to be seeking to include the histories of its First Peoples in the country's story.

A Caveat

When we generalize about people, we are on dangerous ground. In the following pages, I refer to Native viewpoints, Aboriginal sensibilities, and so on. Beware such generalizations, for as the philosophical paradox goes, "All generalizations are false."

There are roughly half a million people of Aboriginal descent or background in Canada.[2] That means quite simply that there are half a million differing perspectives. Aboriginal Canadians are no more monolithic than are English-, French-, or any other convenient categorization of Canadians.

History as a Weapon

History is not always a tool for understanding. The stories that make it into books—or into a historic-site system—often cast one group in a better light than another. As Ronald Wright observes in Stolen Continents, "a foreign version of what had happened" can be a "form of oppression in itself."[3]

For Aboriginal people in Canada the history that was taught until recently was that their ancestors were "primitive" or "pagan" or any of the other terms used to describe peoples from a cultural background different from that of mainstream society. The First Peoples were depicted as the "bad guys," menacing peaceful and civilizing European settlements. It is an interpretation with an obvious, tragic irony at its core: it was the Europeans who were the invading pre ence.

History is no less a weapon when a particular group is simply not included in the interpretation being offered. "Where one chooses to begin and end a story profoundly alters its shape and meaning." When Native peoples are barely mentioned, it says that "they are clearly peripheral."

Until recently, declining figures for the Aboriginal popul tion, along with their general situation on society's margins meant that their stories and perspectives were rarely thoug of in interpreting the past. However, the demographic tren has dramatically reversed itself: the 1991 census recorded over half a million Canadians of Native descent, an increase of nearly 100,000 since 1986.[5] Equally important, political and constitutional developments in Canada have brought Aboriginal issues to the forefront.

The eras when Parks Canada was most busy expanding i system of historic sites—the 1920s and 1930s, and the 1960s and 1970s—were times when neither Native realities nor Native history were prominent in mainstream Canadian thinking. As a result, the many fur-trade and military sites that Parks acquired were perceived primarily as examples o the advance of Eurocanadian civilization and sovereignty across the land. We now recognize that the First Nations often played crucial roles in the developments being commemorated.

The goal for Parks Canada is clearly to do better, but reaching that goal will be easier said than done. An obstacl is the widespread assumption—a creation myth among Eurocanadians—that the continent was a vast, almost empt wilderness before the Europeans arrived. As Luther Standing Bear, an American Sioux (Dakota), observed: "On to the white man was nature a 'wilderness' and only to him was the land 'infested' with 'wild' animals and 'savage' pe ple. To us it was tame."[6] Ronald Wright makes a related point, commenting that the continent's massive depopulation due to the spread of European diseases among the Native peoples had left many areas "open" by the time Europeans arrived in them. "America seemed a virgin land waiting for civilization. But Europe had made the wilderne it found; America was not a virgin, she was a widow."[7]

Lengthening the Line, and Curving It

In mainstream society it used to be thought that Canada' time line was quite short when compared with that of truly aged places. For generations, schoolchildren learned about the "advance" of western civilization from the caves of B.C. times through Greek and Roman achievements and on through the Renaissance and the Age of Exploration. Only then did North America enter the picture. Schoolchildren learned that the history of their particular region began in 1604, or 1534, or 1497, depending on their books' focus. An that was on the east coast. In the West, starting dates were sometimes as late as 1905.

When L'Anse aux Meadows was accepted as a Norse site many Canadians were delighted that their collective past had been pushed back to A.D. 1000. The country still was not as old as Europe, the ultimate comparison for many

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North Americans, but at least it was not as young as had been assumed.

We now recognize that Eurocentric history is not world history and that Canada is ancient by any measure one cares to use, with a history of human occupation that stretches back thousands of years. Just how far back is a matter of debate, but a round figure of 10,000 years is an accepted minimum, and some would say it goes back 30,000 or even 40,000 years. The pre-European experience comprises over 95% of the country's history.

Aboriginal peoples occupied virtually every corner of Canada long before the construction of the pyramids in Egypt, and their societies were far from static. The continent witnessed tremendous migrations, as well as the emergence of a multitude of cultures, languages, and differing responses to differing environments. "One point is becoming increasingly clear: New World prehistory was as filled with significant developments as that of the Old World in the fascinating story of man's cultural evolution."[8]

Tangibles and Intangibles

A Parks Canada strength is its treatment of "things." From excavated artifacts to standing structures, millions of "things" are looked after in the Parks system. They lie at the heart of Parks' approach to history.

The effort that goes into preserving and presenting historic sites is expended in a desire to achieve intangibles: a sense of significance or an atmosphere of authenticity. Within Parks is a widely shared desire to educate the visiting public, usually thought to be best achieved through a presentation of "things"—reconstructed buildings, people in costume, and so on. If enough appropriate items can be presented, so the thinking goes, visitors will be convinced of a given site's veracity. History is seen, essentially, as an object-ifying process.[9]

However, from an Aboriginal perspective, intangibles are often at the forefront, and the past is often not concrete and compartmentalized. One historian, speaking of the indigenous peoples in the Arctic, has written: "The past and present of the northern cultures are not distinct and separate like black and white, but are joined together by history, written and remembered."[10] The same concept is found among Native people in the south of Canada. There is a widespread inclination to speak of an across-the-generations continuum, of a history that is "cyclical" and "holistic." This can sound slightly scary to an agency used to interpreting historic sites to fixed moments in time, and reflecting a "blurred time" approach may not be easy, yet new approaches will have to be tried, using techniques and philosophies consistent with Native traditions and perspectives. Success will be achieved only through close co-operation with Aboriginal people.

A related challenge is to reflect the Native view that interpreting the past is more a cultural than a curatorial question. A particular Native group may well want to talk more about their world view and less about "things." As Marie Battiste put it, "We are more than arrowheads."[11]

Native elders often comment on the importance that another intangible—knowledge—has in the Aboriginal experience. Traditional knowledge, in the view of elders in the Northwest Territories, "offers a view of the world, aspirations and an avenue to 'truth' different from those held by Euro-Canadians whose knowledge is based largely on European philosophies." They define traditional knowledge as:

> *the accumulated knowledge and understanding of the human place in relation to the universe. This encompasses spiritual relationships, relationships with the natural environment and the use of natural resources, relationships between people, and is reflected in language, social organization, values, institutions and laws.*[12]

Anthropologist Robin Ridington says that before contact with Europeans, "technology consisted of knowledge rather than tools. It was by means of this knowledge of their ecosystems, and their ingenuity in using them to their own advantage, that Amerindians had been able to survive as well as they did with a comparatively simple technology."[13]

Lest anyone think that such knowledge was more philosophical than practical, they should recall the countless occasions when explorers and settlers relied on Native expertise. There are, for example, accounts of surgical skill, such as when two Kutchin women perfectly repaired a broken kneecap using sinew and small caribou-bone pegs.[14] Clearly, Parks Canada will have to strive to reflect the Native way of looking at technology—at knowledge—at its sites.

Some tangibles are extremely important to Native people: sacred objects. What those items are and how they are to be presented (usually not at all) can only be determined by First Nations representatives themselves. On a lower plane are other significant tangibles, though their importance often lies not so much in themselves but in what they represent, such as a valued relationship, a beloved ancestor or an ancient craft.

Tangibles or intangibles, the interpretation of Native story lines and objects calls for both creativity and consultations. The only way for Parks to find the right approach is to seek the advice of Aboriginal people themselves.

To Change Perspectives

An obstacle to interpreting Native history meaningfully is mainstream society's widely held view that Aboriginal societies are static. "Whites still think of the Indian as what he was—or what they conceive him to have been. No possibility of change is considered except change that makes the Indian a White man."[15]

As well, the emphasis that some people place on precontact Aboriginal cultures, to the exclusion of how those same cultures adapted, evolved, and survive today, leaves one with the unmistakable feeling that a precontact culture is thought to be more "pure" than what came later. It's an odd perspective. Does anyone think that the only true British culture is that which existed before the Norman invasion of 1066, or before the Norse invasion a few hundred years earlier?

Such views fix the image of Aboriginal people as a "people whose time has past or as "noble savages" or "first ecologists" in a lost golden age. It is fundamentally important that Parks Canada managers and front-line interpreters recognize the many false views that people can hold. Our programs and publications must move visitors beyond one-dimensional images.

Who Tells the Stories?

This question is of paramount importance. Given centuries of less-than-ideal relations between Native and non-

Native, the First Nations want, and increasingly expect, to control how they and their history are presented.

Leenore Keeshing-Tobias (Ojibway) has satirized how the process has worked to date.

> *Soon the white man! (I mean Trickster) will come by … "I'm going to tell those stories for you," he'll say. "You're far too primitive to tell them yourself. I am going to let the world know what you think. I am going to tell the world how you think when you think."*[16]

Parks Canada is not empowered to speak for the First Nations in terms of either their history or their perspectives on the environment. Rather, Parks needs to work with Aboriginal Canadians to present mutually acceptable messages.

Not only do Native people want to speak for themselves, but that is also what visitors want. The public prefers to learn about the Cree, Ojibway, and Nuu-chah-nulth from the Cree, Ojibway, and Nuu-chah-nulth. Messages are considered "more authentic" when they come from the people whose history is being interpreted.

One of the benefits of having interpreters from First Nations is that program content and presentation can move in new directions, and with depth. At sites where the Native presence was historically strong, not to have that aspect represented in today's interpretation is simply misleading. Consider a comment about Colonial Williamsburg:

> *You can talk about that 50% of the population all you want, but remember, these visitors are in a museum where what they see tells the story. Until they see that half the people in costume on the street are black, it's not going to sink in how many blacks were here in 1770.*[17]

Substitute "Native people" for "blacks," and one could easily be talking about any of a number of fur-trade or military sites.

The answer to "Who Tells the Story?" is obvious. Parks Canada needs to improve its efforts to hire First Nations individuals for interpretive positions at sites where their presence is called for.

… and How and Where?

Some managers worry that adding previously untold Native history story lines might complicate long-established programs. They talk of "shoehorning" and worry that people are proposing First Nations content only because it is currently "politically correct."

On the question of "shoehorning," no one, least of all the representatives of First Nations communities, are interested in force-fitting stories where none are justified. If, on the other hand, there are Aboriginal associations with a particular site, then it is in everyone's interest to see that such links receive their proper acknowledgement. How extensive that acknowledgement should be will vary from case to case.

As for "politically correct," the challenge Parks Canada faces is to present the nation's history in ways that are factual, balanced, and respectful. Those standards apply whether one is talking about European rivalries or Confederation or the Northwest rebellions of 1870 and 1885.

If a group or a people have been overlooked, then the goal should be to right that wrong. It is not "politically" correct to do so, it is just correct. It is also understandable. As societies change, so their histories change. Long ago, history was about kings. Today it is about any of a thousand topics. That inevitable broadening of history has come to include people who were long on the margin of the dominant society. Their stories need to be told.

So What is the New Past?

One might hope for a detailed prescription. Alas, no type of history is so simple. Each site and each park has its own stories to present, its own relationships to build with First Nations.

If success is to be achieved, it will be realized only with the willing participation of Aboriginal people. Only they know the sites and stories that are important to them; only they can decide how much of their history, perspectives, and values they wish to share with the rest of society.

Parks Canada is in the early stages of demonstrating to the First Nations its eagerness to include their history at its sites and parks. Equally importantly, Parks has recognized the need to work with the Aboriginal communities so that it understands the messages that Native people wish to see presented. In the long run, one might hope that what has until now been regarded as their history, will become our history as well.

Notes

1 Daniel K. Richter, "Whose Indian History?," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 3rd Series, Vol. 50, No. 2 (April 1993), p. 390.

2 *Statistics Canada, Ethnic Origins* (Ottawa, 1993), p. 24, "Table 1A. Population by Ethnic Origin and Sex, for Canada, Provinces and Territories, 1991."

3 Ronald Wright, *Stolen Continents: The "New World" through Indian Eyes since 1492* (Toronto, 1992), p. 188.

4 William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *The Journal of American History,* Vol. 78, No. 4 (March 1992), p. 1364.

5 *Statistics Canada, Ethnic Origins,* p. 1.

6 Quoted in Wright, *Stolen Continents,* p. 306.

7 Ibid.

8 Olive Patricia Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* (Toronto, 1992), p. 62.

9 See Eric Gable, Richard Handler, and Anna Lawson, "On the Uses of Relativism: Fact, Conjecture, and Black and White Histories at Colonial Williamsburg," *American Ethnologist,* Vol. 19, No. 4 (1992), pp. 791–805.

10 Keith J. Crowe, *A History of the Original Peoples of Northern Canada* (Montreal, 1991), p. 21.

11 Conversation with Marie Battiste, 28 April 1992.

12 [Allice Legat], ed., Report of the Traditional Knowledge Working Group (Yellowknife, 1991), pp. 1–2.

13 Quoted in Dickason, *Canada's First Nations,* p. 63.

14 Crowe, *A History of the Original Peoples,* p. 36.

15 Thomas Berger, *A Long and Terrible Shadow: White Values, Native Rights in the Americas, 1492–1992* (Vancouver, 1991), p. 24.

16 Leenore Keeshing-Tobias, "Trickster Beyond 1992: Our Relationship," in Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin, eds., Indigena. *Contemporary Native Perspectives* (Vancouver, 1992), p. 108.

17 Gable, Handler, and Lawson, "On the Uses of Relativism," pp. 794.

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