The Challenges of Public History

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I am grateful for this invitation to speak to you tonight. I care a lot about the kinds of issues that you have been discussing here today, and have been trying to grapple with some of them for more than twenty years. I should be clear about where I'm coming from in my comments tonight. I have never been an administrator of a public-history institution. My full-time job for the past thirty-two years has been as a history professor at York University. But, ever since I started teaching, I have been fascinated with the questions of how versions of the past are developed and delivered in non-academic, public settings, whether museums, historic sites, historical societies, archives, or whatever, and I have worked with many different public-history groups over the years. I made my deepest commitment to this realm of heritage work when I joined the board of a new heritage group in 1988, the Workers' Arts and Heritage Centre, which opened its doors in Hamilton in 1996. For my fifteen years on that board, I did more than just attend the odd meeting to listen to reports on finance and organization. I helped to organize exhibitions and curated a few. I tacked text panels to walls, served drinks at openings and swept up afterward, wrote grant applications, met with potential funders, spoke to groups on behalf of the Centre, and much, much more. Along the way, I spent three years as vice-chair of the Ontario Heritage Foundation (now Trust) and got exposed to some broad issues in heritage work across the province. More recently I have been spearheading a new public-history initiative at York that aims to bring the worlds of academic and public history closer together, and have met with public historians all over the GTA and in some cases worked with them to develop programming. All that work has given me the opportunity to ponder the state of public history in this province.

I want to start on an up-beat note. Public-history institutions in this part of the world have every reason to feel optimistic about their long-term prospects, for the simple reason that there is abundant evidence that lots of people are still fascinated by history and historical subjects and want to engage with the past. How do we know that? In 2007-8 a team of seven historians conducted an extensive survey as part of a research project called "Canadians and Their Pasts," in which they got feedback from nearly 4,000 Canadians. They used a questionnaire and did half-hour telephone surveys. They learned that 43 per cent had visited a museum in the previous year, 49 per cent had visited a historic site, and 78 per cent had watched movies and television shows with historical content. Most Canadians seem to think it is important to connect with the past in their daily lives, and, interestingly, the great majority like to do that in some way that connects with their own family history and to a somewhat lesser extent with their ethnic group. Of all the possible ways of knowing about the past, museums are seen as the most trustworthy source (this was a conclusion reached in a US study a decade earlier, as well). So there is plenty of reason

to think that there is a market out there for the work that you are trying to do here in your historical society.

If that's the good news, I'm afraid there's also quite a bit of bad news. Connecting with that historical enthusiasm is not easy these days, for a number of complicated reasons, starting with underfunding and extending to new audience expectations. Let me try to unravel some of these challenges and try to end on the more positive note I started on.

The first and overarching challenge is money. There is simply far too little of it available for the heritage work that public-history institutions want to undertake. At the federal level, funding to established heritage organizations has been dwindling over the past several years. For many years now, the Museum Assistance Program has supported only travelling exhibitions. Other agencies engaged in heritage research, preservation, and programming have had their budgets slashed. Parks Canada lost 1,000 staff. Library and Archives Canada lost 450, and has been re-visioning itself to do less for historical researchers – putting a freeze on new acquisitions; shutting down interlibrary loans from its collection; shifting away from the collection of private records, so that LAC will soon be simply a records management operation for government records; showing an appalling disrespect for professional standards, culminating in an edict that warned staff against making presentations at professional conferences; and announcing that digitization of records would be privatized, and for the next ten years patrons of LAC would have to pay a user fee to access the records. An institution that should have been a national leader in developing heritage policy has been weakened and diminished. Meanwhile, the National Archives Development Program, which provided vitally important grants to small archives across the country, was cut completely last year.

In some ways even more troubling has been the politicization of federal grants. The Harper government has harnessed a version of history to promote its vision of Canada. In particular, it has focused on war as a central national symbol – it wants to re-imagine Canada as a warrior nation. Most controversially, it poured $28 million into a celebration of the bi-centennial of the War of 1812 in an unconvincing effort to establish that conflict as the defining moment of our nation-state. Then it announced a re-organization of the Canadian Museum of Civilization to make it into a Museum of Canadian History that will veer away from its emphasis on social and cultural history towards political and military history. And last year it announced that Heritage grants from the federal government would be based on a new set of priorities, which highlight prime ministers' birthdays, military campaigns, and, curiously, hockey (the most military of ours sports, I guess, and the favourite of our prime minister, who has, of course, written a book on hockey history). I wonder where they think an organization dedicated to respecting a history of peace, like the Quakers, will fit?

At the provincial level, the story is scarcely less gloomy. The Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Sport provides small grants to some 200 community museums through the Community Museum Operating Grant Program – that's about a quarter of Ontario's museums. According to a 2008 Ontario Museum Association study, the $2.7 million that flowed through this fund in 2004 amounted to less than 5 per cent of the funding for these organizations. Museums are the poor cousins in the provincial cultural sector.

That year Ontario residents paid 23 cents per capita to museums, $1.85 to libraries, and $2.44 to arts organizations. In 2007 the provincial government substantially increased the funding program for community museums, but the number covered did not increase by much and the proportional underfunding continued.

Some museums benefit from municipal support, but that has been eroded in many cases as well. The City of Toronto's support has fallen far behind what it was thirty years ago, and two years ago there was even a rumour that four city museums would be closed.

As the 2008 OMA report concluded:

> Ontario community museums are growing, they self-generate a significant portion of their budgets, and their activities provide significant economic benefits within the province. Many Ontario municipalities have recognized the value of their local community museums and have made operational investments. However, museums, especially non-profit museums, face tremendous challenges in funding key mandate areas such as education and collections and have little, if any, operational sustainability. Museums are generally operating within their resources, but the gap between available operational and capital resources and adequate resources, while not precisely known, is anecdotally concluded to be a significant and growing one.

I expect that you will think that is an understatement.

The result of this chronic underfunding is of course the relentless need to fundraise. Heritage organizations become competitors for the same limited pool of private-sector funds. They are also competing with many other cultural organizations, such as theatre or opera companies, that want to get rich philanthropists to support their programs. And my guess is that the heritage groups are generally less successful. I must admit that the most significant counter-evidence to my argument can be found in the new proposal to launch a Museum of Toronto, distinct from the existing ten city museums, whose initial phase is being funded by some generous people with deep pockets. But that seems to be more the exception than the rule among heritage organizations.

Heritage groups therefore have to pour a huge amount of time and energy into fundraising campaigns, from bake sales to bulk mailings. A growing trend I've noticed among NGOs is to ask for sustaining monthly contributions. Since everyone is asking donors to do this, I suspect the returns are diminishing.

So what do you do? The word that invariably pops up at this point in the conversation is partnerships. These can be both a decided advantage and a potential quagmire of problems. What is generally proposed is that you approach an organization with an interest in a particular history. Talk to a brewery about the history of brewing, or to the Toronto Maple Leafs about the history of hockey, or a union about the history of workers in a particular industry, or the TTC about the history of subways. Some understanding has to be reached about the content and form of the program you are proposing to develop together. That relationship can be easy and cooperative, or it can involve the external funder leaning on the heritage organization make sure that its history is cast in the best possible light. The public historians feel pressure to compromise their independent,

critical, and professional standards. This is a situation not unlike what the federal government is now expecting from those applying for heritage grants.

When we opened the Workers Arts and Heritage in Hamilton in 1996, we tried to do this kind of fundraising for every exhibition we produced. Typically we approached a union that was associated with the subject of the exhibit. Most of the time, they let us produce whatever we wanted, happy that some part of their story was getting some public attention. In practice, I'm sure we engaged in a bit of self-censorship in order not to offend the funder, but not in any major way. When I proposed a history of workers and drinking, we found the brewing unions happy to chip in as other unions had done before. But when we approached the brewing and distilling companies, they backed away, claiming that our prospectus for the exhibition suggested there would be too much negativity about alcohol consumption in our exhibition, not enough celebration of the fun people can have drinking. That was a misreading of what we were setting out to do – we actually wanted to balance the issues of pleasure and danger in our presentation of the booze story – but we had come up against the kinds of dilemmas that partnerships can produce. Heritage organizations can lose their critical edge if they are compelled to be, more or less, part of the marketing arm of some corporate agency.

Partnerships can nonetheless be useful if the right partners are chosen. If a non-profit organization can be convinced that a particular heritage program fits well with their ongoing advocacy work and campaigns, then a heritage group can work out an interesting and mutually supportive relationship where more funds and more people may be drawn in than the heritage group normally expects to meet. The same might be possible with an educational body within a college or university. But these groups don't have much extra money to invest, and partnering with them won't necessarily add substantially to the heritage organization's coffers.

A different kind of partnership involves more than one heritage organization collaborating together. Last June, at a day-long workshop on the possibility of a Museum of Toronto, there was a groundswell of feeling that this new institution should not simply horn in on all the excellent work that has been done by more specialized organizations for many years (like yours). Rather it should see itself, at least in part, as a clearing house and coordinator of the work of others, to bring together the energy and resources of other groups to better showcase the particular history they work on – whether it is the history of medicine or hockey or … religion. Heritage work could become more a network of sharing, rather than nervously circling the wagons and eyeing each other suspiciously and competitively. I think that is a model worth thinking hard about.

Financial constraint makes it hard for heritage organizations to deal with two large issues facing their operations. The first is the question of who will do the creative work to carry out the group's mandate? Who will staff the organization? Thirty-two years ago, when I was invited to co-chair an Ontario Museum Association conference, I was struck by a great divide among the people who showed up. On one hand, there were the stalwart workers from small community museums and local historical societies, many of them part-time, often not even paid, who had kept the organization alive for years through a commendable level of personal commitment. On the other were the

younger salaried professionals, most of them graduates of professional programs and keen to push museum practices along new paths. That second group has grown considerably in the intervening years.

Indeed, there are numerous programs at post-secondary institutions that train such people - the museum and archives studies programs at the University of Toronto, which are now part of a restructured Faculty of Information; the Public History Masters programs at Western, Carleton, and Waterloo; diploma programs in Applied Museum Studies (Algonquin College), Museum Management and Curatorship (Sir Sanford Fleming College), and Cultural and Heritage Site Management (School of Hospitality, Tourism and Culture, Centennial College). The OMA also offers a part-time program in Museum Studies. These programs have mushroomed across the United States, where scores of colleges and universities now have public-history or "applied history" programs. In fact, when the National Council on Public History met in Ottawa last year, I heard a museum administrator tell an audience that no one without an MA in Public History would be likely to get onto a short list for a job in a heritage organization.

The eager young graduates from these programs on both sides of the border bring a remarkable new range of managerial and curatorial skills to heritage work. This revolution in expectations of staff in heritage has set the standards for what to expect from heritage institutions extremely high. A good heritage institution wants to bring this new professional expertise into its operations. But the cost of hiring these new professionals can often be too great for many such groups, and the result has been large numbers of unemployed or underemployed graduates from these programs, who at best manage to find contract work on a specific project for which a heritage group has found special funding.

Not able to hire large numbers of professionals, how do public-history organizations cope? One way is to tap into the internship programs within professional training institutions. All the public-history programs have internships, as do some others that can be useful for heritage work, such as Communication Studies or Education. Many museums, archives, and other organizations around the GTA have these visitors come to work for them for a limited period each week over several months. They can be a godsend to many organizations, since they not only provide an extra set of hands around the place but often bring some of the professional skills that might otherwise be lacking. But they need to be managed by someone – they have to be given projects to work on and monitored regularly, in a situation where the existing paid staff may already be stretched to the limit. The regular turnover of interns means that managing newcomers is an ongoing demand on time and energy. They also come with some ethical baggage – namely, whether or not they are paid. There is growing concern in Ontario and elsewhere with the rapid growth of unpaid internships – basically free labour – not all of which are directly linked to any academic program. There are now vocal advocacy groups, including the Canadian Interns Association, that have been pushing this issue into public debate. In March the Ontario government clamped down on such arrangements if they were not directly connected to training programs as violations of the Employment Standards Act. A private member's bill would have introduced even tougher restrictions. Heritage organizations need to tread carefully on this terrain.

Who does that leave to run a museum or other heritage group? Why, of course, the age-old solution – the volunteer. There is no question that the heritage sector in this province would have collapsed years ago without the army of committed volunteers who show up faithfully to mail letters, serve tea, conduct research, build exhibits, conduct school tours, edit newsletters, and much, much more. Seniors with time on their hands are common volunteers, but increasingly younger people looking to fill out their resumes are also signing on. Despite all the professionalization, volunteers are the backbone of public history in our society. Yet they too present challenges for heritage groups. Volunteers have to be recruited and scheduled. A staff member at the Bata Museum told me that she brings in numerous volunteers every year, a large percentage of whom disappear soon, or quickly can't be relied upon because they don't always show up when needed (especially students, she claimed). Volunteers also have to be trained – the various tasks around a heritage organization are not all intuitive – and because of the coming and going, the process of training can be never-ending. There can also be frustration from the other side of the relationship. Handling volunteers actually requires great care and consistency, and many organizations do it badly. A friend of mine retired from school teaching a year and half ago and plunged into volunteer work in the cultural sector, especially for theatre groups. He has frequently experienced frustration at how poorly many organizations handle their volunteers – not keeping in touch, not valuing the skills that a retiree can bring, and so on.

So in the context of financial austerity, I think human resource management stands out as one of the greatest challenges for public-history institutions. Trying to meet rising expectations with such limited staff resources can be immensely frustrating, but I think it's the norm at the great majority of public-history institutions across the province.

And what exactly are those rising expectations? That question takes us to the central question of the audience for heritage work - or more correctly the audiences. Museums, historic sites, and historical societies have existed in one way or another for at least 150 years in this part of the world. By the post-World War Two period, the typical audience for heritage work had been identified at two ends of the life cycle – on the one end, school children, mostly brought by their teachers, though sometimes with parents on summer holidays, and, on the other, aging adults, starting in their middle age, especially retirees, who were more inclined to be drawn to historical reflection and to be more interested in cultivating memory.

Heritage organizations never liked to admit that the great bulk of the population rarely darkened their doors from about ages sixteen to fifty or sixty. For young people, forced visits to museums and historic sites were perceived as extensions of schooling, and, as they gained more independence over their personal time, they wanted to distance themselves from anything to do with school. Heritage institutions seemed too serious and boring. They looked elsewhere for fun. Typically, it would take another twenty years, when they started to have school-age children of their own, that they began to turn back to heritage sites.

As the financial crunch hit the heritage sector, heritage groups couldn't afford to give up on that large adult population, and they began to rethink their programming in several major ways. There have been at least five important new approaches to heritage

programming that attempt to reach out to wider and bigger audiences.

The first is a growing focus on entertainment - making the heritage experience not just a learning experience, but fun. The museum or historic site was traditionally a fairly sombre place, with a heavy emphasis on education. Large museums invariably had Education Departments that had responsibility for public programming. Going to one of these places was supposed to be good for you. No one today would suggest abandoning that emphasis completely, but lots of heritage organizations have tried to make their programming more entertaining. Next week Black Creek Pioneer Village is holding a special festival called A Spirited Affair, focusing on beer, wine, and whiskey. The following weekend, the Markham Museum will be staging a fall fair called Apple Fest with a diversity of family-oriented activities organized around the production of apple cider. And almost all heritage institutions like to cash in on the public yearning for a Victorian Christmas, with special programming geared to the season. The various kinds of theatrical re-enactment that are presented at some heritage sites are similarly high in entertainment value. For several years, of course, the ROM has been bringing in blockbuster exhibitions to draw in the crowds. The pressure is therefore on to make heritage exhibitions and programs attractive enough to compete with other forms of popular culture.

Second, heritage institutions have turned to less conventional subjects to reach out to more people. This has been a challenge given the fairly narrow focus of the great majority of heritage work in southern Ontario. For the past half century, as Canada lurched ever more into modernity, groups of heritage enthusiasts put most of their energy into recovering and reconstructing life in the nineteenth-century, mostly domestic life, especially the pioneering era. The image of that part of our past that was generally presented was warm and fuzzy, and reassuring. This was in some ways understandable – rapid social change was often hard to adapt to, and retreating to the world of the pre-industrial farm or village was comforting. So we got a large number of historic houses, mills, taverns, military barracks, churches, and more. Brand new little villages were created as old buildings were pulled together at Black Creek, in Pickering, in Waterloo, at Morrisburg in eastern Ontario, and elsewhere. All of this was fascinating for a segment of the population – I dragged my family to as many as possible when I was a kid. But I was exceptional (after all, I became a historian). A great deal of history – in cities, in the twentieth century, in particular – got left out, and it was hard to sustain the interest of younger adults in all this nostalgic quaintness.

So the managers of some of these places have tried to move their programming in new directions. Campbell House in downtown Toronto, for example, has reached out to the arts community. They have regular exhibits of art and even an artist in residence for periods of time. It has also been the scene of numerous theatrical performances. So the place has become a bit of a hub of artistic energy that goes far beyond the old mandate of showing off some early nineteenth-century artefacts. In 2012 Fort York had a huge art installation consisting of dozens of tents set up on the museum grounds where artists put together interpretations of individuals from the era of the War of 1812. Both the ROM and Mackenzie House have had exhibitions on disability, a contemporary concern that engages many people. Last year I visited the Christchurch

Museum in New Zealand, where staff were putting up an exhibition on graffiti.

Relatedly, the third new direction that finding new audiences has pushed heritage institutions into has been to develop programming in partnership with groups that have ongoing activist agendas. This can include involves collaborative planning with such groups to work out how what the heritage group can do can help the other organization to advance its goals. Often such groups have never thought about the historical dimension of their work and are pleased to find ways to integrate what the heritage group can do with their ongoing programs and campaigns. At the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, we did a lot of this, including a travelling exhibit for the Ontario Nurses Association and another for non-medical health-care workers. The City of Toronto's Mackenzie House museum is in the process of completely rethinking its mandate in this direction. They are looking at ways to turn the place into a museum of social justice, building on the reform heritage of William Lyon Mackenzie, and they are hoping to reach out to many organizations to help develop exhibitions and programming that relates to ongoing agendas for social justice. I think they might well be interested in talking to your organization about something on the history of pacifism.

The fourth new direction in heritage work has been technological. There has been a growing interest in making the past more tangible and touchable, and to make the engagement with the past less passive – something that moves away from dusty artefacts in glass cases. That has often involved interactive technology that allows visitors to activate the exhibition in some way, usually through some electronic touch-screen. Last December I visited New Zealand's national museum, known as Te Papa, and was dazzled by the interactive exhibitions that encouraged me, for example, to become a Maori boy making a series of life decisions in an online game. Often this interactivity can be connected to programs of oral history, where visitors are encouraged to leave their stories for future display. The constraint is that these innovative exhibitions are expensive and require big doses of special funding to install and maintain them.

Many more heritage institutions are using computers to develop online exhibitions, which usually combine text, photos and other images, and perhaps film clips. This is the state of the art now in public-history work, and everybody is doing it. There seems to be a growing recognition that survival means competing with the many delights of the internet, Facebook, Flickr, and so on. There is now a Virtual Museum of Canada which acts as a major portal for large numbers of these online exhibits. It can be an expensive approach to heritage programming, but this week I heard about new software that is more user-friendly and allows for designing exhibits in-house rather than having to hire a web designer. It is a flexible form of technology that makes updating or adding new material relatively easy, compared to conventional exhibits. The downside is that visits to historical websites apparently last only an average of four minutes, compared to the much longer visits to physical exhibitions, but the upside is that there are often thousands of visitors a year – far more than would make the trip to a heritage site.

All of these trends are converging on a fifth new development, that is, to transform heritage spaces into much more open, flexible, multi-purpose spaces. The old image of a museum as a sanctimonious temple, set apart from the hustle and bustle of everyday life, is being replaced by one

that welcomes that hustle and bustle. Community organizations of various kinds are invited in; unconventional subjects are addressed; lectures and debates are staged; contemporary issues and controversies are directly confronted; music, theatre, and film are welcomed. Even more interesting, I think, is the emerging concept of the "pop-up" museum – that is, the use of a space not normally designated for heritage programming, perhaps a storefront or a public square or a church hall or even a parking garage, and installing some kind of heritage programming for a relatively short space of time, where some of the new styles of programming can be presented. This allows public historians to bring their message closer to the rhythms of everyday life, rather than expecting people to make a special trip to the heritage site.

So, looking across the public-history landscape in Ontario, I see some dark clouds, largely resulting from underfunding. But I hope I've also been able to suggest that there are great pastures of sunshine where exciting new ideas are blossoming. I think energetic and dedicated organizations like yours – and there are many like you across the province – are well placed to take up some of those new notions about how to help people understand their past. And as I said at the beginning, there is every reason to believe that you'll find receptive audiences. So I wish you all the best.