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Review: Book Review: Settling and Unsettling Memories: Essays in Canadian Public History

Reviewed Work(s): Settling and Unsettling Memories: Essays in Canadian Public History by Nicole Neatby and Peter Hodgins

Review by: Edward MacDonald

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## Book Reviews

*Settling and Unsettling Memories: Essays in Canadian Public History* edited by NICOLE NEATBY and PETER HODGINS. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012. xii + 458 pp.; images, notes, bibliography, index; clothbound, \$95.00; paperbound, \$45.00; e-Book, \$39.95.

Those who teach public history in a Canadian university setting are often at a loss to find a proper text. Every year I would put that question to book reps anxious to match courses and book sales. They seldom had a suggestion, and like many colleagues, I fell back on assembling my own course pack of disparate readings. There are basically two options here. One can work with texts that explore the nature of memory, or choose case studies that expose the battle for those memories. In Canada, the frustrating search for Canadian tropes and Canadian examples has often dictated the choice of readings. In *Settling and Unsettling Memories*, Professors Nicole Neatby, who teaches at St. Mary's University in Halifax, and Peter Hodgins, who works in the School of Canadian Studies at Ottawa's Carleton University, present a collection of essays that offer one-stop shopping for public history instructors.

The collection's eighteen essays are divided into six sections: "Remembering the Heroic Past," "Pedagogies of Nation," "Visualizing and Revising the Past," "Cashing in on the Past," and "Entertaining the Past." It is not meant as a manual for practising public historians. Of the nineteen authors, only one, Lyle Dick, is actually a public history practitioner in the traditional sense of someone working in the field rather than studying it (and even he, as current president of the Canadian Historical Association, straddles "theory" and "practice"). The editors were determined to reflect in the collection the diversity of disciplines that concern themselves with collective memory, and so, although over half of the contributors are historians, other fields are represented: education, communication studies, literature, geography, art history, Canadian Studies. The range of perspectives is welcome, and the editors have resolutely struggled to constrain the discipline-specific jargon that might otherwise threaten readers' comprehension and try their patience. The result is less uneven than one might expect. Although some of the theory-driven essays will be heavy sledding for students (and perhaps academics!), others (for example, H. V. Nelles's foray into art history, "The Art of Nation Building") carry their learning lightly. There are familiar titles, witness Cecilia Morgan's influential deconstruction of the "placing" of Laura Secord in Anglo-Canadian tradition, and familiar authors, such as Concordia's Ronald Rudin and Ian McKay, but also new voices and new approaches.

As the title suggests, this is a book about contested memory. And more than anything else, it presents a way of approaching the past, specifically, Canada's past. That approach is carefully framed in the editors' useful introduction. "Who remembers and why?" they ask (4). What determines the version of the past that gets disseminated? How does that change over time and among different interest groups? To get at those questions, the collection targets "sites of memory" (8), material or non-material entities that over time acquire symbolic resonance in the memorial heritage of a community. Again and again, then, the collection addresses commemoration and presentation by deconstructing monuments, memorials, rituals, parades, celebrations, texts, advertising, websites, and moving images. One essay even argues that how history is presented *in* the classroom is the stuff of public history (Ken Osborne's curiously titled "If I'm Going to Be a Cop, Why Do I Have to Learn Religion and History?: Schools, Citizenship, and the Teaching of Canadian History").

There are highlights: the section on tourism and heritage (the former subverting the latter) is particularly good; Ian Radforth's dissection of redress campaigns over wartime injustice towards ethnic minorities is salutary; and the making and unmaking of heroes/heroines continues to fascinate. And there is unfulfilled potential, often in the conjunction between history and the creative arts. For instance, the evolution of Canadian historical fiction is a rich mine that is reduced here to a tantalizing handful of samples, while the art history pieces are too often obsessed with hegemonies. Yet, in every case, the essays probe and provoke, troubling received pasts, unsettling rather than settling.

The collection also exposes, quite unintentionally, an underlying tension in Canadian public history that crosses the admittedly blurred boundaries between three interest groups: public history teachers, public history students, and public history practitioners. Their concerns overlap when it comes to the stories we tell about the past; each cares about the stories that get told, who gets to choose them, and what they mean. And yet, there is a series of disconnects. Academics, myself among them, are intrigued by public history from an intellectual standpoint. For us, the past is not just a foreign country, but contested terrain. We ponder suggestive questions of authority and ownership. Perhaps, too, it is reassuring for us to think that interest groups and individuals outside the classroom and the conference venue might consider history worth arguing about. The attraction for students is different. Those who do not wish to teach think of public history as the course where the vocational rubber hits the road: a place where they can learn what careers are out there and what is required to access them. (At least, that is what my students tell me each year at the beginning of term.) That history is contingent, that the past is permeable, that memory is contested, may or may not help them make student loan payments. And then, of course, there are the practitioners themselves, who grapple every day with the practical challenges of mediating a changeable past for multiple publics. They, too, confront questions of shifting authority and possible meanings, but they do so

within a context of budget constraints, relentless schedules, shifting workloads, technological constraints, and available resource. Other than an implicit recognition in some essays that the past is a commodity, this collection provides little guidance on how to navigate those murky professional waters. It is first and foremost an academic text projected at an imagined classroom, and in that it succeeds admirably. But at its best, the collection also echoes conversations that take place in the work place as well as in the classroom, and it may help shape how public historians think about their work.

As a discipline, history is much about ways of viewing the past, and an education in history involves a progressive loss of innocence. After reading this collection, students should see history differently. They should also perceive the *presentation* of the past differently. It may not get them a career, but it could leave them with a vocation.

EDWARD MACDONALD

University of Prince Edward Island

*Speaking for the Enslaved: Heritage Interpretation at Antebellum Plantation Sites* by ANTOINETTE T. JACKSON. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2012. 178 pp.; images, maps, notes, references, index; clothbound, \$94.00; paperbound, \$32.95; e-Book, \$32.95.

“Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter . . .” Antoinette T. Jackson’s new book, *Speaking for the Enslaved: Heritage Interpretation at Antebellum Plantation Sites*, is a twist on this proverb. Although she is not advocating for the reassignment of the historian, she is calling on public historians to use methodologies that will “glorify” *all* of the individuals who contributed to the success of antebellum and postbellum plantation sites. To do this, the voices of the Africans and African Americans who labored on these sites must be heard, and the best way to hear them is through the voices of their descendants.

Jackson, an associate professor at the University of South Florida in Tampa, describes herself as an “academically trained and employed cultural anthropologist” (14) with a professional and personal interest in how plantation museums are preserved and presented. Professionally, her interest lies with the multifaceted roles of cultural resource experts and how they overcome the politics of the profession to fulfill the goals and objectives of heritage preservation, interpretation, and tourism. Personally, as a woman of African descent, she wants to better understand her own heritage.

Plantation culture represented a major piece of southern history and the economic history of the United States in general. It was on these large farms that much of the raw materials used by northern industrialists to produce merchandise sold all over the world was grown. It was here that Europeans and Africans came together in a forced and unnatural relationship that left an unpleasant and ugly legacy that some present-day storytellers want to hide.