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Fort Battleford as an Historic Site

Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it history evaporates. It is a kind of ideal servant; it prepares all things, brings them, lays them out, the master arrives, it silently disappears: all that is left for one to do is to enjoy the beautiful object without wondering where it comes from.

Roland Barthes

It is not uncommon to have history and mythology in competition as we interpret the past at our historic sites. Images of the past are constantly in the process of change as each generation finds something new to tell or forgets a part of what was there. Not surprisingly, when interpreting the history of sites like Fort Battleford and Batoche, there are tensions among various ideologies as well as between regional and central Canadian perspectives. Today, we increasingly find the Native peoples' point of view challenging the established versions of Canadian history. One of the problems has been many of our national historic parks have become sacred sites and serve, ideologically, to commemorate the past as the conquerors see it. The many military sites in our system underline the emphasis on history as the chronical of winners and losers. Thus, in the wide range of potential nationalisms that our historic sites present, some have been valorized and made available for public consumption, while others have been ignored. The same symbol can of course have many meanings depending on who is looking at it. History at our sites ought to draw attention to the wide range of interpretations and the visitor can choose to consider various meanings depending on his or her perspective and experience. A member of the NWMP, for example, who may have been within the stockade at Battleford during the fighting in 1885, is likely to see a dramatically different significance in the fort than might a local Cree who witnessed the hanging of eight members of his tribe on the gallows within the stockade. Gradually there seems to be a recognition of the importance of encouraging many meanings, drawing attention to complex and multivocal histories rather than staying with older monological histories that invoke closure on meaning.

Up until the 1970s, the metropolitan thesis of Canadian history dominated the narrative form, providing the framework for those anxious to relate how exploitation of fish, furs, lumber and wheat produced a wealthy and prosperous Canada. The consequences associated with development rarely appeared in the pages. The predominant paradigm was national: what was best for the nation was best for everyone. Local and regional attitudes were hardly ever considered.

Emerging regional perspectives during the 1970s began to challenge the one-sided version of Canadian history produced by the metropolitanists, and the cost of progress, not only to Natives, but to settlers as well began to be assessed. In the early years of the decade, the story of the history of the Métis at Batoche changed as more was discovered about the social and economic life of these pre-Confederation westerners. No longer was the emphasis at the site on the military

theme alone, nor was Batoche simply presented as the place where the Métis were defeated. Indeed, the events of the so-called 1885 Rebellion took their place alongside the social and economic history of the Métis. New research challenged the dominant national myths held so dear that depicted these people as carefree, hard-living, unpatriotic buffalo hunters. Moreover, the history as it related to the public at the site no longer ended in 1885 with the Battle of Batoche, but extended well beyond this watershed favoured by those who saw the Métis as an impediment to the development of the West.

At Fort Battleford myth and history clashed for ideological reasons and because only one side of the story was emphasized in the established histories. The history of Native people and especially their role in the events of 1885 altered the way in which the official history of Fort Battleford was told. The myth of the Mounties riding triumphantly into a "savage" and "wild" West for the sake of a "civilized" nation had to be deflated and reconsidered. Instead of being represented only as heroes of law and order, it seemed more sensible and balanced to also show them as agents of John A. Macdonald's National Policy, which aimed at developing the western hinterland for the national good. Historians studying Native people also became more interested in examining not only how Natives changed as a result of contact with the NWMP, but also how the Mounties and the society they represented changed in their attitudes towards Natives. Gradually, as the Native point of view was better appreciated, a new history began to replace myth, a history that presented many points of view rather than one. For years the history at Fort Battleford was related to the public as though the Mounties had come into a void, the context of their arrival and the reasons for their large numbers in the Battleford area being only vaguely understood. This is not to suggest that outsiders alone are responsible for the one-sided history that existed for so many years. Anglo-Canadians who held positions of power and influence in the West were no more interested in Métis and Aboriginal history than were central Canadians who wrote most of the mainstream histories. Most Anglo-Canadian westerners internalized the biases of national history and reproduced them in schools and churches established during the settlement era.

There were some exceptions, such as teacher and historian Campbell Innes, who tried to have the Native point of view put forward in the interpretive program at Fort Battleford. Though Innes was a member of the Historic Sites and Monument Board from 1951-54, it appears his efforts remained largely unsuccessful. He supported the move towards interpreting fur trade and Native history, but there were many others who opposed his approach and favoured using Fort Battleford solely to valorize the role of the NWMP. It proved difficult to challenge the myth of the force and to place its role in a more balanced perspective. The myth of the Mounties served the vision of the colonizers well, and while historical research might have helped to demystify their image somewhat, there were few to write the new history and still fewer who were receptive to it.

The conflict between myth and history stood most starkly during the early years when Fort Battleford was first recognized as a national historic site. In the early 1950s, the Director of the Canadian Parks Service advised his Deputy Minister that Fort Battleford should be considered a site of national significance. The focus was to be on the establishment of the fort and its construction. His memo outlined a brief chronology of the fort, beginning with its founding by Walker

and Frechette in 1876 with a troop of fourteen men and six horses. The fort expanded and sub-posts were established at Carlton, Duck Lake and Prince Albert in the next year, when the telegraph line reached Battleford. By 1878, the year in which Battleford became the territorial capital of the North-West, the fort had grown to contain a force of thirty-four men and forty-one horses. The director mentioned in passing that the first stockade constructed in 1878 was built with the assistance of Natives from Big Bear's band. By the 1880s, greater energies were expended on improving the stockade and buildings. As well, the fort was honoured with a visit by the Marquis of Lorne and Princess Louise in 1883. The seat of government was then moved to Regina as a result of the rerouting of the CPR. Following the move the government buildings became the home of the first Native industrial school, and in 1885 Battleford

> became a very important centre and police from this point [the fort] went to Fort Carlton and took part in the Battle of Duck Lake and settlers in the Battleford district congregated at the police fort for protection. Battleford was besieged by the Indians; relieved by General Middleton later in the early summer. Captain Nash formed a Home Guard. Inspector Dickens, son of the novelist, Charles Dickens, was stationed at Battleford and subsequently engaged the Indians at the Battle of Cut Knife Hill not far from Battleford. Battleford was used as a base for the attack on Big Bear at Loon Lake. Poundmaker made his offer to surrender. General Middleton arrived to dictate terms to Poundmaker. Eight Indians guilty of murder were tried at Battleford and hanged.[1]

This thumbnail sketch of Battleford's significance concluded with mention of the 1886 arrival of "C" Division under Superintendent John Cotton. Then, in 1886, the stockade was removed. Until sometime between 1914 and 1916 the police post continued to operate, though with gradually declining importance. From 1914-16 to 1924 the post was supervised by a caretaker, "but as time went on, they [the buildings] became a stomping ground for relic hunters."[2] The property was used for a variety of purposes until 1936, when it was transferred from the federal government to the province of Saskatchewan. During this period the fort fell into disrepair. In the mid-1940s, Campbell Innes initiated a drive to save the remaining buildings with the purpose of using them to interpret the history of the area. In 1945, the fort opened as a Native museum and police memorial, and in 1948 the site was officially opened by Governor General Lord Alexander.

The memo reflects the metropolitan perspective. Highlighted are events initiated by agents of the Canadian government, and the focus is on describing the establishment of Canadian authority through the NWMP and the territorial capital, putting down western rebellion, building an industrial school, and narrating visits of royalty into the empty North-West. It was history from a central Canadian perspective — the West made safe for white settlement. The Canadian government had chosen to commemorate the "civilization" of the West.

This was not, however, the way in which the history of Battleford was presented by Innes and those who began the move to have Battleford recognized as nationally important. The initial project was to establish a Native museum along with a "memorial" to the NWMP. Thus, the story was to be broader, and was to include the history of those who were in the North-West before the Canadian government arrived. In the promotional literature the history of the early occupants was told:

> This locality is the home of the Cree Indian. In the early days they successfully held back the Blackfoot. There are also tribes of Saulteaux, Assiniboine and Sioux, with their long history and cultural development. The Indian Agency office is still located here.[3]

Also mentioned in the prospectus of the museum was the significance of the fur trade to the area:

> Such early explorers as McGillivary, Pink, Cocking, Frobisher, Pond, Henry, Pangman, Umfreville, Thompson and Harman passed up the North Saskatchewan and crossed to the Beaver River and Isle a la Crosse to Churchill. Their fur post sites are still to be seen. It has been a pleasure to search for these and have Professor A.S. Morton come up from Saskatoon and check them over. These posts should be rebuilt or remarked, and the thrilling story of early days retold: Manchester House, Pine Island Post, Eagle Hills Post, Turtle Post, Buckingham House. The rich fur and pemmican trade of the Hudson's Bay and North-West Company was centred in this part of the Saskatchewan River and of Green Lake, Isle a la Crosse, Prince Albert and Edmonton.[4]

There was a real (if paternalistic) hope held by members of the Battleford Historical Society that presenting the history of Native people would assist them in regaining pride in their traditions. The post-World War II consciousness evident in the promotional literature clearly saw education as a way not only to avoid catastrophes of war, but also to raise the Natives from the spiritual and material depression it was thought many suffered:

> In order to fit the cultural needs of the Indians it is felt here this program should be enlarged. Our increasing number of visitors is evidence that the sphere of research be enlarged. There are frequent students of Indian lore visiting here. Indian handicrafts need developing in our schools. This museum may become a central place for exhibitions and sale of their work. All this will tend to make their racial consciousness share in our Canadian Unity. Creative art and Indian folklore will always have an important place here. At present there is an urgent need to assist in saving valued individual collections. As you are aware collectors from across the borders do carry away so much which has its place in western Canada.[5]

Thus it was the need for a Native museum that prompted these early preservationists, not only the need to establish a North West Mounted Police site. This was expressed many times by Innes, but particularly so in a 1949 letter to Dr. Keenleyside, Chairman of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board (HSMB) of Canada:

> Today so many citizens are anxious to forward collections and various articles interpretive of Indian life. Its scholars are assisting in various ways. It is so necessary that such material may be studied and properly classified in the next three months before the rush of visitors. Besides there is the general furnishing of the Indian Museum Building. You will note that the Administration has an Indian Committee or Division. Your Department is free to make additions or changes and to initiate your own policy. Your Department may take the control or the members of the Division may carry on any policy you so initiate to advance this phase of National life.[6]

Motivated by a desire to present a comprehensive picture of the history of the North-West, the Battleford Historical Society pressed on with great energy and initiative towards the establishment of an historic site at the fort. In the early years it did not always have a firm financial commitment from the government,

but eventually the society was able to operate with funds from local subscribers, the provincial government and eventually the federal government.

The work of Innes was remarkable. In the period from 1945 to 1951, when the site was taken over by the federal government, he wrote scores of letters to politicians and bureaucrats for amounts of money to assist in stabilizing, furnishing, acquiring, and preserving the buildings and their contents.

In the early years immediately after the war, assistance to preserve buildings came from the newly elected Co-operative Commonwealth Federation government of Tommy Douglas. This happened after numerous requests to the federal government failed. After considerable lobbying, the HSMB still thought the fort was of local interest only, stating in 1948: "It is suggested that there should be sufficient local interest in Saskatchewan to take care of [the] Police Memorial and Indian Museum of Battleford."[7] Then Innes, as spokesperson for the local historical society, applied to have funding awarded to Battleford on the basis of its status as a museum. In a memo written to Keenleyside, he stated that the museum had raised $8,000 in 1949, made up of $600 from local subscriptions as well as a $5,000 grant from the Saskatchewan government. Innes asked the board for an additional $2,000, half of which was to go to pay an "Indian curator or keen student of Indian lore."[8]

In 1949, in response to the persistence of Innes, the HSMB adopted the following resolution at its annual meeting:

> That this Board recommends to the Department that through the National Museum and the cooperation of the Indian Affairs Branch and the National Parks Service, they consider the establishment over the years of a series of local or branch Indian museums at what seems to be the strategic points, of which the Committee appointed by this board suggested that Battleford should be one.[9]

After long negotiations between J.H. Brockelbank, Saskatchewan's Minister of Natural Resources, and Robert Winters, the federal government's Minister of Natural Resources and Development, the site was plaqued and the land transferred from the provincial government to the federal Department of Indian Affairs. The plaque read:

> On May 24, 1948, this memorial to the North West Mounted Police was officially opened by His Excellency Field Marshall the Right Honourable, Viscount Alexander of Tunis, K.S. Governor General of Canada. The work of restoring this historic fort established in 1876 as district headquarters by Sub-Inspector James Walker NWMP was begun in 1945 by the Government of Saskatchewan under the direction of the Honourable J.L. Phelps, Minister of Natural Resources.
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> On July 1, 1951 this monument was transferred to the government of Canada to be maintained as a national historic park.[10]

Yet, in spite of all the work done by the local community to write its own history, there was no mention of Native people in this first commemoration.

Several brochures and pamphlets produced for the site still tried to present a broader contextual framework for the history interpreted at the fort, but gradually the emphasis shifted towards the history of the police themselves as highlighted by the first plaque. Directions from Ottawa continued to be unresponsive to the broader history of the area as a whole. The emphasis on the NWMP, entrenched in the 1950s, continued through the 1960s and 1970s. It was not until the

1980s that the original intention of including Native history at Battleford again emerged and was integrated into the storyline. Generally the evolution of the interpretation and commemoration at Fort Battleford reinforces the trends noted by C.J. Taylor's "National Historic Parks and Sites, 1880-1951: The Biography of a Federal Cultural Program." A distinctly centralist bias in the recommendations of the HSMB emerged over the years, one that seemed unable to decentre itself enough to recognize the regional nature of Canada's varied cultural traditions. As a result, those areas underrepresented by the board were ignored — regions such as Quebec, the Atlantic provinces and the West. Controversy in the 1920s over whether or not to commemorate sites of the 1885 North-West campaign had a lasting effect even two decades later. The problems persisted and regional preservationists had to lobby vigorously to be heard. On some occasions, such as the commemoration of the 1885 Rebellion, the board was able to offend more than one region:

> A controversy ... arose over the commemoration of a series of sites connected with the Northwest Rebellion of 1885. The interpretation of these sites exhibited a distinct English Canadian bias and was rooted in an Ontarian based nationalism which saw the rebellions as an obstacle to the material evolution of Canada. This ran counter to the views of Quebec nationalists who viewed Louis Riel as a French Canadian martyr and to native Canadians whose legitimate grievances were ignored.[11]

A dismissal of the regional perspective in explaining the causes for the fighting in 1885 was evident in the emphasis given to the interpretation of other sites in the West. The tendency to overlook the role of the Natives (which even the whites in the West were anxious to understand) was a general problem. The composition of the board was primarily responsible for its inability to include other points of view. This helped explain the difficulties faced by people like Innes:

> Given the inherent bias of the members to emphasize the history of their own neighbourhoods, it is not surprising that the prairie provinces received only a small proportion of national historic sites in the years leading up to the Second World War. Moreover, the sites that were designated were likely to be interpreted from perspectives alien to regional/historical traditions. This is just what happened in the case of the Northwest Rebellion sites in Saskatchewan which embroiled the board in some of its most virulent controversies. It was a difficult episode for the board for not only did it result in unfavourable publicity, but it forced the members to face the possible conflict between the historical and ideological significance of a site. Usually the historical events associated with a potential site involved the board in a discourse of subjective interpretation. In the case of Cut Knife Hill and Batoche commemorations, discussions became polemics.[12]

By the 1950s, the Massey Commission began to analyze the state of heritage preservation in Canada. It drafted recommendations intended to make historical commemoration more representative of all regions of Canada, but especially of Quebec and the West. Unfortunately, the final report of the board, whose overall perspective remained predominantly centralist, was vague and indecisive regarding how best to achieve better representation for regional interests. The criticisms of a centralist focus had been made known in hearings held across Canada:

> The presentations at regional hearings, on the other hand tended to note the inability of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board to represent regional peculiarities. They also dwelt on the presentation aspect of the program which was of little interest to the custodians of culture on the Massey Commission.[13]

But the points made to the commission, while heard and apparently appreciated, were not dealt with:

> The resulting report on the historic sites programs, which passed along criticisms gathered at regional hearings as well as including the commissioner's own analysis, made little effort to reconcile these two perspectives with the result that it presented a confusing array of opinions and recommendations.[14]

The commissioners saw themselves as "custodians of culture" and were attempting to foster a unified national outlook in their recommendations. It never occurred to them that greater regional expression might lead to a strengthened sense of community within the larger national framework.

In the 1980s, the move was towards a more contextual approach to the interpretation of history at Fort Battleford. The program looks more like the commemorative program developed during the Innes years. There is the recognition of Native and fur-trade history before the NWMP arrived and the story includes more than one point of view.