

Comptes rendus de livres

Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World*

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Walsh, Kevin. *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World*, from the series "Heritage: Care-Preservation-Management Program." New York, NY: Routledge, Chapman and Hall Inc., 1992. 204 pp. Hardcover ISBN 0-415-05026-X, paper ISBN 0-415-07944-6.

Kevin Walsh has written an excellent and provocative book about history museums; not, of course, without flaws. Those concerned with the heritage industry, in whatever dimensions, owe it to their publics, their colleagues and themselves to read it carefully. Walsh is anything but gentle in his appraisal of contemporary practice; he does offer new patterns for development, and his sharp insights are good enough to forgive self-contradiction from time to time and a propensity to "throw out the baby with the bathwater."

Walsh is a Research Scholar in Archaeology at the University of Leicester, a neighbour if not a tenant with that university's department of museum studies known for its British insular and Anglocentric views of the world of museums. Unlike the writings of many of Leicester's museum studies faculty, Kevin Walsh makes big arguments in the context of European and North American museological thinking as well as that of his British colleagues. What he has to say — and that's a lot of valuable stuff — does apply almost exclusively to the First World, to the North Atlantic Enclave, and not to the post-colonial world of which he makes no mention by name. He writes from well left of centre; concedes in his introduction that he was writing "partly out of anger and despair," but spares us from any excesses of rhetoric.

The author does his readers a great service in the first three chapters, providing a *mise en scene* through an informed discussion of modernity and post-modern societies, with the help of Habermas et al. Even at this early stage in the book there are clues to his affinity for the thinking of Georges Henri Rivière, de Varine, Kinard, Vasquez, and the other progenitors of today's worldwide movements in *la nouvelle muséologie*. He points out the failure of The New Museology in Britain "was highlighted by the publication of a book entitled *The New Museology* (Vergo 1989), which did not explicitly consider what the rest of the world considers to be the new museology at all." *The New Museology* runs 221 pages without mentioning any of the progenitors cited above. Walsh's contribution should encourage British museum professionals to look beyond their shores.

Throughout the book threads the theory of "distancing," — "this distancing from many of the processes which affect our daily lives that is modernity, or more recently, post-modernity." The argument that engendering a sense of place and inter-subjective communities should be the future role of history museums, combatting the distancing and conjunctive alienation of our times, is one of Walsh's most provocative positions. An hour ago I watched a television program about the Smithsonian Institution getting onto the Information Superhighway. Now I can "experience" American history without leaving my armchair, the Secretary of the Smithsonian told me, via satellite.

The book's subtitle is "Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World," and it is about history museums, so that the author's

generalities must always be read in that context. They do not apply to art museums, for example. But some general statements reject, out of hand, other interpretations of the genus museum. On page 170 he writes, "there should not be a role for the kind of exhibition which is concerned merely with promoting the fetishism of the auratic object — the emphasis on the usually prestigious object for itself, a blind aesthetics, which denies any appreciation of context." What then of those who have found a sense of place — a four-dimensional place with time as the Fourth dimension as Walsh would have it — who wish in *their museum* to enshrine objects of power, fetishes if you wish, because they are the irrational, unexplainable, timeless symbols of place? The theory of one kind of museum being the place of objects of power appears to have been rejected. Yet Walsh does recognize the magic of objects two pages later. "[T]he visitor is encouraged to handle archaeological finds from local excavations. For many people this is an almost magical experience." Why, Mr. Walsh? Is it the visi-

tor's understanding and appreciation of context, or something else?

In the final chapter the arguments are pulled together under the heading "Conclusion: the Remoteness of the Past." It is a strong chapter, attacking our "institutionalized rationalization of the past," which legitimizes the ideas of modernity and progress; incisively stating that "heritage should be partly considered as an attempt to articulate an idea of 'nation' at a time when many nation-states believe their power to be under threat." He closes with a statement that might appear banal, might be overlooked as the reader finishes the last page and closes the book, but it is in fact the point of it all and a dire warning.

"There should not be an emphasis on only one form of representation. A true democracy will offer many and varied forms of museum service. *The danger is that we are in fact moving towards an homogenized monopoly of form which in itself is an attack on democracy*" (italics added).

R. Louis Gentilcore, et al (eds.), *Historical Atlas of Canada, Volume II, The Land Transformed 1800–1891*

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R. Louis Gentilcore, et al (eds.). *Historical Atlas of Canada, Volume II, The Land Transformed 1800–1891*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993. 184 pp., 58 plates. Cloth \$95.00, ISBN 0-8020-3447-0.

The *Historical Atlas of Canada* ranks with the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* as one of the most important works of co-operative research and writing in the history of Canadian scholarship. In both cases, dozens of scholars from a wide variety of disciplines have worked together with impressive results. The *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* is the larger work, with thirteen volumes in print. *The Historical Atlas* is complete with three volumes available.

The final of these three volumes to be published is Volume II, subtitled *The Land Transformed 1800–1891*. Essentially this volume deals with nineteenth-century Canada, a century that in many respects defined the nation that we know today. Repeated attempts in both the United States and British North America to

unify the continent were rebuffed: the Americans failed to conquer Canada during the War of 1812; an annexation movement during the 1840s was crushed; Fenian filibusters were defeated; Confederation was brought about at least in part to strengthen this society, vis-à-vis the United States; the late-nineteenth-century continentalist wing of the Liberal Party was neutralized. With the exception of Newfoundland/Labrador, Canada attained her present territorial limits. The West and British Columbia were not only incorporated into Canada but connected with eastern Canada by rail. Ontario was settled and the peopling of the West was well underway. Rebellion movements that could have prevented the creation of a united Canada were suppressed. National institutions like the RCMP were created and our basic constitutional framework established. The economy grew dramatically, preparing Canada for twentieth-century status as an advanced nation.

All of this, and much more, is the stuff of *The Land Transformed*. The volume is organized