

# Introduction: Spectacle, Monument, and Memory

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LET US BEGIN with two visual images, culled from the Toronto *Globe and Mail* over the Victoria Day weekend. The first is of a madcap Queen Victoria, zooming around on rollerblades, with the caption “We are amused ... Big Time.”<sup>1</sup> The cartoon reminds us that for many Canadians Victoria Day is less about Canada’s English imperial heritage than about recreation. It is the first of the long weekends that litter the summer calendar, a time when Canadians customarily open up their cottages, if they happen to have one, and with luck bask in the sun. The second image is a photograph of a demonstration that occurred in downtown Montreal on Victoria Day.<sup>2</sup> It features the former FLQ leader, Paul Rose, addressing a crowd of separatists, with a Quebec flag fluttering beside him. It reminds us that even as seemingly innocuous an anniversary as Queen Victoria’s birthday, first declared as a public holiday in Canada in 1872 and now celebrated on a Monday whether it happens to fall on May 24 or not, can still be invested with political significance: in this instance, to protest the Canadian federation.

Modern-day societies are saturated with signs, and the collective representations of the past and present that they impart are often of considerable political significance. One only has to think of the controversies surrounding the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial in Washington, or the 500th anniversary of the landing of Columbus, or the bicentennial of the French Revolution, to recognize that this is so.<sup>3</sup> Until quite recently, however, historical interest

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1 *Globe and Mail*, May 19, 1997, p. A12.

2 *Globe and Mail*, May 20, 1997, p. A5.

3 See John Bodnar, *Remaking America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 3–9; Steve Laurence Kaplan, *Farewell, Revolution: Disputed Legacies, France, 1789/1989* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

in commemorative politics was relatively slight. Historians of the Renaissance often heeded the importance of pageantry and spectacle in the transmission of royal power and majesty. Marc Bloch, one of the first self-conscious practitioners of social history, devoted a whole book to the ceremonies of sacred monarchy and their compelling power in sustaining the mystique of royalism.<sup>4</sup> Yet, compared to the work that anthropologists pursued in the broader cultural realm of politics,<sup>5</sup> with its flags, monuments, festivals, and commemorations, historians were comparative late-comers in deciphering the “symbolics of power”, to use Clifford Geertz’s phrase, that are now considered central to the structure and working of any society. Even Lucien Febvre’s enjoinder to historians to examine “the enormous problem of tradition”, first posed in 1949, took almost 35 years to bear fruit in the shape of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s highly influential *The Invention of Tradition*.<sup>6</sup>

One of the reasons why social historians initially neglected the study of tradition and its symbolic articulation was that they tended to regard it with a jaundiced eye. In the radical era of the sixties and seventies “tradition” appeared to be a conservative ruse designed to keep the masses in thrall, whereas commemorative politics bespoke of elitism, self-serving notions of nationhood, and a “top-down” approach to history that many historians wished to dispel. While radical activists sometimes engaged in symbolic challenges to establishment iconography, burning flags and effigies of establishment figures or making Black Panther salutes at the Olympic games, historians were more interested in quarrying for the “inward experience” of class and ethnicity, in detailing the raw realities of class confrontation, or in delineating the structures of demographic reproduction and social inequality. The quest for an authentic poor man’s (and, too incidentally, poor woman’s) history often left little room for the dramaturgies of power.

There were, of course, important exceptions to this trend. Historians of the early modern era, in particular, came to recognize that the complexities of popular culture could only be satisfactorily addressed by attending to the dialogue between rulers and ruled, a conclusion that inevitably focused

4 Marc Bloch, *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, trans. J. E. Anderson (London: Macmillan, 1973).

5 In this large field, see Raymond Firth, *Symbols, Public and Private* (London, 1973); Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974); Clifford Geertz, “Centers, Kings and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power” in J. Ben-David and T. N. Clark, eds., *Culture and Its Creators: Essays in Honor of E. Shils* (Chicago and London, 1997), and his *Negara: The Theatre-State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980).

6 Lucien Febvre, *A New Kind of History and Other Essays*, ed. Peter Burke (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 40, first published in *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, vol. 58 (1949); E. J. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

attention upon the social dramas of the great, the social reciprocities they engendered, and the use of public space for social inversion and dissonance. Natalie Davis's exploration of religious riot in sixteenth-century France, for example, paid close attention to rival religious calendars and symbolic practices and to the politics of public commemoration. Rhys Isaac's study of political mobilization in eighteenth-century Virginia drew inspiration from the symbolic interactionism of Erving Goffman and the thick description of Clifford Geertz in its attention to the social dramas of courthouses, elections, and the celebrations honouring local notables.<sup>7</sup> Above all, Edward Thompson put new flesh and blood into the symbolic contests with authority in eighteenth-century England, showing how the rituals of the assize, of Tyburn, of open markets and public anniversaries could delineate the dynamics of power between a patrician elite and a dubiously deferential *plebs*.<sup>8</sup>

All of these studies foregrounded public space as a critical site of popular containment and contention, combining insights from history "from below" with a keen appreciation of the symbolic imperatives of ruling classes to shape the world in their own image. Pioneering in methodology, none quite explains the resurgence of interest in commemorative politics and practices which has proceeded apace in the last decade. What factors, we might ask, have prompted this shift in emphasis, this new fascination with public representations and public memory?

One important precipitant was the political resurgence of the Right in Western contemporary society, in particular its ability to appropriate notions of nationhood to its own advantage. Margaret Thatcher's landslide victory in Britain in the wake of the Falkland War prompted the History Workshop, hitherto a "people's remembrancer" of alternative popular traditions and experiences, to reconsider the many faces of patriotism in the British past and the ways in which the "national we" mobilized wide sections of the public while continuing to privilege some groups over others.<sup>9</sup> Ronald Reagan's willingness to promote patriotism as an integrative force in American society led John Bodnar to conduct a similar enterprise in U.S. history, detailing the way in which official and vernacular cultures, to use his terms, framed and negotiated a public memory.<sup>10</sup>

7 Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France", *Past and Present*, no. 59 (May 1973), pp. 51–91; Rhys Isaac, "Dramatizing the Ideology of Revolution: Popular Mobilization in Virginia, 1774 to 1776", *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 33 (1976), pp. 357–385.

8 Thompson's essays on these themes are to be found, with revisions, in his *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991), chaps. 2 and 4. See also the essays by Douglas Hay and Peter Linebaugh in Douglas Hay *et al.*, eds., *Albion's Fatal Tree* (London: Allen Lane, 1975), chaps. 1 and 2.

9 Raphael Samuel, ed., *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* (London: Routledge, 1989), vol. 1, pp. x–xvii.

10 See John Bodnar, *Remaking America*, and John Bodnar, ed., *Bonds of Affection: Americans Define Their Patriotism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Both Bodnar and Samuel were anxious to “bring patriotism within the province of rational explanation and historical inquiry”.<sup>11</sup> In so doing they strove to distance themselves not only from conservative constructions of nationhood, but also from the proclivity of history “from below” to privilege class or ethnicity at the expense of wider, mediating identities. This line of argument has been taken up by other scholars, particularly in Britain, where the cult of monarchy and popular constitutional traditions have seen a new lease of life in historical writing. How far historians “from below” have addressed this criticism remains a moot point. Certainly recent works have determinedly aligned class identities with over-arching political discourses derived from public memories of the past.<sup>12</sup> What is clear is that social historians have become far more attentive to the public sphere of political discourse in exploring the ways in which class, gender, nation, and race intersect and are negotiated in different contexts. This has increasingly brought the issues of commemorative politics, the publicly articulated modes of remembrance at work in society, to centre stage.

If the current interest in discourse has tilted history in a representational, if not spectatorial direction, so, too, has the very ubiquity of public history. Whether in film, theme park, museum, monument, or retro artifact, history has become an increasingly marketable commodity. Public history may have become, in Christine Stansell’s words, “prey to the divisions of interest groups and a general cynicism about the existence of any shared history”,<sup>13</sup> but there is a lot of it out there: as nostalgia, as heritage, as morale booster, as virtual reality. The consumable past may be slipping from the historian’s grip to that of the leisure entrepreneur as we approach the next millennium. If so, then it is increasingly significant that historians recover how our forebears handled their past and filtered its representations as a touchstone to their own identities.

The essays in this volume speak to many of these themes. Spanning four centuries, they talk of how men and women appropriated public space, celebrated the past, and inscribed it in stone and commemorative plaques. The opening two essays deal with the period before commemorative politics, in the modern sense, at least, was born. They also address moments that cannot be assimilated into a familiar pattern of civic or sacred ritual. Bob Davis shows that the seemingly incongruous *cacce dei tori* of Venice addressed the heady factionalism of local neighbourhoods rather than the vaunted civic harmony of this famous maritime republic. Raucous in tone and often transgressive in intent, these seasonal bull-runnings offered young

11 The words are Samuel’s (*Patriotism*, p. x).

12 See, for example, Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); James Epstein, *Radical Expression: Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

13 *New Republic*, November 21, 1994, p. 37.

men a chance to show off their courage and masculinity in much the same way as the “war of the fists” did upon Venice’s open bridges.<sup>14</sup> They also provided their rich patrons an opportunity to consolidate their position in society by sponsoring the event and lubricating its festive licence.

Tom Cohen’s paper, by contrast, deals with a unique event in the faction-striven papal states of the mid-sixteenth century: the inquiry by papal *commissario*, Anselmo Canuto, into the wrongs inflicted upon the villagers of Rocca Sinibalda by their lord, Cardinal Cesarini, and his retainers. Cohen suggests that the villagers, ever attentive to the humiliating tasks and taxes imposed upon them, avoided a blood-letting in the village and deliberately shielded some of the local malefactors from papal justice. They did so by re-presenting the memory of their depredations at the hands of the Cesarini in ways that were therapeutic rather than recriminatory: a provocative conclusion, because it suggests that the collective memory of the *popolino* was not as unreflexive as some historians have suggested, and perhaps more in keeping with the narratives of homicide found in the French letters of remission for the sixteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

The next cluster of papers deals with the classical age of commemorative politics, the late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries. This was an age when public memory was self-consciously anchored to reconstructions of nation-building: creating a politics, and often conflicting narratives, of national identity.<sup>16</sup> Karen Stanworth’s paper addresses the issue of how public memory was shaped in the early American republic. In tracing Washington’s progress to his presidential inauguration at Philadelphia, Stanworth reveals how the *Columbian Magazine* fashioned a set of narratives that made the first president of the republic appealing to both men and women, to the heroic idiom and the familial, the national and local. In this way the rituals of the new father of the nation could be read and appreciated by different constituencies, a strategy of representation, Stanworth suggests, in which Washington was himself complicit.

In contrast to the homespun, self-effacing demeanour of the revolutionary General, whose career was frequently compared to Cincinnatus, Tori Smith takes readers through the hype of the Diamond Jubilee. Rather than casting the jubilee as a highly choreographed royal performance that reaffirmed the majesty of the monarchy, she argues that it was a populist event made possible by its commercial gimmickry and accessibility. What was singularly new about the jubilee, she maintains, was that its commemorative mugs and prints became genuinely mass commodities, virtually indistinguishable from

14 On these colourful episodes, see Robert C. Davis, *The War of the Fists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

15 Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire”, *Representations*, no. 20 (Spring 1989), pp. 7–16; Natalie Davis, *Fiction in the Archives* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

16 On this issue, see John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

the everyday articles that sought to capitalize upon royal and patriotic imagery such as soaps, jams, beverages, cereals, and polish. Did this mean that the entrepreneurs of food and print determined the meaning of the jubilee? Not exactly. While the barons of consumer culture certainly influenced the style of commemoration — one characterized by hyperbole and excess — Smith speculates that the jubilation left some space for private appropriations of the event, however small. Certainly its coherence derived less from the political acumen of the elite, as some have implied,<sup>17</sup> than from the “exigencies and energy of consumer culture”.

Tori Smith’s essay shares with Karen Stanworth’s a preoccupation with style, with what James Fernandez calls “the play of tropes in culture”.<sup>18</sup> With the essay by Craig Heron and Steve Penfold it also shares a preoccupation with commercialism. Whereas Smith sees the commercial promotion of the Diamond Jubilee as potentially liberating, Penfold and Heron see the same feature as ultimately disabling. Initially promoted by local trades and labour councils, Labour Day was a day of recognition for organized labour that won official statutory recognition in Canada in 1894. Derivative of earlier craft processions in both Britain and North America and predominantly a festival of white working-class manhood, the Labour Day parade sought to enhance the visibility and respectability of the union movement at a time of contested public space and to assert the need for mutual cooperation between capital and labour. Parade organizers and participants found it difficult to sustain its original meaning amid the proliferation of leisure activities associated with it, however. Labour Day always had political bite, Penfold and Heron insist, although rarely the sharpness of a European May Day.<sup>19</sup> But even before the First World War, its political message was being diluted as corporate and municipal sponsors cashed in on the unwillingness of union hierarchies to make it a cultural priority. Its integration within the summer public calendar proved rapid and relatively uncontroversial.

If the politics of commemoration, broadly defined, serves as a unifying theme in the more “modern” contributions to this volume, it does so with a vengeance in Vivien Nelles’s account of the tercentenary of Quebec in 1908. In this “trailer” to a larger study, Nelles asks the question of how Canadians used this opportunity to generate a “nobler image of themselves

17 David Cannadine, “The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the ‘Invention of Tradition’, c.1820–1977” in Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, pp. 101–164. A shortened version of the same essay can be found in Sean Wilentz, ed., *Rites of Power: Symbolism, Ritual, and Politics Since the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1985), pp. 206–243.

18 James W. Fernandez, *Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

19 It is worth noting, however, that May Days sometimes became disarmingly official and mundane, especially under communist regimes after 1945. See Zdzislaw Mach, “Continuity and Change in Political Ritual: May Day in Poland” in Jeremy Boissevain, ed., *Revitalizing European Rituals* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 43–61.

as a new nation, fused from two races, united within a grand empire''. The answer, in part, was through a new art form, an Historical Pageant, in which historians, musicologists, and a pageant-master from Britain choreographed an imagined past on the Plains of Abraham that sought to blend historic rivalries into a paean to national and imperial unity. Despite initial setbacks and some misgivings in high political circles, the pageant proved a surprising success, with relatively few criticisms from the ultramontane camp beyond some predictable and formulaic disparagements of the imperial presence. The critical reason for this, Nelles suggests, was that the pageant had something for everyone. It could be read differently, depending upon whether one focused on particular historical moments, particular participants, the language of representation (French), or some other aspect. There was space within the overarching hegemonic design for polysemy; and those polysemic effects, not always anticipated by the organizers, were what counted.

The historical pageant of 1908 was but one effort launched to celebrate the tercentenary of Quebec. The other included a national park to commemorate the battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759 and the battle of Ste. Foy a year later. Such physical manifestations of public memory are arguably less open to interpretive licence than the more fluid, effervescent forms of an historical pageant, whose reception, we have suggested, was somewhat unpredictable. Yet, as Kathryn McPherson's paper readily suggests, even monuments carved in stone are not interpretatively straightforward. Zooming in upon the 1926 war memorial of the Canadian Nurses' Association, McPherson deconstructs the tableau in terms of gender, race, and colonizing histories. Moving back and forth between the two central scenarios, that of the nuns of New France and the nurses of the Great War, McPherson reveals the allegorical salience of white women as healers, the invisibility of Native women, and the difficulties of reconstructing either scenario as a synecdoche of women's contribution to nation-building or health. In her view, the message of the war memorial is conservative and restrictive: inscribing nurses and their white forebears within a masculine history of colonization and war; disrupting the link between nursing and femininity; and obscuring the relationship between nurses and women in general. The reasons for this representation, she suggests, lay in the particular predicament of nurses as health workers, demanding professional status in an uncertain labour market, yet using the conventional tropes of maternalism to legitimize their position within the world of work.

In contrast to McPherson, Owen Thomas situates his study of commemorative plaques within a broad historiographical canvas. Focusing upon the few plaques sponsored by the Ontario Heritage Foundation that are devoted to exploring the African-Canadian past, Thomas shows that they are largely related to those eras of North American history when blacks fled northwards to escape slavery. Those set up before 1984 tended to conform to a conventional historiography that praised Canada as the land of racial tolerance and

freedom and privileged white benefactors rather than the refugees themselves. This perspective has undergone some revision within the last decade, with greater emphasis upon gender and black self-activism, one that parallels changes in black Canadian historiography. Even so, little effort has been made by the Ontario Heritage Foundation and the groups associated with it to chronicle the contribution of blacks to southwestern Ontario history after the Civil War, and the terminology of the early plaques has not been revised to accommodate the changing politics of black identity: an odd oversight, given the increasing importance of black history tours in the Niagara peninsula and the Windsor/Chatham corridor by African Americans.

Monuments help to anchor collective remembering in fixed, tangible sites and to legitimate the very notion of a collective memory.<sup>20</sup> Flags, by contrast, are principally badges or markers of collective allegiance. More accessible, they are imbued with less cultural authority in the public landscape. Yet in particular contexts they can stir powerful emotions and embody collective values and traditions that need to be invoked, challenged, or defended. During the Vietnam War, when American radicals sometimes paraded the Vietcong flag and burnt their own, especially on one memorable and highly publicized occasion at Central Park in April 1967, pro-war countrymen bought a record number of Stars and Stripes and paraded posters with the words "Love It or Leave It" and "One Country, One Flag".<sup>21</sup> Old Glory became a contested symbol of the sixties, very visible at the march upon Selma in 1965, but increasingly appropriated by the Right as public attention shifted from civil rights to the war.

Robert Goldstein's paper is devoted to the controversies surrounding the display of the American flag over the last century. He notes that the "Star Spangled Banner" became a national (at least northern) symbol during the Civil War, but it was not until the very end of the century that patriotic groups such as the Daughters of the American Republic demanded that the flag be protected from public desecration. The kinds of desecration that the DAR had in mind were commercial as much as political, since many earnest patriots disliked the manner in which companies appropriated a national symbol for their own profit. Yet when it came to prosecuting offenders for violating the sanctity of the flag, the motives were predominantly political. Of the 55 known prosecutions in the period between 1907 and 1964, 45 involved cases of political dissent, most of them occurring during the two world wars or during the Red scare of 1917 to 1920. Political prosecutions soared during the Vietnam War as pro-war citizens reacted angrily to the way in which peaceniks disparaged the flag, although the sentences handed down were less severe than formerly. What complicated these prosecutions

20 See Kirk Savage, "The Politics of Memory: Black Emancipation and the Civil War Movement" in Bodnar, ed., *Bonds of Affection*, p. 130.

21 Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 165.



was a series of legal decisions surrounding the flaunting of “subversive” flags (1943), compulsory flag salutes (1931), and the issue of whether verbal disrespect to the flag was protected by the First Amendment, a position that the Supreme Court finally upheld in 1969. In tracing this legal narrative, including the efforts to exempt the physical destruction of the flag from the provisions of the First Amendment, Goldstein reveals how symbolically charged the flag has been, especially in periods of political tension and anxiety about America’s future. In a country so often vainglorious about its freedoms, the ritual desecration of the flag, even its “modification” with peace signs, has sometimes stirred deep emotions.

If the flag desecration controversy might be read as a parable of political tolerance, the final paper in this special issue might be read as a parable of urban anxiety. Halloween has never been an official holiday in North America, despite its close links to All Souls Day. Yet it continues to be observed with great exuberance, by adults as well as children. How did this come about? Why did a quintessentially ethnic (Celtic) festival transcend its original audience and appeal, at different times, to a wide variety of groups? Nicholas Rogers attempts to answer this question by utilizing Victor Turner’s concept of “liminality”. He argues that Halloween has been a festival in which social inversion and transvestism were customarily tolerated, and that the persistence of these features accounts for its popularity among marginal groups in society and among those who want to revel in festive excess, if only for a day. The revelrous character of Halloween, however, has simultaneously given rise to anxieties about urban decorum and safety, now compounded by the simulated horror that saturates the holiday and accounts for its appeal to a public attuned to the Hollywoodesque. Halloween is the festive site for virtual reality, with all the excitement, dangers, subversions, and perversions that might entail. With its trick-or-treating, raucous parties, sadistic legends, transvestism, and flagrant commercialism, it has become the quintessential *fin-de-siècle* festival of North American mass culture: a spectacle of alterity and excess, whose capacity to criticize society stops at humour and parody. As Victor Turner has remarked: “The way people *play* perhaps is more profoundly revealing of a culture than how they work.”<sup>22</sup>

22 Victor Turner, “Carnival, Ritual, and Play in Rio de Janeiro” in Alessandro Falassi, ed., *Time Out of Time: Essays on the Festival* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), p. 76.