# SETTLING AND UNSETTLING MEMORIES

## *Essays in Canadian Public History*

Edited by

NICOLE NEATBY
& PETER HODGINS

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# SETTLING AND UNSETTLING MEMORIES
## Essays in Canadian Public History

*Settling and Unsettling Memories* analyses the ways in which Canadians over the past century have narrated the story of their past in books, films, works of art, commemorative ceremonies, and online. This cohesive collection introduces readers to overarching themes of Canadian memory studies and brings them up to date on the latest advances in the field.

With increasing debates surrounding how societies should publicly commemorate events and people, *Settling and Unsettling Memories* helps readers appreciate the challenges inherent in presenting the past. Prominent and emerging scholars explore the ways in which Canadian memory has been put into action across a variety of communities, regions, and time periods. Through high-quality essays touching on the central questions of historical consciousness and collective memory, this book makes a significant contribution to a rapidly growing field.

NICOLE NEATBY is an associate professor in the Department of History at Saint Mary's University.

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*À la mémoire de ma mère*

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# Acknowledgments

Our first order of thanks must unquestionably go out to those who contributed to this collection. Through their strong commitment to the project, their willingness to present the results of their cutting edge research in ways that would speak to readers from multiple disciplinary horizons, they greatly enhanced the satisfaction that comes with putting a volume such as this one together. The long gestation period of this publication also meant that we had the great pleasure and privilege of working with scholars we had long admired but had yet to know beyond the page. It also gave us added opportunities to work in new ways with wonderful colleagues some of whom have become friends over the years. In keeping with this sentiment, my (Nicole Neatby) most heartfelt thanks go to Peter. Not only was he the spark that ignited this project but his unlimited intellectual curiosity, his unflinching optimism and his kind understanding and support made this project enriching in ways that I could not have imagined. I want to thank my parents, Blair and Jacqueline Neatby, for their enduring encouragements and kindness. Although my mother was not present during the whole life span of this project, she never stopped being there. My memories are filled with her timeless wise advice, enduring warmth, and insatiable curiosity, and these nourished me throughout. I hope that John, who has been there all along, knows how much his uplifting encouragements, his patience, and his unfailing capacity to make me laugh have meant to me.

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# SETTLING AND UNSETTLING MEMORIES

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# Introduction

In Ottawa in June 1996, Ovide Mercredi, the grand chief of the Assembly of First Nations, led a procession past the National Gallery of Canada up to Ottawa's Nepean Point. Sited there is a tall plinth topped by a one-and-a-half-times life-sized bronze statue of Samuel de Champlain, whose commanding and conquering gaze into the west is framed by an astrolabe held in his extended right arm like a cross or a sword. Less noticeable from a distance was a life-sized figure which occupied a small shelf near the base of the plinth. This was a bronze statue of a loinclothed 'Indian scout' who crouched beneath Champlain in a gesture of supplication and awe. When the procession arrived at the statue, Mercredi covered the scout with a blanket. He then told the assembled members of the press and onlookers that this representation of Aboriginal peoples was demeaning because of the figure's nakedness and subservient position. Mercredi gave the National Capital Commission one year to remove the sculpture of the scout. For its part, the National Capital Commission responded by announcing that it would remove the sculpture and place it in storage. As the art historian Susan Hart reports, this announcement raised a 'swift and mixed' public outcry: 'Within days, the NCC had received dozens of phone calls – mostly negative – and of the five hundred calls to the *Ottawa Citizen*'s touchline, about three-quarters were opposed to the statue's removal. While many callers felt that "history" should not be changed to suit the times, most also acknowledged the uneven power relationship the monument was now seen to signify.'[1] As a result of the ensuing controversy over what to do with the sculpture, the scout did not find a new home until October 1999. He was eventually relocated across the street, set, noble savage style, at ground level among shrubs and foliage in a remote corner of Major's Hill Park and renamed 'Anishinabe Scout.'[2]

The reason that we begin this collection on Canadian public memory with the story of the Anishinabe Scout is that it speaks to many of the tensions and challenges of thinking, writing, representing, and performing public or collective memory. What this story reveals, among other things, is our growing sense of the mutable, constructed, polysemic, and contested character of Canadian collective memory. The concept of collective memory emerged in the work of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and has become common currency in social or cultural memory studies. Halbwachs was one of the first to argue that all acts of remembering are social, pluralistic, and driven by present-day concerns.[3] Even our most personal recollections, he argued, are shaped by interpretive frameworks and narrative templates drawn from our present-day social-cultural context and that 'present concerns determine what of the past we remember and how we remember it.'[4] Halbwachs's insights have since become axiomatic for contemporary memory scholars who study 'who remembers and why?' while taking into account the contextual, dynamic, and performed character of remembering.[5] They also aim to unravel how competing collective memories emerge and are strengthened, absorbed, or marginalized (or simply dissolve) in public space through time.[6] Indeed, underpinning the study of collective memories is a question raised by David Glassberg: 'with all the possible versions of the past that circulate in society, how did particular accounts of the past get established and disseminated as the public one?'[7]

While Halbwachs developed the concept of collective memory in the early twentieth century, more contemporary scholars on public or collective memory have been influenced by a general turn to culture and memory in a wide range of disciplines starting in the late 1970s. In their own disparate ways, cultural Marxist, postmodernist, and poststructuralist scholars in various fields have brought to the fore the degree to which a given representation of the past is inevitably coloured by present-day political, cultural, and aesthetic perspectives and priorities. In line with this evolution, the conventional opposition that had been established by scholars between history and memory has been blurred.[8] When remembering itself is being placed in what the cultural psychologist James Wertsch calls its 'sociocultural context,'[9] traditional criteria for defining its attributes and evaluating the reliability of recent or past memories as a source of information are fundamentally altered. Indeed, as memory becomes a subject of inquiry, debates over its accuracy as a source become less central. More to the point, it is remembering's very *unreliability*, its manifest malleability, that serves as an opportunity for scholars to provide new and valuable insights about the formation of collective memories and the shaping of historical consciousness.[10] This, among other things, means that scholars of memory are made to consider 'historians as both products and

producers of the collective identities of the culture in which they are part.'[11] Indeed, they are '"vector[s] of memory" and carrier[s] of fundamental importance in that the vision [they propose] of the past may, after some delay, exert an influence on contemporary representations.'[12] In fact, many now would share historian Michael Kammen's observation that 'What history and memory share in common is that both merit our mistrust.'[13] And concomitantly, they would endorse Peter Seixas's view that 'historians become students of what others believe (or believed) was significant in the past,'[14] including cultural producers such as museum curators, heritage conservationists, tourism promoters, and archivists.

The notion of competing collective memories has in turn led scholars to think of them as 'usable.' Indeed, the study of remembering makes it apparent that 'some memories once functional, become dysfunctional.'[15] Thinking of memory as being usable has helped to account for the fact that some memories become dominant,[16] or 'institutionalized,'[17] often in the form of an 'official narrative of nation.'[18] Typically, these are memories upheld by what the American historian John Bodnar has called members of the 'official culture.' These include 'government officials, editors, lawyers, clerics, teachers, military officials and small business men.'[19] They can be activated to promote national unity or, on a smaller scale, to produce a stronger cohesion among certain groups, to buttress a common self-identity or self-representation. Conversely, scholars note that the process of memory construction is unavoidably accompanied by 'forgetting' and involves the silencing of alternate memories.[20]

Many have been inspired here by the insights of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in their edited collection *The Invention of Tradition*[21] and of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.[22] Hobsbawn and Ranger argued against the Herderian idea that nations are organic entities, naturally produced through common ethnicity, language, and ties of memory reflected in shared folklore and customs. Instead, they made the point that states and other social groups invent traditions in order to legitimate political projects and to 'inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour.' Far from originating in time immemorial, these traditions 'are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition.'[23] Anderson meanwhile spoke of 'imagined communities' constructed, among other things, through a combination of media technologies, the displacement of vernacular languages and dialects by an official 'vernacular.' This innovative reading of the process of identity formation whether at the state level or among other types of communities spurred scholars to investigate which traditions were being invented, which ones were being forgotten, how they were absorbed in collective memories, and what were the technological

practices through which these imagined communities emerged. In short, it has led them to think in terms of *usable* pasts.

Of course, going too far in that direction is to consider the past as a 'tool box' from which various groups retrieve in order to impose a particular political and social order, suggesting Machiavellian manipulations and conspiracies. Scholars of public memory have adopted a more nuanced understanding of the uses of the past. First of all, there is a growing recognition that any given act of public remembering is usually the product of a wide variety of often contradictory motivations ranging from the ideological, the pecuniary, and the manipulative to the sincere and heartfelt to the traumatic. Secondly, there is a growing recognition that every memory text or performance is the product of a series of complex negotiations between cultural producers, their patrons, and the communities whose past they are purported to be commemorating. At the same time, producers must also grapple with the enabling and constraining technological possibilities of their chosen medium of remembrance, the codes, genres, and conventions associated with that medium, and the historical/intertexual baggage that comes with both.

Finally, producers must also negotiate the fact that their prospective audiences bring to the interpretation situation a historically conditioned and equally complex set of commonsensical assumptions about 'the way the past is,' the kinds of representations that count as 'historically accurate,' and their own cultural and political commitments. As Mikhail Bakhtin, Antonio Gramsci, Hayden White, Paul Ricoeur, James Werscht, and many others have argued, almost every time we take experience up into narrative, we insert it into pre-established narrative frameworks.[24] The use of such formulaic narrative frameworks is often a necessary condition for successful mass communication. In order to make themselves understood, spokespeople for the official culture often have no choice but to draw upon the highly conventionalized words, scripts, images, narratives, and myths that are culturally available to them and their publics. Furthermore, when faced with a new story, the only means most people have to make sense of it is to draw it back into the circle of their existing cultural expectations, assumptions, and prejudices about how a narrative should be composed, the sorts of characters and plots it should contain, and how it should end. In other words, public communication is conservative in its most profound sense: in order to be broadly accessible or legible and believed, the public communicator often has no choice but to work within the restricted vocabulary of the 'already-known' and the 'commonsensical.'

Compounding matters is the fact that public communicators are constantly confronted by the rhetorical problem of dealing with mixed audiences whose 'interpretative horizons' are often very traditional. As the debates over the 'Into

the Heart of Africa' exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum[25] or the television docudrama *The Valour and the Horror*[26] suggest, there are considerable risks for those who want to narrate the past in non-traditional ways. Monuments, museums, and open-air historical reconstructions cater to, to name a few, international tourists, national tourists, schoolchildren on field trips, community groups, and academic critics and must try to produce representations of the past that will fit within all of their respective interpretive horizons, please them, and satisfy their desires. This usually ends up with public historians following the advice of rhetorical theorists for dealing with such audiences: try to say something that resonates with each. When one cannot do the latter, speak ambiguously or remain silent.[27]

In recent years, this concern with the relationship between public memories and their audiences has coalesced around the issue of historical consciousness – the question of 'how ideas about history are ... understood and change over time.'[28] As Jörn Rüsen has argued, the most conservative form of historical consciousness is 'traditional historical consciousness.' He argues that individuals or groups with a 'traditional historic consciousness' treat the past as immutable and look to it only as a means of confirming existing myths, beliefs, and identities.[29] In fact, this traditional historical consciousness is something closely akin to collective memory *per se*. Indeed, as Peter Novick has argued, memory in this perspective 'has no sense of the passage of time; it denies the "pastness" of its objects and insists on their continuing presence.'[30] On the other hand, what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls 'effective historical consciousness' involves the recognition that the apprehension of the past is always framed by the interpreter's finite, partial, and fallible 'horizon of interpretation.' In his *Truth and Method*, Gadamer argued that all attempts at understanding a new text involve readers situating it within a hermeneutic circle of inherited cultural assumptions that he called 'prejudices' – adopting the literal sense of the term. While convinced that we always make sense of the new by drawing it into the circle of the 'already-known,' he also made the point that our apparent imprisonment in the 'familiar' and 'already-known' could be counteracted through the development of an effective historical consciousness[31] – in effect, a recognition of 'the historicity of events.'[32] In order to understand the past of other cultures, Gadamer argued that we should have the interpretive dexterity to recognize that our forms of representation are equally rhetorical, political, conventional, and referential. Without marshalling the ethical and political courage to revise and reject aspects of those forms, codes, and media, we will continue to obscure our vision of the past or of others.[33]

In this collection, we have brought together a multidisciplinary group of established and emerging scholars who put to use the 'interpretative dexterity'

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