

The moral future of museums and galleries, libraries and archives

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INTRODUCTION

I would like you to consider for a moment a poem.

One of the losses in the story of Canadian literature was the murder, at the hands of her husband, of the brilliant, Vancouver-born poet Pat Lowther. She herself is a loss—and I will take up the issue of cultural loss in a moment. But she also has a sharp eye for describing loss: for describing the long movement of history and what may so easily, if we are not careful to preserve it, disappear.

In her “Elegy for the South Valley”, Pat Lowther writes that in Canada “we have no centuries / here a few generations / do for antiquity.”

In the poem—as the rains “keep on and on” and the South Valley silts up—we see

the dam that served
a mine that serviced empire

crumbling slowly deep
 deep in the bush

for its time
 for this country
 it's a pyramid
 it's Tenochtitlan going back
 to the bush and the rain.¹

This is, I think, quite astonishing, for here is the recognition that the culture that surrounds us, however plain, however modest, however workmanlike, is a monument. A concrete dam in British Columbia is an Egyptian pyramid. It is the capital of Aztec Mexico. And like them, though in only “a few generations”, it too can disappear into the wilderness.

1. LOOKING OUT

I start with Pat Lowther’s poem because I want us to look around us. I know what these professional gatherings can be like . . . how interested we can get in the finer points of storage, or blue latex gloves, or who moved to which new job. And I know what it’s like to lose hours nosing around the back shelves of a library, or the remote rooms of a gallery, or the bottom filing cabinet of an archive. I know how fascinating looking in can be.

¹ Pat Lowther, “Elegy for the South Valley” in *Time Capsule: New and Selected Poems* (Victoria, BC: Polestar Book Publishers, 1996), pp.205–7.

But our first step must always be to keep looking out: at where we are, at what we see, at what's there now. It doesn't matter what falls within our line of vision: the mountains, the prairies, a factory . . . or the impressive industrial architecture of a dam. We will never know how to act as cultural guardians, if we fail to remember the life around us.

This is not just a fanciful notion. I want to put to you that it's a tough intellectual project. For one thing, what we ascertain by looking out is what our visitors experience. It's where they work, it's where they raise their families, it's how they build their lives. As some might put it more grandiosely, their cultural repertoire is what is out there, and that is what they bring when they enter any museum or gallery. It is the measure of what they know and what they expect to see. And we are foolish if we forget it.

I raise this not because the idea is new, but because it is so easily forgotten. How enchanting our collections are—who would deny it? I am always keen to discuss the next big project, the changes to our building and our master plan, to sweep people along into what we, as an institution, are becoming. But there is no point moving forward, if we have left everyone behind.

If there is an ethic, a morality, to what we do, it rests in part in honouring the lives, the very situation, of the people around us.

2. RELEVANCE NOW

The poet Pat Lowther saw ancient Egypt in Canadian industry. I love that. She looks out of her car window and sees the past in the present.

As institutions of history, what we need to do is the opposite. We need to make sure we find the present in the past.

It may seem a stretch to place a dam on display in your forecourt and get the public thinking about pharaohs and mummies. I'd be willing to have a go, but we might not succeed.

It is, however, quite plainly less of a leap to take an object from the past and use it to talk about what is important to visitors today. If we are looking out, we can see the questions we ought to address. It is a matter not so much of rejecting our explorations of the past, our research and our expertise, but of bearing in mind that all-important factor—their relevance.

Allow me to give you an example.

Archives are generally understood in one of two ways by the public. They view them as the province of detailed research by professional historians, a sort of mine of hidden gems waiting patiently to be uncovered by someone, probably with a bad haircut, wearing glasses—Hitler’s diary, Beethoven’s Tenth Symphony, the juvenilia of Margaret Atwood, that sort of thing. Or they view archives as a stronghold of family history, where people looking into their origins can uncover news that Great-Grandfather Edwin was not a farmer, as once thought, but a pirate and a buccaneer.

I jest. Mostly archives are a hard sell in the culture sector because it is difficult to make the bulk of what they hold speak to a wider audience. Indeed, if we keep in mind how visual the approach to culture is, it is almost impossible to get most archival documents or letters, in their modest self-presentation, to speak to a wider spectatorship. I have tried at the Royal BC Museum—with land treaties and life-changing historical documents. But it’s difficult. You really have to enlarge the story behind the paperwork that people stand in front of and see.

But archives are relevant. Frighteningly so. And the proof of this is that governments often have strong views about who owns archives, and who has the right to consult them. You know when the government gets involved, something is afoot.

Two months ago, in November 2017, the Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Records Managers adopted a position paper on what are called “migrated archives”. It’s a bit of euphemism. Try “stolen archives” and you’ll end up with much the same result.

They raise a number of issues about government records that belong to Commonwealth countries, but which have, for various reasons, ended up in the United Kingdom. Those countries would like the records back. It is their history and they justly feel they have a right to it. Allow me to quote from the paper:

Until 2011, the official position of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office was that records created by colonial governments were, at independence, routinely passed to the successor governments.

However, in 2011 a successful claim against Britain by elderly Kenyans (seeking compensation for mistreatment and torture during the Mau Mau uprising) forced the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to admit the existence in the UK of about

1,500 Kenyan Government files as well as files from another 37 former colonies.²

And here's where it gets tricky:

A report examining “what went wrong” emphasized bureaucratic incompetence and loss of corporate memory rather than any intention to conceal. The [British] Foreign Secretary promised “to release every part of every paper of interest, subject only to legal exemptions.”

Oh good, you say. The papers will return home. Problem solved. Well, what do you think? The Kenya example is just one cited by the Commonwealth Archivists. They refer to other cases—Cyprus, the colony of Aden (now part of south Yemen). Their records have not been returned, despite the UK government's seeming agreement to do so.

The Commonwealth Archivists object to this deliberate refusal to return the archives. The body states categorically (and I quote) “that the migrated archives are the property of the countries from which they were removed. It believes that repatriation of the records is the legally and ethically correct course . . . Archivists should cooperate in the repatriation of displaced archives.”

2 The “Migrated Archives”: ACARM Position Paper, adopted by unanimous vote at the Annual General Meeting of the Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Records Managers (ACARM), Mexico City, November 25, 2017.

This is powerful stuff. Archivists are provocateurs, pitting themselves against national governments, laying claim to archival records as the rightful belongings of independent nations. And of course, as we can see, they are fighting for all the historical redress such a return could entail—the court cases, the claims for financial compensation. These frail papers are no light matter.

I elaborate this example because it tells us just how explosive our historical material can be. What one dreary index card may describe as “a commissioner’s report” could turn out to be a shocking revelation of violence or intrigue that has legal and financial ramifications today.

If we do anything with our objects—or our collections of any sort—what we must do is locate their topicality. What we must do, as Pat Lowther saw, is turn them into the monuments of now.

3. THE STORY WARS

What we have here is really an ethic of relevance. Each one of us has a duty to make our holdings speak to people’s concerns today. It isn’t that all our work must do that. Topical concerns change, so we need to have collections and

research wide-ranging enough that they can respond to shifting interests and ideologies.

It is not moreover, I would be the first to recognize, as simple as it sounds. One of the problems is that when we look at our obligations, we are caught both by our time, and by the limits of our time.

We are, for example, living in an age of story wars. Whose story gets told—and who gets to tell it—are the subject of friction, animosity and sharp words.

It can be awful to observe. Anyone who followed the dismantling of the public reputation of the writer Joseph Boyden could see pain all round—his own for a series of individual moves that suddenly formed a larger portrait he hadn't intended, that of the First Nations he wanted to represent who rightly insisted on reclaiming their own platforms to speak.

Whose story is it? Who gets to tell it?

It can look like an unresolvable chaos. But there's something courageous about all this, and encouraging. It's not just a battle, like so many battles, for

possession. Are we not more conscious, all of us, here at the start of 2018, of the implications of the stories we tell? Is any of us in the cultural sector so unaware as not to consider what we say about any group or individual?

It's good that we are thinking about these things. We are on the whole telling better stories.

So if we are considering the morality of museums and galleries, libraries and archives, if we are weighing our responsibility towards others, I want to propose that the story wars give us a number of windows to look through.

The **first**, of course, is the missing stories. They are perhaps the hardest to find and the most glaring to see. Where are the First Nations in the Canadian histories we tell? Oh they are arriving—we should feel good about that. But we have to look to the future and moral scale of what's required. We haven't come far enough. If the Boyden case tells us anything, it is yet another reminder of how important this is and how aggrieved First Nations representatives are about how and who tells their stories.

And let us not treat their absence in isolation. The challenge intellectually is to correct all sorts of historical imbalances. How do we tell the story of women, or children for that matter? In what context might the stories of LGBTQ communities be told? At the University of Victoria, we have the Transgender Archives, the largest archive in the world devoted to trans, gender non-binary, and two-spirit people, and we should be drawing on that.³ If we are learning to create a more inclusive sense of Canada before Canada, how do the tales of immigration fit in? I sometimes think there is this sense of the First Nations over here on the left and elegant men in tall hats on the right, arriving from England and France and staking their claim. If you want a corrective to that romantic view of imperialism, read Sebastian Barry's recent novel *Days Without End*. It tells, through its Irish-born narrator, how violence begets violence. And what happens in North America has at least one cause in the treatment of the poor who arrived here. As the narrator puts it, describing how Irish immigrants were seen (and I quote):

No-one wanted us. Canada was a-feared of us. We were a plague. Only rats of people. Hunger takes away what you are . . . I only say it, because without saying, I don't think anything can be properly understood. How we were able to see

3 <https://www.uvic.ca/transgenderarchives>. Accessed 8 January 2018.

slaughter without flinching. Because we were nothing ourselves, to begin with.⁴

Barry is brilliant at re-creating the past. And novels such as his are good models for us. They show us how powerfully the past can be evoked and how forgotten stories, such as that here of poor Irish immigrants, can be made visible.

A **second** opening the Story Wars are providing is a sharp sense of who tells the stories. I would be the first to admit that for all the good intentions in our sector, we have not understood this well enough. We have been hungry for the stories, but not the storytellers. The lack of First Nations appointments among museum and archive staff makes this abundantly clear.

Perhaps the most powerful exemplar for us could be the testimony of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. What a range of intense and moving and angry voices came through. We need sometimes to look beyond the issue in contention, in this case the residential schools, to perceive what other elements are circulating in these debates. If you want to hear some First Nations voices, the TRC testimony is a difficult, demanding and absolutely essential place to

4 Sebastian Barry, *Days Without End* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016; pb 2017), pp.29–30. The novel also startlingly integrates issues of homosexuality and transvestism/transgender into a Western and a history of the American Civil War.

start. I don't see how you could understand anything about Canada without hearing them.

The **third** aperture I can see is that in writing new stories and bringing in new voices, we are rewriting the existing stories. This is a great thing. When I ask visitors about their museum experiences across Canada, they often sigh with a sense of quiet pride—it's very Canadian—and a little bit of boredom. The stories are familiar. There's that dusty bison on display, the old fishing boat. It's fine, it's ours, it's not very interesting.

But what if those stories were turned on their head? Heaven knows if we are looking for topicality, this is it. Has there ever been a time in our lives when the meaning of public statues, for example, has been so debated? Are they useful reminders of the past, or symbols of an oppressive way of life that it is time to jettison? President Trump recently got caught up in the brouhaha when, in Charlottesville, Virginia, the threatened removal of a statue of a Confederate general turned to violence. When the President of the United States weighs in with a tweet, you know you're onto a hot topic.

But we in Canada are not immune. Most of you will have seen the recent story about the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario. They have recommended that Ontario schools rename facilities bearing the name of Canada's first prime minister. They cite as a reason for this John A. Macdonald's (and I quote) "genocide against Indigenous people".⁵

It's the sort of story that has people screaming at each other in public debates and over dinner. But isn't it amazing that in 2018, Canadians are so passionate about the past? My team are thinking hard about how to make sense of this fast-changing debate. And all of you are superbly placed institutionally to intervene, comment and explain. We are experts in history and the meaning of historical records.

A contested history is one that is being rewritten, and if we want to get more nuance into the story, who better than all of us in this room to advise?

4. POLICY SHIFT

⁵ Cited in "Debate escalates over legacy of John A. Macdonald in Ontario schools", *Globe and Mail*, August 24, 2017.

By widening what we do, we open ourselves out to the world. That could be the lost world of a past we need to recover. It might be a world that's distant to us, or unknown.

These are not abstract ideals: they are concrete demands. To change what we are, we have to change what we do. Our hiring practices have to become fairer. Critics of the sort of engagement I'm talking about—with other voices and other lives—cry that such gestures are tokenistic. And you know, they are right.

Sometimes the programmes we put in place are small, symbolic, inadequate to effect real change. So as a body, let's work on that. Let's come up with better strategies. Let's consult in a more just and equitable way. Let's hand over some of the precious institutional power we're so keen to protect. It's the hardest thing in the world—we feel our reputations are at stake if we give up the old ways of working. But we have an ethical responsibility to do so and a practical one too, since the lifeblood of our survival lies in our connection to the real world. If the statues are coming down, we need to be there as witnesses and guides.

A policy shift might also redirect our collections. I've been speaking largely about how we can reinterpret our existing holdings. 2019 is the United Nations Year of Indigenous Languages. UNESCO will be leading a number of initiatives and we,

at the Royal BC Museum, are following them carefully. We had a great success with our award-winning 2014 exhibition called *Our Living Languages*. For that, we worked with indigenous groups to present the 34 languages and over 60 dialects spoken by First Nations in British Columbia. We'd like to build on that and do more. I'm very inspired by Tessa Erickson of the Nak'azdli Whut'en First Nation: she's fifteen, attending high school in BC, and has just developed an app to get young people in her community to revive the Nak'azdli dialect of the Dakelh language.⁶ It's exactly the sort of thing we ought to be doing.

All of our collections need to get to grips not just language, but with Intangible Culture generally. The longer we wait, the more knowledge we lose, and it remains shaming that Canada has never ratified the 2003 UN Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. It also remains a policy contradiction. On the one hand, the federal government supports First Nations culture in Canada. On the other, it fails to recognize that non-material culture is at the heart of First Nations practice. How can we preserve Indigenous history if we don't record it as a living practice? Are we saying that indigenous culture is less important because it lacks a material culture? I certainly hope not.

6 Gemma Karstens-Smith, 'BC teen creates app to help revive fading indigenous language', *Toronto Star*, January 7, 2018

Museums and galleries, libraries and archives—we're also to blame. We like our things. We can hold them in our hands, dust them from time to time, put them on display. But as my museum's languages exhibition taught us, there is gold to be mined from Intangible Culture. We learned an enormous amount. We preserved knowledge at risk of being lost. We helped revitalize interest in these languages and by extension the cultures they represent.

And we also collaborated more effectively than we ever had.

If interpreting and collecting are familiar strategies that we might alter, collaborating is less so. I see the seeds of collaboration across the country: it's encouraging. But I do wish we'd do more. For me, this needs to happen at two levels.

The first is that the national museums, galleries, libraries and archives need to offer more to smaller groups. All large museums have the iceberg problem: we're 10% visible, 90% hidden. Think of what we could do with that 90% for other cultural bodies. And I'm not just talking about our collections in store that we could share. We should offer ourselves: our expertise, our knowledge. The starting point should be not, "What can we give you?" but "How can we help

you?” This help gives pride of place to the partner, not the helper. Let’s see what comes of being asked to work outside our buildings.

And government can help. In the United Kingdom, worthy calls for collaboration never took flight until strategic funding was put in place. With money to foster collaboration, bingo: there was collaboration.

The benefits of this are self-evident: more access to culture away from city centres; more knowledge sharing; more professional development across the sector; more enticement for government to step up to the plate and increase funding; and better relations with our colleagues, neighbours and communities. This can only do good. When we look at the complex failures of cases of repatriation—failures to understand, failures to read the situations clearly—the most obvious sign of break-down, it seems to me, is the lack of good relations between both sides. The repatriation agenda is not going to go away, any more than rising pressures to de-accession for other reasons, including financial pressure. President Macron of France announced he is keen to start repatriating objects from colonial Africa. Canada must lead on this, and not be left behind. So let’s start talking with First Nations and other communities, learn to trust one another, and build stronger ties.

I sometimes think what the sector needs is “Potlatch Funding”. It could drive collaborations that foster giving and exchange, and ask what we can do for others rather than what can we do for ourselves. I know it’s not easy. We all bear the brunt of funding restrictions, inflation and deficits. The big six national museums and galleries have lost 45% of their purchasing power in real terms since 1995.⁷ But the current government is showing more interest, so it’s a good time to suggest pathways to engage the government’s attention and renew federal support. The collaborative model is certainly one of those new paths, and since we’re here, on the first anniversary of what is effectively a new national collaboration, let’s take our own coming together as a platform for doing more.

We can also do more to network internationally. I’m not sure why this makes everyone nervous. The benefits, once you start working out on the world stage, are obvious. More diverse partners. A wider knowledge base. Research synergy.

7 Statistic reported in the *Ottawa Sun*, February 15, 2016, citing briefing notes prepared by the Minister for the Department for Canadian Heritage, Mélanie Joly. The statistic refers to the Canadian Museum of History, Canadian Museum of Nature, National Gallery of Canada, Canada Science & Technology Museum, Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, and the Canadian Human Rights Museum.

It happens in other sectors much more than our own. A recent history of architecture in Canada notes (and I quote): “Throughout the 20th century Canadian-trained architects collaborated with others in a host of countries. Such coexistence has created a fertile context of exchange that stresses hybridity.”⁸

That hybridity takes us back to our interpretive strategies: newer voices and a greater mix in what we say and do. It also fosters a more diverse subject matter for our institutions and to entice the public. Pat Lowther saw Aztec Mexico in a BC dam, I’m looking to bring the Mayans from South America to Vancouver Island. It’s exciting, there are external funding prospects to help along the way, and it’s raising all sorts of questions about our own collection that we would not otherwise have seen in a purely national context. About conquest and defeat. About lives represented in stone. About the people of the world and how they face encounters.

8 Rhodri Windsor Liscombe & Michelangelo Sabatino, *Canada: Modern Architectures in History* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2016), pp.338–9.

CONCLUSION

I've raised a number of issues today that speak to the moral future of museums and galleries, libraries and archives. I do so because I think we are strongly placed as a group to set the agenda for how we work in the future and how we might petition the government to fund more fully our activities.

Let's act as a pressure group to make our case—not just for what we want to do, but because Canada has a moral imperative to do so.