

Public History Internship Reflective Essay

Alexander Pitt

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the practical applications of public history theory and how it related to the work I conducted for the Status of Designations Committee of the Historic Sites of Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC). I was employed at the Historical Services Branch of the Historic Sites Directorate of Parks Canada Agency, an agency of the Government of Canada under the responsibility of the Minister of Environment from May 2nd to August 9th, 2007.

The work focused on the Status of Designation of roughly 30 National Historic Sites in Western Canada related to the fur trade. I was responsible for researching and authoring reports on the designated place and commemorative intent of these posts as well as tracing the HSMBC's history of memorializing the Canadian fur trade.

I intend to show that my internship with Parks was a challenging but rewarding experience. It has furthered my knowledge of the role that public historians can play within government. This internship demonstrated the scope of interdisciplinary research that can face historians in the government as well as other venues within the public field.

From this point on, the work venue often begins to define professional identity, and the disciplinary base recedes into the shadows. Over the years, I have distilled my explanation of what sets public history as a field of focus on the phenomenon of “practice.” Epistemologically, we approach the discipline by time period, geographical area, and also something more. Practice is the fourth dimension of history, and that, I argue, is where one begins to understand what sets public history apart.¹

Rebecca Conrad

I distinctly remember entering one of my first public history seminars in September 2006. Reflective practice seemed a paradox to me; how does one reflect on something while at the same time acting on that issue? Then I read the writings of Noel Stowe and Rebecca Conrad. They argue that the process of educating a public historian is not to teach an individual the narrow concepts of traditional historical scholarship, but rather to demonstrate to the student how to bring traditional methodology out of its box. Stowe states in his article “Public History Curriculum: Illustrating Reflective Practice”: “Beyond basic historical understanding [are] an array of ways to communicate historical knowledge, public history requires *as its foundation* sound habits of thinking about and rethinking intellectual, practical and moral issues.”² Traditionally public history has been seen simply as historians working outside the confines of academe in positions of government, corporations, media, museums, archives, private practice and historical societies. This perception comes from G. Wesley Johnson’s “Editor’s Preface” to the first edition of *The Public Historian* which is referenced in Stowe’s article. Stowe describes the mission-driven element of public history research and how it differs from historical

¹ Rebecca Conrad, “Public History as Reflective Practice”: An Introduction,” *The Public Historian* 28, no.1 (Winter 2006): 11.

² Noel Stowe, “Public History Curriculum: Illustrating Reflective Practice,” *The Public Historian* 28, no.1 (Winter 2006): 40.

investigation outside of the confines of university history departments.³ In his article, Stowe continues to describe how, in the 1970s and 1980s, the emerging public history movement did not develop a professional literature to guide aspiring professionals. He attempts to define the mantras of public history and their applications to the notions of working outside of a structured academic environment. According to Stowe, practical reasoning is fundamental. He states: “Applied scholarship from this perspective ‘is a habit of mind,’ not carried out as ‘a recurring task according to a prescribed protocol, applying standard methodologies,...[but] is an approach to each task as a novel situation, a voyage of exploration into the partially unknown.”⁴ For Stowe the way to incorporate flexibility and applied practice are in a program that takes elements of traditional historical education and adds a field internship, class project, seminar discussion and essay work.⁵

The Public History Program at Western effectively taught the benefits of a reflective approach to public history. The course work incorporated traditional historical, archival and museological theory with practicum projects that challenged the student to adapt different skills to the situation at hand. The research and collaboration skills prepared me for the internship component of the public history program, but also helped me incorporate reflective practice into the way I approach a historical problem.

Several of the seminar discussions were focused on subjects pertinent to my internship at the Historic Sites Directorate of Parks Canada. In the seminar of November 22, 2006 we discussed several articles that examined the early activities of the Historic Sites and Monuments

³ Ibid, 41.

⁴ Ibid, 49.

⁵ Ibid, 55.

Board of Canada (HSMBC), and its role in designating national historic significance and establishing a federal commemoration program. The articles explored the overabundance of sites and events that focused on military history and white expansion and the dearth of sites and events commemorating female and minority histories at both the provincial (Ontario) and federal (HSMBC, Parks Canada) levels. Before arriving in Ottawa to work at Parks Canada, I re-read C.J. Taylor's "Some Early Problems of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada" and also Paul Litt's "Pliant Clio and Immutable Texts: The Historiography of a Historical Marking Program", to get a perspective on the Historic Sites and Monuments Board and government commemoration.⁶ Alan Newell, a public historian in private practice, provided an excellent guide to the ethical dilemmas that are faced by historians working in a government, or client based environment. His article, "Personal and Private Issues in Private Consulting" had an excellent summary of the ethical practice that I would to apply to my work at Parks. He states:

There are times when the collective personal ethics of our historians will dictate the direction that we take as a business in engaging complex issues. However, our practice dictates that we employ a perspective and set of guidelines that differentiates personal ethical choices from the professional standards that should govern our relationship with clients.⁷

This set of guidelines, I believe, sets an example for the newly graduated public historians. It focuses the individual on the professional ethics of accuracy, objectivity, motivation and innovation.

⁶ C. J. Taylor, "Some Early Problems of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada," *Canadian Historical Review* LXIV, no. 1 (1983) and Paul Litt, "Pliant Clio and Immutable Texts: The Historiography of a Historical Marking Program," *The Public Historian* 19, no.4 (Fall 1997).

⁷ Alan S. Newell, "Personal and Professional Issues in Private Consulting," *The Public Historian* 28, no.1 (Winter 2006): 110.

Entering into the internship, I only knew that my work would focus on fur trade posts that had been designated by the HSMBC. The initial job description sent by Meryl Oliver, the Status of Designation Coordinator stated:

Job title: Student Researcher, Status of Designations

Dates: May 2 to August 8 (you can verify this in terms of what you agreed with Blythe, but this is what I have)

Job description: The focus of this internship is on historical research relating to the review of designations of national historic significance, specifically the approximately 30 fur trade posts. Duties include examining documentation on the designations, including formal research papers prepared for the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC), other research material and correspondence between HSMBC members. This material will be analyzed using current Parks Canada policy documents (such as the Guide to the Preparation of Commemorative Integrity Statements) in order to provide recommendations for the commemorative intent and designated place of the sites. Reports on each sites will be prepared for consideration by the Status of Designations Committee, a committee of the HSMBC.

That is a very general description of what you are likely to be involved with. You will not be responsible for preparing 30 reports alone. The final reports are prepared as part of a multidisciplinary team effort involving members of several branches of the National Historic Sites Directorate (I work for the Historical Services Branch of the Directorate). You may be involved with other projects depending on how quickly you work through the fur trade component. I hope this provides enough information for you at this point. Let me know if you want more details.⁸

Prior to beginning my work placement at Parks, I completed a Work Plan which was meant to establish my expectations while working for the Historical Services Branch and, more specifically, the Status of Designations Committee. I stated:

As I sit and write this small piece on the “Whys” of the internship, I reflect on what I have learned most from the Public History program. I have learned that there is a coherent and simple method to history that can be applied to different environments whether business, academic or government related. The thing that excites me most about the program and the internship is that I am extending my toolbox. I remarked once to a friend that I have become a “Handyman” historian and I feel that working at Parks Canada will be of profound interest to me, and develop my skills as a researcher but also open up a possible future career path in government.⁹

Before I discuss the specifics of the internship, a brief introduction on the Status of Designations Committee and the role that it plays within the framework of the HSMBC, and the

⁸ Meryl Oliver, April 16, 2007, email message, (accessed July 25, 2007).

⁹ Alexander Pitt, “Work Plan for Parks Canada Internship,” May 1, 2007.

National Historic Sites Directorate is needed. Since its founding in 1919, the HSMBC has been responsible for recommending sites, events and persons of national historic significance to the Crown. In its various formations, the National Historic Sites Directorate has been/and is responsible for giving the HSMBC the necessary documentation and analysis to enable the Board to make recommendations to the Government for decision. Since its inception, the HSMBC and Parks Canada have administered National Historic Sites that have been under the responsibility of the Canadian Parks Service (Parks Canada). Throughout its history, the HSMBC did not always explicitly designate the subject matter in question. In many cases, it did not specify the limits of sites (the Designated Place) or the reason of the site's national significance (Statement of Commemorative Intent). The Status of Designations Committee (SDC Committee) was originally formed in 1999 to clarify the designated place of National Historic Sites that did not have their limits set by the Board. The SDC is responsible for looking at past Board Minutes to establish or propose a new designated place for approval by the Board. Between 1999 and 2001 the SDC established six guidelines for establishing designated place. In December of 2000 the mandate of the SDC was changed to include all matters pertaining to HSMBC designations including commemorative intent, date of designation, site name, and category of designation (i.e. site vs. event). The process of the SDC includes a Submission Report to the committee, committee discussion and then full HSMBC approval.¹⁰

My job involved reviewing roughly 30 Submission Reports that related to fur trade forts in Western Canada. I then had to establish a thematic framework, and to revise as many reports

¹⁰ Phil Goldring, "Mandate and Priorities of the Status of Designations Committee", Historic Sites Directorate: Parks Canada, December 22, 2004.

as possible in a 14 week period. Despite the fact that the job description had outlined parameters, I was unaware of the significance and the detail that was included in each of the site designations. The first weeks were spent familiarizing myself with the sites and the guidelines that needed to be followed pertaining to research and report format. On my first day I began reading an Agenda Paper (HSMBC Submission Paper) prepared by Terry Smythe a former historian at Parks Canada Historical Services Branch. His Agenda Paper titled “Thematic Study of the Fur Trade in the Canadian West: 1670-1870” is the definitive work which includes historical, commemorative and geographical information on 250 fur trade posts in the region known as the Canadian west. This area includes the three Prairie Provinces, parts of British Columbia, the Superior-Winnipeg portage route as well as the Mackenzie River drainage area. Smythe states in his introduction:

The purposes of the paper and interests of manageability have necessitated setting certain limits to the study. The three Prairie Provinces form a convenient unit; but the region thus defined has, historically, two extensions, the water route from Lake Superior to the prairie west, and the Mackenzie River valley. Taken together, these regions compromise the main theatre of fur trade activity in the Canadian West. ...

The major part of the paper is Part IV, which consists of an examination of about 250 specific sites in western Canada. Not all of these sites are of great importance but some of the lesser ones may be of value because they are typical of some aspects of fur trade operations, or because they are accessible, or because they offer promise for archaeological investigation. ...¹¹

Many of the sites that I worked on were discussed in Smythe’s Agenda Paper and formed the core of my sites. Several fur trade posts fell outside of the geographical area covered in the report. These sites were mostly in British Columbia and the Northwest Territories, as well as several posts throughout the prairie region which were more directly relate to the Northwest Mounted Police and the Whiskey trade.

¹¹ Terry Smythe, “Thematic Study of the Fur Trade in the Canadian West:1670-1870,” Agenda Paper 1969-29:Historic Sites Directorate, Parks Canada, 1-2, 47.

My work at Parks drew on both theoretical and practical elements of the year's course work. The ethical considerations of working in a government environment were paramount, and a large part of the work on the fur trade sites involved negotiating the accuracy of source material, and the restrictions that come with Crown policy documents. The reports authored by me are not for general public use. Due to the provisions of the Official Languages Act, any government document that is made available to the public at the federal level must be in both official languages. The Submission Reports for the Status of Designations Committee are for internal Parks Canada policy making and for the information of the HSMBC. As Sharon Babian, a historian at the Canadian Museum of Science and Technology, states "historians working for government departments such as National Defence and Parks Canada deal with subject matters which can affect the public policy of the federal government. Such subjects include the commemoration of sensitive historical subjects as the Northwest Rebellion."¹² Due to this fact, I am unable to disclose site-specific information in this paper or to members of the general public until the issues before the Status of Designations Committee have been approved by the Minister of Environment.

The research methodology that was developed by me for the Museum London Exhibit, as well as my seminar in Canadian Political History, has been very helpful. In both of these cases I relied heavily on the internet as a resource, and the online databases of libraries and archives across Canada. I found the Library and Archives of Canada website particularly helpful. It has a search function which looks at the collections of university libraries across the country using the AMICUS database. From this information, I was able to order the documents through Inter

¹² Sharon Babian, "So Far, So Good: Ethics and the Government Historian," *The Public Historian* 28, no.1 (Winter 2006): 101-102.

Library Loan. Much of my research for the SDC reports involved finding of repositories that had the case specific documentation for each site. Also, I was in direct contact with archaeologists at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the British Columbia Archaeological Service, and the Alberta Historic Sites office to share field reports which are not contained in the Canadian library system or in the Parks Canada document repository. Much of my research centered on the Minutes of the HSMBC, as well as the documents contained within the site's files known as the Central Registry Files. Included within these were maps, plaque information and general correspondence relating specifically to the historic site in question. In addition, a minor component of my research included using journal articles and published manuscripts to find contextual as well as site-specific information.

A large part of May was spent organizing the thirty posts thematically, as well as identifying the research needs for each designation. Each of the reports had had a "Scoping Report" completed. These reports were prepared by independent contractors who searched the Central Registry Files at the National Archives as well as the internal repository of the Historic Sites Directorate located at 25 Eddy in Gatineau. The contractors were given three days to compile the available source material and make tentative recommendations to the SDC. Each site was given a working Statement of Commemorative Intent and Designated Place based upon guidelines established in the "Guide to the Preparation of Commemorative Integrity Statements" approved in February 2002. Guidelines 6 and 7 are particularly pertinent to the reports that I authored. Guideline 6 establishes the criteria needed to form the site's Statement of Commemorative Intent. Guideline 7 refers to the criteria that need to be met in establishing a Designated Place for a site. Each of the guidelines follows the same basic principles: for each,

the HSMBC Minutes are the definitive expression of the intent of the Board. The Minutes are the document that receive Ministerial approval and become the document which forms the official list of sites, events and persons of national significance. Other documents can be used to establish Board intent including approved plaque texts and Submission Papers to the HSMBC (Agenda Papers). Other sources such as correspondence can be used to clarify the Minutes.¹³

In addition to categorizing the fur trade I was tasked with tracing whether the HSMBC considered the fur trade as a thematic grouping when selecting the sites for commemoration. My first task was to delve through the HSMBC minutes. This task was made easier with the database program ISYS, which is a keyword searchable database that enables the user to identify to search the HSMBC Minutes from 1919 to 2005. I simply searched “fur trade” in ISYS and the Minutes. My findings somewhat contradicted the only recent historical manuscript written on the Historic Sites and Monuments Board and the Historic Sites of Parks Canada, by C. J. Taylor titled *National Historic Parks and Sites, 1880-1951: The Biography of a Federal Cultural Program*. Taylor’s argument is based on the premise that the HSMBC was a grouping of historical minded men who focused on the military history of Canada’s French and British past. He mentions a list of sites in Western Canada compiled by J. H. Coyne, a member of the HSMBC from Western Ontario. A high percentage of the sites on this list have connections to the fur trade. Twenty-one of the fifty sites from Alberta and Saskatchewan are fur trade sites, although the reasons for significance were not given. Taylor states that Coyne had no interest in thematic cohesiveness but only in sites that could be used for popular education meaning that the

¹³ Guidelines 6 and 7, “Guide to the Preparation of Commemorative Integrity Statements,” February 2002.

location of the site was not necessarily important to the Board.¹⁴ Taylor is correct in stating that Coyne did not group sites thematically, but following the appointment of Judge F.M. Howay of British Columbia in 1923, it is clear that the Board considered the fur trade a theme to be commemorated. At the 1924 meeting of the HSMBC, the Board called for the marking of the “first” fur trade post at Tadoussac, and also judged that three fur trade forts located in the vicinity of Winnipeg, Manitoba represented the trade’s “three-phases.”¹⁵ At the 1943, meeting of the HSMBC, the Board compiled a list of sites commemorated up to that point, fifty-two sites had been commemorated specifically dealing with “Exploration, Discovery, Fur Trade” as well in Howay’s inaugural speech he mentioned that a “typical old fur-trading post” should be commemorated to demonstrate “social nation development.”¹⁶ At the June 1957 meeting of the Board, the HSMBC declared the fur trade an event of national historic importance. The Minutes state:

That a committee be appointed consisting of representatives of the four western provinces and the Dominion Archivist, to review the history of the western fur trade, with a view ascertaining, first, which trading posts, in the opinion of the committee were (a) most significant in the history of the North West Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company, of (b) may be of special interest for some other reason; second which posts the committee feels should, when practicable, be marked, restored or reconstructed, these posts to be listed, if possible, in some order of priority.¹⁷

Smythe’s Agenda Paper on the fur trade was the culmination of the Fur Trade Committee’s activities. From 1957 onwards, it dealt with various issues pertinent to of the fur trade and consulted with local groups on reconstruction efforts as well as the erection of plaques. Many of the sites were previous designation of national historic importance dating from the 1920s to the

¹⁴ C.J. Taylor, *National Historic Parks and Sites, 1880-1950: The Biography of a Federal Cultural Program*, PhD Dissertation (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1986), 106-107. And Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada [henceforth HSMBC], *Minutes*, 1920.

¹⁵ HSMBC, *Minutes*, 1924.

¹⁶ HSMBC, *Minutes*, 1943.

¹⁷ HSMBC, *Minutes*, June 1957.

1950s, but some were designated due to the committee's investigation. The categorization of the fur trade as a thematic grouping has specific benefits for the SDC. First, it enables the members of the committee to efficiently look at a group of sites and address each based on a set of precedents shared by other fur trade sites that were already addressed by the SDC Committee. One of my main tasks was to author a set of reports that could be used as examples for other sites that had similar characteristics. For example: the site was destroyed because of river erosion or forts that have been reconstructed on top of archaeological remains.

After the initial screening of the reports, I felt comfortable with the process of creating a SDC Submission Paper from the Scoping Report. I began to assess the research needs of the reports that were considered lacking, and did a more general search for archaeological reports as these were the most efficient way of identifying a definable boundary for each site. For a site to be nationally significant it must have existing remains. I was able to obtain nine archaeological reports that dealt with fur trade sites in Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia and the Northwest Territories. These reports were generally completed by provincial archaeologists, although some studies were conducted by academics. In some cases archaeologists found chimney remains, cellar pits and palisade lines. These discoveries allowed me to author recommendations to the SDC, based on Board knowledge, historical document and the archaeological findings. Most the forts were designated a "site" of national importance meaning that the Board in some respect knew that a fort had existed. In some cases, the Board explicitly referred to the location of the site in the Minutes. More often, they referenced to the locations of the fort in correspondence based on surveys, firsthand accounts or historical knowledge.

For the most part the archaeology reports were received through Interlibrary Loan from university libraries, but in some cases, direct contact was needed with provincial archaeologists. The British Columbia provincial archaeological department was most helpful as they provided me with information on three sites. This information was used to establish a recommended designated place. In other cases there were no resources available to establish a designated place, due to the lack of clarity in correspondence and the HSMBC Minutes. Many of the sites were designated based on historical accounts which give scant details of the site locations. In cases where a designated place can not be offered, the “Lost Site” guidelines come into effect. These guidelines were established by the Status of Designations Committee in 2005 and establish procedures to deal with sites that have had new details discovered about them subsequent to designation, or if the site has no definable location.¹⁸ In cases where the location of the site is unknown, the plaque location becomes the placeholder designated place, meaning that if future archaeology discovers the location of the site it can replace the plaque site as the designated place.

The reports posed several problems for me, as I was used to researching in an academic environment. I found myself reflecting on past experiences and adapting my research methods and written skills to a new situation that was highly structured and limited in the source material that could be used. It took me several attempts to learn the process of amending SDC reports, but by mid-June I felt comfortable authoring and revising reports to conform to Board knowledge and the resources available. By August 9th, 2007 I was able to finalize or partially finish 12 out of the 30 reports. Each of these posed their individual problems, but the major

¹⁸ “Guide for determining the designated place of “lost” sites,” Report to the Status of Designations Committee, March 2005.

challenge was establishing Board intent when some of the Minutes were vague and non-informative, or sometimes inaccurate to the historical record. As the Minutes are the definitive expression of the HSMBC's intent, every effort including re-researching work done by contractors was needed. In some cases the contractor's work had no citations, so I found myself travelling to the archives to simply record the reference of maps and letters, or to find a date, and the correspondents of a letter. This proved to be frustrating but was also a learning experience because it showed me the importance of researching and citing information accurately. In addition to this, the opportunity to look at the original (microfilm copies) of the Board correspondence was exciting because it was a different time in historiography. Also, it was interesting to see the opinions and societal characteristics of British Canadian society coming through in many of the commemorations put forward by the Board.

In addition to the research and writing component of SDC reports, I was fortunate enough to travel to Montreal and Montebello to experience the operations of Parks Canada Historic Sites. The trip to Montreal involved a tour of the Lachine Canal lock system and interpretative centre, the Fur Trade at Lachine, as well as the houses of Sir George Etienne Cartier and Louis Joseph Papineau in Old Montreal. The tour of Fur Trade at Lachine which is located in a Hudson Bay Company fur trade warehouse was of particular interest because it was a practical example of the interpretation of the sites of the fur trade by Parks Canada. Fur Trade at Lachine recreates a warehouse with the goods and trade items that would be used for barter in the Canadian west. The interpretation, although dated was interactive and interesting. Staff at the site, along with the Western Quebec Field Unit has fostered links with the new-immigrant community of Montreal and in the summer months have obtained voyageur canoes that will be

used to take people on tours of the canal. This experience was of particular value to me because it illustrates the purpose of the SDC. The SOCI and the DP become the basis for all management plans and interpretation of National Historic Sites, thus the reports that I am authoring may have an impact on a site like Fur Trade at Lachine in the future.

My work has decreased the labour of my supervisor because now she has a collection of several reports that can be used as precedents for the remaining fur trade posts that have not had final reports written. Upon my departure the each site file included any research I conducted as well as the correspondence that I had with various professionals in provincial governments as well as academe. I also completed a spreadsheet which listed the state of the site files, and includes suggested SOCI and DP based on the Scoping Reports and any further research that I completed but did not include in the final draft of the report. According to my supervisor, the categorization of the fur trade sites into a manageable thematic grouping was a worthy exercise for a summer internship. There were requirements for the number of reports that needed to be completed before the end of my term, and no set structure was given. At times the sheer amount of revisions needed for each report became frustrating. In the end I left Historical Services on August 9th, feeling a certain satisfaction in completing a project that had real meaning to government policy.

As I ponder the possibilities ahead of me in my future public history career, I find that my research methodology and historical knowledge have expanded exponentially since May. After August 9th, I will begin my search for stable employment in the Public History profession. I find that I am reflecting on what jobs would fulfill my desire to make a difference in the historical community and increase public awareness of the past. My understanding of “Reflective

Practice” is now more developed and practical than the theoretical concept I was first introduced to in September 2006. Whether I work in a museum, archive or in a government position in the coming months I have a fundamental understanding of collaboration, research and interpretative skills that will help me in whatever position I take. In addition, a part of me would like to continue in the academic study of public history and pursue a PhD in Canadian History that is reflective of the historical background of public history. Studying the national historic sites of Canada has shown me that this nation has a much richer public history past than is commonly known. The narrative that it reflects is inclusive, but the energy and enthusiasm of Canada’s first commemorators is inspiring for those that wish to change the nature of Canadian History and make it more open to the viewpoints of ethnicity and gender. At Parks I was fortunate enough to witness the present mandate of the Historic Sites initiative. The strategic priorities of Parks have changed to focus on ethno history and the story of women in Canada, so missing from the sites designated prior to the 1970s and 1980s. The collaborative environment of the Historical Services Branch is an excellent example of Public History in action in a government environment. The ethical concerns of the subject matter as well as the historians personal ethics are respected and incorporated into the plaque texts and reports authored. Awards are given, and persons encouraged being at the forefront of historical scholarship. Students are encouraged to participate as equal a peer which is inspiring me as I enter into the search for a career. The positives of working at Parks far outweigh and frustrations that I had during my internship at Parks. I feel that my “toolbox” is much greater than it was three months ago and my research knowledge and source base has far exceeded what it was in May. I encourage any Public

History Masters' student in the future to pursue an internship at Parks Canada. This is due to my experience furthering my appreciation and excitement for my chosen profession.

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