



Courtesy Library Archives Canada

A painting depicts the death of British General James Wolfe on the Plains of Abraham.

Save Canadian history from institutional amnesia

Former journalist Eric Marks laments the degree to which public institutions are impeding understanding of our common history through political correctness, opportunism, and overweening faith in their own cultural leadership.

Eric Marks

On Canada Day, 2006, Canadians were shocked by images of several young men urinating on the National War Memorial in Ottawa. Public outcry inspired the creation of Bill C-217, which criminalized the vandalism of war memorials and cemeteries.

The enactment of C-217's protections was widely applauded in the wake of last October's attack by a terrorist gunman on the National War Memorial and Parliament. The applause may be premature, though, given that public institutions also have proven susceptible to historical amnesia.

In 2009, for example, the National Battlefields Commission cancelled a 250th anniversary re-enactment of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham due to public opposition in Quebec. In 2011, Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick,

demolished a nationally registered war memorial library to make way for a performing arts centre. In 2012, federal bureaucrats preparing for the 110th anniversary of the Boer War recommended downplaying Canada's role as "sensitive" and potentially divisive.

An interesting contemporary example involves the New Brunswick Museum. The museum board recently proposed building a storage facility over a portion of Saint John's Riverview Memorial Park, one of Canada's oldest war memorials and the province's only monument to 700 soldiers of the Boer War. The park's defenders view this as the sort of desecration that Bill C-217 was designed to discourage, while museum supporters argue that the institution is merely asserting its stewardship over an aspect of provincial history.

In each of these cases, local arguments have tended to obscure

a larger national issue: the degree to which public institutions are impeding understanding of our common history through political correctness, opportunism, and overweening faith in their own cultural leadership.

The National Battlefields Commission's decision to cancel the 250th anniversary re-enactment of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham now seems a misguided concession to political correctness. As historian Desmond Morton noted in 2009, the proposed re-enactment was based on the latest scholarship and had been expected to improve public understanding of the roles played by previously undervalued participants, such as French colonial troops and Aboriginal allies. Its cancellation brought an important public conversation about the diversity of the Canadian experience to a premature end.

The expansion plans produced by Mount Allison University and the New Brunswick Museum exhibit a different dynamic: that of opportunism. Canadians can expect to see more of this, as building over historic sites sometimes represents the path of least expense for developers, even if those developers are institutions that have taken on the mantle of cultural leadership.

Mistaking memorial space for vacant space can have serious consequences for the reputations of public institutions. Consider the recent debate over Riverview Memorial Park. The park contains an early cenotaph and century-old trees planted in memory of fallen soldiers and community members. The New Brunswick Museum's proposal to build in the park would see the memorial statue moved and trees cleared to allow construction of an artifact storage facility. None of this will be legally possible, unless the courts or the provincial government remove deed covenants designed to protect the park in perpetuity.

After two months of heated public discussion, the Museum's board announced in March that it had begun to investigate alternatives, citing the length of time it was taking city staff to assess the legal ramifications of its proposal.

The plan to build on a memorial park triggered a passionate debate over whether a museum can honour its mandate to preserve and promote history while bulldozing an historic landscape. In effect, the Museum board asked community members to trust that it would be a wise steward of their history. That's more or less the same argument that Quebec politicians made as the anniversary of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham approached, or that Mount Allison University adopted in response to alumni who wanted the university's war memorial library preserved. Not everyone finds this line of argument reassuring.

Many people I have spoken to no longer trust governments,

universities and museums to act as disinterested guardians of our national past. They aren't conspiracy theorists; they're just aware of the gap between institutional intentions and institutional actions. That says something about how poorly we have managed our historical assets, from artifacts, archival records and public spaces to the diversity of historical narratives that make up the Canadian experience.

Why do these institutional failures and the falling away of public faith matter from a policy perspective? Because historical amnesia robs us of something important: an awareness of where we come from, the complexity of our past and the richness of our collective experience.

Consider the Second Anglo-Boer War, which was added to Canada's National War Memorial in 2014. The Boer War is regarded by many today as a bit of foreign adventuring that enriched British crony capitalists at the expense of Africa itself. To downplay its importance to Canada, though, one would need to ignore some important lessons.

The Boer War prefigured the conditions, weapons and tactics that Canadians would face in the First World War and established our volunteer soldiers as an effective military force. Canadians' performance under fire made a profound impact on future allies, including Sir Winston Churchill, and many Boer War veterans volunteered in the First World War, too. Among them were former Mountie Sam Steele and physician-poet John McCrae, who wrote *In Flanders Fields*. The public's response to this conflict also set in motion many of our traditions of remembrance, from the creation of public memorials to holding remembrance ceremonies.

Unless historians can convince community and opinion leaders of the importance of remembering such details and the context they represent, we will continue to see significant aspects of Canada's history relegated to the darkest corners of museum and university archives, while monuments that were erected to stand in perpetuity by earlier generations are moved or destroyed.

It remains to be seen whether Bill C-217 will offer war memorials protection against the destruction wrought by institutional amnesia. I believe we need a national policy on monuments and memorial spaces that is rooted in awareness of the complexity of our history, and which opts to preserve historic monuments and discuss divergent historical experiences, rather than paving them over or pushing aside events of the past that have become politically unpopular today. ✿

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