

Material Histories: Proceedings of a Workshop Held at Marischal Museum, University of Aberdeen, 26-27 April 2007.* Alison Brown, ed. Aberdeen: Marischal Museum, 2008. 99 pp.

Reviewed by Arni Brownstone

In 2007 the Marischal Museum at the University of Aberdeen held a two-day workshop attended by 30 participants, including five First Nations and Métis presenters from Canada. The essential goal of the workshop was to create new ways of looking at and talking about museum artifacts. Participants' time was equally divided between making objects, primarily beadwork, and spoken presentations. The workshop proved to be a great success and for those who could not attend, the resulting book, *Museum Histories: Proceedings of a Workshop Held at the Marischal Museum, University of Aberdeen, 26-27 April 2007*, edited and introduced by Alison Brown, is the next best thing.

In her introduction Brown puts the workshop into context by sketching Scotland's close ties over several hundred years with Canadian First Peoples through the fur trade. Much of its museum collections evolved out of that relationship. Since 2000, museums in Scotland have been actively reconnecting Canadian First Peoples to artifacts in their collections. At the core of the book are seven essays by workshop presenters, representing a wide variety of disciplines.

The first essay is by Keith Goulet, a Cree from northern Saskatchewan. He explores the patterns between animate and inanimate Cree words. Interestingly, he notes that the term "mother earth" runs contrary to Cree rules of grammar, because it compounds an inanimate word with an animate one. Despite widespread use of the term among many tribes of North America, including the Cree, Goulet considers this to be a relatively new pan-Indian concept, influenced in part by non-natives to whom "it sounded so authentically aboriginal" (p. 11). (At the same time, Goulet exacts Cree revenge on the English language by using "cremanation," a word which he compounded from "create" and "emanation," but which does not appear in the Oxford dictionary.)

Bryce Wilson, Honourary Curator of the Stromness Museum, examines the relationship between Scottish Orkney Islanders and Canadian Native peoples. Their ties were forged through intensive participation in the fur trade, beginning in 1702. Many Orkadians took Native women as wives, "according to the custom of the country" (p. 24). Although most retired and returned as bachelors, some Orkney-born husbands stayed in Canada with their families. Some mixed blood children came to live in the Orkneys, others kept up a correspondence, and still others crossed the ocean several generations later to rekindle ties with long lost relatives, maintaining warm relations between Orkadians and First Peoples to this day.

Kevin Brownlee, a member of the Norway House Cree Nation, grew up as an adopted child in a non-native Winnipeg family. Today he is a Curator of Archaeology in The Manitoba Museum. As a Cree archaeologist, Brownlee enjoys a rich collaborative working relationship with the First

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Nations community. He works closely with those still following traditional life ways, to the point where people in the community have been asking him to initiate specific archaeological projects. They are acutely aware, as Brownlee notes, that the land is their history book, and as they progressively move off the land, knowledge of their past becomes more tenuous.

Chantal Knowles, a curator at the National Museums of Scotland (NMS), is revitalizing Dene (Athapaskan) collections by actively pursuing discussions between the museum and source cultures, putting artifacts at the forefront. Knowles' essay focuses on relations between the Tlicho (Dogrib) First Nation and the NMS, which were reignited in 2002 when seven Tlicho visited the collection. Out of this visit came a plan to bring most of the 40 Tlicho artifacts in the collection to their place of origin. The collection was based for 12 months at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre in Yellowknife, and parts traveled to smaller Tlicho communities. The exchange enriched the Tlicho community, broadened custodianship of the collection to include the Tlicho, and established positive ties between the Scots and Tlicho communities.

Sherry Farrell Racette, who is a Métis artist with a doctorate in Interdisciplinary Studies, began her essay by noting that most Native Canadian artifacts were collected at a time of great duress, citing a list of oppressive measures forced on the Indigenous people by the government of Canada. These "historic circumstances create an often highly charged and contentious space around museum collections" (p. 59). For many Indigenous people, studying museum collections can bring on a profound sense of mourning, which, nonetheless, can help heal the wounds of the past. A growing group of Indigenous scholars are producing a body of literature that is highly critical of non-Indigenous anthropological practice and laying the foundations for Indigenous-based research processes. Museums wishing to work with the new wave of researchers need to step back and empathize more strongly with Indigenous concerns. Against this background, Racette does not hide the great pleasure and rewards she has derived from conducting research in storage rooms and archives of the great museums in North America and Europe. In the end, she recognizes that museum research is largely a labor of love, and that it is often only through compassionate museum employees that Aboriginals can make a positive entry into the museum world.

Neil Curtis, Curator at the Marischal Museum, discusses the repatriation of a split-horn headdress to the Kainai (Blood) tribe of the Blackfoot confederacy, an event which he considers to have had a very positive effect on his museum's relations with the Aboriginal community. The process was initiated by the museum when it learned that the Kainai of Alberta had lost a split-horn bonnet "some decades earlier" (pp. 71-72). Though it did not fit the description of the missing headdress, the Kainai sent six elders and Horn Society Members to the Marischal Museum. The outcome of the visit was a repatriation request, which was approved. The headdress was handed over in a public ceremony at the museum in 2003, followed by a repatriation exhibition several months later. Since the only documentation on the headdress was that the donor had traveled to the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana, one wonders how the museum met its own stipulation that those making the repatriation request must "represent the community to which the object originally belonged" (p. 72). I also wonder about the museum's assessment of the intrinsic value of the headdress. In this regard, Curtis' suggestion that his museum's catalogue record shows ethnocentric bias in its use of the term "war bonnet" is

questionable, since our earliest knowledge of the split-horn headdress is as war medicine, worn in battle.

The Material Histories workshop was evenly divided between practical sessions and spoken presentations. Anna MacLennan focuses her essay on the “doing” part, largely devoted to beadworking. The practical workshop experience greatly enriched her appreciation of the technical aspects of beadwork, as well as the social framework within which it was created. With regard to the latter, she found that in the workshop beadworkers would slip easily into conversations about their daily lives. This led her to the insight that similar kinds of conversations must be occurring among beadworkers in the Native community. There is thus a “hidden depth” (p. 79) in museum artifacts that can potentially add a greater human dimension to the museum’s interpretation of objects to its public.

A verbatim transcript of the first part of the “Materials Handling Session” is also featured in the book. This session was led by a Métis mother and daughter, Jenny Mayer and Jennine Krauchi. Using hands on examples, participants discussed materials and techniques of manufacture. Brownlee and the Native women presenters spoke at length about traditional hide dressing and usage.

The workshop ended with a group discussion among presenters, chaired by Nancy Wachowich. All agreed on the great potential for museum artifacts as a window onto real communities and people. To achieve this, objects need to be studied from both a practical and historical perspective. Native participants expressed pride in the care and interest which Europeans place on their objects. Recognition was given to those museum curators who have welcomed Native people into the inner world of museums. In this regard, Aboriginal researchers today are in an excellent position to investigate the deeper connections, both historical and emotional, between objects and their makers. This was reiterated by Tim Ingold in his concluding remarks, noting the important need to reclaim a “history that has been sidelined by mainstream academic historians” (p. 99), one that vigorously traces the dynamic interaction between the objects and their makers.

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