

## **PERSONAL, ACADEMIC AND INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON MUSEUMS AND FIRST NATIONS<sup>1</sup>**

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[NOTE: This commentary, by the Executive Director of one of Canada's major cultural institutions, is published specifically to attract your response and further comments. We encourage those readers who either agree or disagree with this work to indicate so in written responses. Some responses may be published. This paper, although categorized and published as a *commentary*, was in fact subjected to the usual referee procedure. Referees recommended that it be accepted for publication as a commentary on the basis of its succinct statement of a current and important policy found in some, but not all, museums.]

## Introduction

The great challenge to our times is to harness research, invention, and professional practice to deliberately embraced human values...Experts...perform both center stage and in the wings. And all of us speak from the citizen's chorus. The fateful questions are how the specialists will interact with citizens, and whether the performance can be imbued with wisdom, courage and vision (Lowrance, 1986).

Canada's Aboriginal peoples are now fully engaged in joining the "citizen's chorus," both as citizens and as experts. This is long overdue and there are many obstacles to overcome, but the relationships between mainstream museums and First Nations are changing and there is no turning back. Part of this change is challenging our museum assumptions about how Aboriginal peoples think and act, and I wish to comment on this growing awareness from three perspectives—personal, academic and institutional. One primary characteristic of the academic community is its relentless search for objective knowledge, and although I believe in the existence of such knowledge, it is important to understand that scholarship and professional practice cannot be divorced from our lives as individuals—our training, experience, aspirations, and values. Nowhere is this multiplicity of perspectives more important than in the realm of museums and First Nations.

As a result, this commentary incorporates both a personal and an academic perspective, as well as some observations from my position as the Executive Director of Glenbow, a multifaceted cultural institution with extensive North American ethnological collections. These three perspectives—the personal, academic, and institutional—can be thought of as interlocking circles, as each perspective constantly influences the other. It is impossible to ignore any of these perspectives, if we are to forge new relationships between museums and First Nations.

## A Personal View

My first experience with Aboriginal people occurred in the Northwest Territories, and arose out of a need for archaeological field experience during my first year as a graduate student at the University of Calgary. In fact, I knew nothing of this vast wilderness north of the sixtieth parallel, having no recollection of even having studied it in school. Equipped with this benign ignorance, I joined an archaeological crew in the summer of 1971, bound for the central Barrenlands of the Northwest Territories, several hundred kilometres northeast of Yellowknife, in one of the most

remote regions of Canada's mainland.

From the very beginning, the sense of adventure was enticing. It began with the equipment list issued by the Project Director which advised that undershirts were mandatory, as mosquitoes tend to bite through a shirt alone. The excitement was intensified when our aged, float-equipped Otter aircraft delivered us and our field camp to a relic forest in the middle of the Thelon Game Sanctuary. In short, I had never imagined that such a region existed within North America, for it seemed so exotic to me that it deserved its own continent, or at least the isolation afforded by a gigantic sea. This is a land where ten thousand caribou walked by our camp on their way south and the black flies were so thick that they became mired in the contents of our sandwiches while we prepared them. My final amazement that summer was the onslaught of cold weather in the middle of August, and the urgency with which we struck camp while there was still time to land an aircraft on open water.

Mystified, excited, and firmly committed to doing archaeological field-work somewhere in the Canadian North, I participated in two more field projects in 1972 and 1973. On both field projects, I was part of a much larger effort to identify and record archaeological sites in advance of the proposed Mackenzie Valley pipeline. I had read about the skills and endurance of the Dene people who lived along the Mackenzie River and was intrigued by the prospects of meeting and working with them.<sup>2</sup>

This was not to be, however. Sensitivity to the value of the local and traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples was not part of northern archaeological research design in the early 1970s. This was neither intentional nor conspiratorial, but simply a reflection of the apparent arrogance inherent in a Western scientific world view. As we travelled the length of the Mackenzie River, we observed Dene going about their lives, met some of them, and even asked an elderly couple to assist us with the identification of some artifacts. But, we never really involved these people in our work. The Dene and Métis residents must surely have wondered who we were—youths, fresh from southern Canada, tramping through the bush in search of sites whose whereabouts were already firmly planted in the memories of various local inhabitants. But the excitement and newness of living and working in one of the world's greatest wildernesses was running high, and despite nagging doubts and private thoughts about the conduct of human science which ignores living peoples, nothing was done to involve the Dene.

I gained more experience when I joined an archaeological survey of several interior lakes in the western Northwest Territories, not far from the Arctic Circle, in 1973. We planned to work until well into October, when every night is below freezing and snow comes early and stays. At one lake, we paid a visit to several families of Dene hunters who were busy catching

fish for the winter's work in the bush, in order to introduce ourselves and tell them of our work. Several listened politely and then the Chief advised us that winter was approaching, and that sensible shelter consisted of a canvas wall tent and a wood stove, both of which he then loaned to us for the duration of our stay. This was done without ridicule of our unheated nylon tent, or incriminating questions about what we were doing there. It was a simple act of polite generosity which left an indelible memory.

I spent the fall and winter engaged in graduate studies, excited by these field experiences and vaguely perplexed about what they had to do with getting a graduate degree in archaeology. I was also acutely aware of the distance that lay between my middle-class upbringing and the lives of these northern hunters. Although I had resolved to spend the next five years of my life studying Dene archaeology, I did not know any Dene people personally. This mixture of curiosity and unease led to the inevitable conclusion that I had to go north and live for awhile.

## An Academic View

The time I spent living with the Willow Lake Dene in 1974-75 introduced me to the richness of a living culture, as compared to what one finds in the archaeological record. The vast majority of sites in the Subarctic are astonishingly meagre for a number of reasons. The soil is acidic, and perishable materials such as skin, bone and wood simply don't last very long in the ground. In addition, the Dene were highly mobile in the past and carried only minimal possessions. In other words, archaeologists need all the help they can get in trying to decipher the unrecorded history of these northern hunters, who have lived in the Northwest Territories for nearly 7,000 years. This led me to ethnoarchaeology, a type of research which is concerned with the study of a living society from an archaeological perspective.

The reasoning behind this approach is quite simple. The contemporary setting can provide numerous clues to assist in identifying and recognizing what is found in the ground, in the absence of observable behaviour. I spent a good deal of time excavating contemporary tipis in a hunting camp in an effort to define distinctive features of tipis which are observable in the ground. These features, in the absence of surface tipi remains, are useful in detecting the presence of tipis in an archaeological site. By understanding what dwellings were used, archaeologists are able to piece together settlement patterns.

It is important to counter any tendency to idealize these hunters and their way of life by stating that the years since this fieldwork in the 1970s

and the 1980s have not necessarily been happy ones for the Willow Lakers. Alcohol abuse continues to take its toll, resulting in one intoxicated man dying in a snowmobile accident and another spending his early adulthood in jail for drinking-related offenses. Willow Lake elders have died of old age and hard lives, and a light plane accident took the life of a young Willow Lake woman. The Willow Lakers are not a pristine group of hunters frozen in time. They are individuals and families living through a time of profound cultural change, and the trauma cannot be separated from the joy.

## An Institutional View

The institutional perspective is perhaps the most important in the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and mainstream museums, as the latter are creatures of the dominant society and possess the larger share of power and authority. If this relationship is to truly evolve, Canadian museums will have to assume a leadership role, and consider new approaches to what has always been an asymmetrical relationship. Ultimately, any constructive change will be influenced by the individual experiences and perspectives of those museum workers charged with this responsibility. For example, as an individual and a researcher who has lived among Aboriginal peoples, I understand that their cultures are living ones and not frozen in time. As the Executive Director of a cultural institution, I must attempt to recognize and integrate all of these perspectives. There is no doubt that the personal and academic experiences of individual staff, such as the ones described earlier in this commentary, exert a profound influence on the direction of mainstream museums, despite claims of objectivity by museums.

Perhaps the most controversial institutional issue is the matter of fiduciary trust, that is, Glenbow's obligation to hold its collections in perpetuity for the people of Alberta. When the question of whether to return or loan a ceremonial object arises, for example, the meaning of fiduciary responsibility is called into question. As a fundamental tenet of the museum profession, the idea of keeping collections forever understandably receives unwavering devotion from most museum workers. The real question, in my view, is whether such a commitment to posterity can be upheld within the context of unrelenting social change. With Aboriginal peoples throughout Canada striving for self-determination and social well-being, what responsibilities do museums have when they own materials which are crucial to fulfilling these aspirations? We have decided, with the guidance of Glenbow's First Nations Advisory Council (consisting of representatives of the Blood, Peigan, Siksika, Stoney, Tsuut'ina, Plains Cree and northern Cree

nations), that we have a major responsibility to support ceremonial activities with objects from our collections. We also recognize that the loans we have made may very well evolve into transfers of ownership. Museum workers always say that they are holding their collections for posterity. Perhaps, for Canada's First Nations, posterity has arrived.

The most common defense against any relaxation in the control of our collections is the "Camel's Nose" argument or the "Thin Edge of the Wedge." Recall Aesop's tale of the Camel's Nose. Once you compassionately let the camel stick his nose inside the tent, how can you refuse him further entrance? The inference for museum directors is that, having loaned or returned objects to First Nations, there would soon be a run on the collections and we would eventually lose everything to a variety of special-interest groups.

This argument should be rejected, for the abuse of a thing does not bar its use (Hardin, 1985:63). In addition, those who use this argument act as though they think human beings are completely devoid of practical judgement. We must be willing to take some risks and draw some arbitrary lines in this uncharted territory of museums and First Nations. I think this is what the Report of the Assembly of First Nations/Canadian Museums Association Task Force has asked us to do (Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums Association, 1992:8).

A fundamental ingredient in forging meaningful relationships with First Nations is trust—a firm belief in the honesty, integrity and reliability of the other person. No amount of legal paperwork can create or ensure this trust. Rather, it requires time and openness to develop, which means a major commitment by both individuals and institutions. It is the ongoing personal involvement of key Glenbow staff which has forged the trust which underlies our growing involvement with Aboriginal peoples in southern Alberta.

But trust must be reciprocal or it means nothing, and we have learned this the hard way. We loaned a ceremonial object to one particular family, who then defaulted on the conditions of the loan and have subsequently ignored our appeals. This situation remains unresolved. Should we ban any further loans to anyone because of this particular family? We don't think so, as we have a principle at Glenbow which says that we should avoid practices and policies designed to protect the organization against "mistakes." Such policies tend to force individuals and the organization to perform at the lowest level of competence.

Nonetheless, we have a loan agreement which is being ignored and some sort of action is required. Glenbow's First Nations Advisory Council has suggested that we work with local ceremonialists to resolve this dilemma through traditional means. To avoid similar situations in the future, they also suggested that we sanctify these loan agreements with a tradi-

tional pipe ceremony, in addition to the signing of legal documents. The Advisory Council reasons that traditional practices may exact a greater commitment to a loan agreement. The fact that these relationships are dynamic and that we are learning as we go, is both disconcerting and salutary. In any event, there is nothing to be gained from rigid adherence to *a priori* assumptions and preconceived notions.

Another topic of real and potential conflict, as our relationships with First Nations evolve, has to do with professional standards. An enormous amount of time and money has been committed to ensuring that museum workers develop and adhere to a coherent body of method and theory, in order to sustain a high standard of professional practice. As we step outside the museum into the public arena, however, these standards of conduct have little or no meaning to the majority of people who have an interest in what we do as institutions.

The tension arises when it is impossible or inappropriate to maintain professional standards as we respond to the needs of our various constituents. For example, it is unrealistic to demand that the borrower of a medicine bundle maintain 48° relative humidity in his home on the Reserve. Or what of our requirement to fumigate or freeze incoming objects in order to avoid an infestation in our permanent collections? Should this apply to a medicine bundle which has been returned at the conclusion of a loan? The answer is no, and this has nothing to do with the validity of professional standards. Rather, we acknowledge that the application of various physical and chemical techniques is seen as disrespectful by those who possess special knowledge of the object. Neither should this bundle be readmitted to storage without undergoing inspection, as it could endanger other objects. It is not acceptable to simply reject the professional concerns in favour of increased service to a particular group.

As a result, we have created a forum at Glenbow for addressing these real and potential conflicts among our professional staff. It is a multidisciplinary team of staff whose purpose is to listen to each other, identify concerns and design solutions which meet competing interests within the institution. We need to find the middle ground between professional standards and community needs. This group is essential to thoughtfully fulfilling our obligations to First Nations, and to undertaking initiatives in conjunction with our First Nations Advisory Council, which will serve us all in the years to come.

Collaboration with other museums with similar concerns and interests is also a necessity, as our relationships with First Nations evolve. The Assembly of First Nations/Canadian Museums Association Task Force report has called for the co-management of collections by museums and First Nations, but what does this really mean in practical terms? It may or

may not be realistic to think that Canadian museums could agree on a common approach to this new concept of co-management. It may not even be necessary, but at this time it is important for as many museums as possible to explore its meaning and ramifications. Our Senior Ethnologist, Dr. Gerald Conaty, is working with colleagues from Saskatchewan's Natural History Museum and the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, as well as with various Aboriginal groups and individuals, to develop a workable definition of co-management. The opportunity for these ethnologists to exchange ideas and concerns is in itself worthwhile, even if a generic model for co-management is ultimately unachievable.

It is important in all of this work that we take the time to reflect on the broader implications of what we are doing. Medicine bundles, for example, are powerful objects replete with implicit social status and power, in addition to their spiritual significance. The return of bundles affects the balance of power in a community, and although this is really none of our business as museum workers, we must be sensitive to these complexities. Glenbow's First Nations Advisory Council has made this point very clearly. Such sensitivity requires a commitment to learning local and traditional knowledge, and to listening to community opinions and concerns surrounding these loans.

The benefits will also be greater for all of us if we make the effort to ensure that a meaningful dialogue occurs in conjunction with the transfer of these ceremonial objects. Reg Crowshoe, a Peigan ceremonialist, observes that this is not simply a matter of museums making objects available, as museums may also possess knowledge about the use, meaning and context of the objects which has been lost to the memories of First Nations peoples. Reg Crowshoe is also calling for a deliberate process to ensure that relevant information is collected in Native communities. This documentation, along with the knowledge which the ceremonialists possess, will add immeasurably to what we know about our collections.

It is not easy for me to summarize these issues and concerns, as they are complex, and involve moral, professional and political considerations which continually compete with each other for ascendancy. There are also broader implications, which transcend the particular issues and situations. It is these broader implications which are probably responsible for much of the apprehension we feel as we reflect upon the irreversible course we have charted at Glenbow.

In the first place, releasing collections on other peoples' terms means giving up some authority and responsibility, and sharing them with people whose background, education and experience are radically different from our own. Furthermore, it is impossible to determine what the outcome of

this sharing will be. It will undoubtedly result in challenges to the conventional wisdom of museum practice, such as our belief that replicas of objects are suitable for those who wish to possess objects which we consider too precious to share. If these concerns are not worrisome enough, what about the possibility that there could be further cultural decline among Aboriginal peoples and the objects we have loaned or returned will be neglected, destroyed or otherwise lost? It is possible that this could happen, as it did before, but this degree of pessimism is stultifying, and could very well become the rationalization for inaction.

Museums which hold Aboriginal materials do so in part because they are committed to the fundamental tenets of anthropology, and one of these tenets is respect for cultural diversity. Canadian museums now have the opportunity to embrace this principle, albeit slowly and judiciously, as circumstances require. Sharing authority and collections is much more than a responsibility, however, as it is also an opportunity. To return to the quotation at the beginning of this commentary, museums now have a unique role to play in "imbuing the performance with wisdom, courage and vision," as they address the needs of the First Nations. Museums pride themselves on being the keepers of the collective memory, and they are now being approached by people who have forgotten and want their memories refreshed. To help make this happen is to vindicate the very purpose of museums.

### Notes

- 1 This commentary is a revised version of an oral presentation given at the 1992 annual meeting of the Alberta Museums Association in Medicine Hat, Alberta, Canada.
- 2 The languages spoken by the Indians of the western Canadian Subarctic belong to a language family known as Athapaskan. Those who speak the various dialects of the Athapaskan language are called Athapaskan or Dene (den'ay). Dene is an Athapaskan word meaning "man" or "person." The Athapaskans of the Northwest Territories have indicated a preference for the use of Dene to describe themselves, and this term is used throughout this commentary.

### References

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