

Subverting our stories?

Canada's historic sites offer a false vision of our past, says a pair of Canadian scholars.

Visitors to Louisbourg, the Nova Scotia historic site, approach its gate — and are confronted by musket-wielding soldiers barring their entry. “Qui va là? Are you spies for les anglais?”

Then, having introduced the interactive challenge to which Louisbourg hopes its visitors will respond, the sentries welcome them to the reconstructed walled city. Most visitors love it.

But once I met a loyally British Canadian who found that moment infuriating. We defeated the French, he roared. Why is the government pretending otherwise with my tax dollars? He wanted to attack the poor sentry.

Historic places can be subversive in ways like that. In Nova Scotia, history's potential for creatively unsettling the public is everywhere. Grand Pré is peaceful, yes, but no thoughtful visitor misses the challenge of the people not there: the deported Acadians. The Glace Bay Miners' Museum, with its dark mine and its company store, insists we see how the miners suffered to enrich the bosses.

Bustling Lunenburg, the heart of Germanic Nova Scotia, cannot help but interrogate the province's “tartan” branding. All those forts and blockhouses, green and peaceable today, still declare that rivals have often fought for the history of this place.

It is the same across the country. Who doesn't enjoy Vieux Quebec — or confront there the troublesome choice: Wolfe's team or the French one? Drive that long haul from Thunder Bay to Winnipeg, and the historic sites you encounter offer competing narratives of how Canada was built — the Montreal-centred North West Company story at Fort William, the Hudson's Bay version at the Manitoba Museum. Or visit Batoche, where the site immerses you in the gross injustices done to the Métis and the Cree.

That is something I have always cherished about museums and historic sites.

Even when the tour guide is under instructions to avoid controversy, subversive possibilities abound. In Nova Scotia alone, memorials to Scots Highlanders compete with rival tributes to Loyalists, to Palatines, to Planters, and to Acadians. Visi-

myth and misinformation, mostly concerned with “generating profits.” Indeed, they say it's worse than that — a conscious campaign to impose a specific vision of history, the liberal capitalist order, upon unwilling but helpless consumers.

McKay, a history professor, and Bates, a Ph.D. candidate in the history department



Fortress Louisbourg,
Nova Scotia.

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tors bring their own perspectives, and versions of history clash in ways that puzzle and sometimes enlighten. An immersion in historic sites is a buffeting in conflicting interpretations.

Or, maybe not. *In the Province of History*, a new book by Ian McKay and Robin Bates, tells us very firmly that this never happens. The authors' subject is “the making of the public past” in Nova Scotia, and they find fraud and conspiracy everywhere. “Tourism/history,” they argue, is

at the University of Chicago, offer vivid examples. They show how Grand Pré, a village central to the destruction and dispossession of the Acadians, was redefined for tourists as “the happy place” of child-like peasants living in placid serenity. They make a strong case. Nova Scotians long strove to deny or downplay the deportation, even as they marketed interest in Longfellow's “Land of Evangeline.” But the authors' focus is never on the visitors, and instead remains fixed on the official

scripts of tourist promotion. With regard to the obviously absent Acadians, the official scripts often had a desperate note of "Who do you believe, me or your own eyes?" But McKay and Bates see only passive consumers believing all they are told. The authors do disavow (in one paragraph) the idea of "cunning corporate villains" who "manipulate a brainwashed travelling public," but that is pretty much what they discover throughout the "province of history."

More than tourism is at stake here. Ian McKay, a vigorous and prolific scholar at Queen's University in Kingston, is the originator of a fresh interpretation of Canadian history that has recently had a powerful impact on Canadian historians. In prize-winning essays and books, McKay has argued that the key to Canadian history is "the liberal order framework."

He means that what has held together many different and rival components with-

in Canada is an idea and an ideology: political liberalism allied to capitalist economics.

It's a big idea. After Donald Creighton's argument that economic geography, not ideas at all, made Canada, and then the fashion for social history and micro-history that seemed about to disavow national questions entirely, McKay's "framework" has brought political ideas surging back to the centre of Canadian history.

Many historians are finding McKay's liberal order framework powerful and persuasive.

McKay's big idea is also a conspiracy theory. He's no fan of the liberal order, to say the least. The framework that he describes has been imposed "against steep odds" on unwilling Canadians by "flagrantly anti-democratic" means. His evidence for this authoritarian imposition may seem thin (for example, the Senate is not elected), but McKay makes his case with passion, sarcasm, and irony.

And if all Canadians, except a few "rebels, reds, and radicals," have allowed themselves to be lashed down to the liberal order framework, what chance have a few holidaymakers to resist the tourist-history version of it?

McKay and Bates see the public as being controlled by "the tourist frame." They contrast public "heritage" (which they summarize as no questions, no challenges, no recognitions, no contradictions) to "history," a "form of disciplined knowledge."

Real history, they want us to agree, only happens in classrooms, as the property of history professors.

But I suspect that out there on the tourist routes more than a few Canadians have debated their history without a professorial frame. ❌



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