

The Commemoration of Northern Aboriginal Peoples by the Canadian Government

Introduction

The government of Canada uses the national commemoration of the past to create a national image of the country. National commemoration highlights values and establishes the boundaries of community—recognizing, valuing, and protecting cultural interests by selecting an icon to represent the nation’s past. In fact, this selection makes the icon “our” past. A designation of national significance is the construction of national identity; it is an expression of power. However, the highlighting of national values through commemoration also tends to obscure other icons or bend them to the national purpose. Edward Said stresses the significance of commemoration: “[T]he construction of identity is bound up with the disposition of power and powerlessness in each society, and is therefore anything but mere academic woolgathering” (Said 1978, 332).

This paper examines the disposition of powerlessness in the commemoration process. By reviewing the history of the national commemoration of aboriginal people in Canada’s North, it becomes possible to see who have been left out of the national identity and who have been conscripted to fill needed roles in the national self-image. It also follows the fortunes of northern aboriginal people as they take action to regain control of their past, and explains how they are working at achieving national acceptance on their own terms. The paper also reflects upon how Canadians were able to accept this social injustice and are only now slowly recognizing changes to the national identity.

Creating the Shared Canadian Past and Future

The Canadian government established a program to create a national history early in the last century. The Dominion Parks Branch, established in 1911 as a part of the Department of the Interior, inherited the responsibility for the care of Canada’s historic places. The Historic Sites and Monuments Act was passed in 1919 to regularize the identification and intent of these national historic sites (Anonymous 1996, 333-334). The act also created the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC). The board, consisting of knowledgeable individuals, was appointed to advise the responsible Minister on

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noteworthy aspects of Canadian history and to recommend meaningful ways of commemorating it.

Until well into the 1930s, the board consisted only of members from eastern Canada, the political heartland of the country. These members were driven by a combination of nascent nationalism rising out of Canada's contribution to the First World War and a sense of responsibility for the cultural leadership of the country (Taylor 1990, 75). Not surprisingly, the common traditions commemorated in this period reflected those of the white European culture that had pioneered the St. Lawrence Valley and the Maritime provinces.

The national commemoration program was, and remains, a concrete representation of a created past—a past shaped and molded so that it will help create and maintain a nation. The board's early vision of "common traditions" emphasized the heritage of the trans-Atlantic cultural ties to western Europe, the geography of the country, and its "natural" boundaries, thus justifying both its existence and its difference from the Americans. This vision was drawn from contemporary Canadian intellectual activity.

Harold Innis's seminal work in the 1920s and 1930s, describing the economic history of Canada (e.g., Innis 1930, 1936), connected the exploitation of the country's originally abundant natural resources with the importance of the trans-Atlantic communication links back to the center of the British Empire in England. His subsequent work, and that of his intellectual offspring, expanded the trans-Atlantic idea to include such other staple

industries as the Atlantic cod fishery (Innis 1940), the timber trade (Lower 1933), and the mercantile empire of the St. Lawrence valley (Creighton 1937). All of these works focused upon the importance of the St. Lawrence as the core of the Canadian economic and political system. The resulting historiographic direction, described as the "Laurentian thesis," became the unchallenged analytical framework for the study and understanding of Canadian history to the 1960s.

The Laurentian thesis grew out of the primary concern of Canadian intellectuals in the first half of the century: the fixing of Canada as a distinct and organically logical country in its own right. The idea, emphasizing the trans-Atlantic economic and political linkages, also incorporated the trans-continental transportation system of rivers and, later, railways, built upon trade and communication. These defined what seemed the logical boundaries of Canada. The thesis rested upon the importance attributed to the major metropolitan centers shaping the country: London, Montreal, and Toronto. These centers of agency extended links outward into the periphery of the country, knitting it into a single national entity.

The Laurentian thesis was also a distinct nationalistic reaction against the republican environmental determinism of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis and the resulting concept of an America free of European influence. However, by emphasizing the importance of the connection to the Metropolitan centers, the Laurentian thesis was anti-regional in under-

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standing Canada (Morton 1946). Commemorations arising from this historiographic representation of the country tended to emphasize both the role of the expanding center (rather than that of the regions) and the logical and natural character of this relationship.

This approach had significant consequences for northern aboriginal people: they were either rendered invisible or incorporated as components of the national vision. In national commemoration, the North as a whole was regarded as merely an adjunct to the development of central Canada. By 1955 the HSMBC had identified twenty-five northern icons of national historic significance (Table 1; see Parks Canada 1999; Neufeld 2001). For the purposes of this essay, northern sites were loosely defined as those north of 60° and those south of 60° that had direct or significant connections to the North. These northern commemorations were exclusively in the Canadian Northwest and the Arctic. The fur trade in the northern parts of the western provinces accounted for ten of the twenty-five. Another four celebrated the extension of southern Canadian administration into the North. The sites highlight the commercial links across the Atlantic and the extension of the power of the Metropolis bringing meaning to the North.

Another nine designations described British voyages of Arctic exploration and discovery. From the 1870s, when the British government transferred its claims over the Arctic to Canada, there had been periods of acute concern over national sovereign-

ty in the region (Zaslow 1971, 251-255, 264-268; Zaslow 1988, 199-202; Fogelson 1983, esp. chapters III and V; Anonymous 1957). By the end of the 1920s, however, Canada's Arctic claims seemed secure and the HSMBC celebrated by designating Parry's 1819 winter camp at Winter Harbour on Melville Island as a site of national historic significance. Between then and 1945, four subsequent commemorations of British exploration of the Arctic and the Northwest Passage continued the government's use of northern historic sites as statements of Canadian Arctic sovereignty and the "logical" northern boundaries of the country.

The Laurentian thesis clearly framed how nation-building contributed to Canada's national identity. The interests of the center of this national history paradigm, the St. Lawrence Valley, were thus well represented in national commemorations. In contrast, the North was perceived only as a place subject to the interests of the core. To the middle of the 20th century, it was the Laurentian thesis and the imperatives of Dominion government interest that shaped the commemoration of northern history. The historic sites program was thus utilized exclusively to explain the prominence and importance of the South, that is, it was used to give power to the South and, because no northern perspective was addressed, to make the North powerless. And even after the mid-1950s, when more prominence was given to northern sites, it was to expand the South's importance, not to recognize the North's.

The management of the national

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Table 1. National commemoration in Canada's North, 1920-1955.

Date	Commemoration	Commemorative Intent
1920	Fort Churchill	Built by Samuel Hearne, 1763; reached by rail in 1929
1920	Prince of Wales Fort	18th-century stone fur trade fort on Hudson Bay
1923	Explorations of Mackenzie	Discovered Mackenzie River (1789); reached Pacific overland
1926	Yukon Gold Discovery / Claim	Gold reported in 1840s, expanded in 1870s, rush in 1897-1898
1929	Collins Overland Telegraph	Intended to link Europe and America via Russia, abandoned in 1867
1930	Parry's Rock Wintering Site	Wintering site of William Parry's expedition of the Northwest Passage, 1819
1932	Norway House	Major 19th-century Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) post
1933	Methye Portage	Only practical link from east to Athabasca region from 1778 to 1820
1936	York Factory	HBC principal fur trade depot from 1684 to 1870s
1936	Hearne, Samuel (1745-1792)	Explorer, Coppermine River; governor, Fort Prince of Wales
1937	Dawson, Dr. George Mercer (1849-1901)	Director of the Geological Survey of Canada
1937	Simpson, Thomas (1808-1840)	Arctic explorer, charted the western Arctic coast
1938	Belcher, Sir Edward (1799-1877)	Canadian-born naval officer and surveyor; led Franklin search
1938	Steele, Sir Samuel (1849-1919)	Soldier; superintendent of the North West Mounted Police (1885-1903)
1943	First eastward Northwest Passage	Arctic voyage of the "St. Roch," Vancouver to Sydney, 1940-1942
1945	Franklin, Sir John (1786-1847)	Explorer, charted Arctic coast; lost in 1845
1948	Morice, Adrien-Gabriel, O.M.I. (1859-1938)	Oblate Missionary, northern British Columbia, Athapaskan dictionary
1948	Ross, James Hamilton (1856-1932)	Member, North-West Council; Commissioner of the Yukon
1948	Fort St. James	1806 fur trade post founded by Simon Fraser
1951	Pond, Peter (1740-1807)	Explorer and fur trader, one of the founders of the North West Company
1953	Fort Reliance	Oldest continuously operating HBC post, 1833
1953	Fidler, Peter (1769-1822)	HBC trader on the Saskatchewan and Churchill Rivers
1954	Alaska Highway 1	Joint U.S.-Canada defense project 1941-1943, Dawson Creek to Fairbanks
1954	Alaska Highway	Joint U.S.-Canada defense project 1941-1943, Dawson Creek to Fairbanks
1954	Ile-a-la-Crosse	HBC fur trade site

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commemoration program was vested in the Department of the Interior. It was a natural fit—the commemoration program existed to describe what Canada was and should become, and the department existed to alienate Crown lands and resources so that Canada could become what it was supposed to be: an economic powerhouse of North America. Not surprisingly, the national commemoration program was often used to forward departmental objectives.

From the late 1940s, there were significant changes in Canadian social and economic development policies that affected northern aboriginal peoples. The North continued to be perceived as an area without a past, an area whose only significance was as part of Canada's distinct and independent identity. As the fifties boomed, the North was increasingly seen as the country's future. The stunning victory of John Diefenbaker's Conservatives in 1958 was built partially upon his promotion of a "northern vision" for Canada. Gordon Robertson, Deputy Minister of Northern Affairs and Natural Resources, concluded a presentation in 1960: "We own the north.... It belongs to us. Canadians for this reason, must look to the north to see what it is good for, to see how to use it" (Robertson 1960, 362). In 1966, Prime Minister Lester Pearson voiced similar sentiments when he declared that "the joining of [the departments of] Indian Affairs and Northern Development is a national step which cannot but strengthen both the well being of Canada's indigenous peoples and the cause of northern expansion and

development" (quoted in Lothian 1976, 23). Thus the well-being of northern aboriginal people was inextricably linked to the desired economic development of the North by southern interests.

In addition to this economic development vision, there was also a more active state role in daily life. The provision of such social interventions as expanded educational infrastructure, old-age pensions, Medicare, and family allowance (a cash payment made monthly to mothers to ensure that each child had access to good food and clothing) effectively redefined what it meant to be a Canadian in the 1950s. The new Canadian vision of citizenship—to be a productive participant in an economically dynamic social democracy—was, like the earlier extension of southern Metropolitanism, simply another example of the cultural emasculation of northern aboriginal people. The universality of these services had unintended cultural consequences for aboriginal people. While the benefits to individuals were obvious, the new definition of citizenship undermined the specific cultural institutions and relationships that shaped the cultural identity of northern communities. The new programs established a tension between a universal model of morality and the defense of particular cultural values in the North (cf. Marshall 1978 and Fischer 1998 for parallel situations with the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec and American Peace Corps volunteers overseas, respectively). The lack of northern representation or consultation on issues of northern concern by state programs, including national

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commemoration, effectively denied the region anything beyond a supporting role in Canadian history. In fact, the commemorations were for the South.

This general perspective of the North as vehicle for southern interests was cogently reinforced in May 1963 with the release of the Baker Report (Baker 1963). After a two-year study, William Baker, a parks and recreation planner acting as consultant to Parks Canada, recommended an aggressive program of national park and historic site development in the North to meet the recreational needs of southern Canadians and to prod northern economic development. In his review of the draft report, the History Division chief for Parks Canada noted that "the primary objective of the Historic Sites Division is the commemoration of history. The weight of its work is thus directed to those parts of Canada which have been settled the longest. On this scale, the Division ranks the north last. Furthermore, because it places its primary emphasis on the commemoration of sites, events, buildings and people, rather than in the commemoration of ways of life as such, it has found little reason for taking much interest in the north" (Parks Canada 1963). There was no history in the North, and from the southern intellectual perspective, there were no aboriginal people there either.

Edward Said identifies this denial of history as a tool of an imperialist power seeking to gain control over and understand a foreign region. The creation of a past is to gain control over the present (Said 1978, 66, 108-109). Thus, by denying the North its histo-

ry, national commemoration helped create, and maintain, the Metropolitan vision of an empty land, one which noted the aboriginal presence only as a contrast to the strengths of the immigrant population and through its commemoration program regularized this state of affairs as the norm. Northern heritage, especially the heritage of aboriginal peoples, remained invisible. The social consequences of these attitudes would eventually lead to organized political protest and legal challenges to the Canadian state.

The Federal Commemoration of Northern Aboriginal History, 1956-1997

How have northern aboriginal peoples been nationally commemorated within this Metropolitan paradigm of "national history"? Has national commemoration actually contributed to the destruction of aboriginal culture through its power of defining what has meaning and what has not?

Northern aboriginal commemorations are fairly recent additions to the system. As we shall see, today, national historic sites in the North do not commemorate only newcomers. However, from the time of the first such commemoration in 1956 until about 1990, every one of the 20 northern aboriginal designations focused on the importance of northern indigenous peoples from a newcomer perspective (Table 2; Figure 1). An analysis of these early designations illustrates three general themes: culture contact, shared activity, and archaeological sites, each reflecting the structure of the Laurentian thesis.

The first commemoration noting aboriginal presence in the North was

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Table 2. National commemoration in Canada's North, 1956-1997.

Date	Commemoration	Original Commemorative Intent
1956	Discovery of Coppermine river (Hearne and Matonabbee)	culture contact
1969	Sea Horse Gully remains (Dorset and pre-Dorset remains)	archeology
1969	Inukshuk group of 100 at Enusko Point	archeology
1971	Kitwanga Fort	archeology
1972	Arctic Exploration	culture contact
1972	Herschel Island	culture contact
1976	Bering Yukon Refugium	archeology
1976	Eastern Arctic Whaling Industry	shared activity
1978	Bloody Falls (prehistoric fishing and hunting)	archeology
1978	Igloodik Island	archeology
1978	Kittigazuit	archeology
1978	Port Refuge	archeology
1978	Thule Migration	archeology
1981	Kitwanga Totem Poles	ethnographic
1981	Ipirvik and Taqulittuq (helped explorers)	culture contact
1981	Matonabbee (helped Hearne)	culture contact
1981	Peter Pitseolak	artist
1985	Blacklead Island Whaling	shared activity
1985	Kekerton Island Whaling	shared activity
1992	Hay River Mission Sites, Dene Missions	community
1994	Snookum Jim	culture contact
1995	Arviat and Qikiqtaaluk Inuit Summer Occupation Sites	community
1995	Fall Caribou Crossing Inuit Hunt Site	community
1996	Grizzly Bear Mountain and Scented Grass Hills	community
1996	Deline Fishery	community
1997	Nagwichoonyik	community

the 1956 designation of Samuel Hearne's discovery of the Coppermine River. The role of the Chipewyan chief, Matonabbee, in guiding Hearne and negotiating with other northern people for him, was noted. Matonabbee was subsequently given his own commemoration for this assistance to Hearne in 1981. The theme of aboriginal support for European visitors exploring the North was also noted in the 1976 Arctic exploration commemoration. Five years later, specific commemorations to honor the service of two Inuit couples to northern explorers were also made.

The shared or cooperative nature of cross-cultural northern resource exploitation was also identified in the 1976 and 1985 commemorations of eastern Arctic whaling. In all of these instances it is the support of indigenous peoples in the exploration of their homelands and the exploitation of northern natural resources by Euro-Canadians that is being commemorated. These kinds of commemorations, stretching between 1956 and 1985, define the North, making it a part of Canada.

Another set of designations in this period rises from the efforts to estab-

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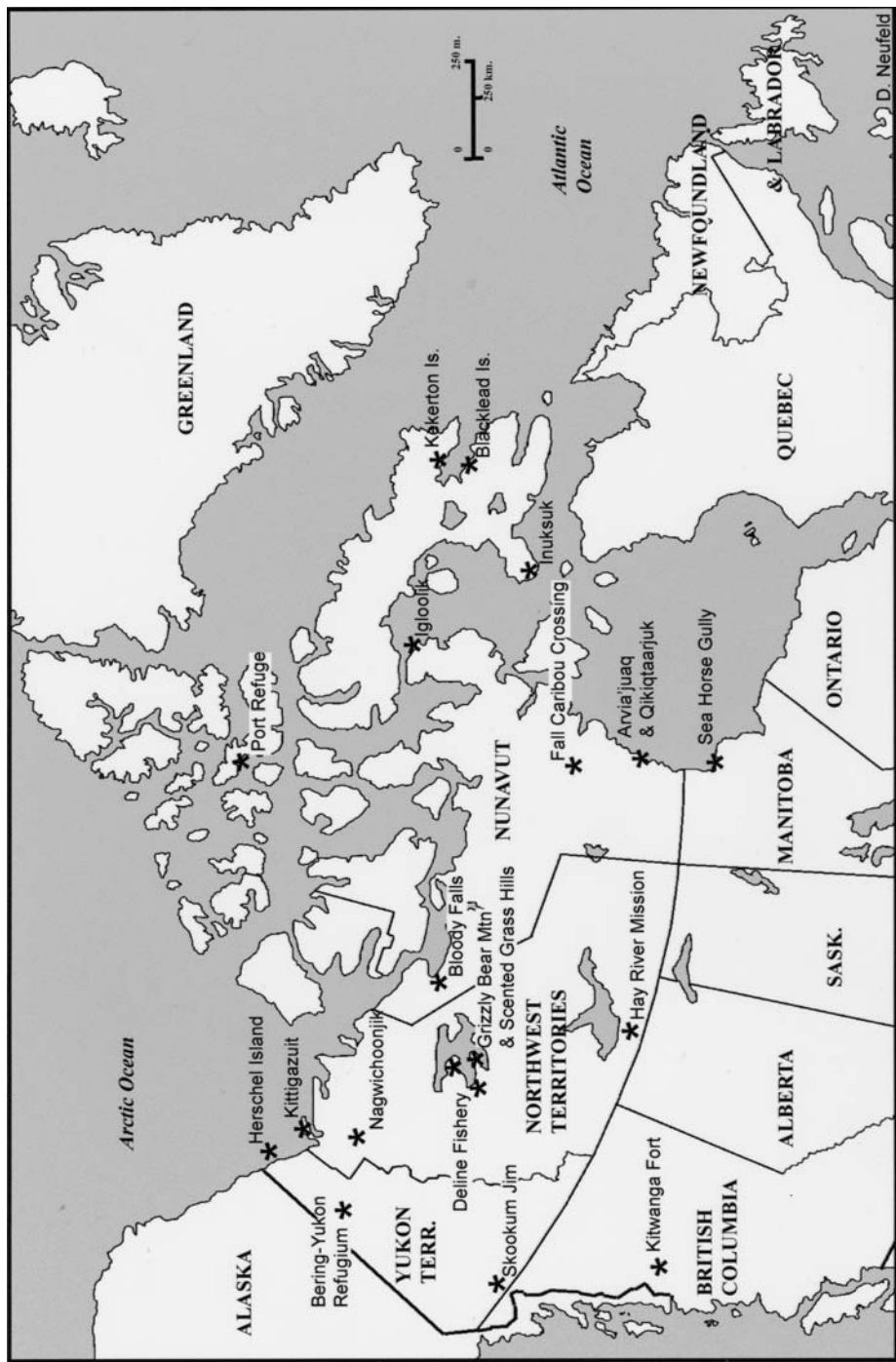


Figure 1. Northern aboriginal sites designated by the HSMBC, 1956-1997.

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lish a long history for Canada. Based upon the material culture of people from long ago, the national program's interest in archeological heritage stems from a 1961 report (HSMBC 1961) prepared by A.R.M. Lower, one of Innis' students of the staple industries. Lower concluded that most Indian sites were archeological in nature. He recommended that the program consider only Euro-Canadian contact with aboriginals as history and that "representative remains" of burials, the pre-historic economy, and sites related to community life, traditions, and religion be considered for commemoration.

Archeologists, following up on Lower's recommendations, obtained national designations of northern sites between 1969 and 1978, seeking to profile their research into the populating of the Canadian Arctic. The identification of Dorset and pre-Dorset remains near Churchill, Manitoba, was commemorated in 1969, while the roles of the Bering-Yukon Refugium and the Thule migrations in shaping Arctic populations were commemorated in the late 1970s. These designations publicized the importance of these places and things and the ideas of the archeologists forwarding them. Thus, these national historic designations in the North also helped create and sustain the Canada of the Laurentian thesis.

In all of these designations northern aboriginal people were seen either as subjects of newcomer actions, or dead and gone. There was no sense that aboriginal people had any effect upon the course of history, with their apparently timeless lifeways being

only on the receiving end of alterations wrought by contact and trade with newcomers. And there was no sense that the designations and the re-creation of their past would have any effect upon them. Without any understanding, newcomers perceived contemporary aboriginal people as hollow, stripped of religion or spiritual structure, and thus "close to anarchy and suicide." In the end they were cast as victims; unable to save themselves, it was only humane for church and government to step in and ensure that their cultural demise was painless (Said 1978, 271).

By themselves the national commemorations addressing northern aboriginal people did not create this situation or the attitudes leading to it, but they were an accurate reflection of and active participant in a broad social and cultural milieu that did create and accept this situation. The commemorations helped perpetuate stereotypes of the dying culture and reinforced the social and political structures developing and implementing those policies of Indian assimilation and destruction. This acceptance of how Canada became and was a country had significant consequences for aboriginal people. By establishing a broad understanding of our national community, it was possible to minimize any sense of individual responsibility or morality that might address this destruction of the discrete cultural identity of aboriginal peoples. There was a sense that the boundaries of the community did not include those under threat, that they could be safely ignored as they did not come under the protection of our care—or often even our conscious-

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ness (Brittain 2001).

Conclusion

There was a growing aboriginal restiveness through the 1960s. Aboriginal people, drawing upon the universal liberal principles of social justice, developed and forwarded their own agendas for cultural survival (Nagel 1996). In Canada, the Department of Indian Affairs' *White Paper* of 1969, with its bald statement of an assimilationist agenda, inspired Canadian First Nations (as the country's aboriginal people have come to be known) to organize political and legal challenges to this prevailing attitude. Over the course of the following three decades there has been a gradual, though often grudging, federal recognition of aboriginal rights and cultural existence as treaties have been revisited and land claims addressed. Aboriginal political activity, with its major judicial victories and substantive land claim agreements for First Nations, has begun to alter the broad Canadian understanding of aboriginal people and their place, and rights, within the national cultural mosaic. The First Nations success has begun to alter institutional agendas and the social expectation that accepted Indians as remnants of a dying culture.

National commemoration of aboriginal people has also undergone a significant change. Questions of the legitimacy and utility of a commemoration set within a hostile national historical paradigm have led to a rethinking of the purpose of designation. What social and cultural purposes would a commemoration serve for a First Nation? What can it offer in addition to the national recognition

already gained by aboriginal political and legal actions? Since the mid-1980s, the HSMBC has pondered the direction of the national designation program. Reflections on why First Nations were neither represented—nor especially interested in being represented—ultimately led the HSMBC in November 1986 to recommend that the aboriginal communities themselves be consulted to see what might be commemorated.

Northern aboriginal communities have always been conscious of the importance of their cultural heritage. Their struggles to preserve languages, to reintroduce traditional place names, and to control their relationship to their traditional lands are all evidence of the contribution of a firm cultural identity to community health and cultural survival. First Nations have a set of tools for cultural reproduction, and the national commemoration program can be interesting to First Nations only if it is a useful mechanism for achieving community objectives. As northern First Nation communities evolve to meet contemporary changes in self-government and education methods, they are also exploring the value of designations for their own purposes. With these cultural values foremost in mind, national historic sites need to deliver programs for community youth, support for elder involvement, and a calendar of activities to reach out to their own community. The community priority is the identification of cultural values and the passing on of identity to the young. Thus, federal recognition of these cultural values can be a community tool for the "creation" of northern aboriginal identities

on their own terms and for their own purposes. National commemoration also offers a platform to gain acknowledgment of their existence by outsiders and broad respect and support for their interests (Nagel 1996, 27-32). First Nations have seized the power of their past: they are creating their heritage and history to serve their purposes, not the purposes of a national government, nor the perceptions of a social majority.

Between 1990 and 2000 seven northern aboriginal national designations were made. Six of these were nominations from communities for elements of their past or their homelands that they felt deserved broader recognition for both community and external purposes. The Harvaqtuurmiut Inuit in Nunavut have marked out a traditional summer hunting camp, Fall Caribou Crossing, to highlight their close relationship with the caribou. In the Northwest Territories, the Sahtu Dene at Sahyoue (Grizzly Bear Mountain) and Edacho (Scented Grass Hills) and the Gwichya Gwich'in at Nagwichoonjik (Mackenzie River) have both identified large portions of their traditional cultural landscape where mythic heroes created the world, where they met their neighbors and other newcomers, and where their grandparents, parents, and, now, they and their children live a life of richness, spiritually and physically connected to their lands. The national designations of these places should be recognized as important

cultural gifts from the First Nations to all Canadians. And in the tradition of potlatch gift-giving, the acceptance of gifts entails the acceptance of obligation. Our obligation as a country is to remake our past so that no member is left out, so that no member bears the costs of carrying a national vision for others, so that we have a sense of ourselves as part of a common community, so that we expand the boundaries of our local community to include every element of the national community.

The national commemoration program, reflecting Metropolitan Canada's political and social interests, worked diligently to construct a national entity, defining and highlighting the icons of meaning, applying a universal principle of what it means to be Canadian, of Canada as being something other than a republican America. It created power, but in the process also created powerlessness. It built a community, but it did so by establishing rigid boundaries of history and clear criteria for belonging. This left out many parts of Canada and accepted a host of evils within our national community. As we have become more secure with our national identity, we are gradually becoming more like a real community, one in which "the obligation to assist others in danger or distress is a powerful imperative" (Brittain 2001). The national commemoration program continues to play an important role in this creation of a new and more inclusive Canadian national community.

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David Neufeld, Parks Canada, Western Canada Service Centre, #205 – 300
Main Street, Whitehorse, Yukon Y1A 2B5 Canada; Dave.Neufeld@pc.gc.ca

