

Time Travel

*Tourism and
the Rise of the Living History Museum in
Mid-Twentieth-Century Canada*

Alan Gordon



UBCPress · Vancouver · Toronto

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Gordon, Alan, author

Time travel : tourism and the rise of the living history museum in mid-twentieth-century Canada / Alan Gordon.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-3153-6 (hardback). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3155-0 (pdf). –

ISBN 978-0-7748-3156-7 (epub)

1. Historical museums – Canada – History – 20th century. 2. Tourism – Canada – History – 20th century. I. Title.

FC21.G67 2016

971.075

C2015-908765-1

C2015-908766-X

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens

Set in Galliard and New Baskerville by Artegraphica Design Co. Ltd.

Copy editor: Deborah Kerr

Cover designer: Martyn Schmall

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

www.ubcpress.ca

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Introduction

Living History Time Machines

ONTARIO ENDURED A COOL and rainy summer in 2009. Average temperatures were more than two degrees below normal, and persistent rain cast a damp pall on many summer plans. As outdoor tourist attractions, living history museums felt the pinch. But in the eastern part of the province, the rhetoric around one tourist attraction was surprisingly heated. Controversial changes to the historical program at Upper Canada Village, a pioneer village recreation near Morrisburg, on the St. Lawrence River some eighty kilometres south of Ottawa, outraged local museum curators, history buffs, and even the president of Ontario's public service union. They were incensed that a museum honouring Canada's settlement past was being turned over to crass commercialization and anachronistic historical messages. Some felt that the museum's direction was more than misguided – it was damaging to Canada's well-being.¹

That the presentation of history at a heritage tourism attraction ignited such passion should suggest that living history was alive and well in Ontario at the start of the twenty-first century. Nothing could be farther from the truth. In June, the *Ottawa Citizen* reported on the hard times facing Upper Canada Village, a reconstruction of a "typical" eastern Ontario community from about the time of Confederation. Its grass and gardens had been left to grow wild and unkempt. Staff had been fired, and its historic buildings, some rescued from the flooding of the St. Lawrence Seaway half a century earlier, were locked up and off-limits to visitors.² The village museum, once a centrepiece of provincial tourism promotion and host to hundreds of thousands of annual visitors, was nearly destitute. The St. Lawrence Parks Commission, the provincial agency responsible for Upper Canada Village, Fort Henry, two tourist parkways, and a number of recreational parks along the north bank of the St. Lawrence River, had responded to diminishing revenues and government pressure to become more self-sufficient by diversifying its mandate.

Perhaps the most controversial of the plans to restore Upper Canada Village to solvency involved hosting a mock medieval fair on the grounds of the nineteenth-century pioneer village. “Surely you joust,” the *Ottawa Citizen* mocked in a front-page headline. Dozens of placard-waving protesters turned up at the medieval fair to denounce the commercialization of a heritage site. They invoked concepts of authenticity as they deplored the anachronism. They denounced the museum’s management and bluntly questioned its commitment to preserving the heritage of Ontario’s pioneer past and of the lost villages whose 1950s flooding had prompted the construction of the museum. And they lamented that a once treasured historical site was “one step closer to being a theme park,” a third-rate Disneyland attraction.³

Picking up on the theme, letter writer Harry Needham from Kanata told the *Citizen* that historic sites were places for education, not entertainment:

Living history sites that are successful, such as King’s Landing in New Brunswick, the Fortress of Louisbourg in Nova Scotia, Black Creek Pioneer Village in Ontario, Old Sturbridge Village and Plimoth Plantation in Massachusetts and Sovereign Hill in Australia, are successful because they are very good at interpreting and exploiting the special characteristics of each. They do not try to be things they are not; they do not operate out of their historical contexts and they do not turn to tawdry and inappropriate “dog and pony shows.”⁴

As sincere as Needham and other protesters might have been, they themselves were in many ways misguided. Their view of living history museums was more idealistic than accurate.

In many ways, Upper Canada Village is a curious historic site. For one thing, it is fantasy, not history. It never existed in the past. Assembled from buildings, some threatened by the widening of the St. Lawrence for shipping and hydroelectric development and others from elsewhere, it was merely “representative” of Ontario’s nineteenth-century past. It was intended to be a living monument to Ontario’s pioneers, the relocation and restoration of various buildings that illustrated the evolution of a hypothetical St. Lawrence River community from its earliest days until the time of Confederation. Initially, the plan was to use only structures salvaged from the submerged lands. However, it was quickly recognized that such limits would leave many aspects of the past unrepresented, so the search for buildings was extended to other communities in eastern Ontario.⁵

The end result, according to museum staff, was a “typical St. Lawrence valley community” and “a living picture of life in the area between 1784 and 1867,” which offered visitors a “first-hand examination of the beginnings of this nation.”⁶ Yet, although it was intended as an accurate reconstruction of a past way of life, it remained a purely fictional village. Why, one might wonder, would people expect a fictional past to be accurate and authentic? And, from another perspective, what was the problem with replacing one fantasy version of the past with another, even if for just one day?

Tourism’s History

The difficulties Upper Canada Village faced in the early twenty-first century did not inspire this book, but they do encapsulate some of the themes and issues that it explores. Living history museums have always walked the fine line between entertainment and education. They were built for competing motives, sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory. Among the most powerful was the economic benefits they could deliver from increasing tourism and providing employment in economically depressed regions of the country. Indeed, although advocates such as Needham insisted that education must supersede entertainment, and despite the best efforts of staff to produce accurate, educational representations of the past, living history museums promoted themselves as commercial tourist attractions. Speaking about another Ontario museum, this time in the 1960s, one publicity agent cautioned that people were generally happy when governments spent money on living history museums for educational purposes but bristled at any semblance of commercial promotion. He nevertheless vigorously promoted Sainte-Marie among the Hurons across North America, exploiting its commercial potential wherever he could.⁷

The study of commercial tourism’s history has been a growing field since the end of the 1990s. It is now rapidly advancing and promoted by its own dedicated scholarly serial, the *Journal of Tourism History*, founded in 2009. Historians recognize in tourism a reflection of the social and political values of past societies. Travel promotions reveal to the world what local societies regard as their most attractive and marketable characteristics. Thus, early historians of tourism directed their attention to the work of promoters, boosters, and entrepreneurs, with a particular focus on the rise of “mass tourism.” For instance, James Buzard argued that promoters such as Thomas Cook and guidebook publishers such as

Baedeker and Murray seized on the growth of the British and European bourgeoisie as well as infrastructural improvements to peddle packaged experiences as “authentic” engagements with foreign places.⁸ Other pioneers of tourism history examined changing travel technologies and commercial operations to trace the expansion of tourism as an industry in the twentieth century.⁹ Much of this early work implied that an artificial barrier separated tourists from truly authentic experiences, a phenomenon that increased in scope during the twentieth century as mass tourism expanded the industry’s scale. Although more recent authors have shied away from such a simplistic characterization of tourists as ignorant interlopers, the distorting effect of the business of tourism on human understanding remains a constant theme in the literature.

Scholars have long cautioned against commercial tourism’s potential to misrepresent history.¹⁰ Commercial imperatives mandate, at least in the minds and ambitions of tourism promoters, a cleansing of the past. This cleansing is often derided as a Disneyfication of history, the creation of a cute cartoon version of life that simplifies highly complex social and political environments. The critique of this process is threefold. First, Disneyfication highlights only the positive elements of the past to make it more appealing. Second, it expunges the dark episodes of our history to make it palatable. And third, this distortion is by its very nature presentist – it judges the past by the values of the present. Rather than taking David Lowenthal’s advice to assess past societies on their own terms, much as one might understand a foreign culture, Disneyfication seeks confirmation of current values. Many historians find this notion problematic because it implies that the economic, political, and social conditions of the present are inevitable.

Recently, Ian McKay and Robin Bates have drilled into tourist promotions in mid-twentieth-century Nova Scotia and revealed how tourism reshaped provincial history into a new form of historical consciousness. Tourism/history, the term that McKay and Bates gave to this new consciousness, was a historically specific strategy of history writing. Characteristic of the ideological apparatus of the mid-twentieth century, it reordered the past, consciously catering to the anticipated expectations of real or imagined tourists. It remapped social reality in the province to conform to those conjured expectations, resulting in a sort of historical feedback. But more insidiously, it reshaped the landscape of the province by constructing tourist attractions to highlight the tourist trade’s historical

message. Thus, the tourist infrastructure, built to conform to the tourism industry's view of the past, became the empirical evidence of that past.

Tourism/history not only blurred the lines between historical fact and fantasy past, but it also served to muddy the distinctions drawn between insiders and outsiders. McKay and Bates congratulate scholars for recently correcting the old formulations in which international tourism was seen as trampling over local identity and imposing false, quaint cultural forms on hapless locals who were desperately seeking to eke out a living. Yet, for the most part, they reject the idea that consumer choice and cultural pluralism characterize tourism's effect on historical consciousness. Instead, they see the history made to serve tourism as another form of imposition. The provincial state and commercial promoters articulated a particular and selective vision of the past, and negotiated its place in both local identity and tourist expectations.¹¹

Promoters and innovators did not see their own work quite so cynically. They often believed in the educational benefits that their projects promised as they sought new ways to bring materials they cared about deeply to an ever more jaded and distracted consumer culture. As much as anyone else, they too lived, worked, and created in circumstances not entirely of their own making. Nevertheless, people have a tendency to imagine the world to suit themselves. Tourism promoters thus constructed an interpretation of the past that conformed to their own interests and their idealized version of history. But the histories they told, as Raphael Samuel once suggested, were Janus-faced: they were both a shrine to an idealized past and a beacon for a post-industrial economic future.¹² At the same time, they helped reshape how the past was presented to tourists and locals in a reformulation of the genre of travel writing.

By the 1820s, professional travel writers were developing the genre of the tourist guidebook. From the late eighteenth century through the nineteenth century, two main forms of travel literature captured the attention of literate Europeans and Americans: travelogues and guidebooks.¹³ Travelogues typically recorded in narrative form the experiences of individual travellers and were aimed at middle-class readers.¹⁴ Travel guides or guidebooks were more ephemeral publications produced for commercial gain. They offered practical information on local sites, attractions, and accommodations to help tourists navigate unknown places with confidence. By the late nineteenth century, the format had been popularized by the German publisher Karl Baedeker and in the United Kingdom

by John Murray III.¹⁵ Crucially, guidebooks offered tourists easily comprehensible and “transparent” information that did not “bewilder the reader/traveller or ... introduce the potential for a multiplicity of meanings.”¹⁶ Thus, they developed the simplified historical understanding that McKay and Bates observed in twentieth-century Nova Scotia.

In the twentieth century, and particularly after the Second World War, travel writing became a more mainstream pursuit. Once the preserve of personal narratives and boosterism, it began to merge with journalism. Newspapers and magazines began sending reporters to provide allegedly objective coverage of travel “news,” and their pages swelled with journalistic reviews and advice on destinations. A new, specialized genre of journalism developed and was nurtured in mainstream newspapers and an increasing number of niche magazines. In the 1930s, travel journalism was primarily the realm of business and economic reporting. Almost immediately after the Second World War, it began to merge with promotional writing in Canadian and American newspapers and magazines. For example, by the mid-1950s the *Montreal Gazette* was publishing a special winter travel section and had hired a travel editor.¹⁷ Like the travel columns and sections of newspapers, popular magazines began to cover tourist destinations. A Philadelphia publisher launched a glossy, illustrated magazine, *Holiday*, in the spring of 1946. *Holiday*’s publication was highly anticipated, and after two years its paid circulation had rocketed to over 800,000 subscribers.¹⁸ *Holiday* helped direct travel writing away from prescriptive guidebooks and toward reporting and news. All the while, it retained its underlying rationale of marketing and boosterism. Eventually, travel writing that dealt with tourist destinations wound its way into mainstream reporting. Often, the researchers at living history museums provided the information that figured in reporters’ accounts of their work, and they occasionally wrote the stories that appeared in general interest magazines and in newspaper travel sections. Thus, the past presented at living history museums became a promotional tool, used to entice tourists to visit the museum to learn about the past.

Studying Living History

Scholars have studied public representations of history as enshrined in monuments, parks, commemorative celebrations, and historic sites. In Canada, history museums have received less attention. Particular examples, such as Pierre Chasseur’s ephemeral museum in 1820s Quebec City, Montreal’s McCord Museum, and the New Brunswick Provincial

Museum, have been the focus of dedicated studies.¹⁹ However, because museums are representations of historical knowledge, the study of their histories presents special challenges. Museums create historical arguments through the positioning and describing of artifacts. As Michelle Hamilton contends, writing about museums thus draws upon the links between anthropology, history, and material culture. Material culture theory suggests that objects can have multiple purposes and meanings, depending on their contexts. In museum displays, they become artifacts. Thus, they are assigned significance, not so much by the cultures that produced them, but by the cultural values of the society that displays them.²⁰ In Western societies, objects as artifacts acquired a particular significance as evidence. Museums trained people to see scientifically by encouraging learning through the observation of artifacts; an object's materiality provided physical proof of the narratives constructed about it. Early Canadian curators, such as David Boyle and Janet Carnochan, spoke approvingly of the use of artifacts as teaching tools, claiming every object should tell a story.²¹ The living history museums of the mid-twentieth century took this proposition farther by recreating the environmental context of artifacts. Moreover, by demonstrating the use of artifacts in their period contexts, they appeared to give them life. Living history museums thus seemed more real and accurate than their traditional counterparts.

Living history museums can be defined as cultural institutions that teach historical lessons by recreating past environments. They are a form of open-air museum – multi-building depictions of “historical” places – that explicitly use interpreters in period costumes to demonstrate past ways of life. They have not attracted specific scholarly interest until fairly recently. Jay Anderson's 1984 book *Time Machines: The World of Living History* was probably the first to seriously examine them. Anderson offered a general overview of the evolution of living history from the 1890s in Sweden to 1960s and 1970s interpretations at American historic parks. However, Anderson's interest was in training public historians. His concern was to investigate and improve the practice of living history in American museums, an approach he more explicitly followed up in a subsequent edited collection. Although some contributors to the collection engaged with the cultural implications of museum displays, Anderson himself steered away from difficult or critical questions regarding the practice of living history, its ideological background, or its implications.²² A more critical approach appears in Tony Bennett's analysis of Beamish Village in the north of England, concluding that, no matter how people might “read

against the grain,” the museum offered a deeply conservative interpretation of the past.²³ Approaching the topic from the perspective of theatre studies, Scott Magelssen has dissected how the performance of history at living history sites constructs historical reality for contemporary visitors. By focusing on the minute details of what he calls the “superfluous,” museums engage in strategies for masking gaps in knowledge and rely on the authority that audiences vest in them as institutions to construct a three-dimensional “reality.”²⁴

Scholars who are interested in living history, such as these three, have tended to look at museums and museum visitors in the present, relying on site visits, oral testimony, and participant observation to create snapshots of historical interpretation. For instance, in a classic work on living history, Richard Handler and Eric Gable took an explicitly anthropological approach to the study of one open-air museum. They examined the ways in which public history is managed and how visitors interpret the history they see at Colonial Williamsburg.²⁵ This is not to say that authors have not rooted their scholarship in historical contexts. Warren Leon and Margaret Piatt surveyed the twentieth-century development of American living history museums in 1989. However, their real focus remained firmly on what were then present-day depictions of history, and they concluded by recommending best practices and improvements in historical interpretation.²⁶ Similarly, and more recently, Carla Corbin traces the development of local fairs to contextualize her examination of contemporary, temporary fairground villages. And Linda Young briefly discusses the connection between developments in social history in the 1960s and 1970s and the prevalence of pioneer village museums in Australia. However, she, like the others, concentrates on the museums today.²⁷ Canadian studies have shown the same tendency, such as Mary Tivy’s discussion of Ontario’s material pioneer past.²⁸ Terry MacLean’s comparative study of Skansen, Williamsburg, and Louisbourg examined these three museums in the 1990s, noting importantly that the present-day “validity of these museums is rooted in popular culture.”²⁹ Likewise, Karen Wall has followed the development of Fort Edmonton Park from its construction in the 1970s through the 1990s, but this material serves as a background for her discussion of twenty-first-century issues in representing history.³⁰ With her own eyes firmly on the present, Laura Peers narrowed her focus to representations of Aboriginal cultures at five living history museums. Her work contrasted the performance of aboriginality with popular culture expectations and made recommendations for constructing more inclusive

interpretation programs.³¹ More typically, a recent doctoral thesis has looked at the presentation of gender history at several Ontario museums, principally between 2003 and 2009.³² All of these studies show the value of investigating living history museums as subjects.

While there is much to learn from these studies of present-day living history museums, they do not represent the only approach to understanding the subject. Certainly, they have policy implications, and they address issues for museum managers and interpreters. They also offer educators platforms for instilling critical historical sensibilities in students, among other benefits. However, few have seen living history museums as artifacts of history themselves, windows on the cultures of the past that constructed them. This approach offers a different perspective on such museums, one that not only helps us to put them in historical context, but aids our understanding of their limitations in presenting history. For instance, the experimentation at Upper Canada Village was a reaction to a decline of interest in living history museums since the heyday of the 1970s. Indeed, according to the general manager of the St. Lawrence Parks Commission, visitor levels were less than half of what they had been in the 1970s.³³ As MacLean suggests, the popularity of living history in the 1960s and 1970s, and therefore the proliferation of these museums across the country, must have been rooted in the popular culture of those years. This book is an examination of that phenomenon.

Thus, the lines of critique offered by the historical perspective differ from those of anthropological or critical museum studies. Tracing historical interpretations as they changed over time allows us to understand how historical knowledge – and by implication knowledge in our own times – is rooted in political and cultural constructs. From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, such an insight is neither new nor original. The men and women who built Canada's living history museums in the 1960s and 1970s demonstrated their faith in the "truth" of history, but it would be too easy to echo the common criticism that heritage sites market only one version of history as truth, often one that bears only a faint resemblance to the record of events as revealed by scholars.³⁴ However, their belief that they could reconstruct an authentic historical environment underwrote their confidence in the power of living history to impart a greater historical understanding than anyone could get from the written word. In her discussion of Historyland, a Wisconsin hybrid of living history museum and theme park, Maura Troester asks why, if everyone knew that the past was no more, so many people believed that they could reconstruct

its material reality in post-war America. She concludes they were motivated by a quest for authenticity, which they believed could be built in the physical environment.³⁵ How people came to embrace these beliefs is one aspect of the rise of living history. How they chose to structure the historical environments they created is a second.

Addressing these issues involves unpacking people's expectations of authenticity. Living history museums are a form of heritage tourism that speak to people's expectations about how history is presented. What made these versions of the truth acceptable or even preferable for public consumption was the sense of authenticity they conveyed. Indeed, this subject has preoccupied scholars of heritage sites generally, and examinations of living history museums in particular. But deciding which aspects of a recreated past are the "authentic" ones and which are intrusions from other cultures or periods is a difficult task. The construction of a physical environment that recalls past material reality is one means by which living history attempts to cultivate a sense of authenticity. Among historical reenactors, the details of weaponry, uniforms, and positions on a battlefield are part of the experience of reliving a historic moment. Similarly, as Magelssen points out, living history museums attempt to immerse visitors in the world of the past by carefully recreating its banal, everyday details. By and large, historical recreations and living history sites may be seen as realistic depictions of the past, but realistic is not the same thing as authentic.³⁶

As Richard Handler and William Saxton write, "authenticity is a dominant value of living history," one connected to the existentialism of Martin Heidegger.³⁷ David Lowenthal argues that "heritage" and history are known in different ways. Heritage *feels* true, often in defiance of history, precisely because it confirms what people want to believe. It is this feeling of the past that transforms realistic representations into authentic ones. Commercialization, politicization, and inattention to detail can prevent the feeling from arising, but equally distracting is the failure to live up to preconceived notions of the past. It is a question not so much of whether an individual "truly" has an authentic experience, but rather what endows the experience with authenticity. In this understanding, authenticity is perhaps better grasped as a concept to be appreciated in its absence. It is much simpler to point to anachronisms, spuriousness, cultural imports, and fakes than to establish the organic belonging of certain aspects of the past. More succinctly, it is much easier to point out what does not fit the expected narrative of history than to specify what confirms it. It is an

emotional experience that is felt as much as seen or touched.³⁸ As Handler and Saxton note, existentialist philosophers understood authenticity as a form of becoming, focusing on the origins and intensity of one's emotional commitments. Moreover, the preoccupation with authenticity is a product of modern living: "The relationship of Heideggerian authenticity to living history lies in this: *Living historians share with other moderns the notion that an authentic life is a storied or emplotted life.* Their ideal of self-realization in an integrated, complete, and fully individuated life is precisely that which can be found in modern narratives, whether historical or fictional."³⁹ In other words, the history told at a living history museum felt authentic because it supplemented the construction and, more importantly, the affirmation of collective identities by contributing to the plotted narrative of the community's formation.

Even when living history museums deal with unpleasant aspects of the past, as they have recently begun to do, they help affirm the values of the present.⁴⁰ Some of the largest, and therefore first studied, examples presented a version of history that was stripped of strife, conflict, oppression, and exploitation. The most famous of these was Colonial Williamsburg, which ignored the massive population of African American slaves that lived there during the eighteenth century. As Thomas Schlereth famously put it, "it wasn't that simple." Yet, although Williamsburg has corrected the worst of its earlier omissions, it and other living history museums of the 1970s adhered to an American consensus historiography of the 1950s that encouraged the celebration of "American values" and functioned as shrines more than museums.⁴¹ Schlereth's critique, delivered in a post-civil-rights America, is suggestive of another feature of living history museums: they are constantly under pressure to adapt to changes in the predominant historiography. The past they depict may appear to be static, but its interpretation changes. Their representations of an "authentic" past, then, cannot be separated from the belief and knowledge systems of the culture that produced them and continues to use them.⁴² If we are to understand the creation of living history museums, and to unpack their place in the culture that created them, we must examine them as artifacts of history.

Negotiating Modernity

As Handler and Saxton's reference to Heidegger suggests, living history museums were products of a modern culture. The watchword of recent Canadian historiography has been modernity. Historians of the twentieth

and late nineteenth centuries have posited the modern era as a direct contrast to an earlier pre-modern social formation, one that modernity obliterated. In this dichotomy, modernity consists of social, economic, and cultural conditions of life that differ from those of the earlier period. In his study of the mid-twentieth century, Philip Massolin defines modernity as the “replacement of a Victorian value system with one more attuned to a secular and materialist society.”⁴³ Such a characterization would seem to suggest that the materiality of living history reconstructions of historical environments both made them popular and reinforced their claims on truth. Others have contended that industrial society’s ability to mass manufacture exact copies is a hallmark of modernity.⁴⁴ According to Massolin, modernity emerged from a process of modernization that subsumed the moral values of the past, especially Christian morality, beneath “attitudes and values consistent with an industrial, technological, and consumer society.”⁴⁵ But such a description of the conditions of modernity is too simplistic.

Modernity, for lack of a better word, goes beyond the loose association with secularization as described by Massolin, even as it encompasses it. Secularization is insufficient to encapsulate the meaning of modernity, yet it does suggest modernity’s replacement of faith in spirituality with a reliance on technology. It is the lived experience of mass society in which everyday people rely on abstract systems and technological expertise that are beyond their own comprehension, much as they had once relied on the certainties of religious doctrine to cope with an incomprehensible world. However, unlike slow-changing religious dogmas, technological change is rapid. For Zygmunt Bauman, modernity is characterized by its very embrace of change. It is a “liquid” concept, one that flows almost freely with the changes that it ushers in.⁴⁶ It was both “monstrous,” in its dehumanizing of social interaction, and optimistic, through the increased economic wealth and rationalism that accompanied it.⁴⁷ Modernity, then, whatever else it may encompass, involves a deceptive experience of change.

This ambivalence surrounding the process of change draws modernity into the discussion of living history museums. Modernity’s unremitting change was the very thing that called into question the authenticity of life under its own conditions. Modernity’s liquid promise of change and progress seemed to accelerate in the mid-twentieth century, especially after the Second World War. The economic catastrophe of the Great Depression and the horrors of global warfare were compounded by social

and technological changes. People contended with the optimism of the space race alongside the anxieties of the Cold War and its threat of nuclear annihilation. As prosperity returned to North America following the war, consumer culture penetrated farther and farther into family life. Shopping and the acquisition of material goods for desire rather than need became part of North American culture. However, living under the conditions of mass consumer society distanced people from one another and removed a pre-modern, face-to-face community of the past, all the while connecting them in an unseen web of abstract systems. At the same time, this consumer behaviour commodified culture, providing choices for consumers but depriving them of intrinsic value. Modernity thus represented a double challenge to the authenticity that living history museums tried to convey. On the one hand, the process of modernity challenged the authenticity of everyday experience. Modern progress ploughed across the traditional social formations and landscapes of Victorian Canada. As new skyscrapers raced to the skies and new roadways spread across the countryside, many people felt a profound sense of loss. This was the sentiment that drove Henry Ford to rescue his own boyhood home and then to expand his mission to the salvation of a disappearing America. On the other hand, the sundering and segmenting of the modern consumer market meant that the past had to compete for the leisure attention of the public, thus diminishing its power to reach consumers' consciousness and inform their identities.

The great irony of the mid-century rise of living history museums was that their attempt to preserve the lost past for future generations relied utterly on the technology and systems of modernity to recreate it and on the modern tourist industry to sustain it. Recreating the environment of the past was a thoroughly modern proposition. Complex planning and research were required to pull together multiple elements of past material reality and manufacture it anew. Historical programming required sophisticated research plans and systems. Perhaps most symbolically, many museums embarked on the relocation of authentically historical buildings to reinforce in material form their historical accuracy. Yet, moving a historic house from one location to another involved the careful cataloguing of architectural features, massive industrial equipment to lift and transport the structure, co-ordinated control of roadways and traffic, often to the extent of temporarily removing other modern infrastructure such as overhead wiring, and the guidance of highly trained specialists to re-assemble the building and return it to its original state.

Moreover, tourism and the pursuit of tourists played a crucial role in shaping the historical messages of living history museums. The market for historical depictions offered North Americans a range of choices for how they might consume the past. Living history museums struggled to differentiate the “authentic” histories they told from the fantasy or Disneyfied histories that were available at theme parks, on television, and at the movies. One way of approaching this was through an emphasis on the authentic sensory experience. Visiting a living history museum was more than simply observing the past. As more than one museum planner proposed, entering the recreated material environment of the past, populated by people dressed in period costume and performing obsolete chores and tasks, was almost a form of time travel.

Plotting Forward

Time Travel investigates the development of Canada’s living history museums from the 1930s to about the end of the 1970s. By the end of the 1970s, living history museums had become entrenched in Canada’s tourist landscape, and the living history approach was widely accepted, applauded for its ability to break down barriers between museum visitors and historical education. However, the end of the decade also marked the beginning of the movement’s decline. In the 1980s, governments began cutting their support for cultural programs, and the interpretive programs of the museums faced growing criticism for their claims on historical truth and authority. As museum work began to adapt to new cultural contexts in the 1980s, living history lost its prominence and its sense of innovation. New trends propelled historians and museologists in new directions. *Time Travel* does not pass judgment on those developments; it leaves the decline of living history museums for another study. It is not intended to demean the quality of the historical and archaeological research that the museums conducted, but rather to see them as the products of their own times and to trace the influence of Canadian culture on the generation of historical knowledge. The book is national in scope, examining museums from the Atlantic to the Pacific, but it is not an exhaustive survey. Instead, *Time Travel* uses selected museums to discuss their place in the construction of Canadian identity and their position in Canada’s culture in the mid-twentieth century.

The book is laid out in three major parts: Foundations, Structures, and Connections. Foundations explores the origin of living history, connecting

it to developments in museum culture and to the expansion of mass tourism. Chapter 1, *History on Display*, explores the emergence of museums in the nineteenth century and demonstrates the centrality of artifacts to historical understanding, as communicated in natural history museums. The chapter links the development of ethnology and anthropology to an expanded understanding of natural history that brought material displays of human history into museum exhibitions. Lastly, the chapter connects these developments to the growth of historic house museums as settings for the communication of historical information. Chapter 2, *The Foundations of Living History in Canada*, traces Canadians' interest in preserving and rebuilding historic sites and structures. The chapter opens with a discussion of the early preservation of Fort York in Toronto and moves on to the notion of preserving historic sites as a sacred trust, especially at Louisbourg. The chapter reveals how governments became involved in this sacred trust during the interwar years and began to think of coupling historic places with tourist attractions. It concludes with the 1930s reconstruction projects at Fort Henry and Port Royal, which initiated the living history movement. Chapter 3, *Tourism and History*, explains the importance of tourism to the post-war economy and how various levels of government became increasingly involved in its promotion. The chapter pays particular attention to the use of history to mark a distinctive brand for Canada and its provinces, especially as tourism became increasingly international in scope during the 1960s and 1970s.

Part 2: *Structures* depicts the development of living history museums by looking at a number of key case studies. Chapter 4, *Pioneer Days*, traces the development of the pioneer village model of museum, especially in Ontario. It connects these museums to a post-war "pioneer ethos" that celebrated the first (European) settlers of the country. It links this ethos to the conservation movement and scientific water management that was emblematic of provincial conservation authorities, where many pioneer village museums were located. It also traces the increasing professionalization of museum staff in the 1960s as governments took over the initiatives of local historians and volunteers. Chapter 5, *A Sense of the Past*, examines the efforts of museums to convey a message about history. It discusses the types of displays and interpretation programs that museums offered to uncover an overall message about what the pioneer past was like. Using evidence from school field trips and educational programs, the chapter reveals how museums helped shape the historical consciousness of young

Canadians. Chapter 6, *Louisbourg and the Quest for Authenticity*, uses the case study of the Fortress of Louisbourg to examine efforts to construct an authentic reproduction of past material and cultural reality. Louisbourg was the most expensive and best researched of all living history museums, but it could not escape the conundrum of its own artificiality. Admittedly, the story of the Louisbourg reconstruction is vast and complex, and could easily occupy several books on its own. This study focuses on how the people who built it pursued the concept of authenticity. Whatever their successes and failures, evidence suggests that their work was enormously popular and that it helped shape public ideas about what a living history museum should look like, and thus what people thought the past was like.

Part 3: *Connections* links the history on display at living history museums to the culture of post-war Canada. It implicitly argues that we can understand why interpretations at living history museums today reflect certain ideas by looking at how they reflected the cultures that constructed them in the 1960s and 1970s. Chapter 7, *Fur and Gold*, concentrates on province building in British Columbia and on how the living history model was adapted to differing settlement pasts at Barkerville and Fort Steele. The popularity of both sites shows how thoroughly the model was embedded in the public mind. Chapter 8, *The Great Tradition of Western Empire*, traces various ways in which the Laurentian thesis of Canadian national development, and in particular its popular association with the fur trade, was reflected at two museums. The contrast of Old Fort William and Fort Edmonton reveals how education and entertainment could both distort history. The chapter also explores Ontario's "historical systems plan" as an example of 1970s social science rationalization. Chapter 9, *The Spirit of B & B*, deals with efforts to foster a specific idea of national unity – bilingualism and biculturalism – at historic sites that emphasized the shared French-English past of the country. It also exposes the weakness of this approach through examining resistance to the spirit of bilingualism and biculturalism and the relative non-existence of living history in Quebec. Chapter 10, *People and Place*, looks at a related idea of national unity – multiculturalism – and explores how it came to insert itself into living history interpretations in the 1970s. The chapter also reveals how some cultural groups used living history museums to tell their own stories, bringing living history closer to the ecomuseum model then emerging in Europe. Chapter 11, *Genuine Indians*, looks specifically at how depictions of Aboriginal people at living history museums have changed over time. It concludes with a discussion of northern British Columbia's 'Ksan

Historical Village and its effect on inspiring an artistic revival among the Gitksan people. Thus, the chapter helps reconnect the discussion to the early days of ethnology and anthropology, especially through the person of Marius Barbeau.

Living history museums were thus a product of their times. Their histories reflect the Canada of the mid-twentieth century, a crucial period in the formation of its national identity. The middle years of the century saw Canadians attempt to forge a national historical consciousness that celebrated their unique past. However, living history museums did more than simply contribute to that developing consciousness. They themselves were another reorientation of the material world, one that reproduced the Canadian past in physical, three-dimensional form and breathed life into it through animation and interpretation. But what made these recreations authentic to Canadians was also a product of the times. How people came to understand the fantasy replicas of the past they built for themselves as authentic historical environments reflected their faith in themselves as builders. Their legacy is their persistence as material reminders built into Canada's tourism landscape.