

Notes and Communications

Preserving the Canadian Heritage: An Interdisciplinary Symposium

National Library Auditorium, Ottawa, October 7-8, 1975, under the auspices of the Royal Society of Canada in association with Heritage Canada.

Only a couple of speakers at the *Preserving the Canadian heritage* gathering touched this reporter's heart — where else indeed should such a subject find a niche? Of all the contributors, most splendidly idiosyncratic and suitably indignant, only Douglas Richardson and Sid Wise really laid matters effectively on the line. Neither adopted a hectoring or evangelical stance but their commitment and understanding came through with perfect clarity. Both seemed to stand on the assumption that by now we know what to preserve, an acceptable premise given the assembled expertise, but we have not yet found wholly effective ways of doing it. Plainly a captive audience of the converted lay before the speakers though it is good to report that only a handful performed on the platform of conventional wisdom. Here indeed was a fine opportunity to register outrage and declare the future — to escalate the symposium beyond its prosaic title and royal deadline.

Richardson, elegant and urbane, fired the first pointed arrow. With a few minutes of cleverly presented and vividly explicit slides stitched together with the crispest text to be delivered at the meeting, he was able to persuade dramatically how devastating it could be to lose a Mennonite dwelling or a city street-scape. Heritage needed no arid definitions during his delivery — the eye made all the necessary cerebral connections. Equally Wise, bereft of prepared address and needing no visual assistance, skilfully deepened the feelings of continuity and wealth of human spirit agitated by Richardson's scenes. Using experience at Louisbourg and with the Ontario Heritage Foundation, Wise reflected on man's perception of historical reality and offered his listeners more hope for the reality of heritage conservation than did the well-meaning flourish of mandarin Bob Phillips or say the bustling good-humour of engineer Robert Leggatt. Moreover the archivist, in high dudgeon at his initial exclusion from such interdisciplinary vibrations, could sigh with some satisfaction at the tapestry of silks so sensibly and expertly woven by Wise.

Sadly, the published proceedings of this two day Ottawa classic will not easily reveal the impact of the Richardson/Wise deliveries. Nor indeed will it do justice to the imperial and ascetic tones of Sir John Pope-Hennessy's opening address, an aesthete's paradise but nonetheless pertinent in principle. He rightly pointed up the importance of industrial archaeology to show the separate roots of curiosity and culture, sketched-in the nature of the 'no man's land' between past and present and emphasised the need to prosecute a feel of what is of value rather than a rationalisation. The printed word will reveal the literary assault made by Northrop Frye upon Canadian contempt for her natural resources — the overriding crassness of technology from the first ruts of settlement which has caused us to withdraw from nature. Frye lamented what he called the "triumph of Descartes" which has produced an indifference for human perspectives — a sort of "proportion pollution". He sharply called for a less revolutionary, less desperate state of mind and mourned a land of ghostless ruins. Later, Alex Colville in a softer overture asked Canadians simply to "know, love and remember". Respond, he urged, to forms which have an integral life longer than our own and do not be so blind as to overlook that decay and supercession are in the nature of things. Together the aesthete, the writer and the artist presented a felicity of thought which requires no apologia.

Architects, historians, scientists, writers, administrators, a diplomat, the lieutenant governor of Alberta and the Dominion Archivist each added their particular responsibility towards preserving the Canadian heritage. General discussion was virtually eclipsed by lack of time though one enterprising archivist venturing bravely on home ground asked why tape-recording of the symposium had been denied the Public Archives of Canada. Without doubt an elitism prevailed and one wondered how effective or how desirable such indulgence would have been outside the hallows of the Royal Society and federal environs. A scathing developer, a dole-ridden worker, a fat city-father would have little profitless time for such pleasant meanderings. And perhaps rightly so; let us not have such gatherings as substitutes for effective action. Bob Phillips, Director of Heritage Canada, made a strong plea for partnership between government and private sectors in planning, financing and legislating heritage programmes. The river and nature conservancy authorities of Ontario are a fine example of the success of such joint action.

Action of course was not the object of the symposium. At the end one was only conscious of statements — all significant to a degree, all related, some moving, some pedestrian. Heritage must clearly be more than the sum of its parts but at least it was helpful to have articulated some of the parts.

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