

Founding Fathers: The Celebration of Champlain and Laval in the Streets of Quebec, 1878-1908. RONALD RUDIN. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. 290 p. ISBN 0-8020-3645-7.

Archivists have engaged for the past decade with questions of memory, exploring remembering and forgetting. They have probed the politics of what is documented, what is preserved, and what is destroyed as interested actors purposively construct a narrative of the past. They have underscored that the record is not innocent: it is a mediated product of a series of decisions, willfully and purposively created, preserved, and made accessible. They have reflected on their authorship of the archival record. And they have affirmed that archives-making is memory-making.

Historians have likewise engaged with the politics of memory. A major field of their recent interest has been the construction of public memory around commemoration: the manner in which depictions of the past have been purposely invented to serve specific ends in conveying carefully elaborated messages to a public. Historians have also addressed (with far less success) the manner in which commemorative acts were experienced by people. The history of commemoration has focussed on the activities of elites.

Internationally, the historical literature has pointed to the disintegration of traditional society and elites' response to the problem of rule in rapidly industrializing and urbanizing societies as driving an upsurge in commemorative acts over the period from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. Elites aimed to stabilize modernizing society by shaping a shared vision of a common past through the invention of unifying myths and respectable traditions.¹ This commemorative flurry has drawn the interest of Canadian historians. In addition to Rudin's book, noteworthy publications such as H.V. Nelles' *The Art of Nation-Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec's Tercentenary* (reviewed in *Archivaria* 50) and Alan Gordon's *Making Public Pasts: The Contested Terrain of Montreal's Public Monuments, 1891-1930* have appeared recently.

In *Founding Fathers*, Rudin deconstructs four events celebrating the memory of Laval, the first Bishop of Quebec, and Champlain, its European "founder," which took place in Quebec City from 1878 to 1908. The first was the rediscovery of Laval's remains in 1877 and the commemorative actions surrounding his reburial in 1878. The second and third events were the building of monuments to Champlain in 1898 and Laval in 1908. The final event was the tercentenary of the founding of Quebec City, a celebration which drew perhaps 150,000 visitors to a city of 70,000 over the last two weeks of July

¹ Pathbreaking publications have included E.J. Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983); and Pierre Nora's multi-volume *Lieux de mémoire* (Paris, 1984-92).

1908. Each event is detailed to highlight its original conception and the negotiations and struggles leading to its realization. Informing all these events, Rudin argues, were contemporary preoccupations with British imperialism, Ultramontanism, relations with France (coloured in turn by the place of the Church in the anti-clerical Third Republic), and relations between French- and English-speakers in Canada.

The decision to celebrate the re-interment of Laval was closely associated with the campaign to gain his canonization. Drawing heavily on traditional "language" associated with the annual Corpus Christi procession, including triumphal arches and *repositoires* (temporary altars), the event was carefully choreographed: the participants, the order in which they marched, and the route they followed. The event was replete with messages embedded in the colour of ribbons, and in the design of the cushions, garlands, and crowns adorning Laval's remains. Dominated by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, discord among the organizers of this event was muted.

By contrast, the project to erect a monument to Champlain prompted sharp debate. In the view of the largely English-speaking Literary and Historical Society of Quebec (whose 1871 petition is credited with prompting the establishment of a Canadian national archives), Champlain warranted a statue because he was "a discoverer, a geographer, an undaunted leader, a man of letters, a Christian gentleman, the founder and first Governor of Quebec." The call was taken up by the *Société St-Jean-Baptiste de Québec*, which argued for a Champlain monument in 1890 as "an affirmation by French Canadians of 'their faith and their patriotism'" (pp. 59-60). On the one hand, Champlain was the founder of a Canadian nation encompassing both French- and English-speakers. On the other, he was a French Catholic hero. Ultimately, the winning design depicted Champlain as a secular figure, and a representative of France. Three allegorical figures adorned the base of the statue: a male figure represented Navigation while two women represented Quebec City and Fame. Just as the principal and allegorical statues were negotiated, so were the inscriptions. Although the responsible committee proposed text in Latin (with its Roman Catholic associations), the final text was inscribed in French and English with only muted references to catholicism.

Similar debates informed efforts initiated a decade later to erect a statue to the first Bishop of New France. Who was Laval? A heavy-handed uncompromising zealot? A saint? An organizer of the government of New France? An educator? Originated by the *Société St-Jean-Baptiste de Québec*, which was stymied in its efforts to raise adequate funds, control over the project was assumed by the leaders of the archdiocese. The statue was inaugurated as planned in 1908.

Tellingly, the unveiling of the statue to Laval was distinct from the events of the tercentenary one month later. Originally conceived by inhabitants of Quebec City to mark the three hundredth anniversary of Champlain's founding of

their community in 1608, the tercentenary's focus broadened. Taken up by Governor General Grey, the project shifted to include the purchase of the Plains of Abraham as a "symbol of Imperial unity" (p. 169). Grey also planned to construct an enormous "Goddess of Peace" which was to be taller than the Statue of Liberty. While ultimately he failed to get his statue, the tercentenary featured an enormous military review, an historical pageant, and a mass, all held on the Plains of Abraham, as well as parades through the streets of Quebec City and countless private receptions, dinners, and balls. The tercentenary also spawned the National Battlefields Commission with a mandate to acquire, restore, and maintain the Plains of Abraham as a national historic site. Underlying the event were themes of Imperial Unity, the Bonne Entente of French- and English-speakers in Canada and (in a subsidiary role) the French Catholic fact in Quebec City for three hundred years.

Rudin's concludes (somewhat abruptly) that the era of commemoration he describes failed to survive the watershed of the First World War. He argues that the elites lost faith both in their ability to mobilize and in the didactic effectiveness or the transformatory power of statues and pageantry. This reflected a broader postwar uncertainty of the usefulness of the past for the present. The past was to be emphasized for its differences, not for its continuing relevance.

At one level, the book succeeds well. Sensitive to the manufacture of memory, Rudin details the struggles surrounding what is remembered and how it is to be remembered. He demonstrates persuasively the extent to which commemorative acts were carefully staged to convey messages whose content was sharply contested. Clerical elites chose to parade the mortal remains of Laval through the streets of Quebec City to underscore a French Catholic faith. Statues (with their allegorical figures and inscriptions) were erected to pay tribute to great men "whose lives told stories that leaders felt needed to be communicated" (p. 233). Military parades aimed to testify to the power of the British Empire. Historical pageants were staged to highlight Bonne Entente sentiments.

At a second level, Rudin is less sure-footed. As Hans Booms observed, archives and history share a retrospective orientation: their subject is the past, to which our access is indirect – through the medium of the documentary record. The greatest weakness of the historical profession, Booms observed, has been that "historians have never considered it significant that, besides the workings of chance, the ways in which archivists design, mould, and shape the documentary record might also have an effect on the 'historical picture'."² While Rudin consulted archival repositories in Quebec City, Ottawa, Paris, Rome, Toronto and Washington, he shows little appreciation of archives and their making. The record is taken for granted. Its circumstances of creation,

2 See "Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources," *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987), p. 81.

subsequent manipulation, and (partial) preservation are not interrogated; nor is the very partial evidence on which his narrative is constructed analyzed. An unconscious irony underlies *Founding Fathers*. While it details the construction of a statue or pageant or procession, recognizing that the messages they are to communicate are contested, it fails to recognize that the document is as much a “site” of memory as the monument: the product of interests, often in conflict, and requiring our scrutiny as we construct narratives of the past.

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