

Exhibition Review

Virtual Exhibition *The Last Best West: Advertising for Immigrants to Western Canada, 1870–1930*. JEAN BRUCE. Canadian Museum of Civilization. <<http://www.civilization.ca/membrs/canhist/advertis/adindexe.html>>

The virtual exhibition, *The Last Best West*, is part of the Canadian Museum of Civilization's Virtual Exhibition Gallery. This initiative went on-line on 7 February 2000. It was developed by Jean Bruce, who was a curator with the museum and is the author of several books, including *The Last Best West* (1976), which dealt with pioneer life on the Canadian frontier. The stated purpose of this exhibition is to document "the Canadian government's role in advertising free land in *The Last Best West* to farmers and farm workers in Britain, the United States and Europe." Bruce relies on a variety of records produced by the government departments who were responsible for immigration from 1870 to 1930, as well as private companies who participated in the recruitment drive for immigrants. Some of the items that she uses include the following: posters, pamphlet covers, newspaper advertisements, atlases, maps, medallions, promotional photographs, and photographs of exhibitions, fairs, and immigrants who came to Canada. The records were gathered from the National Archives, the National Library, the Canadian Pacific Archives, and the Glenbow Archives. In addition, Bruce includes various artifacts from the Canadian Museum of Civilization to document the immigrant experience.

The exhibition begins with a poster that has a picture of two farmers driving a wagon with sheaves of wheat and the prairie landscape in the background. It was obviously used by the Canadian Government to promote emigration to the West. Within the frame is the title of the exhibition. With the click of a mouse, the user is transported to the introduction and the exhibition menu. The introduction provides a brief historical summary along with a preview as to what the exhibition will entail. Bruce organized the exhibition into six general sections or themes, which include: The Early Years (1870–97), Advertising in Britain (1900–1916), Advertising in Europe (1900–1920s), Presenting Newcomers to

Canada (1910–11), Advertising in the United States (1900–1920s), and Advertising in Britain (1920s). There is also a separate section entitled “Immigrant’s Possessions,” which captures images of artifacts owned by immigrants. There are icons created for each of these sections, along with separate icons which enable the user to examine the credits for the exhibition as well as further information and links on the immigration theme.

Unlike a regular exhibition, which typically is presented at a museum or archives and requires visitors to walk through various rooms and hallways to see all of the items on display, a virtual exhibition allows users to rely on a personal computer with a mouse to access and view the material within their homes or offices. In addition to being more convenient and less physically taxing than a real exhibition, a virtual exhibition should provide visitors with the facility and ease of quickly selecting the areas that appeal to them, swiftly bypassing any items that fail to attract their interest. Web exhibitions should therefore provide viewers with a more convenient, flexible, and faster method of examining the items on display.

Although these are some of the benefits of launching an exhibition on-line, not all virtual exhibitions live up to this ideal. This is certainly true of *The Last Best West*. The title page provides a warm welcome to visitors, but the remainder and bulk of the exhibition is fatally marred by flaws of structure and content. In the end, it will be argued, these flaws result in a product that not only fails to meet the stated goals of the exhibition but also overwhelms the user with images and text, and ultimately traps the user in a programme that offers very few methods of escape.

The primary problem that plagues this virtual exhibition is its failure to meet its primary objective of documenting the government’s advertising campaign to draw Americans and Europeans to Western Canada. Although Bruce relies on a plethora of advertising propaganda, the text provides more details about immigration policy in general than the advertisements that were designed to entice prospective immigrants to Canada. As a result, the reader is informed about John A. Macdonald and the construction of the Canadian National Railroad, Louis Riel, as well as the policies of Clifford Sifton and Frank Oliver. Rather than focussing exclusively on government propaganda, Bruce also includes posters and pamphlets that were developed by private companies such as the Canadian Pacific.

Bruce also side-tracks the viewer by including photographs of immigrants which were taken by John Woodruff and William James Topley, two renowned Canadian photographers who were commissioned by the Department of the Interior to document immigrants entering the country around the turn of the twentieth century. While these photographs richly document groups of immigrants as well as families who entered Canada, they were never used as a vehicle to recruit immigrants. Finally, Bruce includes a section in her exhibition entitled “Immigrant’s Possessions,” which serves as an adjunct to the exhibi-

tion, since it only tangentially relates to the theme of the exhibition. Within this area, Bruce has gathered together images of artifacts from the CMC that belonged to immigrants who came to Canada during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some of these items include steamer trunks, clothing, instruments, tools, and decorative objects. One gets the impression that Bruce may have been under some pressure by the Museum of Civilization to include some artifacts from their holdings in her exhibition. While these objects are fascinating relics that reveal interesting details about the immigrant experience, they bear no relevance to the theme of this exhibition.

In addition to straying from her chosen theme, Bruce is also guilty of bombarding visitors with far too much text and too many items for the viewer to digest. Rather than selecting a handful of items that are representative of the immigration programme's advertising campaign, she seems to include every item that was ever produced by both the government as well as the private companies that participated in the immigration recruitment drive. As a result, she includes over one hundred archival records, some of which are so similar to one another that they are redundant. For instance, Bruce includes photographs of exhibitions and fairs that were sponsored by the government and held abroad. Although a smattering of these items may have been interesting to examine, Bruce's decision to include five photographs of horse-pulled and motorized exhibition wagons is simply far more than any visitor needs to see. She also includes a great number of covers from the pamphlet *Canada West* and a dozen photographs of a few key politicians and senior bureaucrats. One assumes that the intent behind the inclusion of these pamphlets and photographs is to complement the text that relates to immigration policies at the time. The inclusion of so many of these images, however, makes it difficult for visitors to distinguish between the immigration records and the photographs that she used for reference purposes. In the end, Bruce's decision to incorporate all of these items serves to diminish the visibility, and hence the value, of those unique archival records that should have been highlighted in this exhibition. Finally, Bruce's inclusion of the section "Immigrant's Possessions" simply adds more objects to an exhibition that is already overloaded.

Although one may be able to forgive a curator for including "a few too many items" in an exhibition, Bruce commits the unpardonable sin of bombarding the viewer with far too much text. Most computer users understand that when it comes to computers and text, less is certainly more. Since most of us find it uncomfortable viewing a lengthy document on-line, it only makes sense that a virtual exhibition should highlight the image and include only as much text as is required to describe each item and provide the necessary context. This technique does not differ from a regular exhibition, since most curators rely on captions and brief descriptions to complement the records or artifacts on display. Within any good exhibition, therefore, the curator must let the items prevail, relying on text as window dressing. Bruce, however,

attempts to use this exhibition to tell the history of the immigration programme in Canada. When printing out the whole exhibition, I discovered that it consisted of approximately twenty to thirty pages of text alone. Although she could have relied on hypertext to build in more layers and hide some of the text, which would make the exhibition a little easier to digest, her incorporation of reams of text makes the exhibition difficult to follow and far too unwieldy for the Internet.

Another feature which contributes to the cumbersome and awkward nature of *The Last Best West* is the organizational scheme that Bruce adopts. Rather than incorporating a structure that examines the government's advertising methods in a chronological fashion, Bruce divides up her exhibition both chronologically and by location. She therefore attempts to link the policy, advertising methods, and advertisements to the location that the immigration programme was targeting to recruit immigrants. The only section within the main exhibition that does not relate to a location is the one entitled "Presenting Newcomers to Canada, 1910–1911." As mentioned earlier, this particular area does not relate to immigration advertisements at all but incorporates photographs of immigrants on their arrival in Canada. Each section is quite self-contained. It is therefore impossible to move freely from a page within one section to another without leaving that area entirely. There are therefore very few links, which results in very little freedom of movement. This is a significant drawback considering the types of opportunities that Web technology affords today in designing virtual exhibitions.

In addition to the limitations of the Web design, the drawback of adopting this kind of organizational scheme is that it is very time-consuming for viewers who are interested in examining the whole exhibition. I also found the exhibition extremely redundant, since Bruce includes an inordinate amount of text within each section to describe the politicians and policy makers of the day and how they approached advertising for each target country. Seeing as there was often some overlap between these countries in regards to the advertising strategies that were adopted by the Canadian government, the viewer feels like she has read all of this information before. Perhaps Bruce should have considered organizing her exhibition chronologically, thematically, or by medium. The last approach would have enabled her to highlight the different kinds of propaganda that were used by the government, such as the posters, pamphlets, and newspaper advertisements. In turn, it would have provided some insight into how each kind of propaganda was used and the type of response it solicited from the targeted audiences. In the end, Bruce's format not only fails to highlight the records and document how they were used, but it also ends up frustrating visitors who are interested in quickly browsing through the exhibition to examine the archival documents.

The final shortcoming of the exhibition is the absence of any references for the quotations that Bruce used, as well as the lack of full citations for the

archival records. Although curators seldom footnote the quotations that they include in their exhibitions, Bruce's initiative is more like a book than an exhibition. Since she relies on several lengthy statements from politicians and bureaucrats, she should cite the sources that she used. As for the graphic items, Bruce simply provides a reference in the form of the name of the institution and the negative number. Although full citations may seem unnecessary for this type of exercise, I certainly do not envy the reference archivists who will have to respond to questions from the public about the items that she used in the exhibition. While the photograph numbers that she included are extremely useful, researchers often want to order the textual records that provide additional context for these graphic images. If Bruce had some reservations about including full citations due to the fact that they might clutter the page, she could have simply relied on hypertext to build in another layer of information about the images.

A virtual exhibition focussing on immigration propaganda should hold great promise, based on the vibrant and interesting nature of the records as well as the possibilities that the Web provides to showcase these items. Unfortunately, Bruce's decisions on structure and content serve to overwhelm and confuse the visitor. If someone like myself, who is well versed in the history of immigration policy in Canada, became disoriented and confused when viewing *The Last Best West*, what are the chances that students in high school would be able to follow this type of display? By concentrating on a single theme and restricting her attention to twenty to thirty items, Bruce could have put together a splendid exhibition. Instead, *The Last Best West* fails to meet its stated objective, nor does it meet the standard expectations held by visitors to virtual exhibitions: to be exposed to an educative and entertaining presentation that draws visitors in and provides sufficient links to enable viewers to move freely throughout the exhibition.

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