

Article

"2013 Canadian Historical Association Presidential Address: On Local History and Local Historical Knowledge"

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2013 Canadian Historical Association Presidential Address: On Local History and Local Historical Knowledge

LYLE DICK

Abstract

This article considers two undervalued aspects of historical production — local history and local historical knowledge. It distinguishes between microhistory as carried out by professionals and local history as practised by vernacular historians, sometimes in collaboration with professionals. Relating his own experience with the genre of local history, the author highlights the importance of local historical knowledge as held and transmitted by community elders. His collaboration with the Elders of the Inuit community of Grise Fiord, Nunavut, is discussed as an illustration of its potential. The collaborative and dialogical character of local historical knowledge is further exemplified by folklorist Henry Glassie's work with a small Northern Irish community. Noting current challenges of changing demographics, uprootedness and diaspora, the article considers how emerging communities and minorities are recreating new opportunities for local historical knowledge in Canada's cities. Heeding the advice of senior Elders such as the late William Commanda of the Algonquin First Nation at Maniwaki, Quebec, the author asserts the importance of local historical knowledge to Canadians' identities as members of communities with a common history, strengthening connections between people, past and present, and positioning us to better face the future.

This address is dedicated to the memory of Professor Ed Rea, sixty-seventh President of the Canadian Historical Association — teacher, scholar, friend. I also want to acknowledge the contributions of Ron Frohwerk, Jean Barman, Valerie Korinek, Penny Bryden, and Ruth Sandwell, who kindly provided comments on earlier drafts, and my successor Dominique Marshall, whose thoughtful reflections in her introduction to this address were very helpful in framing the written

version. My partner Ron has assisted me in countless ways throughout my career and should be credited for whatever we have accomplished together in public and academic history.

In keeping with the CHA conference theme of Intersections and Edges I will try to address two aspects of the study of the past that have preoccupied me intermittently for more than 35 years — local history and local historical knowledge — the latter an epistemological concept bearing upon who holds knowledge of the past, and which forms of knowledge have value. The presentation distinguishes between microhistory as carried out by professionals and local history as practised by both vernacular authors and professionals. I will attempt to define local history, outline some methods I have found useful, and suggest where it might enhance the general practice of history while making a distinctive contribution in its own right. Over time, greater collaboration between professional historians and Canada's local communities offers the potential to help us transcend the boundaries that sometimes still persist between the national and the local, the professional and the vernacular.¹

While embraced to a greater degree than a generation ago, local history still occupies a subordinate place in scholarly historical production in Canada and elsewhere. Several outstanding monographs have been prepared, but local studies are often passed over in survey textbooks and articles on Canadian historiography. Community studies and other so-termed particularist histories gained some brief notoriety during the so-called “history wars” of the 1990s when their authors were chided for undermining the nation-state.² However, our task is not to shore up patriotism but rather to discover and illuminate the past as accurately and fully as possible in its manifold diversity. If smaller-scale studies are sometimes better suited to addressing certain historical problems, we should not be reluctant to take that route. This is often the case with aspects of history that have been overlooked, and for which we lack the basic data or community comparisons to enable sound generalizations.

This fact became apparent to me while researching several studies on male same-sex sexuality in various localities across Western Canada during the region's settlement era. The available evidence resides mostly in archived legal collections relating to criminal pros-

ecutions, for which the testimonies and contextual evidence enable insights into the distinctive time and space relations of interactions of men animated by same-sex desire during this critical period. Beyond the specific cases, the better documented examples illuminate the larger history of the communities, provinces, region, and the country.³ After examining more than 80 same-sex criminal court files from archives in the four western provinces and at Library and Archives Canada, I can report that every case was different, and the associated community dynamics within which these episodes occurred were also quite variable.⁴ Of course there were cross-regional social, demographic, and cultural commonalities, and aggregate data from across the West are also of value in interpreting the specific cases. However, to properly understand the dynamics of these examples, we need to try to grasp the attitudes, motivations, and actions of individual participants interacting in a specific place at a moment in time. For the history of sexuality, as for several other fields in history, the development of sound generalizations will require the documentation of enough local studies in sufficient detail to enable meaningful comparisons and the discernment of patterns.

If there is anything to be gleaned from comparative studies of ostensibly similar localities, it is that, while they often share common characteristics, no two communities are the same. Each is the product of distinctive time and space relations between and among individuals. Further, every individual's consciousness incorporates a unique set of time and space relations developed in dynamic interaction and dialogue with other people. Generalizations can become very tenuous when we stray very far from this central insight from the dialogical philosophy of the literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin.⁵ For me, the signpost in Resolute Bay, Nunavut is a fitting, tangible expression of local difference. It positions Resolute Bay geographically in relation to the North Pole, Tokyo, Moscow, Paris, Winnipeg, and Las Vegas, among other localities. No other community occupies exactly the same space or has the same history. Resolute Bay and all other communities are unique, and therefore worthy of historical study.

Much of the current professional production in local history is subsumed under the rubric of microhistory, which the Italian historians Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni have justified for two reasons:

On the one side, by moving on a reduced scale, it permits in many cases a reconstitution of ‘real life’ unthinkable in other kinds of historiography. On the other side, it proposes to investigate the invisible structures within which that lived experience is articulated.⁶

The investigation of “invisible” social and economic structures connecting the local to the general has been a particular strength of several microhistories of communities carried out across Canada. For example, in her monograph on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, Ruth Sandwell examined household structures in identifying important departures from the assumed commercial orientation of the agricultural economy.⁷ The importance of family structure to farm economies was also central in Royden Loewen’s studies of Manitoba’s Mennonite communities, which emphasized adaptive strategies by immigrant farmers seeking to retain religious and cultural difference.⁸ Gérard Bouchard’s classic treatment of Quebec’s Saguenay District included a comparative analysis of local family economies that placed its agricultural settlement into a continental context.⁹ Beatrice Craig’s *Backwoods Consumers and Homespun Capitalists* traced the development of local market cultures in a formative era of Atlantic Canada, illuminating the relationship between hinterlands and regional and global economies.¹⁰ These are just a few of the many excellent microhistories by professional historians that have increased our understanding of Canadian history on various levels. Each meets the criterion of Marc Bloch, co-founder of the French Annales School, that scholarly local histories should illuminate wider social and economic phenomena.¹¹

Achieving the other goal of microhistory identified by Ginzburg and Poni — the reconstitution of so-called “real life” — is a different but no less challenging proposition, especially when reconstructing the history of places for which the evidence substantially resides within living historical memory. Here, oral history will come into play if we desire an accurate or comprehensive representation of past human experience. Depending on the availability of individuals with local historical knowledge, oral history will be relevant to addressing a wide range of issues but especially the

reconstitution of real life, the repeatable everyday routines and activities at the heart of social history. For these kinds of projects, I prefer the term local history to microhistory as the local extends beyond academic archival research to direct engagement and dialogue with local residents within their own communities.

There are numerous definitions of local history available¹² but for this discussion I offer the following: local history is the study of individuals and groups interacting within a specific locality in the past, often with continuing and tangible connections to the present. The scale of what I term “local” varies considerably according to the context — it might encompass a village or rural community, an urban neighbourhood, or a cultural zone of human-environmental interaction. For local history, I prefer to work with small communities of people in recurrent interaction over an extended period. Typically, these are people who knew or at least were aware of one another, worked together or against each other but were nevertheless brought into regular contact by the structures and relationships of everyday life. The tracing of detailed intersections between people within a particular social and cultural environment is what gives local history its potential vitality and explanatory power.

Microhistories of communities could fall under the rubric of local history, but the latter term also comprises the work of local or vernacular historians not practising a scholarly discipline. While in some respects a branch of the discipline of history, I prefer to look at local history as a distinct genre in its own right. Sometimes its nearest counterparts are works of ethnography, folklore studies, or even literature. As documented in Malcolm Bradbury’s *The Atlas of Literature*, much of world literature, including notable Canadian novels, consists of stories set in particular localities, in which the detailed interplay between individual characters and specific environments is at the heart of the story.¹³ So it is with local history.

In principle, the very lack of breadth of local history should enable greater depth in historical treatment than studies of larger units. When commencing research on the history of Ellesmere Island in 1989, I recall a discussion over lunch with my friend the late Professor Irene Spry at the now-defunct cafeteria at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa. On hearing expressed doubts that I

would be able to research every single source bearing upon the topic, she asked: “How can you be sure that your conclusions are right if you haven’t looked at everything?” I took this admonition from a learned elder as sage advice and thereafter sought to make my research on High Arctic history entirely comprehensive. We can sometimes do that with local history while it is often not feasible in studies of larger units.

Practising local history also enables, and often obliges us to draw upon elders. The term Elder is usually associated with Aboriginal communities but it also seems an appropriate designation for senior members of other communities who sometimes assume a similar role in their own milieux. To acknowledge the distinctive role of Aboriginal Elders, I propose to capitalize the term while applying a lower case spelling for elders in other contexts. Over the last 35 years my approaches to history have benefited from the advice and generosity of many elders of academic and public history. I have also been lucky enough to encounter and learn from elders of local communities, some of whom will be discussed in this address.

My own approach to local history has changed over time through experience with the genre and interactions with people in communities. It seldom starts with the big picture and instead begins with research on a specific person, place, or artifact. While I have long been interested in theory, I try to avoid applying historical models, at least not before the late stages of a project, and then only with great caution. After defining a study spatially and temporally, and carrying out a review of the secondary literature, I shelve the historiography and try to forget about it pending extensive primary data gathering and development of provisional hypotheses as a guide to further data collection. This process is repeated again and again until heuristic possibilities emerge, are tested, rejected, or revised, eventually congealing into provisional explanations. It only ends when all conclusions closely fit the evidence and other possible interpretations have been found wanting. Often enough, this approach has permitted me not only to generate different answers but to change the basic questions of these studies. And if evidence-centred “thick description”¹⁴ and analysis at the local level indicates we should move in a different direction than current historiography or our own presup-

positions, then as professional historians I think we need to be prepared to do that.

Where feasible, it is also important to try to experience directly the physical environments of the places and historical actors we are writing about. I would endorse the advice offered by David Hackett Fischer in his 2011 CHA keynote address, when he encouraged us to “go there, do it, write about it.” Direct experience of historic places better equips us to grasp both the spatial and temporal dimensions of a locality in establishing what has changed, and what has more or less stayed the same.

In approaching local history, I have long been guided by an approach pioneered by Marc Bloch, which he termed “understanding the past by the present.” Bloch rejected the notion that historical change, even in the modern world, has been so sweeping that most historical structures and cultural traditions disappeared after one or two generations. Rather, forces of inertia have ensured the persistence of many anterior forms into the present. Rather than commence historical enquiries at a fixed point in the past and reconstructing history forward in time, Bloch instead proposed beginning with the most vibrant and tangible evidence of earlier eras persisting in the here and now, and tracing it backwards in time to access the earlier historical eras being studied.¹⁵ Bloch’s innovative approach had parallels in other such as geography, ethnography, and vernacular architecture studies, whose practitioners have made similar use of extant evidence of antecedent cultures surviving into the present to better understand the past.

My first significant engagement with the work of Bloch and the Annales School occurred during my first local history project in the late 1970s and early 1980s that eventually became the book *Farmers “Making Good.”*¹⁶ Much of this study was an archivally-based settlement, social, economic, and political study of the farming community of Abernethy surrounding the Motherwell Homestead National Historic Site in southeastern Saskatchewan. The archival research and especially tabulations of aggregate data and statistical modelling of this community’s history documented a local example of the origins of rural prairie inequality, the emergence of socio-economic classes, and patterns of cross-generational inequality in

Saskatchewan, among other issues of wider significance.

Yet there was something missing in the focus on quantitative data collection and measurement. While revealing of general economic trends, the statistics could not illuminate the material conditions of life, social interactions and relationships that make a community function. Accordingly I carried out an oral history with elders of the district, especially descendants of agricultural settlers still living in Abernethy or nearby communities, and who were knowledgeable about its history. Their detailed historical recollections, continuing presence and involvement in farm life and activities akin to their ancestors, enabled a much more complete and accurate reconstruction of work and daily life in the settlement era than would otherwise be feasible. Their local knowledge brought out the material conditions and interactions with people and the environment that historically defined much of prairie agricultural experience over successive generations. They had a deep understanding of agricultural processes and daily life of their own and earlier eras, demonstrating the practical value of Bloch's advice about understanding the past by the present. Only with the passage of time did I realize that this study could have gone farther than the collection and synthesis of oral history interviews to the inclusion of the informants' own voices and words in the text alongside my own as author.

A decade later I again found myself relying upon Marc Bloch's "prudently retrogressive" approach while researching the study that became the book *Muskox Land*, although it did not start out that way.¹⁷ My second large-scale local history project, it was initially intended to provide a context for interpreting the post-contact human history of for Ellesmere Island National Park Reserve, now Quttinirpaaq National Park of Canada, although my research obsessions carried it well beyond that mandate. The 1988 agreement to establish the park reserve established a basis for cooperation between Parks Canada and Grise Fiord, the only Inuit community on Ellesmere Island and Canada's most northerly permanent settlement. We planned an extensive oral history with its residents and also former members of the community who had returned to Quebec to include their experience in the larger history.

In November 1989 I travelled to Grise Fiord to explain the project, seek the community's input and approval, and to find local residents to help carry it out. I was notionally working with the theme of adaptation and developed an initial list of questions to address such issues as accommodations to modern technology in the first four decades following the establishment of Grise Fiord in the early 1950s. In the actual interviews, however, these questions proved tangential to the concerns of several Elders, especially those originally from northern Quebec who returned to their native community of Inukjuak in 1988. These individuals preferred to talk about the hardships of the relocation. The informants originally from Baffin Island who were still living in Grise Fiord discussed other topics, including the scarcity of game animals, the cost of gasoline, and the difficulties of hunting in such a challenging environment. It wasn't what I expected and didn't seem to fit in with the kind of narrative that seemed to be emerging from the archival research for this study. For a long time I was uncertain how to proceed and decided to shelve the project until a way forward could be found.

Coming back to the material a few years later, I started again almost from scratch, this time beginning with the oral histories we had assembled. Reconsidering the oral evidence dealing with the community's recent history helped me see the history of Grise Fiord and earlier High Arctic eras with fresh eyes and it also prompted revisiting the textual evidence and the larger study's themes. It helped me see that, even in the modern era, Inuit survival in the High Arctic owed more to the continuity of traditional knowledge and adaptive strategies developed over numerous generations than to externally-driven cultural change, such as the introduction of Western technology. Akin to Marc Bloch's retrogressive method, I belatedly understood how Grise Fiord's recent experience incorporated important elements of earlier High Arctic history, or in Braudellian terms, how the *longue durée* was embedded within the *moyen durée* of recent history.¹⁸ The local data showed the importance of adaptation and adaptability to human survival in a very challenging environment, a universal theme built up from the specific to the general, and from the present into the past.

In the end, the oral history evidence did not require scrapping the theme of adaptation and survival, but the local historical knowledge of the Elders suggested a different path to reconstructing High Arctic history. Rather than impose an interpretive synthesis, I opted to lay out the evidence and quote extensive passages from the Elders so that they would speak for themselves on important issues alongside the voice of the author. Sometimes local history obliges interpretive restraint. Having shared the evidence with readers, authors appropriately should encourage them to evaluate it and draw their own conclusions. If such an approach stops short of definitiveness, it permits the inclusion, if not the integration, of differing perspectives and interpretations and a richer set of viewpoints than thesis-driven models.

In May 2001 I travelled back to Resolute Bay and Grise Fiord, the High Arctic communities whose history was treated in the manuscript, to make presentations on the book's content to local residents. The presentations outlined the theme of 200 years of adaptation and survival in the High Arctic, including the more recent history beginning with the Inuit relocations of the 1950s. At the Resolute Bay meeting, Liza Ningiuk, who carried out several interviews for the oral history and was by then Mayor of Grise Fiord, stood and said to me in Inuktitut: "I believe every word you said is true." Several other residents of Grise Fiord have commented that they appreciated the respectful way that the book discussed the role of their elders, the fact that individuals were identified by name, their words quoted and their contributions credited in the book. I feel that it helped generate trust that subsequently enabled the ecologist Dr. Micheline Manseau and me to secure the support of Grise Fiord hunters and trappers for our Parks Canada Species at Risk project focussing on the Peary caribou, which also drew upon the traditional knowledge of members of the community.¹⁹

Among the people attending my presentation in Grise Fiord in 2001 was Liza Ningiuk's father, the late Abraham Pijamini, a seasoned hunter and respected Elder (Figure 1), who asserted his view that Inuit were able to survive in the High Arctic because of caching. He was referring to their need to hunt as many animals as possible when encountering game on the trail, and to cache the meat on the spot.



Figure 1: Abraham Pijamini, Grise Fiord, Nunavut, n.d.
Photo courtesy of Ms. Mimi Akeegok.

The reason caching was so important was that the biomass in the High Arctic is very limited relative to more southerly ecosystems, and animals tend to be few and far between. Operating far from their communities, Inuit hunters could not immediately transport back all the meat from the kill sites but caching enabled them to continue hunting, maximizing their efforts to ensure the community's survival.

I had included a section in the manuscript on caching but Pijamini's comment warranted a fuller treatment, and the text was duly revised. Later, an archaeological colleague advised me that the eminent anthropologist Lewis Binford arrived at much the same conclusion as Pijamini in two books on archaeological theory, based on his work with the Nunamiut of the Western Arctic. Binford hypothesized that by distributing their practice of caching to a range of sites in their areas of land use, arctic hunters mitigated the effects of possible damage to any single storage site.²⁰ I find it fascinating that Binford and Pijamini came to similar conclusions regarding critical adaptations enabling arctic survival. But where Binford's conclusions derived from ethnographic study and abstract reasoning, Pijamini's insight came from his life experience. It reminds us that there is more than one pathway to knowledge, and our understanding is only strengthened when different knowledge systems corroborate one another.

This brings me to the second of my concerns today — local historical knowledge. I will not be discussing Traditional or Local Ecological Knowledge (TEK or LEK), which have become common in bureaucratic circles.²¹ I prefer to listen instead to what vernacular historians themselves have said about local historical knowledge. Typically, they define it as an outgrowth of shared experience. When revising Donald Gunn's "History of the Red River Settlement" in 1912, his grandson George placed the elder Gunn's historical knowledge into the experiential contexts of his career in the fur trade and social and intellectual interactions with other elders.²² In *Stories of My People*, a collection of historical vignettes on Vancouver's Japanese Canadian community over its first century, Roy Ito similarly wrote that history "should be told from the inside, a history as seen and remembered by the people who have shared the experience."²³ For both Gunn and Ito, local historical knowledge is not generated solip-

sistically by individuals but flows instead from the common, intersubjective experience of the members of a community.

Reliance on experience alongside historical evidence has been challenged by some practitioners, most notably by Joan Wallach Scott in her 1991 article "The Evidence of Experience."²⁴ Martin Jay has further elaborated in his book *Songs of Experience* that experience is a complicated concept that has engaged numerous thinkers and definitive conclusions as to how to access and rely upon it continue to be elusive.²⁵ Yet, Scott acknowledges that we cannot dispense with experience, however problematic a concept it appears to be. Her article offers useful admonitions regarding the essentializing of experience but the sweeping critique of experiential knowledge seems excessive, especially if we are talking about the shared local knowledge elaborated by Donald Gunn, Roy Ito, and other elders. The evidence of experience can certainly be distorted by layers of subjectivity, and we are obliged to apply rules of verification to all forms of evidence. Further, oral, written, and indeed other sources should not be accorded a privileged status over other forms of evidence. But when it connects to material and intellectual interactions commonly experienced and independently corroborated by different members of a community, oral history as rooted in direct experience can contribute compelling historical knowledge.

Provisionally, I would define local historical knowledge as the shared understanding of the past produced by members of a locality in dialogical interaction in time and space. It springs from interconnections within a community in a specific cultural and natural environment. While abstract reasoning forms part of local knowledge, it is not usually oriented towards the abstract. It is knowledge put into action and applied in day-to-day living and problem solving. Its value for historiography can be greatly enhanced when outsiders with professional training and skills team up with local practitioners in collaborations drawing upon complementary but different strengths.

Throughout my career I have looked for ways to better connect history, a written abstraction, to the realities of past life. For me, an outstanding model has long been Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*,

the first major work to advance and extensively engage the diversity of historical time.²⁶ It is the quintessential example of macrohistory, taking the Mediterranean region of the sixteenth century as the world centre driving the global margins. Notwithstanding the many merits of this great work, I long felt we also needed an alternative model that might achieve the opposite, a history that, radiating out from the margins to the centre, and moving from the specific to the general, could inform macrohistory while respecting local difference.

Recently such a model unexpectedly turned up in the work of the American folklorist and material historian Henry Glassie. I first encountered Glassie's work when researching my first local history that became the book *Farmers "Making Good."*²⁷ His *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia* was then a vanguard work in the exciting new field of vernacular architecture studies illuminating American social and cultural history.²⁸ At the time I paid little attention to another of Glassie's books, a monumental local history of a small rural community in Northern Ireland called *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*, published in 1982.²⁹ Returning to it last year, I belatedly realized that this book, and its companion volume *The Stars of Ballymenone*, published a quarter century later in 2006, are the breakthrough texts I had long been seeking.³⁰ While it may not have received the attention of Braudel's *Mediterranean* among historians, Glassie's *Ballymenone* is its equal — a completely different yet comprehensive and utterly compelling approach to reconstructing human history from the ground up, with local knowledge at its centre.

Passing the Time in Ballymenone was the culmination of ten years' collaboration between its author and the elders of Ballymenone, a community riven by poverty and social conflict, yet amazingly rich in local culture and knowledge. Like much of Glassie's work, it is difficult to categorize. Part history, part ethnography, part folklore, it is steeped in the storytelling practices of a traditional community nevertheless seeking to navigate its way through changing times and the often turbulent history of the island in which it is situated.

If there is a hero in Glassie's book it is the group of men and women comprising the community's elders. They are, or were, the stars of Ballymenone, individuals whose talents functioned as the

glue holding the community together. These storytellers and musicians kept alive the spirits of their fellow citizens during the dark period of the 1970s and early 1980s, when exploding bombs were part of the social landscape. These extraordinary performers were not agents of escapism, but thoroughly engaged in local efforts to persist in the face of violence and sectarian strife. Every elder incorporated the knowledge of a mentor, in turn passing on what they knew to a designated successor. The chain of transmission encompassed centuries of struggle extending back to the invasions of Oliver Cromwell, the British appropriation of the island, and past conflicts with landlords to win back their land.³¹ Yet, the elders' keen powers of observation enabled them to find meaning also in the unremarkable practices of daily life, the manifold ways that Ballymenone's residents passed the time through work at day and stories at night.

Glassie's particular favourite is Hugh Nolan, the community's philosopher, historian, and sage. He quotes several of Nolan's stories in their entirety, revealing his remarkable grasp of historical process, and stature as an entertainer, educator, and poet. Nolan also has a gift for historical aphorism. In commenting on historical change, he observes cryptically: "Aye, the two things happen at the one time. Things get better. And they get worse."³² Only when you reflect on that seemingly innocuous statement do you realize how much knowledge is behind it. Rejecting the notion of patterns in history, Nolan observes simultaneous but different trajectories, that things are getting better and worse *at the same time*. The notion of concurrent progress and declension is at odds with historicist syntheses but seems a sophisticated approximation of the actual complexity of human events. Braudel discovered asynchronous time scales through the study of world civilizations at the macrohistorical level; Hugh Nolan came to a parallel perspective by closely observing local events and storytelling the history of his own community.

Glassie's books are exemplars of dialogical writing. Rather than impose his own words, he shares the stage with the elders, and invites readers to join the conversation. In the manner of Dostoevsky as interpreted by Bakhtin, each of his characters is accorded their own voice, unfiltered and unsubordinated by the author's.³³ As further elaborated in Bakhtin's *Art and Answerability*, the author's voice is

always shaped in relation to other voices, to whom the author, and indeed their readers, are answerable.³⁴ Glassie's focus on polyphony and dialogue represents a deeply ethical commitment to the people of this community with whom he has generated a work of genuine collaboration, a history of, for, and by the people.

Of course, Glassie's Ballymenone is a quasi-traditional society where, notwithstanding the intrusion of the modern age, its history has changed relatively slowly, at least until the last few decades. The world of Ballymenone seems remote from present-day Canada, where few of us live in the communities where we were raised. Our current places of residence, whether urban or rural, are characterized by ever-accelerating social and economic change and high rates of mobility, continually uprooting us and weakening long-established connections in time and space.

And yet, we are not done with local history and local historical knowledge, and they are not done with us. There are still communities of longstanding duration in this country, both rural and urban, where local historical knowledge persists. Many have resident sages who with little outside assistance continue to patiently document their histories and tell their stories. Over the last decade, with the collaboration of Jean Barman in Vancouver, Lynn Cousins in Iqaluit, Michael Gates in Whitehorse, and Tom Andrews in Yellowknife, I was fortunate to meet a variety of community historians of Aboriginal and ethnocultural communities, as well as professional practitioners of women's history connected to communities across the West and the North, at gatherings to encourage nominations of potential national historic significance for commemoration. These are people who have stayed close to the grass roots and to place, elders who carry both written and oral historical memory of their communities into the present.

They include such people as Joe Wai, a Vancouver architect with a vast knowledge of Chinese Canadian history and heritage and the leading advocate of Vancouver's Chinatown for more than 40 years, which he was instrumental in nominating as a National Historic Site. Another was Grace Eiko Thomson, the former President of the National Association of Japanese Canadians and a respected elder of the Japanese Canadian community. Grace initiated

nominations to commemorate Tomekichi Homma, an early advocate for disfranchised Japanese Canadians, and the Asahi Baseball Team, the remarkably successful Japanese Canadian team based at Oppenheimer Park in Japantown in Vancouver. Both have now been nationally commemorated. When I was with Parks Canada in Vancouver, Jean Barman helped us organize workshops with these individuals and many other elders connected to ethnocultural, First Nations, and women's history communities, prompting more nominations and national designations of Canada's diverse history. Jean is herself an example of an elder who has remained closely connected to both academic and local communities, effectively bridging the gap between professional and vernacular history.

In increasingly urban environments many Canadians are establishing new connections that over time may evolve into enduring local communities. A case in point is Canada's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people. Often obliged to move away from the negativity of traditional environments, LGBT people have established networks of several decades' duration and particularly in urban neighbourhoods across Canada. The work of Valerie Korinek with LGBT elders and communities on the prairies offers a fine example of how the study of detailed interactions at the local level is helping us better understand Canada's recent history, notwithstanding our contemporary condition of uprootedness and diaspora.³⁵ A similar process is evident among Canada's Aboriginal peoples, ethnocultural communities, and all manner of other groups, whose members have also moved away from their original communities and been obliged to adapt to new environments. We cannot predict the future but as these newer communities evolve over time, they may well benefit from local historical knowledge produced every day by individuals in dialogue with others, both near and far.³⁶

A sobering caveat is that the continued erosion of governmental support to local archives, including the recent cancellation of the National Archival Development Program, poses major challenges to the protection and stewardship of irreplaceable documents and the future practice of local history in Canada. Each of us concerned with protecting the legacy and possibility of local history has a responsibility to challenge unwise public policy decisions imperilling this

heritage, while voicing our support for programs that will foster the continued viability of local historical research in the future.

I want to conclude with an anecdote and an image. In 1992 I had the good fortune to meet the late William Commanda, the senior Elder of the Algonquin People at Maniwaki, Quebec. The National Capital Region is within the Algonquin's traditional territory. At that time I was coordinating Parks Canada's strategic plan for new commemorations,³⁷ and we wanted him to formally preside at our first national workshop on the history of Aboriginal Peoples. A colleague and I drove to Maniwaki to meet with William, then in his late seventies, to extend the invitation. He politely received us but put off any discussion of our request for most of the day. He took us into the woods to inspect the birch trees, then withering from acid rain contamination. For Commanda, who had made 200 birch-bark canoes, many housed in royal and museum collections, this was a calamity. Returning to his house, he showed us the wampum belts, ancient artifacts on which the history of his people is written in coloured beads. After several hours' instructing us on spiritual, environmental, and historical matters, he accepted our invitation to preside at our workshop.

At the workshop in the boardroom at the Canadian Museum of Civilization a few months later, Chief Commanda prayed to the Creator, burned sweet grass and brought it around the table to envelop each participant with the smoke, a cleansing ritual that also underscored the importance of harmony in our discussions. Later, he took a lively role in the exchange, sharing his expansive knowledge and speaking on both environmental and historical issues. He referred to the Royal Proclamation of 1763 as written on the sacred wampum belts, and its implications for the rights of Aboriginal Peoples. He also discussed the graves of members of his people on Victoria Island in the middle of the Ottawa River, and his First Nation's efforts to set the island aside as an Aboriginal heritage site. For us it was a rare privilege to see this wise old man in action but perhaps it was just another day in the life of a great Elder. He passed away three years ago at the age of 97, three years after being awarded the Order of Canada.

Observing the Idle No More protests that took place on Victoria Island earlier this year following the movement's beginnings

in Saskatoon, I was reminded of those meetings 20 years ago with Chief Commanda, his close connections to his community, and the importance he attached to place in the history of his First Nation. For me, a photograph of a wigwam on Victoria Island, with Canada's Parliament Buildings in the background, perfectly expresses the kind of perspective I think he might have wanted us to have on our country's history (Figure 2). It's a perspective that is aware of the nation state but ever mindful of the unique vantage points on history endowed by local historical perspective, appreciating what we have in common but never forgetting who we are or where we came from.

Local historical knowledge is all around us. It is inscribed in our memories of people, places, and shared experiences. It is integral to our identity as members of communities with a common history. It strengthens connections between people, past and present, and it better positions us to face the future. As long as we live in communities, local historical knowledge will continue to be generated as we interact with one another and adapt to our environments. As historians we have barely scratched the surface of the possibilities for documenting and interpreting local historical experience. The field is



Figure 2: Wigwam at the Aboriginal Experiences village, Turtle Island Tourism Company, Victoria Island, Ottawa.
Photo by the author, August 2013.

wide open for study and experimentation. Long live local history and local historical knowledge.

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Endnotes:

- 1 On the practice of vernacular history in Canada, see Lyle Dick, "Vernacular Currents in Western Canadian Historiography: The Passion and Prose of Katherine Hughes, F.G. Roe, and Roy Ito," in Sarah Carter, Alvin Finkel, and Peter Fortna, eds., *The West and Beyond: New Perspectives on an Imagined "Region"* (Athabasca: Athabasca University Press, 2010), 13-46; "Red River's Vernacular Historians," *Manitoba History*, Special Selkirk Settlement Bicentenary Issue, no. 71 (Winter 2013), 3-15; and "The Seven Oaks Incident and the Construction of a Historical Tradition, 1816 to 1970," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada* 1991, New Series, Vol. 2 (1991), 91-113.
- 2 My responses to the homogenizing imperatives of nationalist pan-Canadian history are elaborated in the following publications: Lyle Dick, "Saving the Nation through National History: The Case of *Canada: A People's History*," in Nicole Neatby and Peter Hodgins, eds., *Settling and Unsettling Memories* (University of Toronto Press, 2012): 188-214; "Sergeant Masumi Mitsui and the Japanese Canadian War Memorial: Intersections of National, Cultural, and Personal Memory," *Canadian Historical Review* 91, no. 3 (September 2010): 435-63; "A New History for the New Millennium: *Canada A People's History*," *Canadian Historical Review* 85, no. 1 (March 2004): 85-109; "Representing National History on Television: The Case of *Canada: A People's History*," in Zoe Druick and Patsy Kotsopoulos, eds., *Programming Reality: Perspectives on English-Canadian Television* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), 31-49; "Nationalism and Visual Media in Canada: the Case of Thomas Scott's Execution," *Manitoba History*, no. 48 (Fall/Winter 2004): 1-18; "'A Growing Necessity for Canada': W.L. Morton's Centenary Series and the Forms of National History, 1955-1980," *Canadian Historical Review* 82, no. 2 (June 2001): 223-52; and "Renegade in Archives: Peter C. Newman and the Writing of Canadian Popular History," *Archivaria* 22 (Summer 1986): 168-81.

- 3 Lyle Dick, "Same-sex Intersections of the Prairie Settlement Era: The 1895 Case of Regina's 'Oscar Wilde,'" *Histoire sociale / Social History* 42, no. 83 (May 2009): 107-45; and "The 1942 Same-sex Trials in Edmonton: On the State's Repression of Sexual Minorities, Archives, and Human Rights in Canada," *Archivaria* 68 (Fall 2009): 183-217.
- 4 Lyle Dick, "The Queer Frontier: Male Same-sex Experience in Western Canada's Settlement Era," *The Journal of Canadian Studies* 48, no. 2 (2014), 1-38.
- 5 See Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*, 2nd Edition (New York: Routledge, 2004); and Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1990).
- 6 Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, "The Name of the Game," in Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, eds., *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 8.
- 7 Ruth Sandwell, *Contesting Rural Space: Land Policy and the Practices of Resettlement on Saltspring Island, 1859-1891* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).
- 8 Royden Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).
- 9 Gérard Bouchard, *Quelques Arpents d'Amérique: Population, économie, famille au Saquenay, 1838-1971* (Montréal: Boréal, 1996).
- 10 Beatrice Craig, *Backwoods Consumers and Homespun Capitalists: The Rise of a Market Culture in Eastern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).
- 11 Susan W. Friedman, *Marc Bloch, Sociology and Geography* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 80.
- 12 See, for example, Carol Kammen, *On Doing Local History: Reflections on What Local Historians Do, Why, and What it Means* (Nashville, Tennessee: The American Association for State and Local History, 1986), 1-11; and the definitions by various authors in Carol Kammen, ed., *The Pursuit of Local History: Readings on Theory and Practice* (Walnut Creek, California: Walnut Creek Press, 1996).
- 13 Malcolm Bradbury, ed., *The Atlas of World Literature* (London: De Agostino, 1996). I want to thank Susan Buggy for drawing my attention to this book and its relevance to my address.
- 14 See Joseph G. Ponteretto, "Brief Note on the Origins, Evolution, and Meaning of the Qualitative Research Concept "Thick Description,"" *The Qualitative Report* 11, no. 3 (September 2006): 538-49.
- 15 Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (trans., Peter Putnam) (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1992), 36-39.
- 16 Lyle Dick, *Farmers 'Making Good.' The Development of Abernethy District, Saskatchewan, 1880-1920*. Revised edition (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2008).

- 17 Lyle Dick, *Muskox Land: Ellesmere Island in the Age of Contact* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2001).
- 18 For a recent discussion of the relationships between Braudel's temporal registers, see Dale Tomish, "The Order of Historical Time: The *Longue Durée* and Micro-History," The *Longue Durée* and World-Systems Analysis Colloquium to Commemorate the 50th Anniversary of Fernand Braudel, "Histoire et sciences sociales: La longue durée," *Annales E.S.C.* 13, no. 4 (1958), 28 October 2008. <www2.binghamton.edu/fbc/archive/tomich_102508.pdf>
- 19 Micheline Manseau, Lyle Dick and Natasha Lyons, *People, Caribou, and Muskoxen on Northern Ellesmere Island: Historical Interactions and Population Ecology, ca. 4300 BP to Present* (Winnipeg: Parks Canada, 2005).
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- 21 For a critique of these models, see Paul Nadasdy, *Hunters and Bureaucrats: Power, Knowledge, and Aboriginal-State Relations in The Southwest Yukon* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003).
- 22 Archives of Manitoba, MG9, A78-1, George Henry Gunn Fonds, Box 4, File 1: "Revised manuscript of the Donald Gunn chapters," 7.
- 23 Roy Ito, *Stories of My People: A Japanese Canadian Journal* (Hamilton, Ontario: Promark Printing, 1994), 432, quoted in Lyle Dick, "Vernacular Currents in Western Canadian Historiography," 32.
- 24 Joan Wallach Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 773-797.
- 25 Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).
- 26 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Vols. I and 2 (trans., Siân Reynolds) (New York and London: Harper Colophon Books, 1976).
- 27 Lyle Dick, *Farmers "Making Good": The Development of Àbernethy District, 1880-1920*. Revised Edition (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2008), first published in 1989.
- 28 Henry Glassie, *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975).
- 29 Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), first published in 1982.
- 30 Henry Glassie, *The Stars of Ballymenone* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006).
- 31 *Ibid.*, 280-81.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 131; and Henry Glassie, "The Practice and Purpose of History," *Journal of American History* 81, no. 3 (December 1994), 968.

- 33 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (ed. and trans., Caryl Emerson) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
- 34 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* (ed., Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov; trans., Vadim Liapunov) (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).
- 35 See Valerie Korinek, "'We're the girls of the pansy parade': Historicizing Winnipeg's Queer Subcultures, 1930s-1970," *Histoire Sociale* 45, no. 89 (May 2012): 117-55.
- 36 For an eloquent statement on the importance of history to building communities, see Robert R. Archibald, *A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community* (Walnut Creek, California: Walnut Creek Press, 1999).
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