Stunden Bower on Coutts, 'Authorized Heritage: Place, Memory, and Historic Sites in Prairie Canada'

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Robert Coutts’s Authorized Heritage: Place, Memory, and Historic Sites in Prairie Canada represents an important contribution to understanding state-sponsored commemorations at heritage sites in the provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Focused primarily on the commemorative activities of Canadian governments and agencies over the second half of the twentieth century, Authorized Heritage offers a pointed critique of many official heritage practices. At the same time, Coutts identifies opportunities to bring these practices more in line with the historical understandings of diverse communities as well as the findings of contemporary academic historians, which often focus on the experiences of groups harmed through the historical and ongoing operation of colonialism, racism, capitalism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity.

Coutts’s study is anchored by careful attention to the specific commemorative practices that defined key heritage sites in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, including attention to Indigenous cultural sites, key fur trade nodes, locations linked to resistance by Indigenous peoples, and locations associated with processes of settler colonialism. Coutts makes clear how the commemorative practices predominating at many prairie heritage sites reflect the imperatives of the Canadian state, effectively invoking Laurajane Smith’s notion of authorized heritage discourse in pointing to the limitations of state-sanctioned history. As Coutts puts it, his rendering exposes how prairie Canada’s authorized heritage came to equate attachment to the soil with private property, to glorify the creation of capitalist labor markets, to celebrate the ascendancy of individualism, and to perpetuate the fallacious idea that Indigenous peoples’ homelands were available for the taking. Coutts also includes a chapter late in his volume focusing on representations at key heritage sites of diversity along the lines of class, gender, and sexuality, emphasizing the inadequacy of these representations to date.

Environmental historians might be particularly interested in Coutts’s attention to landscape and place. For Coutts, existing landscapes that reflect prior ways of life offer revealing portals on the past. These places typically serve as repositories for multiple historical understandings, rather than a single state-sanctioned version. The non-curated character of these places and the multiplicity of the histories they anchor contrast with the constructed historical representations Coutts finds at heavily developed state commemorative sites in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. In advocating a view of
heritage as “the persistence of the past in the present,” not as “a depiction of the past in the present,” Coutts argues for an approach to commemoration that involves identifying and preserving signal landscapes, rather than producing tightly scripted heritage experiences (p. 204). While the role of nonhuman nature is not at the center of Coutts’s analysis, his preferred approach to commemoration has the potential to emphasize diverse relations between humanity and the wider environment, potentially opening the door to commemorative practices that engage nonhuman nature in new ways.

*Authorized Heritage* is defined by the author’s professional positioning. Coutts spent decades in the employ of Parks Canada, the federal government agency with primary responsibility for heritage commemoration, before pursuing doctoral studies focused in large measure on that agency. This volume has origins in Coutts’s PhD thesis. Coutts’s professional trajectory recalls that of other historians of Canada, like Lyle Dick and Walter Hildebrandt, who have made important contributions to academic history rooted in part in their public history work. *Authorized Heritage* is enriched by the author’s insider knowledge of government heritage practice. For instance, Coutts’s professional experience within Parks Canada informs his diagnosis of the agency’s central bureaucracy as particularly conservative, in contrast with regional staff more interested in exploring new historical understandings and new commemorative possibilities. From his insider perspective, Coutts also shares concerns about the bureaucratization of public history, identifying the use of the concept of commemorative intent by Parks Canada’s National Office as particularly culpable in stymieing what otherwise might have been a broader and richer state-sponsored heritage effort.

In *Authorized Heritage*, Coutts has authored a volume that will be of interest not only to history scholars and heritage practitioners in Canada but also to all those interested in grappling with internationally significant questions about how to more effectively and appropriately foster the persistence of the past in the present. *Authorized Heritage* will be particularly interesting to those keen to consider how heritage practices might be, in Coutts’s terms, “progressive” and “forward-looking” (p. 204).

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