

Walking Through The Past

Stephen Hornsby and Graeme Wynn

Volume 10, Number 2, Spring 1981

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad10_2rv03

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Hornsby, S. & Wynn, G. (1981). Walking Through The Past. *Acadiensis*, 10(2), 152–159.

concern with place, Doyle's historical context, Sparling's interpretive comment and de Volpi's market appeal, these works demonstrate that proper bibliographic references, full caption information and a conceptual or historical framework can make popular publications useful tools for scholarly research. Now that the evidential value of "documentary art" — long shunned by art critics as "record" and dismissed by historians as "art" — has been recognized, we have come to realize that art and fact need not be in conflict although photography and fact need not be synonymous.

JOAN M. SCHWARTZ

Walking Through The Past

The past is ever before us, and in Maritime Canada it has become a growth industry. According to provincial Departments of Tourism, the "vivid and elusive history" of this "storied corner of North America" is being rediscovered. It is also being made accessible to everyman. The rhetoric of tourist brochures encourages us to "journey back to another time", urges us to "leave the Twentieth Century to look after itself for awhile", and welcomes us to 1744. The going is easy: simply "pull off the Trans Canada Highway at Exit 259" or turn from Route 11 between Caraquet and Grand Anse to enjoy the "scenic serenity" of communities "out of time". Should we still hesitate to venture down the "time-tunnel", perhaps the promise of jingling harnesses, "evocative scents of kerosene, molasses [and] saltfish", costumed *animateurs*, or "Beef Braised in Guinness", and "Topsy Trifle" will lure us backward.¹ Escapism is widely available. From Caraquet to Louisbourg and from the St. John valley to Nova Scotia's eastern shore, a growing number of historical villages bring the past to life.

There are three types of historical village in Maritime Canada: preserved settlements; reconstructed places; and historical creations. Sherbrooke falls into the first category. A prosperous late nineteenth-century river port, engaged in shipbuilding and the timber trade and serving the gold mining districts in its hinterland, the town declined as its traditional industries foundered and the mineral wealth of the interior was exhausted.² Isolated and unimportant, twentieth-century Sherbrooke stagnated until the Nova Scotia Museum undertook to renovate and restore several of its buildings. Today, the historical village,

1 Tourism New Brunswick, *Historic Faces New Brunswick Atlantic Canada* (n.p., 1980 edn.) pp. 1-4; Kings Landing Corporation, *Summer at Kings Landing/Kings Landing in the Fall* (n.p., n.d.) and *Site Plan/Plan du village* (n.p., n.d.).

2 J.N. Grant, "The Development of Sherbrooke Village to 1880", *Nova Scotia Historical Quarterly*, 2 (1972), pp. 1-15.

a mix of private residences and buildings open to the public, in many of which crafts are practiced and traditional activities conducted, stands alongside the modern town. Louisbourg is a magnificent reconstruction. Where once had stood an imposing French town and fortress there remained in 1920 but “a dreary waste of ruins, tenanted only by a few farmer-fishermen”.³ Then, in 1960, the Federal Government directed \$25 million to the re-creation of “an historical cross-section of military, maritime, commercial, administrative and domestic pursuits as they originally existed at Louisbourg”. Twenty years later, approximately one-fifth of the eighteenth-century settlement has been rebuilt, providing, perhaps, “the most faithful touchstone of man’s past to have been created in our time”.⁴ Historical creations — villages located and developed specifically for the tourist trade — are more common than preserved and reconstructed places. They include Kings Landing and the Village Historique Acadien in New Brunswick and the Nova Scotia Highland Village at Iona. Here show-places have been developed. Old houses from various locations have been assembled at carefully chosen sites. A few structures have been built to exemplify their type. “Period” furnishings and staff in traditional attire have been added. Visitors are invited to “stroll the scenic trail” and to quench their well-earned thirsts on “suitable traditional beverages” (or canned “pop” if one’s taste preferences remain in the present) at strategically located refreshment stations along the way.

Several reasons account for the development of these sites. Each village was created as part of the campaign, mounted in the 1960s, to promote tourism in Maritime Canada as a source of local employment in the depressed regional economy. The Louisbourg project, in particular, was to offer employment to redundant Cape Breton coal miners. All the villages also claim didactic intent in preserving the spirit of the past, exposing Maritimers to their own history, and showing how our great-grandfathers coped with life. Indeed, it would seem that we, as a people, are entering into a new relationship with our history. Yet, although it is argued that people “care deeply about the past”,⁵ the enthusiasm for “living history” begs many questions. Even if we put aside such issues as whether Louisbourg was cost-efficient in reducing distress in the coal towns or whether an expanded tourist industry has been the elixir governments envisioned, we should ask how accurately historical villages portray the past, speculate about what their visitors learn, and reflect upon what they reveal about contemporary attitudes toward the past.

3 J.C. Webster, “Ourselves and Others or Does History Pay?”, *The Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 1 January 1924.

4 J. Fortier, “Louisbourg Lives Again”, *Conservation Canada*, 2 (Autumn 1976), pp. 3-7; Sir J. Dunn, “Louisbourg: the emerging touchstone”, *Canadian Antiques Collector*, 7 (1972), pp. 37-40.

5 Tourism New Brunswick, *Historic Faces*, p. 1.

Veracity seems to be an over-riding concern of those in the historical village business. Restorations are described as “appealingly accurate”; every effort, it is claimed, has been made to “portray authenticity”. Thus it is possible to “relive a moment in time” and to discover how our predecessors “really lived”.⁶ But is this the case? Louisbourg comes closest to historical reality. Ample documentation and prodigious effort have allowed the re-creation of an eighteenth-century urban fabric. With the original annoyances of leaking roofs, damp, and gloom eliminated by concealed twentieth-century technology, new buildings replicate the old. The tones and textures of the restoration evoke those of its pre-industrial model, and location and land-use patterns follow those revealed by eighteenth-century maps. Rebuilt in the image of its predecessor, the modern fortress of Louisbourg embodies the character and physical diversity of a real place. Historical creations can never achieve as much. The very act of relocating buildings compromises authenticity. Rarely does one find an accurate replication of historical circumstances. Site layouts are designed for the circulation of visitors and there is little sense of organic growth (compare Kings Landing and Sherbrooke). The selection of buildings is arbitrary (those available to be moved) or subjective (reflecting the designers’ views of the past). Public preferences (expectations) seem to dictate which crafts, occupations, and professions are included. Schools and churches, comfortable farmers, strong-armed blacksmiths and friendly storekeepers are common enough, but where are the hovels and the brothels, the wretched, the oppressed, the chattel paupers and the prostitutes in these depictions of the past? Even in Louisbourg, the costumed soldiers are better nourished and probably better humoured than those they represent, for they are free of oppressive military discipline and need not rue the prospect of standing guard through the bitter winter of Ile Royale.

Moreover, Louisbourg apart, these villages encapsulate a curiously undifferentiated historical space and time. Buildings from several parts of New Brunswick are included in the Village Historique Acadien, and pamphlets suggest that they represent the province’s four Acadian regions. Yet a tour of the site offers little sense of regional cultural variation. Perhaps similarity prevailed, despite the mingling of Quebec and Acadian families in Madawaska and the historical and environmental differences between Memramcook and Caraquet. But food preferences suggest more complexity. *Poutine rapee*, a “traditional Acadian dish” featured in the village cafeteria, is generally disparaged by those northeastern Acadians staffing village buildings as an ill-tasting concoction popular in the Moncton area. Similarly, the villages convey a relatively weak sense of time other than as time-past. Without the intent, the discipline, of creating a thin-section of the past (as in Louisbourg’s focus on 1744), time becomes vague, its passage goes unremarked, and the chronology of development is blurred. Kings Landing claims, variously, to offer

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 1-6.

“a vivid view of life in the central St. John river valley and the past two centuries”, and to depict the lifestyles of the same area “between the 1780s through the end of the 19th century”.⁷ Sherbrooke offers a sample of village life 100 years ago, but settings are restored to various dates between 1850 and 1900. Finally, the perception that nineteenth-century farm families lived in a “more leisurely time” than those whose vacations bring them into vicarious contact with the past portrayed in these historical villages is simply too sanguine.⁸ Verisimilitude obscures truth.

What of the didactic function of these villages? Louisbourg is intended to be “stimulating to the imagination . . . [and] instructive to the mind”, with its buildings as a “point of departure, a physical setting in which to explain and encourage understanding of an earlier way of life”.⁹ Yet it is a rare visitor who takes the time to stand and stare. Most visits to the fortress last little more than two hours, scarcely time to circulate through the orientation centre, walk uninterrupted around the site, eat at the tavern, and visit the giftshop. Perhaps tourists are the victims of too tightly scheduled itineraries. Perhaps the size and complexity of Louisbourg overwhelms (but then visits to other historical villages are probably equally brief). Perhaps our society has lost the habit of contemplation and reflection. In any event, there is little to distract the average visitor from his/her rapid stroll through “the past”. Reception centres provide site plans, fold out maps with buildings identified and in some cases sketched, but apart from *Les Defricheurs D'eau. Le Village Historique Acadien. En textes et en images* (Ottawa, 1978), available only in French, more detailed guidebooks are lacking. Yet such works would stimulate thought. They could heighten the interest of casual visitors and inform those with a deep-seated curiosity about the past; they could also serve as attractive souvenirs of the villages.¹⁰ There is a lesson to be learned from British practice here. Even the most cursory review of the guide books published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office reveals something of the potential for intelligent interpretation that is being overlooked in the historical villages of Maritime Canada.¹¹

7 *Kings Landing Site Plan*; Tourism New Brunswick, *Historic Faces*, p. 4.

8 *Kings Landing Site Plan*.

9 Fortier, “Louisbourg Lives Again”, pp. 3-6.

10 Commercial publishers have attempted to meet the last of these needs with W. Barrett, *Kings Landing. Country Life in early Canada*. (Toronto, 1979) and J. Fortier with O. Fitzgerald, *Fortress of Louisbourg* (Toronto, 1979). The villages have also spawned a considerable number of brief, illustrated articles in popular and other journals. For example, see D. Proudfoot, “How Louisbourg Restored Looks Today”, *Canadian Geographical Journal*, 93 (August/September, 1976), pp. 28-33. C. Foss, “Kings Landing Historical Settlement, New Brunswick, Canada”, *Antiques*, 115 (1979), pp. 1212-22; J.R. Dunn, “The Village historique acadien: a review”, *Canadian Museums Association Gazette*, XI (1976), pp. 21-9.

11 A Fenton, *The Island Blackhouse and a guide to “The Blackhouse” No. 42*, Arnol (Edinburgh, 1978) offers a good example simply because it is available at the Nova Scotia Highland Village.

Costumed animaters are intended to serve in lieu of formal guides and detailed published accounts of the recreated past. Indeed, great effort has gone into “peopling” the villages. At Louisbourg, for example, “the care that is being taken in the reconstruction and refurnishing of buildings pales beside the care that must be taken in the costuming of staff and the fidelity with which each role must be prepared”. Mobility — life and animation — it is argued, “carries a stronger message than immobility”.¹² Be that as it may, the animaters still have to be questioned, and unless one has the patience to wait one’s turn, one can pass through the village without tapping their knowledge very deeply. Moreover, good questions stem from a well-honed curiosity and a certain amount of familiarity with the issues at hand. Too much is demanded of the lay public in expecting them to establish the facts of the case. While the historical village may democratize the past, its treatment of that past is essentially sensuous. Within its confines, history becomes fun. There is little doubt that historical villages are enjoyable environments. School-children, in particular, are excited by what they see and hear. But without more obvious communication of the historian’s vital role in interpreting and reflecting upon the past, the village’s impact upon the historical consciousness of its visitors is likely to be fleeting. If it is more lasting, what lessons are being learned?

All of Maritime Canada’s historical villages reflect a good deal about modern North American society and its attitudes toward the past. At the turn of this century, New Brunswick historian W.F. Ganong stressed the importance of locating historic sites in order that people might visit them and feel themselves surrounded by the inanimate witnesses of previous events. Twenty five years later, Ganong’s close friend, J.C. Webster, sought to have Louisbourg designated a National Historic Site where a small museum might be built to house relicts found on the site, and plaques might be erected to mark “the chief features of the old French town and fort, the graveyards and the positions occupied by the American and British troops in the sieges of 1745 and 1758”.¹³ Success brought excavation of a few buildings and the stabilization of their foundations for public display. Similar museums and plaques were erected at historic Forts Anne and Beausejour, where the public might contemplate the ruins, exercise their imaginations and enter into “the spirit of the past”. Today, we demand more tangible encounters with history and we tax our minds less. It is tempting to attribute this to the development of a “television culture”, oriented toward the visual and captivated by the image. But the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg was initiated in the 1920s and a replica of the original

For a similar standard, set by a private organization, see the anonymous booklet *Weald and Downland Open Air Museum, Singleton* (Worthing, Sussex, 1977).

12 Dunn, “Louisbourg”, p. 39.

13 W.F. Ganong, “A Monograph of Historic Sites in the Province of New Brunswick”, *Transactions, Royal Society of Canada* (1899), p. 214; Webster, “Ourselves and Others”.

habitation was erected at Port Royal at about the same time.¹⁴ Perhaps, then, part of the reason for the increase in “living history” lies in the rise of mass tourism.

By and large, historical villages provide what most people want, and that is an idealized sanctuary from the disturbing present. They tell the story of difficulties overcome, and they offer contact with “a quieter and more gracious age”, provide a release from “the pressures of the twentieth century”, and allow us to “become an integral part of village life”. There we can drink in the scenic community’s “air of content and fulfillment”.¹⁵ Sanitized and purified, this is the agrarian past of our Christmas cards, with old homesteads scattered in a pastoral countryside. That it occurs as well in so many of our historical villages is testament to its popularity. But what does our embrace of it reflect: a loss of community; divorce from nature; lack of variety and personal satisfaction in our everyday lives; a sense that the modern world is too complex a place, that man no longer shapes his destiny? Certainly there appears to be little enthusiasm for portrayals of harsher facets of the past: high rates of infant mortality, near endless toil, class struggle, and privation. We escape the imbroglio of modernity for a pure and simple rural existence in our re-creations of the past. In this context, the Fisherman’s Life Museum on Nova Scotia’s eastern shore stands in revealing and poignant contrast to such elaborate developments as Kings Landing. This subsistence unit of a few acres and a two-man dory maintained parents and thirteen children. Obviously there was a price; one child died in infancy and for the rest of the family there was a low standard of living.¹⁶ The modest circumstances, honestly preserved in the simple dwelling, remind us that struggle and hardship were, and are, no strangers to thousands of Maritime Canadians.

To recognize that modern North American society’s enthusiasm for heritage is a form of self-indulgent nostalgia is to remind ourselves that, as a people, our concern for the past is superficial. While Kings Landing was being built, much of old Saint John was being destroyed. Concrete and glass towers continue to replace the city’s late nineteenth-century Italianate commercial architecture. Likewise, the skyline and character of Halifax have been transformed by urban renewal and the proliferation of corporate monuments. Only when the advance of “progress” underscored what was being lost were efforts made to preserve something of the earlier urban fabric. Refurbished to cater to the tourist, a waterfront enclave of wharves and warehouses was set apart and designated not

14 W.M. Whitehill, “‘Promoted to Glory . . .’ The Origin of Preservation in the United States”, U.S. Conference of Mayors, Special Committee on Historic Preservation, *With Heritage So Rich: A Report* (New York, 1966), pp. 35-44, and J.C. Webster, *These Crowded Years 1863-1944: An Octogenarian’s Record of Work* (Shediac, 1944), pp. 18-28.

15 Tourism New Brunswick, *Historic Faces*, pp. 3-6: *Kings Landing in the Fall*.

16 Nova Scotia Museum, *Fisherman’s Life Museum Jeddore Oyster Ponds, Nova Scotia* (Halifax, n.d.). It should be noted that the circumstances portrayed in several dwellings in the Village Historique Acadien are strikingly, and accurately, simple.

"historical" but "Historic Properties", a reflection, perhaps, of its singularity.¹⁷ On the one hand we obliterate the cumulative textures of local places, replacing them with "placeless" symbols of modernity, while on the other we devote enormous resources to creating essentially fictitious "past places" that we describe as "psychological refuges".¹⁸ The past is not an integral part of contemporary North American lives so much as a special retreat "always in quotation marks and fancy dress".¹⁹ Thus time is dichotomized, and space is zoned. Periods and places are set apart to be experienced in discrete packages.

Historical villages serve to put the common man in contact with the past, but they do not go as far as they might in encouraging him either to appreciate the stream of time or to integrate the past into his daily existence.²⁰ Thus there is a general failure to recognize that genuinely historical landscapes, the products of generations of human effort, are to be found throughout Maritime Canada, and that they are, in themselves, worthy of our attention. One consequence of such oversight was pointed out twenty years ago by English poet John Betjeman, when he lamented his countrymen's indifference to the look of things and their tendency to "slice off old buildings, fell healthy trees, replace hedges with concrete posts and chain-link fencing, all in the name of 'safety-first' which is another phrase for 'hurry-past'". Just as Halifax comes to resemble a scaled-down Toronto, so in an earlier England there was little resistance as the "well-known chromium and black glass" of corporate commerce transformed "the country town with the characteristics of its county into a home from home for the suburbanite".²¹ Valuable as Maritime Canadian historical villages are in satisfying the nostalgic impulse of the late twentieth century, they are essentially products of "placeless" North American tourism. The real past of the region is outside these villages, along the highways, and especially the byways, of the provinces. Ultimately we need a broader and deeper historical consciousness than historical villages promote. Because only as we contemplate the rich

17 C.B. Fergusson, "Halifax has a winner: Historic Properties", *Canadian Geographic*, 92 (October/November, 1978), pp. 34-9; L. Watkins, "Halifax Historic Properties. Recycling the Past to Enhance the Future", *Habitat*, 19 (May/June, 1976), pp. 2-9.

18 Fortier, "Louisbourg Lives Again", pp. 36-7, referring to Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York, 1970).

19 D. Lowenthal, "The American Way of History", *Columbia University Forum*, 9 (Summer 1966), pp. 27. Geographer Lowenthal has been a perceptive commentator on American attitudes to the past. His "The Place of the Past in the American Landscape", in D. Lowenthal and M.J. Bowden, eds., *Geographies of the Mind, Essays in historical geosophy in Honor of John Kirtland Wright* (New York, 1976), pp. 89-117 provides a summary and bibliography.

20 See J.B. Jackson, "'Sterile Restorations' Cannot Replace a Sense of the Stream of Time", *Landscape Architecture*, 66 (1976), p. 194; L.R. Ford, "Historic Preservation and the Stream of Time: The Role of the Geographer", *Historical Geography Newsletter*, 5 (Spring 1975), pp. 1-15; K. Lynch, *What Time is this Place* (Cambridge, Mass. 1972).

21 J. Betjeman, *First and Last Loves* (London, 1960), pp. 11-15.

complexity of the past, and begin to interpret the ordinary landscapes which surround us will we begin to develop the discriminating memory that offers perspective on the present.²²

STEPHEN HORNSBY AND GRAEME WYNN

22 D.W. Meinig, ed., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes. Geographical Essays* (New York, 1979); W.G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1970).

Nova Scotia's Nineteenth-Century County Histories

Since 1967 Mika Publishing of Belleville, Ontario, have reprinted a wide variety of Canadian local and county histories. This programme has been particularly kind to Nova Scotia. Seventeen of its county histories have been reprinted — ten drawn from the nineteenth and seven from the twentieth century. Mika has been so thorough that there are now virtually no major nineteenth-century county histories, and precious few minor ones, left out of print. It would therefore seem a suitable moment to reflect upon the nature and quality of these early works, and the wisdom of their republication.

In their first incarnation, seven of the ten nineteenth-century county histories were contestants for the Akins Historical Prize Essay offered annually from 1864 by King's College, Windsor. The founder of the prize was Thomas Beamish Akins, a native of Nova Scotia, a lawyer by profession, and Commissioner of the Public Records of Nova Scotia from the creation of that position in 1857 until his death in 1891. Akins was dedicated to the preservation of any material which would throw light on the history of his province. This determination was one part patriotism and one part habit of mind, for like many good antiquarians he was a compulsive collector. Akins, who has been described as "the foremost bibliophile of his generation in British North America",¹ advocated the establishment of a provincial archives as early as 1841, and probably wrote his own terms of reference when his job was created sixteen years later. He was a prime mover in the formation of the Nova Scotia Historical Society in 1878, and in the publication of that society's *Collections*. Hardly a single maritime historian, from the time that T.C. Haliburton wrote *An Historical and Statistical Account of Nova Scotia* in 1829, to the end of the century, did not owe Akins a substantial debt.

Akins' approach to history was deeply coloured by his habits as a collector:

1 B.C. Cuthbertson, "Thomas Beamish Akins: British North America's Pioneer Archivist", *Acadiensis*, VII (Autumn 1977), p. 101.