

AT PLAY IN THE FIELDS OF THE MUSEOLOGISTS: TWO YEARS AT THE CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

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Ross Ellis was one of those young men who stepped forward during the Second World War to create the First Canadian Army. In many ways he was typical of those who provided the backbone of the officer corps. But as a subaltern, then a company commander, and finally the Commanding Officer of the Calgary Highlanders through some of the most difficult and terrible battles of the war in Northwest Europe, he was untypical in that he was a natural leader with an instinctive grasp of tactics, a man of courage and perseverance and compassion who made his regiment into what David Bercuson called it, “a battalion of heroes.” I think it most appropriate that this Centre and this University should honour Ross Ellis with an annual lecture, and I am greatly honoured to be asked to give the third Ellis Lecture.

My subject this afternoon is historical and museological. It is also a fragment of the autobiography I will never write. I have participated on the fringes of some important events, I have lived through some interesting times, but I do not believe that anyone, anywhere, would ever be interested in reading my maanderings over my life. I have some vanity, but nowhere near enough to try to inflict my autobiography on the world.

Historians know, as Dutch historian Pieter Geyl has said, that history is an argument without end. They also understand that all history is contemporary history. I believe these comments most strongly. Each generation interprets its past through the filter of its own times, and each historian brings his own mindset, his own ideology, his

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own ideas of what is interesting and uninteresting in the past, and he argues with his colleagues and the public about those interpretations. The only danger occurs when one ideology smothers all the others and seeks to marginalize those of different views. I am, of course, not talking of the Communist bloc, though I could be. I admit that sometimes I think the contemporary Canadian historical profession might fit the bill.

A museum is an institution that treats history, and it is subject to these same laws. Of course, a museum is fundamentally visual, using artifacts to convey an understanding of events or historical social, cultural and artistic movements. Its task is difficult, however. Most visitors to museums are streakers, racing through the exhibits at breakneck pace so they can say they have seen the Louvre or Prado—and get on to the next tourist site or tavern. Some are browsers, strolling through the displays and stopping at something that catches their interest. A few are experts, coming to pore over the artifacts, text panels, and computer screens to learn something new and to see if the museum got it right. The museum's object must be to serve all these individuals, arranging its artifacts and text panels, touchscreens, film clips, and brochures to snare visitors' interest.

But how? What does a museum tell its visitors? The Canadian War Museum is part of the Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation, and I might be indiscreet and comment on the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec. This extraordinary museum in an amazing building, open only for a decade, is very much a product of the 1980s when it was planned. It is very strong in its Northwest Coast Indian artifacts, and very weak in everything else. Its coverage of Canadian history, in the broad sense, is limited to the Canada Hall, a Disneyesque chronological treatment of Canadian social history from east to west. Many of the artifacts used are reproductions; much of the history presented is sanitized and made politically correct, and completely omitted is the politics and blood and interest of the Canadian past. This is history as seen through a rose-coloured lens. This is, in effect, heritage: history as we might have wished it to happen. It is not history, which is the past as it was. Canada Hall is very much a product of social history as it was seen in the 1980s. Those who built the Hall, I think,

may have been aware of the then-current research but they were determined to subordinate that research to the museological and quasi-historical vision of CMC's founders. They succeeded all too well, but it is only fair to say that Canada Hall is popular with ahistorical Canadian visitors who, because they have not been taught much Canadian history, assume that what they see at the Canadian Museum of Civilization is all there is. Foreigners, however, have been heard to ask if there is anything but Northwest Coast Indians in Canadian civilization.

The Canadian War Museum, when I was asked to become its Director and CEO in February 1998, was the poor cousin of the CMCC, and it existed very much in a CMC interpretative mould. It had two buildings, the museum on Sussex Drive, located in a century old building between the glass towers of the National Gallery and the fortress-like solidity of the Mint, and the warehouse, Vimy House, a former Ottawa streetcar barn in an industrial area. Neither building was purpose-built or remotely satisfactory. The museum building was full of asbestos and below code in every respect, not least in meeting museological requirements for the display of art and artifacts. That was the good building. Vimy House leaked in heavy rains and was subject to floods, and it too met no museological standards. It was and is a disaster waiting to happen.

This mattered because the War Museum has an extraordinary collection of some half million artifacts. First, it holds the official Canadian war art collection, 13,000 pieces in all. There are magnificent oils and watercolours, for example, by the Group of Seven and Alex Colville, official war artists in the two wars. There are the maquettes for the figures on the Vimy Memorial made by the great Walter Allward. There is a huge poster collection, wonderful aviation and naval paintings, drawings, sketches, oils, watercolours, pastels. All in all, this constitutes the single largest collection of Canadian art—and the least known. The Museum also holds extraordinary collections of vehicles and weaponry, medals and uniforms, artifacts of every kind. It has a first-rate military library and an archives with more than four hundred collections of letters and diaries, much still unorganized and hence never used by scholars. This is my own area of research, and I did not know the archives even existed until I went to CWM.

What did the War Museum do with all this material? It was seriously underfunded, its non-salary, non-maintenance budget when I arrived limited to a mere \$500,000 a year, so there were limits on what it could do. Much of its budget was foolishly devoted to naval and military re-enactments, the previous Director's passion. The result was a museum that was nothing more than a heap of artifacts, arranged in a roughly chronological order. There were text panels, of course, but they were riddled with errors of fact and interpretation. And overall hung the pall of political correctness and historical make-believe that was imported from the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The evacuation of the Japanese Canadians from the West Coast in 1942 received treatment on two panels (each with different data and inaccurate interpretation), but the Italian campaign of 1943-45 which cost 5000 Canadian lives was treated in a single diorama that was so excruciatingly dreadful that it offended veterans and visitors alike. Most of the third floor was devoted to peacekeeping, a worthy subject, to be sure, but one that never employed more than a tiny percentage of the postwar Canadian Forces. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which absorbed the bulk of Canadian Forces budgets and personnel for a half century after 1949, was scarcely treated at all. Why? Because opinion surveys had shown that peacekeeping was what CWM visitors—most of whom knew no history and no Canadian military history at all—wanted to see. In its own way, CWM was as much a prisoner of historical trendiness and supposed visitor demand as CMC's Canada Hall. That it made no sense historically, that it left out far too much that was important, was immaterial.

Money, as I have suggested, was a major problem, and this led my predecessor into the fiasco of the War Museum's Holocaust Gallery. The tiny museum could not display all of Canadian military history well and it needed more space. How could this be secured? We need more space and this costs money, the reasoning seems to have gone. Who has money? Jews have money. How can we get their money? Have a Holocaust gallery. This makes a complicated story far too bald, I admit, but the essential cynicism at the heart of the process is, I believe, accurate.

Thus plans were drawn for an expansion of the Sussex museum to incorporate a Holocaust gallery—as well as additional space for other exhibits. This plan immediately ran into a buzzsaw of criticism from veterans' organizations (who had been emboldened by "The Valour and the Horror" fight) and others who argued correctly that however important the Holocaust was, it was not a Canadian story, and CWM was not the place for it, and certainly not until Canada's military history was fully and properly presented there. This opposition eventually led to brutal Senate hearings and the Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation's abject recantation—there would be no Holocaust Gallery at the War Museum. This debacle also led to changes in personnel. Hon. Barney Danson, a wounded veteran of the Second World War and a former Defence minister in the Trudeau government, joined the Board of Trustees of CMC and became chair of the newly-reformed Canadian War Museum Advisory Committee. And it was Barney Danson who recruited me, much against my will, to become Director of CWM for a two year term. It was, I think, no coincidence whatsoever that both Danson and I were Jewish.

Why did I take the job? I had left York University in 1995 and was happily enjoying my early retirement writing books in my attic and doing whatever else I wanted. I knew nothing about museums, and I had no desire to commute weekly between Toronto and Ottawa. Can I blame my decision to accept on Who Killed Canadian History? I had written the manuscript of that little book in 1997 and in the early winter of 1998 I was awaiting its publication. I had been fairly prominent in attacking the way Canadian history was being treated, or maltreated, in our schools and universities for some time before. Very simply, I think I was hoist on my own petard. How could I continue to object to the state of the profession if I turned down the opportunity to try to fix a major historical institution at precisely the moment Who Killed Canadian History? appeared? As it turned out, the book had large sales and substantial impact, and it dovetailed neatly with the campaign for a new CWM. I gave a hundred or more talks across the country in the next two years preaching for Canadian history and a new Canadian War Museum.

But first I had to put my stamp on CWM. In my museological ignorance, a national military history museum, to me, had to be research-based, chronological, and historically accurate. It had to tell the story fully and fairly, conveying the utter horror of war without being pacifistic. It had to demonstrate how ordinary Canadians did extraordinary deeds in the most difficult of times. It had to focus on the individual, the national, and the international, and none of this is easy. It had to be a chronological and historical museum that used its artifacts to tell the story graphically to visitors. It could not be a pile of artifacts without context, as the old CWM was. A pile of artifacts with historical errors staring at visitors at every turn.

To me, in an increasingly globalized and homogenized cultural world, Canada's history is one of the few things that all Canadians share that is uniquely ours. We must do everything we can to protect and encourage our culture, of course, but the inescapable fact is that our art, our dance, our music, our theatre and our films are created in an international context. Our history is Canadian, however, and in a nation that worries about its identity, our history is, or should be, critical in defining that identity. Military history is part of Canada, part of Canadian history, part of our story. That it is also a dramatic story of courage and loss, of success and failure, is vitally important too. Moreover, our military history is something of which we can and must be proud. Canada is one of the few nations never to have fought a war of aggression. We have fought for our friends and our values, for democracy and freedom, and we have fought with skill and tenacity. Moreover, we have paid a terrible price for our freedom and values—anyone who has ever visited the war cemeteries at Dieppe, France or Holten in the Netherlands knows this, and our surviving veterans can never forget. There is much material here to build and maintain an identity.

To me, history matters, and it is absolutely critical for museums and museum historians to get it right. That does not mean, I hasten to add, that museums spout a party line with only one government-approved truth. It does mean being fair and accurate and covering all that is important. It means stating frankly that there are different interpretations of events and trends. It does not mean pandering to political

correctness and victimology—we ought not to wallow in defeats such as Hong Kong and Dieppe, because defeats happen in war; there cannot be 50 percent of the exhibits on women, for example, because women made up only a tiny proportion of the forces, under 5 percent in the Second World War; there cannot be 20 percent of the exhibits on aboriginal veterans because Indians provided only a few thousands of volunteers in our world wars, and the interpretation and presentation of the two world wars must occupy most of the War Museum's space. There cannot be permanent exhibits on Ukrainian-Canadian internment in the Great War, Italian-Canadian internment in the Second World War, or the Japanese-Canadian evacuation in 1942 because, however important these events are, they are not central to the military history of Canada. And Canadian military history is the CWM's mandate, and properly so. Other museums can and should tell those stories, but not CWM.

So the key condition I imposed, even before I accepted the job of Director and CEO, was that my CMC masters let me recruit three first-rate researching historians for CWM. They became the heart of the renewal, the indication that historical research and the need to get the right things right were now front and center at the War Museum. They came to CWM because they recognized that a first-rate military history museum could reach more Canadians with their past than fifty years of lecturing in university and fifty books. They came to fix the egregious errors and to see new and accurate text panels put up. To create better exhibits that reflected our military past and present. To see a NATO gallery carved out of the third floor. To see more and better use made of the courtyard on Sussex Drive and relations restored with the Canadian Forces. To see no more money wasted on re-enactments that served CWM not at all. To see more and better take-home handouts. To create arrangements with publishers to do books with the CWM logo—and eventually using CWM archival materials. To see easier loan arrangements with other military museums and to restore relations that were hostile to say the least. And to put the CWM on the national cultural map. That they turned out to be superb managers and colleagues was an unexpected but terrific bonus.

To me the best way to get the War Museum on the map was to use the art collection. I like art, buy it, and collect it, and instinctively I grasped that the Museum's collection was its trump card with those who might not think battles or tanks or medals mattered. In my first few months on the job, I secured a donation of \$300,000 from the Donner Canadian Foundation for a war art exhibit to feature the best of the collection. This turned into a major and costly job of restoration on some of the huge Great War canvases that had been rolled up rotting for eighty years and a major restoration project on the crumbling Allward maquettes. I knew nothing of such questions, and my conservators spent a good deal of time beating me over the head until I understood. These major projects also could not have happened without assistance from CMC which, I am happy to say, generously funded and willingly supported all my efforts at the War Museum. It could not have happened without an extraordinary effort by CWM's small staff which worked itself near exhaustion. Happily it was all worth it. "Canvas of War", the exhibit, opened in early 1999 at CMC (there was no space at CWM large enough to show it, even if the climate in the building had permitted it to be hung there—which it didn't) and has just closed, but not before some 300,000 visitors passed through it. A book under the same title was published in the summer of 2000 by Douglas & McIntyre in Vancouver and has sold out its first printing. The exhibit will travel the nation for the next four years and it will be at the Glenbow in 2003. I expect that 2 million Canadians all told will see this fine exhibit.

After I arrived at CWM in July 1998, it quickly became clear that there were limits to what could be done in the present quarters. An expansion might help, but it could never take the place of a purpose-built museum. Moreover, an expansion would do nothing to deal with the problem of two buildings. Only a purpose-built new museum, combining exhibits and storage, could meet the need. It was Barney Danson who resolved the problem by persuading the Minister of National Defence, Art Eggleton, to give the museum 20 acres at CFB Rockcliffe which was scheduled to close. This was absolutely perfect—the site on a rise overlooking the Ottawa River and served by two underused parkways was superb. And 500 metres away was the Canada Aviation Museum with a complementary collection. That was step one, and it was announced by

the Ministers of Canadian Heritage, National Defence, and Veterans Affairs in Remembrance Week 1998.

But now we needed money to build the museum. The cost, we were told after an architectural assessment, was \$80 million in all with the building to cost \$58 million, infrastructure \$7 million, and exhibits and programmes \$15 million. CMCC generously offered us \$7 million, the Passing the Torch Campaign of the Friends of CWM undertook to fundraise \$15 million, and we needed the Chretien government to put up the remaining \$58 million.

Getting this money was to prove extraordinarily difficult. In 1998, 1999, and 2000 money was not, contrary to popular belief, flowing like water in Ottawa, and a military history museum was not at the top of the priority list. Danson worked the telephones and lobbied everyone. Our friends in Parliament did the same, as did the Royal Canadian Legion. CMC officials worked the bureaucracy. In my view, the decisive factor came when John English, a distinguished historian and former Liberal Member of Parliament for Waterloo, Ont., became the chair of CMCC in the autumn of 1999. His connections and access swung the balance our way, and in March 2000 the government agreed to provide the \$58.25 million needed for the building. When my two years ended and I left the Museum on June 30, 2000, we were well on the way.

Now all we had to do was fundraise \$15 million. I had never been involved in fundraising before, and I had no idea how difficult it was. The volunteers of Passing the Torch, led by the former Chief of the Defence Staff, Gen. Paul Manson, worked extraordinarily hard with great assistance from the Development staff at CMC, but in our peaceful and ahistorical society we suffered from our name and subject—a war museum is less attractive to potential donors than a peace museum or a hospital or university. A national institution is also subject to localitis—if I had a dollar for every time I was told by a potential donor that he would support CWM if it was in Toronto or Hamilton or Vancouver or Halifax but not in Ottawa, I'd be a rich man. Somehow, I do not believe that Americans in Seattle or Miami or New York City complain that the

Smithsonian or the Lincoln Memorial is in Washington, and I find this regionalism and parochialism very depressing. Canada's capital should be the location of national museums, and the capital, like Washington to Americans, should be a place that Canadians visit with pride. Whatever the difficulties, and they were huge, nonetheless by this month we have \$10 million in hand. I anticipate we will secure the rest of the funds we need in 2001.

Planning for the new Canadian War Museum is also well in hand. Our 20 acres at Rockcliffe has somehow expanded to 35 acres, allowing ample room for outdoor exhibits and amenities. We have a "needs" study that defines the spaces required for exhibits and storage. We are in the midst of the search for an architect and a project manager, and I confidently expect we will make our scheduled opening date of June 6, 2004, the 60th anniversary of D-Day.

So where do we go from here? A new CWM will go a long way to putting Canadian military history front and center in our consciousness. CWM can and will do electronic outreach, it can and will send teachers around the country, and it can and will loan exhibits and art. The new CWM will also have an Institute of Military History to do research and serve researchers. But it cannot do the job alone.

Calgary is enormously fortunate to have the superb Museum of the Regiments, at present the nation's best military history museum and one that is soon to be expanded further to include an art gallery and research center. The Canadian War Museum has committed itself in writing to cooperating in this venture by making the Museum of the Regiments its lead partner so that Western Canada can see more of the riches of Canada's military history that have until now been held in Ottawa--including Canada's war art too. Passing the Torch is also undertaking a joint fundraising campaign with the Museum of the Regiments and the Naval Museum of Alberta in the Calgary area.

In the long run, I look to the day when the government of Canada will create the Canadian War Museums with centers in Ottawa, Calgary, Halifax (where the Maritime Command Museum is located), and Hamilton (with its Canadian Warplane Heritage museum). Then and only then will Canada's military history be secure and truly accessible to the people. A government with vision would recognize that as the World War II veterans fade away and as small military museums inevitably close, much history will disappear unless plans are made now. The Canadian War Museums, as I have suggested, could resolve the problem and for relatively little money, by building on what already exists.

Men like Ross Ellis fought to defeat Canada's enemies and to make this nation what it is today, God's country, for all its troubles and divisions the best of all places on earth. We owe it to our children to ensure that they know the story of Colonel Ellis and his battalion of heroes, and the Canadian War Museum and the Museum of the Regiments and the country's military museums are keepers of the flame. If we fail our children, if we dishonour the memory of those who fought and died by forgetting them, we do a terrible disservice to history and to Canada.

I am very pleased to say that I believe we have turned a corner in the last few years. The fight over the "Valour and the Horror" led directly to the CBC coverage of the anniversaries of D-Day and V-E Day, and this in turn led to the new CWM and then to the construction and dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The pendulum of public historical interest, if not yet Canadian academic interest (outside the University of Calgary), has begun to swing back, and not before time. And who can doubt that when the new CWM has its Institute of Military History with its library and archives available and the MOR has its new research center fully open that academic Canadian interest will begin to follow public interest? Not me. It is simply a matter of time, and for once I believe that time is on the right side.