

A THINK PIECE ON
COMMEMORATIONS



PREPARED BY

HERITAGE
SASKATCHEWAN

WWW.HERITAGESASK.CA

JANUARY 2021

FUNDED BY



SASK LOTTERIES

LIVING HERITAGE...

...is a part of our daily lives. It includes our beliefs, assumptions about the world, and how we interpret our surroundings

INTRODUCTION

Renewed calls to remove or rename commemorative statues, streets, and schools have demonstrated that we in Saskatchewan need to rethink the memorialization of historic figures and events. While many of the requests to re-examine public commemorations have occurred around Regina - including the call to remove the statue of Sir John A. Macdonald in Victoria Park and rename Dewdney Avenue - the conversation is one that must happen at a national, provincial, and municipal level. Heritage Saskatchewan's position as a provincial organization is to give voice to living heritage in our province and we are interested and willing to help consult or guide in this process.

Commemoration is a complex and multifaceted issue full of strong emotions, and concerns about the representation of public memory. Historical events and figures do not fit simple narratives; they are full of personal and public failings, or incomplete or contradictory evidence. Commemorative elements permeate our built landscape. These range from names of places (towns and streets), to historic plaques, to statues of figures from the past. Physical public commemorations are the subject of this piece. These places have a physical presence or are associated with a place (e.g. a building named after a significant figure). On an average day we likely pass a street or park named after a person without even thinking about it, but it is worth reassessing whether those figures are who we want to commemorate in public places, and how that commemoration is perceived by others. The legacy of these physical public commemorations is part of our ongoing living heritage.

Living heritage is a part of our daily lives. It includes our beliefs, assumptions about the world, and how we interpret our surroundings. What some of us see as 'normal' is actually part of our particular living heritage that we inherited from those who came before us. Examples are plentiful and can be as complicated as how we interact with the environment, as obvious as what holidays we celebrate and how, or as simple as what food we regularly stock in our cupboards. How we commemorate and celebrate our heritage can leave material reminders – physical, touchable things - across our landscape.

Heritage Saskatchewan believes that we need to make decisions about who is publicly commemorated and why, based on discussions informed by careful, considered insight and equity. In this short piece, we are going to discuss physical public commemorations: their history and context; the need for public discussion; and (re)conciliation. The questions provided after each section are intended to be considered in context of any physical public commemoration local to the reader. Our intention in this piece is to help foster heritage-related conversations and relationships.



Physical public commemorations are ... places [that] have a physical presence or are associated with a place (e.g. a building named after a figure from the past). The legacy of these physical public commemorations is part of our ongoing living heritage.

HISTORY & CONTEXT OF COMMEMORATIONS

History is not what happened in the past; rather, it is how we interpret past actions or events in the present. What happened in the past is static, but our understanding of those actions is dynamic – it changes throughout time and is based on different assumptions, attitudes, and contexts. The construction of history has traditionally privileged written textual sources over other types of source material, especially oral history and tradition. American Folklorist, Henry Glassie, summarized this, saying “History is not the past, but a map of the past drawn from a particular point of view to be useful to the modern traveler” (Passing the Time in Ballymenone 621). The over-reliance on the written word by European scholars resulted in many voices being discounted. In practical terms, this can mean that the impressions of a single witness in the past, who happened to leave a written document, are often given undue importance in the historical record over oral histories of the same event.

It is our understanding of the past that constitutes history – Glassie’s map. The process of understanding history is played out in classrooms, news outlets, movies, video games, books, journals, museums, historic sites, and whenever we tell stories about the past. In these venues, history is discussed, questioned, amended, re-interpreted, and new understandings of the past are drawn. That is, we re-present the past in order to better understand it. One reason we might change our interpretation of the past is when previously unheard voices are invited to the table to present new information or provide a new lens to view previously understood events. Without the inclusion of these many and varied voices, our interpretation of history is incomplete or even incorrect. As the scope of sources we incorporate into making history grows, these new sources can change how we understand the past. Figures or events that were once seen from one point of view may be transformed by the addition of a new perspective, rendering old perspectives irrelevant or incorrect in relation.

Memorials, plaques, commemorative statues, and public monuments are history-inspired memory aids that are usually built to valorize and venerate events or people from the past, not to create a discussion. Public commemorations are built with a message in mind, and

these messages do not always match how we understand history in the present. The most prominent of these public commemorations are intended to transmit values, rather than teach history (Upton “Confederate Monuments and Civic Values in the Wake of Charlottesville”). So, when people ask for the removal of public commemorations, no actual ‘history’ is being lost, rather, we as a society are re-evaluating what elements from the past ought to be celebrated in the present, and in the public realm (Upton, “Confederate Monuments”).

Adding context to pre-existing monuments, as was done for Duncan Campbell Scott’s grave in 2011 (CBC News “Duncan Campbell Scott plaque now includes his past creating residential

schools”), can add missing perspectives to standing commemorations. The intention behind adding explanatory plaques is to provide enough context to subvert the original narrative of valorization. It is important to consider whether this approach can provide adequate context, and whether it has enough visibility to compete with the extant commemoration. It may be that some stories are too complex to tell on a commemorative plaque. In addition, explanative plaques can have unintended effects, such as marking the commemorative monuments for further destruction or defacement (AASLH “Monuments and Memory”). In the case of Scott’s grave, the re-interpretation of the historic plaque was deemed a contextually appropriate step to help tell a more complete story (CBC News “Duncan Campbell Scott”).

Many public monuments are built and presented in ways that render them poor teaching aids (Upton SAH). In the case of statues, the viewer is often given a set of visual clues about how they are supposed to understand the commemorated figure: the location, the pose, the scale, and the elevation all indicate that the viewer is supposed to respect and idolize the depicted figure and what they stand for. Additional explanatory information must fight against the contrary visual language of the statue. For place names (schools, roads, etc.), before introducing an explanatory plaque, one must consider its efficacy: will people see it? Will it be accessible? Does it give enough information? Un-learning what we thought were indisputable facts is difficult and requires time and space to be processed and understood.

For this reason, people have posited moving public commemorations to museums or locations where they can be presented with more context (Melnychuk, “MacDonald Statue Protestors”). If a museum or gallery is willing to take on that task, which is by no means guaranteed, this does not negate the need to have discussions about physical public commemorations. As members of the public, elected officials, heritage professionals, and as the arbiters of public spaces, we cannot relax that responsibility on to someone else and walk away. In addition, a solution we agree on in 2020 is not final. It remains open to criticism, revision, and change as our interpretation of the past changes. History in the public sphere is an ongoing discussion.

Q: *What do we lose by removing commemorative monuments? What might we gain? Is there a better way to symbolize the values that the monument represents in a way that doesn't carry other baggage? Is it possible to provide satisfactory context on the commemorative monument as it is now? How will we adapt if the contextualization is not met with approval?*

PARTICIPATION & DISCUSSION

Present-day standing public commemorations are not themselves history, but represent the ideals, needs, aspirations, and myths of the people who originally erected the commemorations. Many public commemorations were produced without consultation or informed discussion with the general public, or with communities that the subject of commemoration may have affected. Furthermore, many commemorations do not represent what historians would consider ‘good’ history, which is they are overly simplified in order to tell a palatable story. To foster an inclusive and equitable environment, new physical public commemorations require a much more vigorous analysis and conversation than was done in the past. The reconsideration Heritage Saskatchewan believes is necessary is one that often did not happen when past commemorations were put in place – a discussion that must be rigorous in historical research, equitable to all people involved, and open to future re-evaluations.

Since physical public commemorations are not themselves ‘history’, but rather part of the process of making history, it behooves us to respect the weight and responsibility that we bear when faced with the task of creating public commemoration, or evaluating existing commemorations. Re-evaluation is part of the historical process, and often a response to the lack of consultation when original structures were put in place.

Q:

Does the existence of physical public commemorations create a more inclusive public space? Do they represent values we hold today? If not, why should we keep them? Are these values universal, or only relevant to some members of our community? What “public” does the statue represent? What message is the statue saying to the public who use those spaces? Is that a message we feel comfortable sending? Who is this message for?

“

It is our understanding of the past that constitutes history. The process of understanding history is played out in classrooms, news outlets, movies, video games, books, journals, museums, historic sites, and whenever we tell stories about the past.

(RE)CONCILIATION & LEARNING

Removing a statue or renaming a building is not in and of itself (re)conciliation. It does not solve the issues that people who were and are marginalized face in the present. Opening a thoughtful dialogue based on equity, empathy, and vulnerability can indicate a willingness to deal with the truth (NowThis News, “Myths About Confederate Monuments”) and move past “misty nostalgia” of the past (Hustvedt “Tear Them Down”). Legal scholar John Borrows notes that Canadians tend to avoid confronting the past and prefer to address the present (“Residential Schools, Respect, and Responsibilities for Past Harms” 489). However, whether we want to confront it or not, events that occurred in the past impact our lives today, as well as the decisions we make and the opportunities we can build for the future. Borrows cites Shawn Atleo to this point: “the past isn’t the past. It remains with us to this day” (492).

While there is no perfect or one-size-fits-all solution, there are examples of renaming projects in Saskatchewan that have successfully considered the differing opinions and made changes that best suited the needs of their community. In 2018-2019, Davin School in Regina changed its name to the Crescents School, and erected plaques explaining reasons for the change. At that time there was very little consensus on whether the name change was appropriate, and many people had strong opinions on how to address the problem. Many felt that the



What history do we forget by not having these discussions? What voices are not being invited to the table? Are these commemorations telling the story they were intending to tell? What other stories are they telling? What actions can be taken to advance reconciliation?

name should not be changed as they did not associate the name ‘Davin’ with the individual from the past who participated in genocide (CBC News “We are being heard right now”). Others felt that although removing ‘Davin’ from the school was positive, the new name was an opportunity for (re)conciliation by renaming the school after an Indigenous person or in an Indigenous language (Martin “What’s in a name? A closer look at

the decision to rename Davin “The Crescents School”). In light of the opinions expressed during consultation, and the solution the Regina Public School Board came to, the addition of a plaque was deemed important to explain the process and history of the name change, and the presence of physical markers of the old name left behind on the historic building. Responding to the newly christened Crescents School, alumni Simon Ash-Moccasin was quoted by the CBC saying “As an Indigenous person, we’re being heard right now. There’s a lot of people before that fought to be heard that weren’t heard” (CBC News “We are being”).

Another provincial name change occurred in 2019 when Killisnoak Lake in west central Saskatchewan was renamed Kikiskitotawānawak Iskēwak at the request of the Red Pheasant First Nation. The lake’s new name translates to “we remember the women,” or “we honour the women” (Piller “Ceremony held to change derogatory name of Sask. Lakes”). Kellie Wettunee, who proposed the name change, said the new name is intended to honour Indigenous women rather than denigrate them, changing the narrative created by the offensive former name (Piller “Ceremony held”).

The examples provided here show the influence of the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) Calls to Action. Calls to Actions on commemoration (especially numbers 79 and 83) ask for the integration of “Indigenous history, heritage values, and memory practices” into heritage policies, criteria and practices (TRC 334). Monuments, historic plaques, and heritage designation are all used to create a visible past. The practise of history-making in Canada originated from European practises and has often failed to understand and recognize non-Western forms of heritage. The process of creating heritage, activities like designating historic buildings; erecting monuments or informative panels; naming public spaces or infrastructure, has been done in the image of its creators. The TRC and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) both call for changes to how heritage and commemoration is conducted. They also require that heritage-making bodies give free, prior and informed consent for changes to heritage that affect Indigenous peoples. This is important to avoid the paternalistic and elite decision making the heritage sector has often performed.

To have an equitable discussion about public commemoration requires creating the space and opportunity for historically and contemporaneously disenfranchised people to offer their understanding and knowledge. These difficult conversations are necessary to do the work of reconciliation. As the recently published Reconciliation Regina “Community Action Plan” outlines, issues cannot be solved without community level (re)conciliation plans (Reconciliation Regina 26). Working with others necessitates confronting biases, both personal and communal; creating and repairing relationships; and unlearning histories previously held as ultimate truth. The point that Borrows makes about the past is that it bleeds into the present - events that occurred in the past are still felt today.



Building relationships, having conversations, and listening to each other is critical to a shared future, and necessary if we are meaningfully seeking (re)conciliation.

CONCLUSION

Living heritage contributes to our daily lives and identities. It informs our sense of who we are as individuals and as communities and constructs our worldview. Regardless of who we are and what the issue is before us, we all need to acknowledge that our heritage informs our choices, our beliefs, our ways of living, and our sense of belonging.

In seeking (re)conciliation around issues that elicit deep emotional and intellectual responses, building relationships, having conversations, and listening to each other with open hearts and minds are critical to a shared future.

In this piece Heritage Saskatchewan offers insight into how we as a society can commemorate the past respectfully and ethically by considering our history, culture, and living heritage. We do not expect the solutions communities agree upon to be the end of the discussion. Public memory is dynamic and public commemoration should remain open to re-evaluation and re-examination (TRC 268).

Every call to remove public commemorations is worth consideration, and the voices asking for change should not be dismissed. History is our relationship with the past and while the past does not change, we are able to make choices about what we choose to commemorate. As Marlene Epp, a historian at the University of Waterloo, says, learning about the past requires unlearning what we thought we knew, as well as listening and compassion (Epp “Anti-Racism includes unlearning”).

We trust that these thoughts can provide guidance for the difficult discussions about who, where, how, and why we commemorate figures or events. Our goal is to encourage equitable engagement and solutions, acknowledging that this requires difficult work, both emotionally and intellectually. There is no one-size-fits-all solution available; what works for one community is not guaranteed to work for a neighbouring one. Heritage Saskatchewan is in a position to facilitate discussions that are aimed at coming to equitable solutions. We are prepared to lend our expertise however we can.

The present is shared by all of us, and it is in this shared present that we must negotiate how we understand our heritage and what that means for our relationships with each other.

WORKS CITED

- AASLH Learning: Recorded Webinar: AASLH Conversations: Monuments and Memory.
<https://learn.aaslh.org/products/recorded-webinar-aaslh-conversations-monuments-and-memory>. Accessed 31 Aug. 2020.
- Borrows, John. "Residential Schools, Respect, and Responsibilities for Past Harms." *The University of Toronto Law School*, vol. 64, no. 4, 2014, pp. 486–504, doi:[38/utlj-2499](https://doi.org/10.1086/utlj-2499).
- CBC News. "Duncan Campbell Scott Plaque Now Includes His Past Creating Residential Schools." *CBC*, 2 Nov. 2015, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/duncan-campbell-scott-plaque-updated-1.3299062>.
- . "'We're Being Heard Right Now': Regina's Davin School Named after Residential School Advocate to Be Renamed | CBC News." *CBC*, 19 June 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/davin-school-renaming-1.4712866>.
- Epp, Marlene. "Anti-Racism Includes Unlearning the Histories of the Land." *Facebook*, 8 July 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/marlene.epp/posts/10158562073363210>.
- Glassie, Henry. *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.
- Hustvedt, Siri. "Tear Them Down: Siri Hustvedt on Old Statues, Bad Science, and Ideas That Just Won't Die | Literary Hub." *Literary Hub*, 8 July 2020, <https://lithub.com/tear-them-down-siri-hustvedt-on-old-statues-bad-science-and-ideas-that-just-wont-die/>.
- "In 1966, a Sacred Aboriginal Rock Was Blown up to Make Way for a Man-Made Lake. Now Divers Search for Remnants." *Nationalpost*, <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/in-1966-a-sacred-aboriginal-rock-was-blown-up-to-make-way-for-a-man-made-lake-now-divers-search-for-remnants>. Accessed 25 Nov. 2020.
- Martin, Ashley. "What's in a Name? A Closer Look at the Decision to Rename Davin 'The Crescents School.'" *Regina Leader Post*, 22 June 2018, <https://leaderpost.com/news/local-news/whats-in-a-name-a-closer-look-at-the-decision-to-rename-davin-the-crescents-school>.
- Melnichuk, Mark. "Macdonald Statue Protesters Meet with Regina Mayor." *Regina Leader Post*, 30 July 2020, <https://leaderpost.com/news/local-news/macdonald-statue-protesters-meet-with-regina-mayor>.
- NowThis News. *Myths About Confederate Monuments*. 2020. *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55ehKPUM7dc>.
- Piller, Thomas. "Ceremony Held to Change Derogatory Name of Sask. Lakes." *Global News*, 18 June 2019, <https://globalnews.ca/news/5377638/killsquaw-lake-kikiskitotawanawak-iskewak-indigenous-women/>.
- Reconciliation Regina. *Reconciliation Regina, Inc. Community Action Plan 2020/2021*.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, and Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, editors. *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future. Volume One: Summary*. Second printing, James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers, 2015.
- Upton, Dell. "Confederate Monuments and Civic Values in the Wake of Charlottesville." *Society of Architectural Historians*, 13 Sept. 2017, <https://www.sah.org/publications-and-research/sah-blog/sah-blog/2017/09/13/confederate-monuments-and-civic-values-in-the-wake-of-charlottesville>.

HERITAGE

SASKATCHEWAN



200 - 2020 11th Ave Regina, SK S4P 0J3
Treaty 4 Territory & Homeland of the Métis
info@heritagesask.ca • (306) 780-9191

WWW.HERITAGESASK.CA

FUNDED BY

