

Time Travel: Tourism and the Rise of the Living History Museum in Mid-Twentieth-Century Canada by Alan Gordon

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Time Travel

Tourism and the Rise of the Living History Museum in Mid-Twentieth-Century Canada

by Alan Gordon

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016. 364 pages. \$34.95 (paperback) ISBN 978-0-7748-3154-3 <ubcpres.ca>

The proliferation of living history museums across Canada tell the history of more than just the time period they are depicting. These open air museums are also indicative of the political and cultural atmosphere in which they were conceived.

Time Travel is the third book authored by Alan Gordon and is an examination of Canadian memory and how we, as a country, look at our shared past. Gordon turns his attention to the relationship between tourism and the development of living history museums and the growth of a Canadian identity. Gordon successfully argues for a correlation between the push, restore, and re-purpose historic sites and the increased focus on tourism-based economies. He argues that the increase in tourism impacts the history told at these sites.

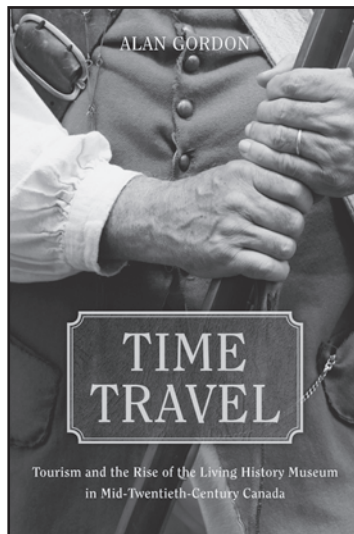
Gordon uses a three-pronged approach to show how the rise in a tourism-based economy highlights the growth of the living history museum. He first takes an in-depth look at the history of museums in general and the idea of creating collections to be shared with the public. The narrative then shifts to focus on the growth of museums and public collections within Canada,

highlighting how the growth of the nation is mirrored in the manner that museum collections developed in Canada.

The book then turns to an examination of the worldwide rise in tourism before narrowing the focus to examine the history and rise of tourism within Canada. Gordon astutely highlights how tourism, along with a desire to preserve our built heritage, was the driving force behind the reconstructions of so many living history sites. He notes that the push to reconstruct Fort York in Toronto was one of the earliest efforts within

Canada to make use of historic sites to promote growth in tourism and all of the economic benefits that are associated with a booming tourist industry.

Throughout the book, Gordon outlines case studies of living history sites within Canada to provide context and evidence to support his argument. The final part of the work uses case studies of living history sites across Canada to support the idea that each reconstruction or creation represents the climate in which the museum was conceived far more accurately than the time period they were meant to represent. Living history sites struggle with



the discontent between what Gordon references as “myth history,” that is what the public expects to see at these museums, and the actuality of what life was like in the past. For these sites to thrive, and in some cases merely survive, they must often choose to depict a past that is the one visitors expect to see, even if it is sanitized and simplified for their benefit. If visitors knew that to have an authentic experience of the past they would have to deal with dirt, foul smells and unsanitary conditions that are very different from today, very few would choose to visit living history museums. Imagine visiting a pioneer village where you had to use boot scrubbers before entering a building to remove the dirt and fecal matter you collected from crossing the field, and you get the picture.

Gordon’s use of case studies, while useful to illustrate the connections between the rise of tourism and the living history museum, are to some extent a distraction from his argument. After wading through each case study, it took some time for Gordon’s argument to once again come to the forefront. Although the case studies are important as illustrations, perhaps they would have better served the argument if they were less convoluted and more focused.

In his conclusion, Gordon writes about the shift in the museum field itself to better understand that current cultural

expectations greatly influence the way that the past is interpreted. There are no right or wrong ways to interpret a site and each one is valid in its own way. Within history, perspectives can change and often necessitate a shift in the way past events are interpreted. Why then, have living history museums been slow to move from the more simple interpretation of the site to a more complicated, multi-voice interpretation of the site? According to Gordon, a lot of it has to do with the museums’ past and the difficulty of being both experts of the past and entertainment for today.

Museums, in particular living history museums, continue to adapt and broaden their mandates in order to simply continue their existence during changing economies. They have had to embrace, to some extent, the amusement park model to better connect with current visitors. If done well, the focus on amusement can bring in new visitors who then see the education value in the site. If the amusement, such as a farmer’s market or art installation, enhance the mandate of the site and bring in new visitors, it will allow these sites the opportunity to begin shifting the narrative they are presenting to one that includes multiple perspectives and voices.

Jennifer Weymark,
Oshawa Museum

***Dr. Oronhyatekha:
Security, Justice, and Equality***

by Keith Jamieson and Michelle A. Hamilton

Toronto: Dundurn, 2016. 368 pages. \$26.99 paperback. ISBN 978-1-45970-663-7 <dundurn.com>

In the midst of today’s discussions about the abuses of Indigenous children in residential schooling, broken treaty prom-

ises, and missing and murdered Indigenous women, Keith Jamieson and Michelle A. Hamilton’s biography of Dr. Oronhyat-