

How do Canadians celebrate and commemorate our past?

By Matthew Hayday, University of Guelph

The bicentennial of the war of 1812 kicked off a wave of commemoration fever in Canada. We are currently in the midst of the commemorations of the 150th anniversary of the Charlottetown and Quebec conferences, and the 100th anniversary of the start of the First World War. Next year will see a host of events marking 200 years since the birth of Sir John A. MacDonald. In addition to these major anniversary commemorations, Canadians routinely celebrate major “national holidays” including Canada Day (July 1st), Quebec’s Fête Nationale (or St. Jean Baptiste Day elsewhere in Canada, on June 24th), National Aboriginal Day (June 21st), and National Acadian Day (August 15th).

As we progress towards the 150th anniversary of Confederation in 2017, it seemed an appropriate time to bring together scholars and experts in the field of commemoration and celebration to reflect on how Canadian and regional identities are shaped by these events. This was the impetus for a workshop held at the Canadian Museum of History from 18-20 September 2014. With the backing of a SSHRC Connections Grant, Raymond Blake (University of Regina) and I convened a group of scholars from Canada, the United Kingdom, Denmark and China, with backgrounds in history, literature, political science, sociology, geography, cultural studies and Canadian studies to consider a wide array of major commemorative events from Canada’s past, as well as the repeating annual holidays that have contributed to the fostering of different identities in our country. While the primary goal of the “Celebrating Canada” workshop was to discuss draft papers that participants had submitted for a pair of edited collections that are in preparation for publication in 2017, it was also an opportunity to reach out to the public.

With this in mind, we organized a public roundtable considering the politics of commemoration and celebration in Canada. The bilingual roundtable included Professor Yves Frenette, a Canada Research Chair at Université Saint-Boniface, who recently created a stir with his article in the *Canadian Journal of History* about the Harper Government’s politicization of history. Dr. Mark Kristmanson, the CEO of the National Capital Commission, brought an insider’s perspective on how these events have been organized in recent years. The perspectives of younger scholars came from workshop participants Robert Talbot, a SSHRC post-doc at the University of New Brunswick (and co-editor of the *CHA Bulletin*), and Marc-André Gagnon, a doctoral student at the University of Guelph (and the graduate

student representative on the CHA council). It was a lively discussion centred around four main questions: 1) why do we celebrate major anniversaries and what are the social and political functions of commemorations; 2) how have Canadian and regional identities shifted over time and how has this been reflected in our national holiday celebrations and major commemorations; 3) whether commemoration is significantly more politicized now, or whether there is continuity with past practices; and 4) what the panellists thought Canada could or should do in 2017 to mark the 150th anniversary of Confederation. (See photo, below.)

The question of politicization of commemorative events was, unsurprisingly, the subject of the most vigorous discussion, and pointed questions from audience members. Panel members did cite some key changes in the current commemorations process. Frenette, for instance, observed a declining role for outside experts in government-planned events, and a visible guiding hand from the PMO directing the messaging contained in these commemorations in an effort to alter our understanding of Canadian history. And yet Talbot noted that there have certainly been variants of political messaging in the past, such as when the King government used the 1927 Diamond Jubilee of Confederation to promote biculturalism. Kristmanson also cautioned us not to underestimate the roles of the bureaucracy and past practices in shaping these events, as they worked for inclusive celebrations that would be well-received by Canadians, or participating artists, who thrive on the energy of the unscripted moment. He joined the other panellists in reminding us that the general public is not stupid, and is often keenly aware of efforts at political manipulation.

As for thoughts on our upcoming observances of Canada’s 150th birthday, the theme of maturity and a vision for the future was central to many of the panellists’ observations. There was a keen awareness of the ongoing divisions in the country that need to be addressed, perhaps in an original and fresh manner.

**Note: The Celebrating Canada roundtable was recorded as a podcast, and is available online at ActiveHistory.ca. Sean Graham, the host of ActiveHistory.ca’s “History Slam” podcast series, also recorded a series of short interviews with workshop participants about their research, which will be posted in late-October and early November 2014.*

