

OTTAWA

By John Walsh

Program Chair – 2009 Annual Meeting

“Ottawa” signifies all sorts of meanings for all sorts of people. For many, it is the name of Canada’s capital city and the river whose waters flow behind the Parliament Buildings, or a favored tourist destination, or perhaps a necessary research destination. For some, especially during an election cycle or at tax time, it is also a name conveying a mix of condescension and revulsion. Perhaps the least well-known “Ottawa” is the city that is home for almost one million people. Before, during, and after the 2009 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical



Association, which opens at Carleton University on Monday, May 25 and ends Wednesday, May 27, there will be ample time to explore both the official and the vernacular Ottawa which, together, make the city a place worth exploring or exploring anew. Indeed, this year’s conference theme, “Authority in the Past, Authority of the Past” owes much to the city’s official and vernacular cultures, and as Program Chair it is my hope that time spent traipsing around the city will extend the conference experience, deepen it, and make your time in Ottawa even more enjoyable. I cannot offer a money-back guarantee, but I can offer some reasons for why I think this is the case.

Official Ottawa, the one that appears on currency, on television screens, and in the consciousness of all taxpayers, needs little introduction. Much of this known “Ottawa” is actually a micro-region clustered in the core, straddling both the Ontario and Quebec sides of the Ottawa River. For historians, especially,

there is good cause to (re)visit official Ottawa and to experience and reflect upon the ways in which authority becomes embedded in the past and the past in authority. In a bold, hubristic gesture, the National Capital Commission (NCC) has spent the past ten years landscaping this micro-region as “Confederation Boulevard.” At a cost of nearly \$40 million it is a heritage megaproject that seeks to nurture both tourist spending and some historical understanding of how Canada was made. As the NCC describes Confederation Boulevard on its website, “[p]erhaps no other development in the Capital region so clearly defines the distinctive nature of Canadian culture. Many capitals — such as Paris and Washington — were planned with grand linear avenues conceived in the spirit of triumphal processions. Confederation Boulevard is not linear. It is inclusive. It draws a circle around the downtown areas of Ottawa (in Ontario) and Gatineau (in Quebec), connecting both sides of the Ottawa River.”

Following a 7.5 km loop, Confederation Boulevard starts and ends, not surprisingly, on Parliament Hill. Depending on which direction one travels, the route passes the following icons of monumental architecture: Chateau Laurier, Union Station, the Embassy of the United States of America, Notre-Dame Cathedral Basilica, the National Gallery, the Canadian Mint, 24 Sussex Drive, Rideau Hall, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the Canadian War Museum, Library and Archives Canada, the Supreme Court of Canada, and the Bank of Canada. In addition to the monuments scattered around Parliament Hill, the route also passes, among others, the National War Memorial and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the National Monument to Aboriginal Veterans, the Peacekeeping Monument, and, perched on high behind the National Gallery at Nepean Point, Samuel de Champlain.

Far be it from me to deny that which becomes obvious: Confederation Boulevard offers spectacular vistas and even without entering any of the buildings, one is rewarded with a memorable experience (and a decent workout if doing the whole loop!). As a landscaped narrative, however, the historian will be tempted by the interpretive plaques, guides, pamphlets, and even by ornamental street signs. Sometimes with the grace of a sledgehammer but more commonly through the decision to include and exclude certain information, all of these interpretations tell the visitor what they are seeing and why seeing it is so important. “Oh, really?” many of you will no doubt wonder and cast a skeptical eye back over the landscape before you before unleashing the deconstructionist within. Fortunately, there are ample places on or near Confederation Boulevard to

grab favoured refreshments over which to perform this cultural act and if, like me, you find friends and family growing tired of your “expert” analysis, be comforted by the fact that there just might be a journal article or future conference paper to be had from your experiences. More importantly, though, there might also be an opportunity to take something else back home with you from the conference.

A historian’s trip to the city should also include some exploration of vernacular Ottawa. While less-known outside of the city, it is a rich landscape that reflects the contours of Ottawa’s local history but also echoes the silences that linger in its public memory. This is especially true for a number of the city’s urban villages, such as Chinatown, Little Italy, Westboro, the Glebe, Old Ottawa South, Lowertown (including the Byward Market area), and Vanier. More about each of these (and others, on both sides of the Ottawa River) will be identified in more detail in our customized visitor’s guide, “A Historian’s Ottawa”, to be made available as a .pdf download at the conference website, <http://ocs.sfu.ca/fedcan/index.php/cha/cha2009>, on or before April 1, 2009. The guide provides many suggestions about walking these urban village streets, eating in their neighbourhood restaurants and diners, enjoying a drink in the pubs, cafés, and coffee houses, perusing the overflowing shelves of their used book stores, and taking in a concert or show. The guide provides some commentary on how Ottawa’s local histories are both visible and invisible in these streets, and I hope you find time to explore it. These neighbourhoods are a reminder that Ottawa is not merely a stage for Canada, but like every other capital city, it is also a hometown with all sorts of stories of struggle and survival, of becoming and belonging.

Both the official and the vernacular Ottawa provide an enticing setting for our conference but it is the quality of our program that I expect will make the investment of your time and money well worth it. At the time of writing, we are in the stage of reviewing proposals and assembling the program. There are a few trends emerging from the proposals that are worth highlighting. First, the response from both French-speaking and English-speaking colleagues, from all over the country, has been impressive, a strong reminder that the CHA remains a truly national organization. Second, transnational and international topics are a real strength among the proposals, and while there is room to grow in this respect, it is a hopeful sign that the CHA is making strides towards its goal to be an association regarded by all historians in Canada as theirs, regardless of their geographical or chronological specializations. Third, the proposals include a rich variety of panels and roundtables framed as joint-sessions with sister associations in Congress. Not only does this bring in some much-needed revenue for our own meeting, it also builds important institutional relationships that mirror those already being pursued in our research. All three of these trends bode well for the future of the CHA and our participation at Congress.

With respect to the program, there are some special elements I can already report. First, there will be at least two sessions devoted to professionalization and work-life issues as they involve graduate students and junior faculty. In particular, we will have a roundtable about the professional challenges of having children while doing graduate study and also a session about the employment options for graduate history students outside academic and public history careers. Second, there is a mini-conference within our conference, “Fur Trade and Métis History: Patterns of Ethnogenesis” which is open to all attendees of the CHA Meeting and is fully integrated into the CHA Program. Third, we shall be having a plenary session devoted to the Canadians and Their Pasts / Les Canadiens et leurs passés (<http://www.canadiansandtheirpasts.ca>), a major national research project exploring the historical consciousness of a wide range of Canadians. In presentations to earlier meetings of the CHA, and other scholarly and professional audiences, the project’s lead investigators have shown some of the exciting and unique insights into, among other things, where Canadians from all walks of life think the “authority of the past” resides and ought to reside. Fourth, in the General Meeting, we shall also be hearing Craig Heron’s farewell address as the outgoing President of the Canadian Historical Association and welcoming our new president, Mary Lynn Stewart. These addresses are often an important statement about being historians in Canada, not only the challenges we face, but also the opportunities that lie waiting for us. Other special program items are still coalescing and they will be highlighted at the conference website (<http://ocs.sfu.ca/fedcan/index.php/cha/cha2009>) as they become finalized.

Around the core program, we are also building on some past innovations as we plan next year’s meeting. There will be a pub night for graduate students the night before our meeting officially begins. Besides providing some food and even a little drink, we are also going to be doing some trivia games and, of course, lots of good talk. Cliopalooza 2009 will also provide the funk (and the food) in hoping to lay to waste to some of the lingering perceptions of Ottawa as a boring, government town. Also in the works: a field trip to the Diefenbunker, a behind-the-scenes tour of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and a temporary display organized by Library and Archives Canada that Carleton is hosting. Again, the conference website will keep all of this information up-to-date.

With the grass and trees green, the tulips in their full glory, and small pleasure boats floating up and down the Rideau Canal, Carleton University and Ottawa will be a wonderful place to visit next May. I hope the above has whetted your appetite for making this visit and for taking full advantage of being in Ottawa. It promises to be an exciting, inspiring, and enjoyable three days.