

Commemoration in Canada: Narratives, Nationalism, and Resistance

Theses

1. Commemoration symbolically embodies particular narratives of belonging, thereby promoting a particular conception of identity, while excluding others.
2. In Canada, commemorative activities are primarily linked to fostering a sense of a unified Canadian national identity.
3. Nationalistic commemorative activities have also served as sites of resistance by marginalized peoples.

-1870s-1920s: “Heyday of public commemorations”

>Proliferation of monuments erected, pageants performed, and historical societies

-Context: Nation Building

- >Railway
- >Immigration to western Canada
- >New provinces
- >Expansion of Dominion government
- >Debates over national identity
- >Growing middle-class

-The Loyalist Narrative

>Monuments commemorating the Loyalist migration and their role in “founding” the Canadian nation

-The United Empire Loyalists’ Association of Canada (UELAC)

- >Responsible for most passionately promoting the Loyalist narrative and a pro-British identity
- >Emphasizing the unswerving devotion, character, and sacrifice of the Loyalists
- >The less glorious historical reality...
- >UELAC commemorations of the War of 1812

-Joseph Brant Memorial Statue

>Complicated divisions around commemorating Brant the Mohawk Loyalist

-Quebec Tercentenary, 1908

- >Ostentatious program
- >Instilling national pride and promoting unity between the French and English “races”

-Commemorating the Battle of the Plains of Abraham

>Creative reinterpretation in the name of national unity

-Diamond Jubilee of Confederation, 1927

- >Ottawa-based planning committee emphasizing the ultimate importance of 1867
- >Indigenous peoples making use of the celebrations for their own ends
- >Provincial deviations from Ottawa’s hopes

-Commemorating the Diamond Jubilee in Winnipeg

>Emphasizing the contributions of Eastern Europeans to the city

-Commemorating the Diamond Jubilee in Toronto

>Emphasizing the pre-Confederation period

-1920s & 1930s: Commemorating the First World War

>Forging a collective memory: a borderline national “obsession” among the middle-class

>A tragic, hideous and pointless war? Or noble and necessary?

>In desperate need of a meaningful public narrative

-Victory Square, Vancouver

>Plans for commemoration began almost immediately following the beginning of the war

-The Ubiquitous War Memorial

>Statues and obelisks in every city and town

-Public Ceremonies of Commemoration

>From Armistice Day to Remembrance Day

-Canadian National Vimy Memorial

>Growing popularity of overseas pilgrimages

>Unveiling of Vimy Ridge monument in 1936

>Shift from a pro-British identity to a Canadian identity

>Important narrative of Canadian national unity a century later

-Expo 67

>Celebration of a unified progressive Canadian nation

-Indians of Canada Pavilion

>Celebration of Indigenous resilience and resistance to the progressive Canadian narrative

>Re-educating visitors: exposing injustice and emphasizing positive Indigenous themes

>Negative visitor responses

> “Representing ourselves”

-Expo 86 Native Peoples Pavilion

>Rejected given the controversy of Expo 67

-Summit Series, 1972

>A loss inspires a crisis of identity

>Hockey epically enshrined as a national symbol of unity and Canadianness

-“Experts on our own lives”

>The rise of marginalized voices in commemorative activities

>Demanding recognition

> “Curating difficult knowledge”

>Women

>Ethnic and cultural minorities

>Indigenous peoples

>Organized labour