

Workshop Report

*Confluences: A Workshop on Rivers, History and Memory*¹ 15-16 November 2007, University of British Columbia

Prepared by Matthew Evenden with contributions from Stephane Castonguay, Laurie Dickmeyer and Jonathan Peyton as well as feedback from workshop participants.



'Confluence' 2007, Shelley Mansel

Mansel, a Halifax-based artist, studied at Fraser Valley College and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. 'Confluence' is part of a 2007 exhibit at Ingram Gallery, Toronto, entitled *Divining II*. In this body of work, Mansel, in her own words, 'explores the natural and artificial divisions of landscape. Forms such as rivers, fences, and overpasses figure prominently... These seemingly disparate forms share a congruent theme of passages within geography as they cut, weave, and wind across the terrain.' 'Confluence' depicts a river 'somewhere in France'; its overlapping colours suggest the mixture of flows, the meander of channels and the way separate streams merge.

Rivers cross and re-cross the boundaries between public history, conservation politics and historical scholarship. On 15-16 November, 2007, scholars, curators, educators, civil servants, members of community groups and first nations met at the University of British Columbia to discuss the different ways in which river history and memory can be conceived and practiced.² The word confluences, chosen for the title of the workshop,

¹ The workshop was organized by Matthew Evenden with assistance from Stéphane Castonguay, Laurie Dickmeyer and Jonathan Peyton and was sponsored by **The Canadian Water History Project/ Projet sur l'histoire de l'eau au Canada** (co-organized by Stéphane Castonguay, CRC, UQTR, and Matthew Evenden, UBC), a subcluster of the NiCHE (Network in Canadian History and Environment/ Nouvelle initiative canadienne en histoire de l'environnement, which receives funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada), and UBC's **Nature/History/Society** speaker series based at Green College (co-organized by Matthew Evenden, UBC, and Eagle Glassheim, History, UBC). We thank the Departments of Geography, History and the Program in Canadian Studies at UBC as well as Parks Canada for additional financial and in-kind support.

² Participants not listed in the speakers list below, included: Ian Baird, PhD student, Geography, UBC; Matt Cavers, MA student, Department of Geography, Queen's University; Diane Coleman, Earth Observation Services, and Adjunct Professor, Geography, University of Calgary; Graham Daneluz, MA Student, Department of Geography, Simon Fraser University; Emily Davis, PhD Student, Geography, UBC; Kenneth de la Barre, Consultant with Northern Quebec Cree Heritage Rivers Program; Laurie Dickmeyer, MA Student, Geography, UBC; Matt Dyce, PhD Student, Geography, UBC; Brian Egan, PhD Student,

also became one of its central metaphors, as participants came together, placed different modes of research and communication in juxtaposition and shaped the sometimes seamless, sometimes turbulent intersection of ideas. The workshop operated as a series of linked discussions, including three introductory talks, poster presentations and two panels responding to previously circulated questions.³ A final reflections and redirections session drew the workshop to a conclusion.⁴

As the inaugural event of the Canadian Water History Project/Projet sur l'histoire de l'eau au Canada (CWHP/ PHEC) (http://niche-canada.org/water_history), the workshop provided a networking opportunity for students of river history and sought to structure a conversation that transcended the boundaries of the university and the Vancouver region. The hope was to open an important conversation that would continue among individual participants and collectively through the CWHP/ PHEC. Because the workshop did not aim to develop a set of bullet point conclusions or directives, this document seeks only to summarize the presentations and annotate them lightly with references, so that participants and interested people might have a guide to the discussion and find sources for further reading and research.

Session One: Braided Streams

In the opening session of the workshop, Gerry Conaty, Don Gibson, and Sonny McHalsie offered three perspectives on the relationship between rivers and public history and invited participants to reflect on the different purposes, practices, audiences and possible outcomes that informed their work.

Department of Geography, Carleton University; Susan Garland, North Thompson Community Foundation and Director of the Barriere and District Heritage Society; Eagle Glassheim, Department of History, UBC; Doug Harris, Faculty of Law, UBC; Sally Hermansen, Department of Geography, UBC; Inae Kim, PhD Student, Faculty of Forestry, UBC; Will Knight, Independent Scholar, Ottawa; Takaia Larsen, Castlegar Museum and History, Selkirk College; Molly Malone, MA Student, Anthropology, UBC; Helen Mills, Lost Rivers, Toronto; Pat Myers, Historian, Alberta Heritage; Jonathan Peyton, PhD Student, Department of Geography, UBC; Robert Reinhardt, PhD Student, Department of History, University of California, Davis; Terry Simmons, Environmental Lawyer, Mediator and Arbitrator; Meg Stanley, Commonwealth Historic Resources Management; Phil Van Huizen, PhD Student, Department of History, UBC; Graeme Wynn, Department of geography, UBC.

³ Speakers included, in order of presentation: Dr. Gerald Conaty, Curator, Glenbow Museum, Calgary; Don Gibson, National Manager, Canadian Heritage River System, Parks Canada; Sonny McHalsie, Cultural Advisor, Sto:lo Nation; Dr. Katrine Barber, Director, Centre for Columbia River History, and History, Portland State University; Dr. Charles Jago, Chair of the Fraser Basin Council, and History, University of Northern British Columbia; Jennifer Bonnell, Doctoral Candidate, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education; Dr. Matthew Hatvany, Département de Géographie, Université Laval; Dr. Julie Cruikshank, Professor Emeritus, Anthropology, UBC; Bill Layman, Public Historian, Wenatchee, Washington; Dr. Lorne Hammond, Curator, Royal BC Museum; Dr. Joy Parr, CRC, Geography, University of Western Ontario. Four research posters were displayed by: Matt Dyce, PhD student, Geography, UBC, Phil Van Huizen, PhD student, History, UBC, Helen Mills, Lost Rivers, Toronto, Robert Reinhardt, PhD student, History, University of California, Davis. Some of these posters will be placed on the NiCHE website shortly.

⁴ These were offered by: Dr. Laura Cameron, CRC, Geography, Queen's University; and Dr. Stephen Bocking, Environmental Studies, Trent University

As a curator involved in a team project at the Glenbow museum in Calgary exhibiting the Bow River, Conaty explained the possibilities which rivers provide museums to integrate different aspects of their collections as well as curatorial expertise and to attract diverse regional audiences. In researching the exhibit, Conaty was impressed by the remarkably local perceptions held of the river by different communities along its banks and by the common assumption that the river could be thought about straightforwardly as natural on the one hand and cultural on the other, despite the profound re-engineering that the Bow has experienced over time. Juxtaposing river art, artifacts, cartography and text, the exhibit sought to invite audiences to think beyond local situations to a basin-wide view to reflect on the complex mixture of natural and cultural forces that have shaped the river's flow and character.⁵

Don Gibson, the National Manager of the Canadian Heritage Rivers System (CHRS), opened his survey of the CHRS and its activities by invoking three different explanations of the value of rivers: for aesthetic and cultural reasons (Roderick Haig-Brown), as *not* simply a resource, but a formative aspect of landscape, people and nation (W. Liebau, Canadian Federal Water Policy, 1995), and as a metaphor of life itself (Elder William Commanda of the Algonquin First Nation). He emphasized the importance of rivers in Canada and of Canada's rivers in the world before explaining the CHRS's legislative authority, governance process, evolving program and mandate, as well as its more recent focus on urban rivers. In general, Gibson sought to explain how the CHRS works with community groups to shape a sense of place and to protect the natural and cultural heritage of rivers at a national scale.⁶

Sonny (Albert) McHalsie, the Manager/Cultural Advisor for the Sto:lo Research and Resource Management Center in Chilliwack B.C., emphasized the inseparable connection between the Sto:lo, the Fraser River and its tributaries. Sto:lo means the Fraser River in the Halkomelem language. The Sto:lo are the *people of the river*. McHalsie proceeded to share *sxwoxwiyam* and *sqwelqwel* (oral histories) which explained the actions of *Xexa:ls* (transformers) who helped to make the world. He also explained the Sto:lo's understanding of their territory as informed by the presence of *stl'aleqem* (spiritual beings) who live in the land and rivers, such as *T'liteqo Spa:th*, the underwater black bear who lives in the Fraser River near the entrance to the Fraser Canyon. Over all, McHalsie sought to explain the relationship of the Sto:lo to the land and water of their territory as an inseparable bond.⁷

Session Two: Academic History/Public History

Through a series of questions, speakers in session two were asked to reflect on the links between the academic and public history of rivers.⁸

⁵ See: Gerald Conaty, ed., *The Bow: Living with a River* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2004).

⁶ See: http://www.chrs.ca/Main_e.htm and Lynn Noel, *Voyages: Canada's Heritage Rivers* (Breakwater Books, 1995).

⁷ See McHalsie's contributions in: Keith Carlson, ed., *A Sto:lo Coast Salish Historical Atlas* (Vancouver and Seattle: Douglas & McIntyre and University of Washington Press, 2001).

⁸ These questions were: What do academics have to say to public audiences about river history and why should it matter? Are public audiences all that interested in what academic historians have to say about rivers? How has your work crossed the academic/public divide to reach a wider audience for river history/

Katy Barber, the director of the Center for Columbia River History and an associate professor of history at Portland State University started the discussion by stating that academics must engage in a dialogue with their communities, not speak *to* or *for* them. Academics nevertheless have a specific role to play in unraveling assumptions about the inevitability of past decisions and actions about rivers by explaining change over time and the complexity of our common and contested relationship with rivers. By way of example, Barber explained the development of her own research and thinking on the destruction of Celilo Falls, an important indigenous fishing site, flooded under a reservoir in 1956, from the early research stage for her book to a recent commemorative conference to a forthcoming special issue of the *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, which she co-edited.⁹ She has been encouraged to observe and participate in an emerging “method that recognizes Indian people as experts of their own histories rather than as sources for ours.” Although Barber recognized a robust public interest in the activities of the Center for Columbia River History, she also noted some barriers to greater engagement between academics and public audiences on river issues: the lack of time and money, the deadening effect of red herring positions which posit all or nothing solutions to river problems, distant management institutions which close out public interest, the depressing sense that river history is all bad news, and, finally, nostalgia which clouds critical thinking about the past and invites a form of forgetting. Barber argued in favor of more collaborative work, between academics and communities and between institutions near and far.

Charles Jago, a Professor of History at the University of Northern British Columbia and that institution’s former President (1995-2006), followed by reflecting on his diverse experience with several different public institutions managing river issues, including the Nechako Environmental Enhancement Fund, a three-person commission that sought to resolve long-standing conflicts over the damming of the Nechako River, as well as the Fraser Basin Council, which he serves as chair, a basin-wide institution that draws different stakeholder groups, levels of government and first nations together to promote and coordinate sustainability aimed at social, economic and environmental well-being.¹⁰ While the first experience revealed the divisive potential of river issues and river history, the second has opened the opportunity to see rivers as sites of consensus and potential harmony. Nevertheless, he argued, there is a challenge to engage different communities to see the river beyond one location or set of issues, to transcend jurisdictional boundaries and to take a basin-wide approach to sustainability issues. Lower mainland communities, for example, may view the pine beetle outbreak in the north and interior as a distant issue, but it is one which will bear downstream effects on the Fraser and other rivers as changes

and/or how do you think this should be done? Have there been important examples of academic engagement in public river history that should be brought to wider attention? What are the barriers to public engagement? What conditions facilitate it? If you had an unlimited budget and release time from your primary job, what would be the public river history project that you would launch? What would be your aims? What media would you choose?

⁹ See Barber’s *Death of Celilo Falls* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005) and the Center for Columbia River History: <http://www.ccrh.org/>

¹⁰ See: www.fraserbasin.bc.ca

in forest ecosystems impact river flow. Rivers, he reminded participants, unite us in sometimes surprising ways.

Jennifer Bonnell, a PhD student at the Ontario Institute in Studies in Education, took the discussion in an eastward and urban direction by explaining the development of her own research program on the Don River. Although her project is primarily based on archival research, she has found a lively public interest in her work: in Toronto the Don inspires a vivid urban environmental imagination and interested groups and individuals demonstrate a strong sense of ownership about the river and a profound local expertise about its many facets. The river's role in the city, she argued, has been diverse and sometimes paradoxical. Apart from its uses for water and power or as a transportation corridor, over time the river has been valued as a beauty spot, a source of moral regeneration and a wild place, while treated also as a dumping ground for pollution and as a rough space for the homeless. Its position within the city has made it a barrier to east-west communication and occasionally a daunting environmental force delivering floods, ice jams and silt. Like Barber, Bonnell described her role partly as explaining how the Don has changed over time to challenge a sense of inevitability around its history. She also suggested that she hopes to provide a new synthetic understanding tied to the local scene but also set within a broader set of processes. Among the many ways to promote public engagement, Bonnell noted the possibilities for place-based computing, as has been developed by Bill Turkel and his colleagues at the University of Western Ontario.¹¹

Matthew Hatvany, a Professor of Geography, at the Université Laval explained the course of his own research on the historical geography of the wetlands of the lower St Lawrence River and considered, in this context, the claims of public memory and the difficulties of representing or understanding the myriad human experiences of the river over time.¹² In the Quebec context, he argued, current understandings are often defined by a managerial approach which seeks to shape rather than reflect public understandings and debates. In a recent example drawn from Quebec City, for example, he noted the erasure of names for a cove in the extension of the Champlain promenade. Here, the pressures of a tourist economy and a top-down approach to planning have re-directed public memory. The history of colonization on the river, however, is far more complex and dynamic than such public commemorations would suggest. He saw a strong potential role for historical scholars to challenge official understandings by doing more to integrate the work of natural scientists and local historians, two groups that rarely interact. In all of this work, he underlined, the capacity to integrate nature and society in the history of rivers is crucial.

Session Three: Rivers and Public Memory

After addressing the role of academic research in public history, the discussion turned to consider how we might think about public memory and rivers.¹³

¹¹ See: <http://digitalhistory.uwo.ca/pbc/>

¹² Matthew Hatvany, *Marshlands. Four centuries of change on the shores of the St. Lawrence* (Ste Foy: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, Les Éditions de L'IQRC, 2003)

¹³ These questions were: People remember rivers and their lives along rivers, they tell stories about rivers, and they are also asked through various public history events/exhibits and commemorations to remember

Julie Cruikshank situated her remarks in the northwest section of the continent where Alaska, the Yukon Territory and British Columbia intersect and where the Alsek, Tatshenshini and Yukon Rivers have provided an important context for her long-term research program in oral and cultural history.¹⁴ Cruikshank stated her interest in the embedded understandings of glaciers and rivers which inform perception and shape social practices over time both within groups and from competing perspectives. The very language used to express the idea of glacier points to profound differences. In Athapaskan languages glaciers are more frequently described with verbs emphasizing movement, action and sentience, whereas in English the use of nouns highlights glaciers as things out there. Cruikshank also remarked on the multiple spatial scales which have shaped human relations with rivers. Citing Hugh Raffles' important re-statement of Bruno Latour on railways that rivers are "'local at all points' while being definitively, unstopably trans-local," she explained how rivers need to be thought about also as places, always in the process of being made.¹⁵ She illustrated these points by examining the different meanings of place and rivers that have developed in the course of recent changes to transportation, tourism and parks management in the region. River places that were once known through use and practice have sometimes been forgotten by peoples excluded from Kluane National Park, while at the same time they have become integrated into new landscapes of recreational tourism and white-water rafting. The processes of place-making and forgetting, she explained, are complex, layered and closely linked.

Bill Layman, a public historian from Wenatchee, Washington, emphasized how people need stories about their surroundings and how rivers play an important part in these stories. Rivers are in us, he noted; humans are mostly water. Paraphrasing AA Milne (and Winnie the Pooh) he suggested that "rivers can teach us all we need to know." Layman proceeded to tell his own story of becoming engaged with the Columbia as a mythic idea while a youth growing up in Ohio, prompted by a postcard of "Indians fishing at Celilo Falls." He provided examples of his recent attempts to engage a wide public audience in the history of the Columbia River through book projects, museum exhibits and theatrical performances.¹⁶ With the North Central Washington Playback Theatre Company, for example, he has worked with audiences who have experienced displacement from large dam projects and sought to interpret their stories in performance.

rivers in particular ways. The following questions seek to explore these different ways of remembering rivers. How has your work sought to come to grips with the way people remember rivers? Why have you sought to explore this subject? What is at stake for you? Why do people remember rivers? How do rivers come to be talked about over time? How does spatial scale affect public memories of rivers? That is, do people remember rivers locally, regionally, nationally, internationally, or in some complex mixture of scales? Why does this matter? Have you been involved in any project which asked people to learn about river history or heritage? Did this project seek to resurrect memories of rivers, and if so, to what ends? Should academics attend more carefully to river memories in constructing river histories?

¹⁴ See, for example, *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Hugh Raffles, *In Amazonia: A Natural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 181-182.

¹⁶ See, for example, *Native River: The Columbia Remembered* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 2002), *River of Memory: The Everlasting Columbia* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006) and the website for the River of Memory Exhibit, <http://www.wvmcc.org/rom/index.html>

In each of these settings Layman has sought to help people remember the river and to restore something that has gone from their lives.

Lorne Hammond, a history curator at the Royal British Columbia Museum, sought to explain an innovative attempt in the Living Landscapes Project to share the authority of an important institution with local communities in British Columbia.¹⁷ Through a granting process that made funds available to local groups wishing to contribute to a major exhibit with a traveling (and changing) format, the project sought to provide a context for local communities to find significance in the community and at the same time educate that community. A series of public openings with tie-ins to area schools gave the exhibit a wide audience as it moved about the province. Hammond found this process exhilarating and surprising. One never could tell what might appear in the exhibit, from lamas to leg-hold traps. He also found it interesting which stories became better told through the exhibits and which went largely unmentioned. Hammond also offered some discursive reflections on how public memories of rivers change over time, depending upon dominant modes of transportation and communications. He also provided some other examples of innovative museum displays from Louisiana and Minnesota that seek to engage audiences about their relationship with rivers.

Joy Parr framed her comments around a project she has been conducting for several years on the impact of mega-projects on surrounding communities.¹⁸ She sought to intervene in the preceding discussion, however, to question a recurring idea that a primary responsibility of historians is to tell stories about rivers and their communities. This emphasis on narrative, she argued, was important, but risked ignoring a whole realm of human experience which could not be expressed in words. "We know more than we can tell," she observed, quoting Michael Polanyi, and citing the work of Mark Hansen.¹⁹ Parr raised several examples from her work on the St John, St Lawrence and Columbia Rivers to highlight the important sense of loss experienced by displaced people. Large dams have not only changed water flows and the look of places, but also the understanding of place known through other senses of smell, hearing and touch. This literal and figurative displacement has frequently undermined a sense of competence in those affected. Such people have faced a stark realization: "If I am here, therefore I am. If here is gone, who am I?" Parr also considered the difficulties she has faced in learning about sensuous understandings of place. Interview subjects often provided screen memories when asked about lost places, but sometimes deepened their descriptions when there was time for reflection and for viewing interview transcripts. Transcripts, of course, raised difficulties all their own. They translated a conversation into words and in the process lost notes of hesitation, awkwardness and emphasis. She also shared some important cases of people reclaiming their memories and reacting to official attempts to commemorate local landscapes. Parr viewed these activities less as acts of nostalgia than as acts of grief for a whole lost realm of experience and place.

¹⁷ www.livinglandscapes.bc.ca

¹⁸ See Parr's mega projects website: <http://megaprojects.fims.uwo.ca/> and "Smells Like?: Sources of Uncertainty in the History of a Great Lakes Environment." *Environmental History* (April 2006): 282-312.

¹⁹ Michale Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 4; Mark Hansen, *Embodying Technesis: Technology Beyond Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000)

Session Three: Reflections and Redirections

How to draw these various confluences to a conclusion? Laura Cameron and Stephen Bocking reflected on the discussion by highlighting some of its central questions and concerns and raising questions to take away.

Laura Cameron began by reminding us that we are thinking about river history while living with rivers *now*, in a period of enormous uncertainty and anxiety about climate change and with a profound legacy of environmental modification through large dams, and other river structures. We could have framed the workshop in terms of crisis, she observed, but instead the accent seemed to be placed more often on strengthening connections between rivers and people, emphasizing collaboration, oral history and speaking with rather than for communities. All of this raised questions, she noted, that have only been partially addressed about which rivers, which publics and what purposes should be our individual and collective focus. In general, the workshop raised profound questions about authority, positionality and situated knowledge. In drawing out some commonalities in the discussion, Cameron suggested that rivers are ‘good to think with’. This paraphrase of Claude Levi-Strauss, once removed, suggests how rivers provide an important and generative site for thinking not only about the physical forces in the landscape, but also cultural history, public memory, and the interactions among humans and the rest of nature at the broadest and most particular scales.²⁰ She invited the workshop to consider some closing questions: How do we address conflict? How do we understand rivers as processes rather than things? How do societies engage in acts of forgetting as well as remembering? How do we make local stories interesting to a broader audience? How do we use objects and the study of objects to connect people to rivers?

Stephen Bocking began his remarks by noting some of the common themes shared by public history, environmental history, and political debates about rivers. These include a view of rivers as a mingling of natural and cultural heritage – as expressions of how humans and nature mutually make the world. This idea was also expressed during the workshop in terms of the notion of the river embodying the memory of its landscape. Another common theme was the complementary and sometimes contradictory roles played by rivers: as archives of static knowledge and memories, while exemplifying action and change – as expressions, that is, of how a landscape is not just something that is, but something that acts. Similarly, just as rivers themselves change, so is their history constantly being reworked, through (for example) museum exhibits, assembly of heritage information, and collecting of Elders' accounts. Finally, another common theme was the shared value of stories, and their roles in forming common ground, in making memories, and in making sense of the world.

During the workshop a number of benefits of making connections between these diverse views of history were noted. One was the possibility of innovation, in the form of new

²⁰ She borrowed this phrase from Cruikshank who wrote in *Do Glaciers Listen* that glaciers are ‘good to think with.’

historical methods, forms of evidence, and communication strategies; these innovations illustrate the ability of other approaches to provide a critical perspective on historical practice. These connections can also encourage new ways of thinking about rivers and nature, such as the notion of rivers as both animate themselves, and animating their landscapes; or of thinking of the history of rivers in terms of contingent possibilities – the idea that there are always other possible stories about rivers, with no outcomes inevitable. Connections between public concerns, and knowledge of history and the environment are also valuable, as are connections between history and politics – uncovering, for example, the historical dimensions of controversies involving climate change, water allocation, the impacts of transport projects, and other issues. Connections with history can also enhance the authority of local people, perhaps enabling academics to play a role in empowering communities.

However, these connections also imply various potential challenges or tensions. Some relate to divergent ways of seeing rivers: as a single unit, or in terms of distinct segments; and through different forms of evidence, such as artifactual versus oral versus written, the combining of which raises methodological and political challenges. Making these connections also implies challenges in terms of sharing authority – adjudicating, for example, between place-based and academic forms of knowledge. Other tensions are inherent between a consensual history of a community and multiple stories about places, and between change and the static identity of a region. Some practical challenges are also evident, such as the time and money required for cooperative approaches to history, the belief that the public is not interested in academic history, and the disincentives for academics to focus on local stories. There are also unresolved questions regarding audiences for stories: are these intended for newcomers (including tourists), or for those already there?

Finally, a few overall themes were evident in workshop contributions. One was the significance of power (of institutions, knowledge systems such as science, or academic history) in shaping views of rivers (for example, as ‘wild’ or as inhabited), and in shaping the purposes of heritage recovery. These forms of power are tied to power over rivers themselves. Another was boundaries, and their construction: between parts of rivers and ourselves, or between today and rivers in the past (as are formed when people forget).