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Batoche National Historic Site of Canada by Mark Calette

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There are approximately 8,000 visitors to the site each year, and they are welcomed and informed by a dedicated and knowledgeable staff of interpreters, some of whom are in period dress. The site requires, and has, other kinds of specialists, such as an equine expert. There are many special events from the end of May to early September, including a Victorian tea, an “Equine Extravaganza,” a binding and stoking demonstration, and threshing day. There are children’s summer day camps in July and August where they learn Victorian etiquette, make ice cream and butter, and help the hired man with chores.

Visitors to this site learn a great deal about rural life in this corner of Saskatchewan in the early twentieth century. But much more could be conveyed. Panels that were up until a few years ago based on the work of Dick, Clarke, and other Parks historians have been taken down. I was informed this was because of the restoration of the implement shed (where the panels were exhibited), because of problems with accuracy in the French translations, because visitors did not like to read that much and because of unspecified issues of “political correctness.” There is a pamphlet that covers selected topics but superficially. There is a celebratory emphasis on a simpler, happier time, and on the achievements of Motherwell—his service, dedication, and defense of Western Canadian and agrarian interests. There is little for those who want to dig deeper. The site could draw more effectively not only on the wealth of research completed in the 1970s and 1980s specifically for the site, but also on more up-to-date research on Western Canadian history.

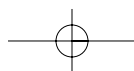
SARAH CARTER

University of Alberta

Batoche National Historic Site of Canada, Parks Canada, Batoche, Saskatchewan. MARK CALETTE, site manager.

Batoche National Historic Site is a gem in the Parks Canada crown, but one that could use a little shining. Located approximately one hour’s drive north of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, on the lush rolling hills adjoining the South Saskatchewan River, the site presents visitors with two major historical narratives: the first bearing on Canadian progress and nation building, and the second espousing the Métis community’s separate history and struggle to persist. These are brought together through interpretation of the last battle of the Northwest Rebellion of 1885. It was here at Batoche that Louis Riel established the headquarters for his Metis provisional government, and here that Canadian forces under General Middleton defeated those under Gabriel Dumont’s command who sought to protect their lands and land tenure system from eastern encroachments.

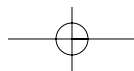
Batoche is a large site (thirty-six hectares) that is open to the public on a seasonal basis and draws roughly 8,000 visitors per year. As with many Parks Canada heritage sites, Batoche has a range of physical anchors around which



interpretive programs revolve. As such, visitors should plan on spending more than an hour, and even then they will only see the site's highlights: a multimedia centre; a museum gallery; heritage buildings (most notably the Catholic rectory and church with its still visible bullet holes revealing where Canada's military made the world's first combat use of a gatling gun); a cemetery where the bodies of Métis and Canadian combatants of 1885 lie alongside the more recently deceased members of the still existing adjacent Métis community; the trenches and Zareba of General Middleton's encampment; Métis rifle pits; and foundational remains of the original Métis village and its associated French-style "river lot" system. The staff and management, likewise, are to be congratulated. They are highly motivated and keen to participate in what they describe as "the many voices approach" to heritage communication. They proudly refer to the role Métis elders have recently played in helping develop and clarify interpretive messages, and they are pleased with the relationship and collaboration they are nurturing with the Gabriel Dumont Institute.

The human and physical resources, in short, are remarkable, and the historical interpretive opportunities almost limitless, linking, as they do, contemporary Aboriginal political and social issues with key events in Canadian national, military, and social history. Of special note are the walking tours where staff dressed in either Parks Canada uniforms or period costumes guide guests to the site's various historical highlights. Also impressive is the modern Visitor Orientation Centre where, among other things, guests can purchase two well-researched, illustrated, and accessible (though dated) books describing specific aspects of the site's history: Walter Hildebrant's 1985 work *The Battle of Batoche British: Small Warfare and the Entrenched Métis*, and Diane Payment's 1990 book *The Free People—Otipemisiwak: Batoche, Saskatchewan 1870–1930*. But it is within the underlying interpretive message that opportunities principally exist for updates and improvement in the Batoche programme, for though by and large neither historically inaccurate nor culturally insensitive, they are presented in such a way as to absolve mainstream Canadian society of its historic and ongoing complicity in the marginalization of Métis people and the alienation of Métis land and resources. Nowhere is this more evident than in the once award-winning but now dated multimedia presentation.

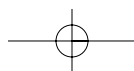
The approximately forty minute-long multimedia presentation describing the 1885 battle at Batoche and its legacy is the first interpretive opportunity visitors encounter on entering the Batoche site. Staff and management are rightfully proud of its striking visuals, engaging theatrics, choreographed sound and Foley works, and emotionally gripping storyline. The presentation consists primarily of a series of vocal over-dubs associated with different historical figures portrayed by life-size mannequins hidden behind a giant fine-mesh screen. When a character speaks, lights illuminate the figure and the scene through the screen. These frozen actors are complemented by a series of short film clips showing live performers in historical re-enactments.



Visually stunning and emotionally engaging, the multimedia presentation, nonetheless, presents a view of Canadian history through the lens of colonialist alibi or apology.

The interpretive dilemma confronting Batoche has likewise stymied others interested in presenting tension-fraught history to audiences who do not necessarily appreciate being implicated in the legacies of such happenings. The movie *Little Big Man* (1970), for example, is still regarded as one of the best Hollywood films ever made about Aboriginal people and Native-newcomer relations. And yet, for all its strengths, it too presents an apologist or colonial alibi perspective. *Little Big Man* tells the story of Aboriginal efforts to understand and accommodate non-Native newcomers to their land, and the malfeasance Euro-Americans provide in return. The historical message of *Little Big Man* could be, and should be, that European-descent newcomers systematically displaced Natives and alienated them from their land and that they justified this process through a standardized discourse of racism wrapped around such teleological notions as “Manifest Destiny.” This language in turn was used to rationalize and give life to official government policies and actions. But instead filmgoers are presented with nostalgic history and apologetic glimpses of what could have been, if only one or two things had gone differently. In *Little Big Man*, Natives are not displaced by the juggernaut of western modernity, but by westering individuals, most of whom are depicted as either mad or barbarous. George Custer, in particular, is represented as completely insane. Viewers are never challenged to contemplate society’s complicity in this brutal and tragic chapter in history, or to acknowledge that they today continue to benefit from the wrongs that were done to Aboriginal people in the past.

Likewise through the film at Batoche we are told the story of the battle against Métis people primarily through the eyes of a naïve young Anglo-Canadian soldier from Ontario, and we are left with the impression that here too, if only one or two things had gone differently, things might have turned out better for Métis people. Through the eyes of the soldier we are presented with what is essentially a coming of age story for the young primarily English-speaking Canadian nation. Confused and bewildered, the young soldier watches as British, French, and Aboriginal interests fight around him. Canadian politicians, who of course in reality created the political circumstances that led to the bloody conflict, are depicted in the Batoche film as aloof and disengaged from grassroots Canadian society. Indeed, unlike the young Ontarian foot soldier whose voice and accent are indistinguishable from any contemporary Canadian youth, politicians back in Ottawa speak with Scottish and English accents. The central character (and villain) of the film is General Middleton. Though not overtly insane like *Little Big Man*’s Custer, Batoche’s Middleton is similarly disengaged from reality. Bombastic and full of bluster, his exaggerated upper-class English accent immediately allows audiences to disassociate from his actions. Of course the historical Middleton and many Canadian politicians in 1885 did have British accents. The voices them-

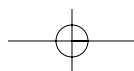


selves are not wrong, but their juxtaposition with the soldier, who sounds just like you or me, creates a duality that reinforces the notion that nineteenth-century Canadians were innocent of what contemporary historians have rightly determined were the racist and culturally insensitive (if not strictly illegal) Canadian policy and public attitudes in 1885. Through the overly British Middleton we are presented with an imperialistic view of history, and one in which Canadian troops are purportedly keen to fight. Through the voice of the young Canadian soldier, however, we learn that the troops are not at all eager for battle. Rather, they begrudgingly follow orders they know to be wrong; they are sad to learn of the plight of the Métis; and they think of General Middleton's actions as "a childish display."

In the end, rather than learning that the Battle of Batoche was the end result of Canadian policies and legislation created and implemented by Canadian politicians with the support and endorsement of the Canadian public (albeit with on-the-field British military leadership), viewers could be forgiven for thinking that if real Canadians, like those depicted by the young soldier, had been able to exercise their political influence, the Métis would never have been displaced from their river-lots, attacked in battle, and subsequently denied meaningful expressions of their Aboriginal rights.

Batoche is somewhat unique in Canadian history because the military was used against Aboriginal people, but in most other regards what happened at Batoche was typical of Canadian Native-newcomer relations. First Nations and Métis people all across Canada were systematically displaced from their lands, alienated from their ways of life, and denied the right to be genuinely self-governing, not because of quirky British leaders, but because that is what Canadian business, labor, and agriculture leaders, among others, wanted—and these people generally reflected the attitudes of other Canadians. As such, the Batoche site should challenge us to consider that perhaps it is not sufficient to feel sorry for Aboriginal people who were marginalized by overtly racist policies that skirted the spirit and intent of the Royal Proclamation of 1763 and other expressions of British Common Law that should have protected Aboriginal rights.

National historical sites, like Batoche, will inevitably wrestle with divergences between the major Aboriginal and non-Native narratives and perspectives. But competing voices is not necessarily a bad thing, and if done right can spark a whole new range of conversations with and among tourists and visitors. At Batoche exists the opportunity to remind visitors that it was not only the way that Native people were displaced that was wrong, it was the process of displacement itself. If First Nations people can somehow bear living on marginal reserve lands with inadequate infrastructure and economic resources, and Métis people can tolerate struggling along without a land base and with only the vaguest of recognized Aboriginal rights, surely it is not too much for non-Native visitors to Canada's principal heritage sites to come away reminded that the benefits they enjoy in terms of land and resources were created precisely because Canadian and American society historically



encouraged, accepted, and endorsed the actions of men like Middleton and Custer.

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I am indebted to Susan McKenzie, C/VH Coordinator at Batoche National Historical Site, for arranging my official visit to Batoche on September 19, 2007, and especially to Rose Mary Carey, who, without notice, stepped in for Ms. McKenzie and provided me with a behind the scenes tour of the site, substantial background material, and introductions to all the Batoche staff.

The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom, a traveling exhibit mounted by The Parks Canada Agency in cooperation with the Ontario Black History Society, launched at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Ontario (April 2002–ongoing)

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the northward migration of thousands of formerly enslaved African Americans seeking freedom resulted not only in the establishment of new Canadian settlements, but also in lasting influences on the fabric of Canadian political, legal, religious and cultural life. When the exhibit *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom* opened at Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum in April 2002, the intent was to bring this story and how it had affected the City of Toronto into mainstream historical presentation.

The genesis of the exhibition can be traced back to the fairly recent burst of interest in Underground Railroad history in both the United States and Canada and, more specifically to a larger initiative undertaken by the Parks Canada Agency to commemorate the importance of the Underground Railroad to Canada (see www.pc.gc.ca/canada/proj/cfc-ugrr). This, in turn, was a response to the United States National Park Service's *National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom*, an initiative to commemorate the history of the Underground Railroad both in the U.S. and in partnership with its neighbors to the north and south of its borders (see www.cr.nps.gov/ugrr).

The Underground Railroad exhibition remained at the Royal Ontario Museum throughout 2002, during which time it was visited by an estimated 330,000 people. It subsequently moved to another popular Toronto destination, Black Creek Pioneer Village, where it showed to enthusiastic crowds until 2006. Demand from other, smaller venues resulted in a traveling version of the exhibit being produced. This version has shown at the North American Black Historical Museum in Amherstburg, and at the Buxton Museum in North Buxton, both historic centres of Underground Railroad refugee settlement in southwestern Ontario.

The original exhibit is in an experiential theatre format, a twenty-five-minute multimedia show with audio, video projection, theatrical lighting effect, sets, and artifacts. It presents laser images of actors representing histor-

