

Appropriating the Past: Pageants, Politics, and the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between public commemoration and the construction of social and political identity in the period between the wars, through a case study of the historical pageants that played such a conspicuous part in the celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation in 1927. Nationalist elites in Ottawa attempted to exploit pageantry for nation-building purposes by disseminating selective images of the past, conforming to the officially approved themes of material progress, social harmony and political unity. At the local level, historical pageants were used to define and celebrate the community's links to the past, present and future, the contribution of different social groups to its development, and its relationship to the larger nation. By organizing and participating in the pageants and other civic rituals of the Jubilee year through their networks of voluntary associations, middle-class women consolidated their public role as guardians of collective memory and historical tradition. And for a number of important groups-

French-Canadian nationalists, British-Canadian imperialists, European immigrants and Native people, among others—a commemorative occasion intended to generate a common national consciousness ironically provided opportunities to affirm and celebrate competing sources of group loyalty and identity, through the use of historical representations that subverted the aims of federal organisers.

Résumé

Cet article explore les liens entre la commémoration publique et la formation d'une identité sociale et politique dans la période de l'entre-deux-guerres, en étudiant le cas des spectacles historiques à grand déploiement qui ont marqué le 60^e anniversaire de la Confédération, en 1927. L'élite nationaliste d'Ottawa a tenté d'exploiter ces célébrations pour renforcer la nation, en diffusant des images choisies du passé qui étaient conformes aux thèmes approuvés du progrès matériel, de l'harmonie sociale et de l'unité politique. À l'échelon local, les spectacles servaient à définir et à célébrer les liens de la collectivité avec le passé, le présent et l'avenir, la contribution des différents groupes sociaux au développement de cette collectivité, et son rôle dans la nation. En organisant des célébrations et d'autres événements par le truchement de leur réseau d'association de bénévoles, et en y participant, les femmes de la classe moyenne ont renforcé leur rôle public en tant que gardiennes de la mémoire collective et de la tradition historique. Ironiquement, pour certains groupes importants - notamment les nationalistes canadiens-français, les impérialistes canadiens-britanniques, les immigrants européens et les peuples autochtones - les fêtes commémoratives destinées à renforcer une identité différentes, en détournant ainsi les représentations historiques évoquées par les organisations fédérales.

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