

Neepawa's heritage tourism: Margaret Laurence's literary legacy

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Introduction

Heritage is known in ways utterly unlike history. It is sanctioned, not by proof, but by present day exploits. As Lowenthal (1996) points out, "no one in the fourteenth century would have thought to test the date of the Turin Shroud. What mattered was the shroud's current miraculous efficacy." The value of heritage is similarly gauged, not by critical tests, but by current potency. History is for all; heritage is for ourselves alone. It is presented as the secret, sometimes personal, history, created to generate, protect and/or enhance group interest. Heritage is sometimes equated with reliving the past. More often, it improves the past to suit present needs.

In North America, heritage has been promoted to requite economic and social angst and lost community. Preserving old towns and small rural communities, particularly in Middle America, is gaining mainstream supporters (Lowenthal 1996). Sustaining a legacy in stones, silos, family farms and mainstreet towns, requires stewardship. According to one United States National Endowment for the Arts annual award recipient, "We are the heritage" (Lowenthal 1996). Under labels like "folkways", "organic farmers", artisans, such as thatchers and cowboy balladeers, become living, national treasures, as these types of heritage in the U.S. can be sustained and commodified best in a living community.

Modern preoccupation with heritage dates from the 1980's, a time of strong conservatism characterized politically by Reagan's America, Thatcher's Britain and Mulroney's Canada. It manifested itself differently in different places. According to Lowenthal (1996),

Each country or region treats its newly inflated heritage concerns to be unique, reflecting some trait of character or circumstance, some spirit of veneration or revenge that is peculiarly its own. Some impute these concerns to patriotic ardor, some to nostalgia, others to mourning or celebrating.

Vaunting its own legacy, each place seems unaware of how strikingly concurrent it often is with those of its neighbors. For example, below is a typical list of unique heritage sites from relatively recent brochures from the Canadian Identity Cultural Development and Heritage Ministry (1997):

Chestnut canoes, cowboys, O Canada!, the Rocky Mountains, totem poles, wheat fields of the prairies, Peggy's Cove, moose, autumn leaves, mounted police, fishing villages, loons, northern lights, strong and free, maple syrup, Jack pine wilderness, Group of Seven, hockey, Inuit, toboggans and Anne of Green Gables, The Great Lakes...

These items are Canadian, but the resonant words and stress wilderness, national pride, ethnicity, and childhood typify heritage anywhere. American self-praise is equally sweeping, but punctuated by stronger ideological undertones than those found in Canadian heritage. This is reflected in the use of expressions such as: 'freedom-loving', 'hard-working', 'egalitarian', 'generous', 'civil liberty' and 'manifest destiny'; all qualities and attitudes which typify the American legacy in heritage tourism literature. The various ways in which these inflated national legacies are interpreted by visitors to the numerous tourist sites in Canada and the United States remains unknown, as heritage, a source of national identity and the 'past', continues to increase across North America.

Background to the Study of Literary Tourism as Heritage Tourism

Those who express a desire to experience this type of tourism are a relatively new legion. Heritage expands because more and more people now have a share in it. In literary tourism, for example, heritage is reconstructed, exclusive and biased in favor of the author. The period within which he/she wrote is usually glossed over. Exclusion and bias consolidate into a generalized version of the writer's past. Often, this revamped legacy of the writer reflects what people think of the present, or what they want it to be.

Today, people use this type of tourism experience to negotiate and redefine other social and cultural values. How is this so? The empirical material collected and discussed here is an attempt to answer this. It is drawn from responses to questions developed from a literary tourism survey used for Neepawa, Manitoba. The significance of the information learned by tourists, and the links that are made between this information and its broader meanings, become very interesting in the context of literary tourism. Survey questions and responses act as a catalyst for a whole range of social and cultural heritage issues. In brief, the findings from the one hundred and fifty three completed surveys included ideas of national/regional identity, exclusion of minority heritage, authenticity, the preservation of 'history,' and the contemporary significance of fictional prairie writers. In the case of the tourist town of Neepawa, Manitoba, tourist responses stated that the town's reconstructed heritage is not confined to Margaret Laurence's literary legacy and her childhood home, which is now a museum, is only one part of this town's heritage. In fact, Neepawa, outside this home, contains few 'signs' to indicate Laurence's literary associations with this place. As a result this town manages to symbolize, for their visitors, certain myths regarding the North America's frontier heritage and identity.

Margaret Laurence's 'Manawaka'

Her birthplace, the setting for Margaret Laurence's Manawaka canon and her final resting place, the small prairie town of Neepawa, Manitoba, has, since her death in 1987, received international recognition as a literary tourist attraction.

Though the many literary accomplishments of Margaret Laurence did not impact directly on the town of Neepawa's tourism industry until 1983, in 1975, Ivan Traill, then principal of the local school, invited Margaret Laurence to visit her home town and be honoured by its residents for her contribution to Canadian literature. In 1983, a Margaret Laurence Room was set up in the Neepawa Post Office building by the Viscount Cultural Council, an organization already dedicated to the promotion of events within Neepawa. Members of the Viscount Cultural Council were the first Neepawa residents to realize the importance of a tourist site which would honour their famous citizen. It was at this time that Dorothy Campbell-Henderson, founding member of both the Viscount Cultural Council and the MLH Committee, designed and published the first brochure (still used today) which stated "Margaret Laurence...a Prairie person at Heart." By 1985, when the Margaret Laurence exhibit of Laurence artifacts in the Post Office building had outgrown its room in the building's basement, some members from the Viscount Cultural Council branched out to form the MLH Committee.

The purchase and restoration of the Margaret Laurence Home commenced in 1985. At that time, the house at 312 First Avenue, which was built by Laurence's grandfather in 1895, was a boarding house for mentally handicapped girls. It was about to be sold to a developer, who planned to demolish the house. Laurence had lived in this house from 1936 until 1945, the year she left Neepawa to study at university. The house has come to symbolize in Laurence's novels, authority and power, along with the perseverance and intrepidity of pioneers like her grandfather. The Neepawa Area Development Corporation, dedicated to the tourist growth and promotion in the area, offered \$10,000 (Canadian) to any group interested in buying and developing the house. The MLH Committee decided to buy the \$40,000 (Canadian) house from Muriel Mackenzie in October 1985. Laurence herself showed a genuine concern for how the home restoration would develop. She wanted it to be used rather than become a stuffy museum. In 1986, Laurence wrote to the committee saying: "I was delighted to learn that the Old Simpson House has been purchased. It means a very great deal to me that the old brick house will remain in the town and

will survive.” (Margaret Laurence Newsletter 1992) She continued to donate many of her own artifacts to the Home’s museum until her death on January 5, 1987.

During the first years of renovations, the committee took in paying tenants (local artists) to offset the costs. The home’s kitchen became the temporary head office and showroom of the Viscount Cultural Council, which used the space to promote other local artists. The Viscount Cultural Council donated all of its collected Laurence artifacts and eventually moved into a building along Hamilton Street, called the Manawaka Gallery. This arrangement suited both organizations, as they now had the abundance of space needed to fulfill their particular mandates. Today, the kitchen operates as the Manawaka Books, Gifts and Souvenir Shop, and the parlour, now restored with hardwood flooring and antique furniture bought or donated from the local surrounding area, is the home of many of Laurence’s memorabilia and artifacts, which have since spread into the upstairs area. The home was designated a Provincial Heritage Site in 1989.

In 1991, a past committee president, Brian Curtis, convinced CBC Radio’s Peter Gzowski to interview him about the Margaret Laurence Home on his popular show “Morningside.” During the interview, Curtis mentioned that the committee was raising funds through private donations and the sale of Laurence’s own memoir, which had been posthumously published by McClelland and Stewart in 1989. The final payment on the mortgage of the house was then made through the sale of those five hundred hardback copies of Laurence’s *Dance on the Earth*, donated to the MLH Committee, in 1990, by McClelland and Stewart publishers.

On June 24, 1992, the MLH Committee burned the mortgage to the Margaret Laurence Home in a ceremony dedicated to Margaret Laurence’s contributions to the town. At this time, the then President, Lawrence Hargreaves, thanked, in the Margaret Laurence Newsletter, “all board members and other volunteers who helped make 1992, a success,” stating that, “We must continue to fulfill our mandate to promote, develop, and preserve historical biographical property, both real and personal, relating to Margaret Laurence and promote. . . education and tourism.” (Margaret Laurence Newsletter 1992) Earlier that year, the Laurence children,

David and Jocelyn, donated to the home, university robes, fourteen ceremonial hoods, honorary degrees and Laurence's old Remington typewriter on which she typed almost all of her novels.

In 1997, between May and October, the Home received over four thousand visitors between May and October, suggesting it has developed into a very popular spot for tourists. During the school year, tours are conducted for student classes from Winnipeg and other neighbouring cities. In October, 1996, Neepawa's Mayor, Roy McGillary, declared Margaret Laurence Week, commemorating Laurence's life and work. The week included a Gala Evening at the Neepawa Yellowhead Centre, video clips of the renowned author, and Canada Post's unveiling, in her honour, of a special postage stamp which featured the Margaret Laurence Home symbol. All proceeds from this event were directed towards the continued operation of the Home. Besides these one-time grand events, literary workshops, book launchings, Elder Hostel educational programs and conferences occur regularly and the MLH Committee raises funds from the local Neepawa residents through its annual antique auction held on the Home's front lawn. Proceeds from this annual event have traditionally been in the range of CAN \$5,000. As well, books and souvenirs are sold inside the home to offset the home's upkeep costs. The latest project, initiated by the Laurence Home Committee, is a plan to improve and expand the Home's wrap-around porch, in response to summer visitors' requests to sit and have tea there.

The popular and commercial tourist brochures for Manitoba and, in particular, the Yellowhead Highway Route, have, since the early 1980s, promoted the town's association with the famous Canadian writer and Neepawa's fifteen hundred varieties of flowers, "Lillaceae" (lily), available for viewing in July and August. Historically, the Lily Nook Festival took precedence over the Laurence Home as a tourist attraction. The last three years, however, have seen a dramatic increase in the popularity of Margaret Laurence's life and writings about the town. This rise in popularity coincides with the broader attempts of regional and provincial proponents of tourism to promote and preserve Manitoba's heritage. Popular tourist publications, since 1990, have marketed the provinces one hundred and fifty commemorative plaques, and over one hundred

and sixty museum and heritage sites. Prominent among them is the Margaret Laurence Home. The *Museums in Manitoba 1997* brochure highlights this marketing strategy with, “Manitoba’s museums offer a wonderful opportunity to experience the best of our memories and our rich heritage.” (The Association of Museums and the Ministry of Culture, Heritage and Citizenship 1997) Local visitor guides (in existence since 1993), created through advertisement space and published by members of the local Chamber of Commerce, now place Margaret Laurence on the front page, highlighting her former home as open to the public and containing much of her memorabilia. Other recent regional publications, developed out of the city of Winnipeg, also actively promote the town’s Margaret Laurence Home as a tourist destination. Commercial publications, such as the most recent 1997 publication, *An Architectural and Lily Walking Tour*, in collaboration with Neepawa’s Viscount Cultural Council, the Board of Directors for the Beautiful Plains Museum, the Historic Book Committee, McClelland and Stewart publishing house, the Margaret Laurence Home Committee, Chamber of Commerce, and the Legislative Library of Manitoba, produced an historical illustration and narrative of Neepawa, which incorporates the Margaret Laurence Home as both the childhood home of a famous Canadian author and an historical heritage building. Once concerned only with the alleged scandalous paragraphs from one of Laurence’s novels, tourism proponents have, particularly since her death in 1987, promoted both her status as a writer and her heritage connection with the town of Neepawa

Discussion of the Study

What has not taken place is an embracing of Laurence’s rich literary legacy and subsequent landmarks by the proponents of tourism at either the local, provincial or even the federal level. Margaret Laurence’s Neepawa, has yet to be reconstructed into a town that represents, for tourists, an assembly of literary sites that together create images of her Manawaka culture and society. Instead, only her childhood home provides an interpretation of Laurence’s own personal heritage, and even here, most of the

artifacts are not associated with Neepawa, directly. Tourist interpretations of what Neepawa more broadly represents for Canadians were ambivalent, with ‘small prairie town ideals and history’ being the most frequently stated response after remarks about the town’s connection with Laurence.

Visitors did, however, couple the Neepawa they encountered through Laurence’s literary connection with the many Canadian ancestors who had settled the prairie; for example, ‘this is the town of my people who gave it its rich cultural heritage and strong religious values.’ Many others commented on the importance of perpetuating a Canadian heritage through sites like these. Neepawa is ‘a part of Canadian culture and an important ingredient to Canadian heritage. Neepawa is Margaret Laurence as she brings it alive in her literary works’, and ‘the home of a Canadian writer that helped to put the prairies on the map’. The importance of Neepawa in relation to Canada’s broader national identity and heritage is prevalent throughout the responses. Laurence has become part of a wider symbolic system and, correspondingly, these interpretations even occurred cross-culturally. In Germany and Japan in particular, fascination with Margaret Laurence and her town of Neepawa continues to grow, to some extent because of wide spread fascination for rural Canada and the possibility of experiencing Laurence’s Manawaka firsthand.

The issue of notions of country was also expressed by respondents. In a larger sense, the touristic experience also helped people to fulfill certain understanding about the prairies in general and Canada in particular. Here again, both Laurence and the tourist’s exposure to the town itself were subsumed within a larger symbolic framework, as people negotiated literary associations to make some powerful statements about other social and cultural values. For example, Neepawa represented for some visitors ‘any town in prairie Canada’, ‘a friendly Canadian small town’, ‘our Canadian cultural heritage of the west’, and a ‘typical Canadian landscape’.

These ideas of Canada have their origins in other cultural traditions. Such traditions reflect an intricate combination of historical fact and myth, perpetuated and promoted, among other sources, through contemporary tourism literature. Because cultural approaches are about meanings and communication, the way that

Laurence has been incorporated into such defined ways of seeing the Canadian prairie provides graphic illustration of the various producers, consumers and interactions that underlie interpretations of literary tourism sites. As these meanings and values for Margaret Laurence intersect with wider cultural influences and sources, certain interpretations of what is Canadian prairie become accepted.

Valuing heritage as the very source of the past can create interesting facets of heritage pride and national vainglory associated with particular places. Lauding triumphs and lamenting tragedies, literary tourists from Neepawa claimed, in their expectations of this town a type of patriotism and national pride were very much in evidence. Comments described the representations of such a town as: 'quaint', 'strong and enduring', 'how settlers rooted themselves', 'beautiful', 'culturally representative of Canadian prairies', 'prosperous and clean', 'full of Canadian heritage of the west', 'a place of high culture because of Margaret Laurence', 'wheat bowl', 'typical close knit prairie communities', 'a Canadian landmark', These comments reflect not only images of Neepawa's heritage, but a heritage of the Canadian west and its inhabitants. Characteristics such as clean, upstanding, ordered, conservative and prosperous, resonate to punctuate the ideological undertones which have created an image of Canadian small town heritage. Words which stress qualities like unassuming, hard working, wheat bowl prairie inhabitants, typify the heritage of this region.

Conclusion

The issues of heritage and the literary sites of Laurence are inextricably linked. As demonstrated in the tourist responses to the various survey questions. Responses revealed the various ways Neepawa has been socially constructed to reflect a particular sense of the past. While history is never objective, always written from a specific point-of-view, history in the case of literary tourism is not simply interpretations of the past, based on some empirical evidence, but rather a fabrication of the past based on a writer's personal visions and imagination. In the case of Neepawa, Manitoba Margaret Laurence's childhood home and some of the details from

the settings of her fiction are offered up to visitors as integral parts of Canada's small town prairie heritage.

References

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