

# IN SMALL THINGS REMEMBERED: HISTORIC WATERCRAFT AND CANADA'S MARITIME HERITAGE

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The 1970s saw a resurgence of interest in traditional small craft in North America, due in large part to the dedicated work of a small number of individuals who were generally not members of the traditional, academic, maritime historical community. Has the burgeoning popularity and strength of the historical small craft movement affected the writing and researching of maritime history in North America generally, and in Canada in particular? The underlying assumptions about what is and is not maritime history are reflected both in the research produced and in the artifacts collected and documented by Canada's maritime museums.

Certain kinds of maritime artifacts are well-represented in collections, but others not at all. For many museums, this has been the result of a relatively random collecting policy. There is, at present, no national consensus on what constitutes the country's watercraft heritage which could serve to guide regional or local policy. For the writers of economically—and politically-based maritime history, ships and boats are often of secondary importance, examined as workplaces more than as items of historic technology in their own right. At the same time, large parts of the country's watercraft heritage still exist, in boathouses and at docks across the country, and what could not be collected by museums is at least susceptible to documentation.

Is it possible to unite these diverse activities around a single focus? Would it be possible to subject historic Canadian watercraft to the kind of full-scale scholarly treatment possible in a university context? Can those who hold the boats and those who write the country's maritime history be brought together productively? Could museums begin to support more actively the work of individual collectors and chroniclers of watercraft types, and commit themselves at least to documenting what they cannot collect? Can a national consensus and inventory be achieved for historic watercraft, a kind of endangered species list for maritime preservation? This article will examine the progress made since the mid-1970s in the study, care and use of historic watercraft and the contexts in which this has occurred, suggest directions for future work with small craft in Canada and reiterate the fundamental importance of small craft to Canada's maritime past.

Working in a museum, it is easy to forget where you are. This is not, however, a confirmation of the stereotype of the absent-minded curator. Instead, it is a recognition that the pragmatic necessities of staffing, budgeting and meeting deadlines often obscure the basic

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assumptions which museums make about the past and the way they characteristically understand it. As those who have worked with both museums and other kinds of heritage agencies will attest, the museum community has certain shared values and assumptions about what constitutes history and how it should be approached which are not necessarily the same as those of, say, a university history department.

One fundamental part of the museum ethos is the importance of the artifact and the recognition that the material remains of the past are primary sources for its understanding. This artifact-centred method goes most often by the name of material culture studies. Over the past two or three decades, spirited disputes have been waged between those who felt that history should be written primarily from textual sources and others who were convinced that the artifacts themselves held important clues to the past. Most frequently, the text people worked at universities, and the artifact people at museums. At times it seemed that the two sides were advocating an either/or solution: that only texts or only artifacts would be left as a means of comprehending the past when the fight was over. Like most such debates, the real issue was more complex than this dichotomy would indicate. The debate was eventually resolved through a recognition by both sides that each approach was necessary but not sufficient. For museums, which are the primary trustees of society's material culture, the debate helped to strengthen the sense that material culture was essentially their approach, that it was what they were best equipped to do.

Discussions of the purpose of museums often proceed no further than an acknowledgement that their work is important. In the kind of rhetoric often heard around budget time, the dominant metaphors are care, custodianship, preservation for the future, storehouses of the past, treasure troves and sometimes attics, as in the Smithsonian Institution's sobriquet, "the nation's attic." These are the kinds of metaphors with which no one wishes to be caught arguing—who, for instance, in this heritage- and culturally-conscious age, is prepared to stand up and say that the past does not matter? However, the effect of this accumulation of sacred truths is that the basic assumptions behind a museum's collection and stewardship of the material remains of the past are often not examined critically. We all acknowledge that the past is valuable, and we assume therefore that it must be good to save it in a museum.

In earlier eras, when the number of museums and museum professionals was smaller, simple physical attrition was an effective filter for what museums collected. Immutable physical laws, as recognized in Herreshoff's famous phrase that "wood was made to rot," ensured that the pool of material available to be collected was not too large. Now, though, with museum growth continuing at a rapid pace and with the technology available to capture ever-larger amounts of information about the past, we are approaching the point of being able to collect or document virtually everything about it. We are close, particularly in museums of popular and contemporary culture, to running out of the past, or at least radically re-working our definition of it. The focus of our collecting has shifted from pre-history, to antiquity, to history, to yesterday. More now than ever, when technical tools have improved dramatically in their ability to capture the past, museums need to examine critically exactly what it is they are collecting.

A good portion of the material culture now in our country's museums was acquired by what I call the Paddington Bear method. That is, it just arrived on the doorstep in a basket one morning, with a note saying: please take care of this artifact. Most collections have a few high points, some notorious low points, and a great deal in between. Most collection management has been devoted to working with the artifact after it enters the museum's care. There has yet

to be widespread recognition of the importance of overseeing the intake of artifacts into the collection, though we now appear to be entering an era of deaccessioning, as more and more museums attempt to rectify past errors in judgement. Where a concerted collecting strategy has been followed, it has often been the result of a personal vision on the part of the curator, which faltered after the individual was no longer there to guide acquisitions, so that the institution ended up with part of a good collection, but no knowledge or resources for finishing the job. Much as a house which was built in turn by anyone who happened to walk by, our museum collections bear the marks of many hands.

A frequently-stated assumption behind our museum collections is that they are there to be used to assemble an understanding of the past. Yet particularly in the case of the country's maritime collections, the picture of the past thus assembled is peculiar indeed. We have rudders, but no ships to go with them. We have binnacles, but no wheelhouses to house them. We have clothing, but no information about the person who wore it. We have boats, but know nothing about the persons who built or used them. We have pictures of ships, but no idea of their design, machinery or hull shape.

Even a cursory examination of my institution's collection, to take an example, will reveal that certain classes of material are drastically over-represented, a phenomenon I call: so many binnacles, so little time. For instance, do we really need, unless it has exceptional associative or relic value, to acquire another binnacle or another ship's wheel? We know how ships' wheels were built and used and we have a good sample size in statistical terms. How many other maritime museums in the country have large quantities of the old favourites, the binnacles, wheels and navigation lanterns? Much of our collection, so lovingly assembled, and looked after at such great expense, is in the final analysis only useful as window dressing for exhibits or for opening a marine curiosity shop.

It is readily apparent that a number of factors have skewed the composition of the material record that museums have assembled with such devotion. In many ways museum curators are like archaeologists, who of necessity work only with what survives and who therefore spend more time with durable stone and bone than with perishable food and cloth. But curators have an advantage over archaeologists in being able to control the deposition of material at their site or museum, thus enabling them to exercise judgement as they assemble the record of the past. In effect they work up, rather than down.

The first factor affecting the composition of the collections is simply that certain things are more likely to survive than others. This accounts, in part, for the relative proportions of brass and bronze bells as opposed to small wooden boats in our museums. The second factor affecting museum collection-building is what the public at large, the donors, consider valuable. For every model of Nelson's *Victory* that we are offered, we likely lose ten old journals or diaries which were simply discarded as junk. Because of our dependence upon artifacts brought in by the public, we stand to lose or gain by what we tell the public is important about maritime heritage. The predilections and areas of expertise of particular curators have also affected the composition of collections. There are many areas of Canadian maritime heritage which are simply waiting to be "discovered" and adopted by someone who will take them on. A third factor is the speed with which artifacts go from being ubiquitous to being virtually unknown. The small, workaday steam vessels, such as tugs and ferries, which serviced our harbours, are a case in point. Nothing could be further removed from the romance of the *Bluenose* or the grandeur of the *Titanic*, yet these workboats are a vital part of the overall heritage picture and

they are certainly far more representative of the workplaces of many mariners. We often fail to collect or document what we know best.

These same peculiarities in the assembled record hold generally true for large-scale maritime preservation as well. As John Carter, president of the Philadelphia Maritime Museum, pointed out in a recent article, a preponderance of the large historic vessels preserved in the United States are WWII-era naval vessels, yet at the same time "one could count the number of important large historic yachts preserved in the entire world on one hand." Battleships, destroyers, submarines and, surprisingly, lightships are very well represented in the country's collections, but entire other areas are wanting. On the Great Lakes, very few large vessels remain to document the early days of a distinct maritime form: the long, narrow Great Lake bulk carrier. The newest museum ship on the Lakes, the former Cleveland Cliffs steamer *William G. Mather*, now stands with a dismayingly small number of other ships to document a vitally important chapter in the development of North America is inland navigation.

All of these observations apply equally well to Canada, and to small watercraft as well as large. The record of historic small craft in Canada's maritime collections, and the state of knowledge about them, illustrates the same gaps and omissions, and the same biases, as the material record generally. Certain kinds of watercraft have fared relatively well. The Banks dory, for instance, is venerated and studied almost more as a social artifact than an historic watercraft, and its iconic cultural status ensures that it has received a great deal of attention. Less-mythologized forms, however, have at the same time perished almost entirely unstudied.

It is with regard to our historic small craft that the question of whether our maritime museum collections represent the full range and breadth of the country's maritime heritage becomes particularly acute. I would readily acknowledge that at present the answer to the question must be "no." However, something can be done. In the words of the noted American small craft historian John Gardner,

Small craft have a special role to play. Several circumstances have combined to place historic small craft in a strategic position for supporting and advancing the conservation aims of marine museums, which are central and basic to an acceptable museum program. Yet for the most part maritime historians have ignored small craft in their studies and plans, failing to recognize the potential, inherent in a well-conceived small craft program, for supporting and transmitting much that is valuable and useable from our maritime past.<sup>2</sup>

This call to arms was made in 1976 at the Second Annual Museum Conference on Small Craft. Has the maritime historical community heeded Gardner's admonition in the fifteen years since it was made? Have museums begun to collect and utilize the historical and interpretive potential inherent in small craft? Have small craft programmes become well-represented in the maritime preservation community, attracting an equal share of funding with large-scale ship reconstructions, such as those for the Columbus Quincentenary? Have maritime historians begun to get out of the office and spend more time with boats?

In a North American context, the answer to at least some of those questions would be a qualified "yes." It is maritime museums which have answered the call most strongly. Significant museum small craft collections have burgeoned to the point where a Union List of small craft

held by North American museums is in preparation, and its listings are growing rapidly. The so-called wooden boat renaissance, gathering speed when the 1976 meeting was held, has exploded into an industry. There is no surer index of this than the progress of *WoodenBoat* magazine, which has matured from a specialist journal into a mainstream magazine with an international circulation. So great has been its success that other publications have moved into the specialist, grass-roots territory which it has now vacated.

The annual Museum Conference on Small Craft, hosted in turn by different maritime museums in the United States and Canada, was transformed in 1987 into a distinct organization, the Museum Small Craft Association (M.S.C.A.), which numbers among its other projects the Union List referred to above. In Seattle, the Center for Wooden Boats has become a focus for historic small craft in the Pacific Northwest. Its collection of originals and reproductions, which visitors can rent and use on Lake Union, makes it in essence a museum which privileges interpretation and programming above all else: more like a museum, in fact, than many places which have the word carved in stone over their front door.

Several other programming initiatives are also underway. For example, a number of replicas of British, Spanish and American ships' boats have been constructed in the Pacific Northwest in preparation for the "Wake of the Explorers Reenactment Expedition" in 1992, and have been used for public programming and voyaging, often with an environmental theme. The Columbia River Maritime Museum has recently constructed a replica of a nineteenth-century sailing gillnetter, treating both the boat and its construction as a public programme.

As historians such as John Gardner have proven so ably, small craft have several signal advantages to assist maritime museums to meet their mandates. They can have great pragmatic appeal to museums facing ever-tighter funding restrictions. The cost of acquisition is often very low. Small craft restorations rarely turn into the massive capital projects required for larger vessels. They also lend themselves well to reproduction and water-based programming, and to the interpretation and teaching of the whole constellation of skills which go with their construction and operation. For the price of one coat of paint on a large historic vessel, a museum can construct and operate a whole fleet of reproduction watercraft based on boats in its collection. Small craft can also rescue museums from being stuck in the past, from being seen only to deal with things which occurred before, say, 1890. Someone looking for a small boat can be directed to a museum with a collection of small craft, and could well come away with building plans or an inspiration for something which will be both a piece of history and a good boat. In doing this, small craft are a means to foster the notion that heritage is not a curiosity but an ongoing part of society.

Small craft have not been neglected by researchers, although the bulk of this investigation has not been conducted by academics. Publication is imminent of the M.S.C.A.'s long-awaited field manual for lines-taking, entitled *Boats: A Manual for Their Documentation*. This text will be a crucial step in extending the range of watercraft documentation efforts beyond a museum's curatorial staff, who are often hard-pressed to perform as much research as they would like, by training a cadre of knowledgeable amateurs who can feed information back to the museum.

Individual watercraft types have been researched and published in monographs, as maritime historian Ben Fuller outlines in his forward to *Boats: A Manual for Their Documentation?* Dories, Friendship sloops, Adirondack guideboats, catboats, and canoes: for the majority of these boat types, researchers with in-depth knowledge have laid out their history, form,

construction and use. In several notable cases, a boat form has been subjected to a full-scale ethnographic treatment, which considers both technical aspects of design and construction along with its use and ethnographic context.<sup>4</sup> These investigations have followed the pioneering work of historian Howard Chapelle, who conducted much of his research under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution, where he was for many years Curator of Marine Transportation. Most researchers now working in this field readily acknowledge their debt to his work as published in now-classic texts, such as *American Small Sailing Craft*.

It will be evident from this brief summary that fair progress has been made in the research and interpretation of historic small craft in North America since the mid-1970s. Yet on the Canadian scene, the record is not quite as good. Canada has not to date produced a Gardner or a Chapelle, an historian and researcher who was able, by sheer intellectual force and volume of research to galvanize an entire area of study. Nor did Canada have this kind of researcher in the era when Chapelle began his work, the crucial first decades of the twentieth century when the material culture of the age of sail was still very much in evidence. There is no debating that much material from that era is now beyond the reach of documentation efforts. Some idea of the attrition rate for historic vessels may be gained from the fact that of the 426 vessels included in the 1936-1937 *Historic American Merchant Marine Survey* documentation project, precisely one is still extant fifty-five years later.<sup>5</sup> It would be only speculation as to what a similar ratio would be for smaller and more ephemeral craft.

Some initiatives are underway in Canada. In Victoria, the Maritime Museum of British Columbia has initiated its Vintage Vessel Registry (V.V.R.), which records vessels forty years of age or older, either built in B.C. or used there for at least forty years.<sup>6</sup> The Maritime Museum of the Atlantic has embarked on a province-wide survey of small craft types and builders. The National Museum of Science and Technology has commissioned several studies, including a national survey of significant small craft types. As always, there are also the private collectors and enthusiasts, some of whom have either published or will shortly be issuing their work on particular kinds of boats. Finally, support has also come in the form of publicity from Canada Post, which has now done two series of stamps, one featuring native watercraft and the other four small craft of national significance: the dory, the pointer, the York boat and the *canot du nord*.

Thus, Canadians appear to have answered Gardner's call in some measure. Nonetheless, I would contend that we still have not truly, in Gardner's words, "recognize[d] the potential, inherent in a well-conceived small craft program, for supporting and transmitting much that is valuable and usable from our maritime past." Where do we go from here?

The first task in ensuring the preservation and study of the country's small craft heritage is to collect and manage information about historic watercraft. In recent years the notion of what constitutes a museum collection has been expanded to include information as well as artifacts. By this I mean not just data in the traditional archival sense of written documents, but material pertaining to artifacts both collected and uncollected. The perennial shortage of museum storage space, and the large size of collections already accumulated, has meant that the acquisition of a given artifact is not the automatic decision it perhaps once was. In some cases, physical collection of an artifact may represent a failure of imagination on the museum's part, the most obvious but not necessarily the best solution. British Columbia's Vintage Vessel Registry reflects a recognition that there is much that a museum can do to

foster the preservation of heritage watercraft without necessarily assuming title. Ironically, many of the vessels are probably better off not being under the care of a museum.

Museums do not have an enviable record when it comes to the preservation of large historic ships. Although they often intervene for the best of motives, the record is filled with examples in which the museum's largest and latest acquisition has very rapidly turned into its most massive liability, in some cases almost literally sinking the institution. Successful heritage vessel projects are most often run by people who have a clear vision of the vessel's future uses and capabilities, as well as some management expertise. Time and again, museums and well-meaning societies of volunteers have found themselves in situations in which the best intentions in the world were not enough to rescue the project. The cruellest irony is that these failures invariably affect the vessel they set out to preserve. "But," I hear someone say, "doesn't your museum have a large historic tug?" We do indeed, and I give thanks every morning when I come to work that the vessel is made out of steel rather than wood. The truth is that her acquisition was a major struggle for the organization, and that difficult work continues with ongoing maintenance and restoration. I would certainly think very hard about a proposal to acquire another vessel of similar size, or one which was not such a simple and durable structure as a steel harbour tug.

If the museum's mission is to act in the long-term best interests of the artifact, then it must be recognized that in many cases a vessel maintained in active use in private hands is better off than one collected for posterity. If a museum can work with the community to foster such efforts through a recognition programme such as the V.V.R., as well as keeping a watching brief on selected vessels, then it will truly further the cause of maritime preservation. Similarly, documentary records can be collected through systematic fieldwork by museum staff and volunteers. The kind of grassroots training being conducted by the M.S.C.A. ensures that museums, by building up a network of trained and enthusiastic amateur fieldworkers (who are often amateurs *only* in the financial sense), can cover a much larger area than if it relied solely upon its own staff.

One model for this activity is architectural preservation. Like heritage watercraft, buildings are large, heavy, complex structures that do not lend themselves to being "collected" in the traditional sense, and which in many cases can have their long-term survival assured through historically-sensitive adaptive re-use. Recognition programmes, published inventories and catalogues, restoration grants and awards for exemplary projects are only some of the means by which buildings are incorporated into society's heritage fabric. Heritage buildings preserved in context lend texture to urban environments, just as historic watercraft in use and interpreted by museums enrich the public's experience and understanding of our maritime past. In both cases the artifacts, rather than being simply stored for the future, earn their living. As well, in both instances this activity occurs outside a museum. A significant step in this regard was taken last summer with the official recognition of the World War II Tribal-class destroyer H.M.C.S. *Halda* by the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board, which hopefully will set a precedent for the recognition of historic vessels. Similarly, in the United States the inclusion from the late 1970s of historic ships on the National Register of Historic Places has been of significant benefit to maritime preservation efforts.

The collection and management of this information is vital to museums if they are to make informed collection and preservation decisions.<sup>7</sup> It was partially the need for this kind of information which led to the creation of the National Maritime Initiative in the United States

in 1985.<sup>8</sup> This coordinating effort resulted in a central registry of both historic vessels and the efforts being made to preserve them, as well as a means of keeping track of the progress of particular projects. The M.S.C.A.'s Union List of Small Craft is another such resource. Work is also underway with the Canadian Heritage Information Network to establish national authority and vocabulary lists for maritime collections.

We need to establish targets for what is to be collected that are coordinated on a national level, an aim which is supported by area surveys such as that being carried out in Nova Scotia. As well, endangered species lists need to be set up and monitored for types of boats and for particular vessels. We all know how quickly a boat, especially a wooden one, can go from active use to being a hulk: one, two, or perhaps three seasons without going back in the water, often with inadequate storage, and the physical well-being of the artifact can be seriously threatened. The museum needs to function as a coordinating centre and a clearinghouse of information which connects owners with appreciators, funders, restorers and the rest of the historical community.

If the first task is to collect and manage the information, the second is surely to encourage the use of the data thus amassed. Historic small craft have much to tell us. The boats are worthy of study in and of themselves, as examples of design and engineering practices and construction techniques. Around each of these boats there is also a complex network of ideas, associations, causes and effects. The fundamental premise of a museum collection, that the artifacts are held in public trust for increased understanding and knowledge of the past, will only be validated if people come to use them. A resource which is carefully assembled for an undetermined future and lovingly tended but never utilized smacks of obscure antiquarianism, the very antithesis of the public history which museums frequently claim to practice.

At present, Canada's maritime museums have substantial artifact collections which together form part of the stuff of history. If they begin to work together more closely to share information, the collections will improve in range, quality and representativeness on a national scale. For instance, the notion of a national collection of historic watercraft should be expanded from a room full of things in a particular place to a usable information resource which can offer critical guidance to those charged with assembling the material record of history. But if museums assemble the history, they must also ensure that the record is read and studied. More emphasis needs to be placed on watercraft as objects of study in their own right, receiving the same diligent attention as changing wage rates for seamen in the Atlantic fishery, for instance, or the relative tonnages clearing from east coast ports. There is a tendency now to treat maritime history as a variation on the theme of land-based history generally, and to see workers as workers, regardless of where they were employed. While this approach provides a bulwark against old-fashioned maritime antiquarianism, and a useful corrective for the "romance of the sea" school, it also has its drawbacks. By ignoring the specificity of the ship or boat as a workplace, it factors out all that is unique about it, reducing a particular experience to a general one. As well, the vessel, the vehicle of that experience and the thing which by its very nature gives rise to a great many of the particularities of the historic experience of maritime labour, is relegated to a supporting role.

To put it bluntly, the history is in the boats, inherent in their very structure and in the accumulated associations of their design, construction and use. The real job of Canada's maritime museums and the maritime historical community is to ensure that the boats are also in the histories.



NOTES

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2. John Gardner, "New Directions in Small Craft Collection and Preservation," in *Wooden Shipbuilding and Small Craft Preservation* (Washington, D.C., 1976), 22.
3. Museum Small Craft Association, "Boats: A Manual for Their Documentation" (Unpublished manuscript, n.d.), 13-17.
4. See, for instance, David W. Zimmerly, *Hooper Bay Kayak Construction* (Ottawa, 1979), and Eugene Y. Arima, *A Contextual Study of the Caribou Eskimo Kayak* (Ottawa, 1975).
5. Richard K. Anderson, Jr., *Guidelines for Recording Historic Ships* (Washington, D.C., 1988).
6. John MacFarlane, "Towards a Vintage Vessel Registry for British Columbia," *ARGONAUTA*, VIII, No. 1 (January 1991), 4-8.
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8. James P. Delgado, "Grim Realities, High Hopes, Moderate Gains: The State of Historic Ship Preservation," *History News*, XLVI, No. 2 (March/April 1991), 10.