

# Cultural Tourism, Commemorative Plaques, and African-Canadian Historiography: Challenging Historical Marginality

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*Although Black Canadians have participated in the history of Canada since the European invasion, the study of Blacks in Ontario has been a marginalized historical endeavour. Recently the marketing of Black history as a tourist attraction has attempted to bring the African-Canadian experience to the attention of the general public. Commemorative plaques, erected by local historical societies and all three levels of government, including the Ontario Heritage Foundation of the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Tourism, form the backbone of these tours. The absence of plaques pertaining to experiences since the Civil War and the wording and viewpoint of many of the older plaques, however, do not do full justice to Blacks' role in the history of the province.*

*Même si les Noirs canadiens participent à l'histoire du Canada depuis l'invasion européenne, l'étude de la présence des Noirs en Ontario est demeurée une entreprise historique marginalisée. On a récemment tenté d'intéresser le grand public à l'expérience africo-canadienne en faisant le marketing touristique de l'histoire des Noirs dans certaines régions de l'Ontario. Des plaques commémoratives érigées par des sociétés historiques locales et les trois paliers de gouvernement, dont la Fondation du patrimoine ontarien, un organisme relevant du ministère de la Culture et du Tourisme de l'Ontario, sont la pierre angulaire de ces circuits. L'absence de plaques relatives à l'expérience des Noirs de l'Ontario depuis la guerre de Sécession de même que les messages et points de vue figurant sur bon nombre des plus vieilles plaques ne rendent toutefois pas justice au rôle des Noirs dans l'histoire de la province.*

ALTHOUGH BLACK CANADIANS have participated in the history of Canada since the European invasion, they have not fared well when it comes to mainstream history in Ontario, an area which has played a central role in the story of Blacks in Canada and where the majority of African Canadians now reside. In fact, the study of Blacks has really been a mar-

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ginalized historical endeavour, usually viewed as a weak eddy in the stronger current of ethnic history.

The latest effort to combat the marginality of the African-Canadian experience within the general history of Canada is the marketing of Black history as a tourist attraction. Commemorative plaques and other markers form the backbone of these tours, acting, in effect, as “proof-positive” of the importance of each site. Their use arises from the fact that many sites important to Black Canadian history no longer exist. These plaques have been erected by local historical societies and all three levels of government, including the Ontario Heritage Foundation (OHF), a sub-ministry of the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Because the major impetus behind this re-evaluation of African-Canadian history stems from local historical boards, tourist councils, and local political societies, it can be quite correctly deemed a grassroots movement.

### **African-Canadian Historiography**

This newest trend can best be put into perspective by a brief sketch of the evolution of African-Canadian historiography. The arrival of Blacks to Canada in any appreciable number can be seen as taking place in two eras. The first was the “refugee period” and encompassed the immigration of Blacks to Canada prior to 1861. This period comprised two distinct phases. The first dealt with the coming of the Black United Empire Loyalists from the United States after the American Revolution and the settlement of Maroons from Jamaica in the late eighteenth century. The second phase of the refugee period was probably the most famous epoch of African-Canadian history: the influx of around 20,000 Blacks who came to Canada to escape either the institution of slavery or the repressive “Black Codes” that became law in many northern states in antebellum America.<sup>1</sup>

The second era of Black immigration to Canada can be called the “labour era” and was characterized by economically motivated relocation as opposed to flight from oppression. Immigration during this era took place almost wholly in the twentieth century. Although small numbers of Blacks came to Canada in the early decades to work as domestics, railway porters, or semi-skilled factory workers, the racial bias of federal government officials guaranteed that the vast amount of Black immigration came following 1960 when immigration policies were somewhat relaxed.<sup>2</sup>

1 The refugee era can really be extended to 1910, when a group of Black settlers from Oklahoma left their home state after the violent race riots of that year and came to Alberta. See Colin A. Thomson, *Blacks in Deep Snow: Black Pioneers in Canada* (Don Mills, Ont.: J. M. Dent, 1979) and “Dark Spots in Alberta”, *Alberta History*, vol. 25, no. 4 (Autumn 1977), pp. 30–35; Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1971), pp. 301–313.

2 For a more extensive treatment of Blacks in Canada, see Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*; Daniel Hill, *The Freedom Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada* (Agincourt: Book Society of Canada, 1981).

It is within this historical framework that writings on African Canadians have fallen, with the vast majority dealing almost exclusively with the refugee era. The reason for this focus is simple. Since most of the refugees came to Canada to escape the poisoned atmosphere of racism and violence in the United States, the study of this period allowed for a very favourable comparison of Canadian society and the “Queen’s justice” with that south of the border. In historical ventures, there is an almost smug sense of the superiority of not only Canadian law and the Canadian way of life, but also of the innate level of morality and tolerance among Canadians. The study of Blacks in Canada thus becomes less important for its Canadian relevance than as an interesting sideline to American history.

Probably the most representative example of this style of Black history can be found in the work of Fred Landon. Landon, a one-time librarian at the University of Western Ontario, published numerous papers between 1918 and 1960 dealing with Blacks in nineteenth-century Ontario and did much to pioneer the study of Blacks in Canada. He deserves to be remembered for legitimizing the field in both Canada and the United States. Yet Landon’s work also manifests many of the weaknesses of African-Canadian historiography.

First, his highly narrative work tends to simplify the field into a “good guy/bad guy” perspective of Blacks in Ontario. This, in turn, downplays the many problems that refugees faced once they arrived. After reading Landon, one is left with the distinct feeling that racism was forgotten once the border was crossed. Canada becomes a utopia in which Blacks prospered and worked side by side in harmony with their White neighbours. This perspective led to a highly idealized view of the era and spawned a false mythology that persists to this day.<sup>3</sup>

The second weakness that appears in the work of Landon and his ilk is that, while African Canadians are supposedly the subjects, they are largely voiceless. Except for a few “exceptional” Blacks, the refugees are portrayed as having little control over their lives and future and being dependent on the guidance of White leaders, philanthropists, and the Canadian population at large. In effect, Blacks are characterized as wards of Canada, being protected and uplifted by the Canadian way of life, a paternalistic viewpoint with an inherently racist tinge. Although it probably tells the reader more about the times in which it was written than about the author’s personal views, it still works to make Canadian Blacks seem more like objects than living, thinking human beings.<sup>4</sup>

3 For a sample of Landon’s writings, see Fred Landon, “The Buxton Settlement in Canada”, *Journal of Negro History*, vol. 3, no. 4 (October 1918), pp. 360–367, and “Social Conditions Among the Negroes in Upper Canada Before 1865”, *Ontario Historical Society*, vol. 22 (1925), pp. 144–161.

4 This paternal mentality is evident in Landon’s phrase, “Such is the earlier history of the experiment in Canada of taking bondmen and placing before them the opportunity not alone to make a living in freedom but also to rise in the social scale...” (“The Buxton Settlement in Canada”, p. 367).

The final problem might be the most important. By focusing exclusively upon the era prior to the American Civil War and ignoring the period beyond it, authors like Landon perform their greatest injustice to African Canadians. In effect, they create the appearance that the existence of Blacks in Canada was a temporary occurrence that ended with the Confederate surrender at Appomattox. The study of Black utopian settlements in southwestern Ontario and of famous Canadian abolitionists and the Underground Railroad is both interesting and important, but 1865 was not the end of the African-Canadian story; instead, it was only the close of an important chapter. By inferring that all of the country's Blacks were repatriated to the United States (because they do not deal with the experiences of those who stayed), Landon and others have done much to marginalize the role played by Blacks in Canada. Instead of being represented as proud members of this society, they appear as interlopers with little or no stake in the development of Canada.<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1950s and early 1960s there was a change in the tone of African-Canadian historiography, connected to the negative publicity arising from the racial unrest in the United States. The Black experience had come to centre stage and African Americans demanded more than the political and economic rights they had previously been denied. African Americans called for a re-evaluation of the role they played in the evolution of American history. They wanted an historical presence commensurate with their power in society. These demands (coupled with an interest in the "new social history") led to an explosion in the field of African-American history. The shock waves were felt north of the border, rekindling interest in the nearly forgotten field of African-Canadian history.<sup>6</sup>

The work of Robin Winks is an example of the renewed interest in the study of Blacks in Canada. *The Blacks in Canada: A History* represents the first attempt at a truly comprehensive chronicle of the Black experience in Canada from the first European settlement to the mid-twentieth century. Although it still remains the most useful scholarly work in the field, it also suffers from weaknesses inherent in the best comprehensive histories. At times it falters on both facts and analysis. More importantly, the voice of Blacks is often lost amid the focus on White activism, relegating Blacks to the capacity of passive recipients. Although Winks strips away at the myth of Canada as a place where Blacks were welcomed with open arms, he still does not allow African Americans much agency.<sup>7</sup>

5 Another author representing this view of African-Canadian history was Justice William Renwick Riddell, a contemporary of Landon. See Wm. R. Riddell, "Some References to Negroes in Upper Canada", *Ontario Historical Society*, vol. 19 (1922), pp. 144-146.

6 Of the early work of this new phase, see William and Jane Pease, "Uncle Tom and Clayton: Facts, Fiction, and Mystery", *Ontario History*, vol. 50, no. 2 (Spring 1958), pp. 61-73.

7 The same criticism applies to William and Jane Pease and Ged Martin. See William and Jane Pease, *Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America* (Wisconsin: The State Historical Society, 1963); Ged Martin, "British Officials and their Attitudes to the Negro Community in Canada, 1833-1861", *Ontario History*, vol. 66, no. 2 (June 1974), pp. 79-88.

Finally, while Winks's writings reflect the real racial hurdles that people of colour had to endure, he largely ignores the importance of historical continuity within the African-Canadian community. Rather Winks represents the post-refugee period of African-Canadian history as one of atrophy. In his view, Black-Canadian society and culture suffered a steady decline after the end of the Civil War when many people of colour returned south. It is as if a steady stream of African-American blood was needed to maintain any semblance of Black community north of the border.<sup>8</sup>

In the following decades writers began to examine the achievements of a few exceptional members of Canada's Black community. Although this approach gave a more central place to Black voices, its focus upon exceptional individuals still marginalized Black society as a whole. To a large degree, these exceptional people are viewed in a vacuum, separate from the rest of the Black community. Works by Daniel Hill, Donna Hill, and Dionne Brand fall into this category.<sup>9</sup>

The influence of American social history is perhaps most acute in the area of the Black community study. Unlike the previously mentioned works, this genre of historiography focuses on the collective nature of the African-Canadian experience and attempts to reconstruct Black culture. James Walker's *The Black Loyalists* is an example of this genre. Walker is able to recount the history of Nova Scotia's Black loyalist settlers from their appearance in the colony around 1783. In 1792, disgruntled with the poverty and racism they encountered in Nova Scotia, many of these settlers emigrated to the colony of Sierra Leone. Much of the author's work deals with the lives of these Blacks on both sides of the Atlantic, and therein lies its power.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike many other authors, Walker is able to provide details surrounding the everyday problems encountered by the Nova Scotian Black community. His analysis adds a sense of humanity to the subject, transcending the somewhat antiseptic atmosphere of politically oriented histories and those that focus only on exceptional Blacks. In this sense Walker's work is a major breakthrough in African-Canadian historiography.

From this brief analysis of the historiography of Blacks in Canada, two points should be stressed. First, it is evident that the field has been largely ignored by historians and is woefully underdeveloped. Second, newer avenues of historical investigation have yet to reach the popular level. When

8 The title of Winks's chapter on the post-bellum era is telling. Entitled "To the Nadir, 1865-1930", it is overly critical of the failures of African Canadians during this period. See Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, pp. 288-336.

9 Daniel Hill, *The Freedom Seekers*; Donna Hill, ed., *A Black Man's Toronto: The Reminiscences of Harry Gairey* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1981); Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Working Women in Ontario, 1920s to 1950s* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1991).

10 James Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1976).

it comes to African-Canadian history, it is the older school of historiography, one that centres on the refugee era and sees those migrants as consumers of Canadian fair-play and hospitality, that appears to have the most sway. This legacy is very apparent in the field of cultural tourism.

### **Cultural Tourism and the Ontario Heritage Foundation**

In Ontario, Black history is now for sale. The buyers are tourists, mainly of African-American extraction, who venture northward across the border with their wallets to sample the flavours of Black history that this province has to offer. The sellers are local governments, historical societies, businesses, and tourist boards. Located in the Chatham/Windsor corridor and the Niagara Peninsula, they see the proliferation of Black history tours as important to their regions. For some the motivation is altruistic: they just want to see an incredibly fascinating but largely forgotten facet of Canadian history disseminated beyond those already aware of it. For others, the motivation is strictly financial. In the Windsor region, for example, there have been 356 bus tours from the United States in the last few years, the majority coming in 1994. In fact, tourists of the region's Black history were responsible for the greatest percentage of overnight trips in the area prior to the opening of the Windsor casino. A further 100 or more tours were planned for the summer of 1995.<sup>11</sup>

In the Niagara peninsula, in only its second full year of cultural tourism, the number of visitors was smaller but still very important to the region. In 1994 the regional tourist council began "Niagara's Freedom Trail", an initiative that linked together a number of sites important to African-Canadian history. Maps, pamphlets, and a guidebook were also made available to tourists as support materials. Indeed, a permanent exhibit of African-Canadian history will be incorporated into the existing galleries at the St. Catharines Museum in an attempt to reflect the historical legacy of the region's people of colour while making the museum itself a necessary stop for cultural tourists.<sup>12</sup>

Of the 1,077 plaques unveiled to date by the OHF, only ten pertain directly to the field of Black history, erected between 1957 and 1995. Of this number, three plaques deal with the early refugee era (including both the American War of Independence and the War of 1812) and five with the Civil War era (1850 to 1865). When grouped thematically, four of the plaques commemorate places or events important to African-Canadian history and four deal with "exceptional" Blacks.<sup>13</sup>

In an analysis of the OHF's plaque programme, it becomes apparent that

11 These statistics were made available by Mr. Jude Kelly of the Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Culture.

12 These statistics were provided by the Region Niagara Tourist Council. In addition, the St. Catharines Museum is preparing a study guide of local Black history for students.

13 Of the plaques focusing upon individuals, four deal with men and two with women.

the commemorations can be separated into those that were erected before and after 1966. It is also clear that there is a temporal correlation between the civil rights movement in the United States and the erection of plaques prior to 1967. The first commemoration by the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario, the forerunner of the OHF, is a case in point. Entitled “Negro Burial Ground, 1830”, its text reads as follows:

Here stood a Baptist church erected in 1830 through the exertions of a former British soldier, John Oakley, who although white, became pastor of a predominantly negro congregation. In 1793 Upper Canada had passed an act forbidding further introduction of slaves and freeing the children of those in the colony at twenty-five. This was the first legislation of its kind in the British Empire. A long tradition of tolerance attracted refugee slaves to Niagara, many of whom lie buried here.

A number of interesting points arise from the wording of this plaque. The four sentences typify much that was wrong with earlier Black Canadian historiography of the refugee era. First, Blacks (whom the plaque supposedly commemorates) are barely even mentioned. Instead, the focus is placed on the exertions of John Oakley, the White pastor of the congregation. This is redolent of the paternalistic historiography of Landon and others. People of colour are effectively stripped of any agency and appear only as objects of White benevolence.

Secondly, over half of the text is devoted to what could be deemed nationalistic back-slapping, focusing first on the progressive anti-slavery legislation of John Graves Simcoe and then attesting to the “long tradition of tolerance” that brought Blacks to Upper Canada. The wording reflects a belief in the superiority of Anglo-Canadian to American justice, and it was probably no coincidence that the plaque was erected during a period in which race relations were becoming a political embarrassment for the United States.<sup>14</sup>

One final point deals with the terminology used in this plaque. Although most people of colour do not have any problem with the terms “Black” or “African Canadian”, the terms “Negro” or “Coloured” are seen at best as being outdated and at worst derogatory. Plaques such as these need updating.

<sup>14</sup> Simcoe’s Emancipation Act of 1793 was a piece of legislation aimed at ending the importation of slaves into the colony of Upper Canada. Although the act did cut off the supply of new slaves, it did not free a single one. One of the most overrated pieces of legislation in Ontario history, it was a compromise. Its opponents (merchants, the wealthy, and a number of farmers, all of whom were concerned with protecting their property rights) were able to maintain the status of those slaves already in the colony. Those who were born into slavery would remain in that state. Moreover, the legislation made it more difficult for an owner to free a slave. The importation of slaves was banned as of July 9, 1793. The children of slaves born after this date would receive their freedom at the age of 25. The act also limited the period of voluntary servitude to no more than nine years. See 33 George II c. 7, reprinted in Michael Power and Nancy Butler, *Freedom and Slavery in Niagara* (Niagara-on-the-Lake: Niagara Historical Society, 1993), pp. 33–39.

This becomes all the more important in light of the rising popularity of the Underground Railroad Tours among African Americans. The plaque programme is an integral part of these excursions, and, for many tourists, the outlook they form concerning past and present racial attitudes in this country will be largely determined by what they read on these monuments. Unlike some other forms of historical inquiry, ethnic history demands that a level of racial sensitivity be maintained and adapted as times dictate. The plaque programme is not exempt from this requirement.<sup>15</sup>

No more plaques dealing with Black history were dedicated by the OHF until the 1980s. By the time the next commemoration was erected in 1984, a definite change in both the orientation and the motivation of those behind the plaque programme was apparent. The plaque, entitled “Black Settlement in Oro Township”, reads as follows:

The only government-sponsored Black settlement in Upper Canada, the Oro community was established in 1819 to help secure the defence of the province’s northern frontier. Black veterans of the War of 1812 who could be enlisted to meet hostile forces advancing from Georgian Bay were offered land grants here. By 1831 nine had taken up residence along this road, called Wilberforce Street after the renowned British abolitionist. Bolstered by other Black settlers who had been attracted to the area, the community soon numbered about 100. The settlement eventually declined, however, as farmers discouraged by the poor soil and harsh climate gradually drifted away. Today only the African Episcopal Church erected near Edgar in 1849 remains as testament to this early Black community.

A number of differences between the wording of this plaque and earlier ones should be immediately apparent. Unlike the first example, the subject (the Black community at Oro) remains central. Moreover, by commemorating the settlement, the OHF has stepped away from the “great man” view of history. This plaque views the past from the bottom up.

Secondly, the Oro settlers are accorded a much greater sense of agency in this plaque than in the previous one. Although mention is made of the government’s sponsorship of the community, it is not written in a way that attributes all the activism to politicians. The government offered land, but it was the settlers who took the initiative to pioneer it. They also made the decision to drift away once the futility of the endeavour was realized. This may seem a small point to raise, but recognition of African Canadians’ agency in history is something sorely lacking in much of the historiography. Too often they are portrayed as wholly dependent upon the leadership and

15 Other plaques that were erected between 1957 and 1965 include: “John Brown’s Convention (1858)”, erected in 1958 at Chatham; “Reverend Anthony Burns (1834–1862)”, erected in 1964 at St. Catharines; “The Josiah Henson House”, erected in 1965 at Dresden; and “The Buxton Settlement”, erected in 1965 in Kent County.



largesse of White Canada, much as a flock of sheep is dependent upon the shepherd for its welfare. Such a representation is inaccurate. One cannot discount the fact that the decision by slaves to seek freedom in the North of the United States or Canada (under constant threat of death or mutilation) was in itself evidence of a desire to take control of their destiny.<sup>16</sup>

When examined as a group, the post-1984 plaques depart from earlier commemorations in their acknowledgement of gender. Although only two of the ten plaques deal with women, both were erected during this phase of commemoration. The first, to Harriet Tubman, one of the most famous conductors on the Underground Railroad, was unveiled in February 1993. The other, dedicated to Mary-Ann Shadd Cary, a leading abolitionist, newspaper editor, and lawyer, is the latest to be inscribed by the OHF. It was unveiled in February 1995.<sup>17</sup>

### Conclusion

How, then, does the Ontario government's plaque programme fare in the light of its important role in the burgeoning cultural tourism of southwestern Ontario? By and large there is room for improvement. Many of the older plaques need to be reworded, a necessity for this type of cultural endeavour. Yet it is good to see the OHF depart from the self-congratulatory history evident in the earlier plaques, more memorable for its positive representation of White Canada than for the insight it throws on the African-Canadian experience. Moreover, the OHF seems more willing to commemorate African-Canadian history on its own merits, not because of its importance to American history. Certainly the Oro township plaque reflects this emphasis.

By far the greatest weakness in the OHF's plaque programme is the absence of plaques dealing with the African-Ontario experience beyond the Civil War. This rupture creates some serious problems because it tends to minimize the role played by Blacks in the historical development of Canada. Such a charge is even more significant when aimed at an organization such as the OHF. Unlike many scholarly books that are open to the same criticism, the fruits of the plaque programme are consumed by the public and (in many cases) become the only history tourists encounter. The wording and perspective of a plaque can be a fundamental determinant of the way in which the public views the subject under scrutiny, especially when it deals with lesser-known aspects of Ontario history such as the contribution of Blacks. This is the major reason why the OHF must address this chronological imbalance.

16 Contemporary narratives of ex-slaves who escaped to Canada reflect this viewpoint. See Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee, or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Co., 1856).

17 The other post-1984 plaques include one dedicated to Richard Pierpoint, erected in 1985 at St. Catharines, and one to The Colored Corps, erected in 1995 on the Niagara Peninsula.