

Introduction

Niels Jannasch

I am indeed pleased to see an issue of *The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord* devoted to maritime museums. It is especially pleasant because I can remember only too well the 1950s and early 1960s when there were only a few maritime history collections in Canada; when the subject of maritime history was hardly taught in universities; and when publications such as *ARGONAUTA* and *The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord* were not even glimmers in the eyes of their founders.

The articles in this special issue are both a testimonial and an introduction to work under way in our museums. They describe four different aspects of present-day museology, covering presentation and interpretation, education, surveys and research and the adaptability of modern technology to museum needs. Having just returned from nearly four months at sea, I have not yet been able to study the manuscripts closely. For this reason I leave them to your judgement.

To provide some context, it may not be amiss to convey a few observations on maritime museums, institutions with which I was so intimately involved for many years. Looking back, this was an experience I am inclined to look upon now with a certain amount of nostalgia. Those early years (some have called them the "heroic years") were exciting despite untold problems in housing, staffing, financing and developing the collections - in other words, in gathering the material remnants of Canada's maritime past before they all disappeared south of the border or were consigned to the local dump.

During the 1970s and 1980s maritime museums became more-or-less established, with their own libraries and archives in larger and more suitable quarters. There was hope that once their basic needs had been filled maritime museums could finally embark on a proper course by carrying out serious curatorial research, the foundation of any good exhibit, publication or education programme. Here was the chance to catch up with the excellent work being undertaken by many European, especially Scandinavian, maritime museums.

Gregg Finley, that astute observer of the Canadian museum scene, wrote in his article, "Material History and Curatorship: Problems and Prospects" (*MUSE*, Autumn 1985), about "current trends which effectively relegate most historical interpretation in museums to mere storytelling, based on research that has already been published in books or articles." How true! And "if one accepts that the curator's first responsibility is to the collections and to collections-based research, everything else falls rather neatly into place." Moreover, he reminded us that "the role of caretaker, custodian, collector, connoisseur, public relation person, exhibit organizer, departmental administrator and author are all

predicated upon the assumption that the curator's professional activities are conceived and nourished through imaginative, museologically relevant research."

Gregg Finley has much more to say about the role of curatorship and I hope that at some point he will share his insights with readers of *The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord*. In the meantime, maritime museums should be assessing how close they have come to attaining Finley's goal. In any case I take it that he sees the curator as the nucleus or the heart of the museum. I could not agree with him more. While maritime museums have enlarged their staffs over the years by adding exhibit specialists, education officers, public relations personnel and many others, all of whom are necessary to run an up-to-date museum, they forgot to look after their hearts. As a result curators, overburdened by the increasing demands of growing collections, subsidiary staff, administrative duties and the public, find it ever more difficult to do original research. This situation is being aggravated by current economic trends which, in turn, put pressure on museums to be more self-sufficient and, at the same time, to make do with less staff. I can only hope that the governing bodies of maritime museums recognize the importance of curatorial positions and that they will not be endangered in the quest to reduce budgets — or possibly even be replaced by contract researchers. Such developments would transform maritime museums into theme parks or mere exhibition centres devoid of knowledgeable staff, a regressive step and a far cry from the vision (again expressed by Gregg Finley) of a fruitful partnership between historians and museums in an article "The Museum and the Historian," also published in *MUSE* during the 1970s.

Having mentioned theme parks and similar ideas I do not want to overlook the "new" approach to museums exemplified by the Museum of Civilisation in Ottawa. A costly flash in the pan, the Museum presents a model that I hope and pray will not be followed by maritime museums which, I trust, will remain islands of sanity and integrity in our hectic world. Certainly, they articulate a much more sensible future for museums!

I would also advise maritime museums to include more of Canada's present involvement *and* non-involvement with the sea and seafaring in their programmes. There is a danger in being trapped in the past, even a past as glorious in relative terms as Canada's. By including the contemporary scene maritime museums will not only flesh out the story but also acquire more weight with which to breast the potentially turbulent waters ahead.

Finally, let me conclude this brief introduction with one fervent wish. I hope that the relationship formed a few years ago between maritime museum curators and the Canadian Nautical Research Society will blossom and that more museum-related articles will grace the pages of *The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord* in the future. Both the curators and the remainder of the CNRS membership will benefit from such an interchange of ideas.

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