

REVIEW:

The Unnatural History of Stanley Park Exhibit, Vancouver Museum

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THE EERIE SOUND of creaking wood resonates above as you pass through the first room of the Unnatural History of Stanley Park exhibit at the Vancouver Museum. Triggered by motion sensors, the recordings from the winter of 2006-07 play through hidden speakers as you navigate between a series of geometric columns that represent the tangle of fallen trees and branches left by the last major windstorm event in Stanley Park (Figure 1). It is a stunning entrance to this smartly designed museum display.

In September 2008, the Vancouver Museum opened its Stanley Park exhibit to the public in both English and Chinese languages. Funded in part by the Community Care and Advancement Association (Johnny Kwan Hok Fong, Shek Kwong Leung, Cheng Jia Huang, Zhan Wei Hao, Hua Chen, Kwok Chun Yu, and Shun So) it continued until 15 February 2009.



Figure 1. The first room of the exhibit used sharp geometric columns to represent both the impact of the 2006-07 storms in Stanley Park and the greater argument about the artificiality of the park.



Figure 2 (i and ii) ABOVE AND RIGHT. The museum displayed an array of souvenirs and other physical artefacts related to the past of Stanley Park. These emphasized the ways in which humans historically used the park.



Figure 3 (i and ii) ABOVE AND BELOW. The postcard room was one of the most impressive parts of this exhibit. Many of these postcards came from a single donor, Peggy Imredy. She is the wife of sculptor Elek Imredy, who made “Girl in a Wetsuit,” the bronze statue located near Brockton Point in Stanley Park.





Figure 4. Vancouver sculptor Charles Marega designed the two lions that adorn the southern approach to the Lions Gate Bridge. Marega had hoped to produce his sculptures in marble, but in the context of the economic depression of the 1930s, he settled for concrete, a cheaper material.



Figure 5. While Stanley Park is home to many urban animals today, it was once the site of the city zoo. Polar bears, monkeys, penguins, and even bison have lived and died in Stanley Park.



Figure 6. Historical documents provide an unclear record of logging in Stanley Park prior to 1888, when the park opened to the public. While we know that several logging companies held timber leases that incorporated parts of what would become Stanley Park, historians have limited evidence to determine the extent to which the peninsula was logged in the nineteenth century.

After offering a virtual walking tour of the 2006-07 storm damage in the park, the exhibit continued with panels displaying information about previous storm events and restoration efforts. This section of the exhibit was most immediately relevant to the current debate over forest management in Stanley Park and highlighted the impact of windstorms in the park's history. Yet, the primary focus of this part of the display was on the restoration efforts in 1934 and 1962. It was intended to reveal the role that humans have played in reshaping the park's landscape. The remaining rooms displayed physical artefacts related to Stanley Park's past, including books, souvenirs, artwork, and a brilliant showcase of historical postcards (Figure 2 and Figure 3). This rich collection of material history complemented the exhibit's emphasis on the human impact on Stanley Park by demonstrating the long history of visual and literary representations of the park. This served to show not only how humans modified nature in Stanley Park but also how people have imposed

their own perceptions of nature on the park. Visitors were treated to a wide array of artefacts, including artwork by Emily Carr, some of the earliest tourist literature on Stanley Park, and an original model of one of Charles Marega's famed Lions, which now stand at the entrance to the southern approach of the Lions Gate Bridge (Figure 4). The final component of the exhibit was a collection of digital photographs and videos of the park drawn from the online photo-sharing website Flickr and the streaming video website YouTube. Visitors were encouraged to share their own photos and videos of the park through the Vancouver Museum's Flickr and YouTube pages. Curator Joan Seidl highlighted the storm history and material history of the park to illustrate the broader thesis of the exhibit: the artificiality of Stanley Park's environments. According to the museum's website, people have "interfered with, altered, and rearranged Stanley Park's forests, creatures, and people to make nature more 'natural.'"

In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that I wrote a doctoral dissertation on the environmental history of Stanley Park and that I am the author of two scholarly articles on its history. Standing in the first room of the exhibit on opening night was akin to witnessing a physical manifestation of my dissertation – as a museum display. The curator even used some of my research to construct the exhibit. So while my experience of the exhibit felt somewhat surreal, it provided me with an opportunity to think about the troubled relationship between academic research, public history, and public policy.

Having spent the better part of my doctoral training researching the history of this park, I was highly sensitive to the handful of inaccuracies in the exhibit's various information panels. For instance, the display on park animals (Figure 5) inaccurately states that the Park Board introduced grey squirrels to the park in 1914, after receiving a donation of Central Park grey squirrels from the New York City Park Commission. I found the statement disconcerting because the Park Board correspondence in the City of Vancouver Archives includes letters about grey squirrels written in March 1909 between Vancouver Park Board chairman Charles Tisdall and Manhattan Park commissioner Henry Smith. Smith did not, in fact, offer to ship grey squirrels from Central Park to Stanley Park but, instead, provided Tisdall with a list of other people who might be able to assist him in his quest for the now ubiquitous park critter. After corresponding with park officials in Baltimore, Tisdall contacted a game preserve company in Yardley, Pennsylvania, called Wenz & Mackensen, early in 1910 and ordered twenty-four grey squirrels on

behalf of the Vancouver Park Board. After nearly a year of delay, Wenz & Mackensen shipped twelve grey squirrels to Stanley Park along with a sixteen-dollar invoice. This may seem like a minor point, but it both illustrates a slip from the standards of precision expected of academic writing and suggests that a richer history than that presented here can be unearthed through archival research.¹

As an academic researcher, I was disappointed to find very few references to the historical source materials for the exhibit. At times, this lack of proper citation was misleading. The section on nineteenth-century logging on what would become Stanley Park created the impression that the peninsula had been extensively logged prior to its designation as a public park in 1887. This point was underlined by a series of historical photographs of loggers standing atop stumps and posing among newly felled trees in an extensive forest clearing. Having seen these images in the archives, I knew that none of them was taken in Stanley Park (Figure 6). They came from different parts of the province and merely served to illustrate what nineteenth-century logging might have looked like in Stanley Park. The problem is that the documentary record of logging on the peninsula does not match the photographs. We have very few records about logging in the area before 1887, and those we do have strongly suggest that its impact was minimal. Because the province's timber lease records do not indicate the amount of lumber removed from a given site, no historian can give a definitive assessment of the impact of nineteenth-century logging in the park. In fact, historical photographs and artwork of Stanley Park from the 1880s suggest that logging had a negligible impact on the visual landscape and an indeterminate effect on the ecology of the forest.² The exhibit also suggests that the Great

¹ City of Vancouver Archives (hereafter *cva*), Board of Parks and Recreation Fonds, Correspondence January–December 1909, 48-C-1, file 3; *cva*, Board of Parks and Recreation Fonds, Correspondence January–April 1910, 48-C-1, file 4; *cva*, Board of Parks and Recreation Fonds, Correspondence May–August 1910, 48-C-1, file 5; *cva*, Board of Parks and Recreation Fonds, Correspondence September–December 1910, 48-C-1, file 6.

² Lauchlan A. Hamilton's watercolours and sketches of the peninsula from 1885 do not show much visual evidence of logging. While it is possible that Hamilton omitted this evidence, it seems unlikely that he would have selected the peninsula as his subject had it not appeared densely forested, especially when the Burrard Inlet region held many other potential forested landscapes. Furthermore, Hamilton was an amateur landscape artist but a professional surveyor. He painted what would become Stanley Park at the same time that he drafted the first city survey. Given this context, it is likely that Hamilton sought to accurately capture the landscape of the Burrard Inlet area for both practical and artistic purposes. Hamilton produced several sketches and watercolour paintings of the peninsula that would become Stanley Park, and these are held in the City of Vancouver Archives. His artistic representations of the park are substantiated by the earliest photographic evidence from the 1880s. Photos of the park from its official opening in 1888 also fail to provide historians with much evidence

Fire of 1886 may have substantially altered the forest, but this, too, is contradicted by both the visual and documentary evidence from the 1880s. Fire suppression after the creation of the park probably had a greater impact on the ecology of the forest.³ And so the exhibit's claim that "the impact of logging led in part to a weakened forest, susceptible to the great blowdowns of 2006-2007" is a gross overstatement that cannot be substantiated in the historical record. Furthermore, without proper citations, these statements cannot be verified.

Given that the exhibit sought to explore the many ways in which humans have modified the environment of Stanley Park, it had one jarring omission. As Jean Barman's research makes abundantly clear, one of the largest Aboriginal villages in the Lower Mainland was located on the peninsula in prehistoric and historic times, yet its presence was hardly acknowledged in the exhibit.⁴ Over the course of more than a century, archaeologists have uncovered numerous artefacts and evidence of the indigenous history of Stanley Park. This research shows that humans have lived on the peninsula for at least three thousand years, that they cleared away parts of the forest, and that they harvested the resources of the surrounding marine environment.

Finally, I was left unsatisfied by what I regard as an oversimplification of the park's environmental history, which frames changes to the environment of the park within a natural/artificial dualism that obscures the more complicated relationship between human and non-human (natural) forces that, even to this day, continue to alter the appearance of Stanley Park. The exhibit did not adequately challenge or question our ideas about nature. If the park has been modified by people over time, how did that change our collective understanding of the meaning of nature in Stanley Park? Even though one panel notes that the forest of Stanley Park has "been drastically altered over time at the hands of loggers and Park staff and through natural events," the exhibit's overwhelming

of extensive logging. There are images of stumps that had clearly been cut by loggers (some of which can still be found in the park today), but the overwhelming collection of hundreds of photographs show the peninsula to be densely forested. Furthermore, descriptions of the peninsula from this period also emphasize a densely forested landscape rather than one that was substantially altered by logging.

³ The Great Fire of 1886 originated to the east of what would become Stanley Park. Photographs of the park entrance in the late 1880s do not show evidence of fire scars or a burned landscape. Most likely, the waters of Coal Harbour, which separated the peninsula from the rest of Vancouver at high tide, acted as a firebreak. For more on fire suppression and forest management in Stanley Park, see Sean Kheraj "Improving Nature: Remaking Stanley Park's Forest, 1888-1931" *BC Studies* 158 (2008): 63-90.

⁴ See Jean Barman, *Stanley Park's Secret: The Forgotten Families of Whoi Whoi, Kanaka Ranch and Brockton Point* (Vancouver: Harbour, 2005).

message was that the park is “unnatural.” By failing to disrupt the dichotomy between nature and culture this argument misses a substantial opportunity to examine the social construction of nature through the complex intermixing of the human and non-human (natural) forces that have long shaped this peninsula. This includes the deep geological history of a combination of diastrophism, sedimentation, volcanic intrusion, glaciation, and mass wasting that produced the now beloved peninsula we call Stanley Park. The public message of this exhibit was that humans “interfered” with nature and thus created an artificial park.

These critiques reflect training in environmental history rather than an education in public history. The exhibit did a fine job of emphasizing the human history of the park since the 1880s and portrayed aspects of Stanley Park’s past that have not received much attention to date. The sharp design of the different rooms and information panels was impressive but suffered from the need to distil and simplify the history of the park in order to appeal to a wide public audience. A mountain of footnotes and references, commonly found in scholarly writing, might have alienated that audience. However, the distillation of that story should be based on a foundation of archival research and nuanced analysis. This is the intersection at which academic historians and public historians need to meet.

Ultimately, this exhibit drew from, and could only be as good as, current published research. The display clearly depended upon parts of my research as well as work by Renisa Mawani, Jean Barman, and Robert A.J. McDonald.⁵ There was reference to the long storm history of Stanley Park, to the families who once lived within the park boundaries, and to debates over the reconstruction of Coal Harbour early in the twentieth century. But the academic research of historians was used strictly for *reference*. Because no historians were *consulted* in formulating the displays, the foundations of this exhibit were limited to the available published research on Stanley Park and lacked a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between humans and non-human nature.

I believe that historians can provide a very valuable service to public history (and their own research) by more actively engaging as consultants. There are, of course, many historians who do this, and environmental historians should be no exception. Yet, many academic historians are reluctant to become more active in the public realm, possibly out of a fear of being tainted by what Alan MacEachern has called “that most cursed

⁵ Renisa Mawani, “Imperial Legacies (Post) Colonial Identities: Law, Space and the Making of Stanley Park, 1859–2001” *Law Text Culture* 7 (2003): 98–141; Robert A.J. McDonald, “‘Holy Retreat’ or ‘Practical Breathing Spot’? Class Perceptions of Vancouver’s Stanley Park, 1910–1913” *Canadian Historical Review* 45, 2 (1984): 127–53.

of scholarly works: the commissioned history.⁶ As consultants, environmental historians need not (and should not) abandon their academic freedom; instead, we must use our academic freedom to assert more authority over questions about the public history of past environments and public policy regarding present environmental issues.

To this end, I participated in the Vancouver Park Board's effort to compose a new forest management plan for Stanley Park. The board's own records have poorly documented the history of this small forest, and forestry scientists have few tools to reconstruct that history with much accuracy. For instance, the history of the impact of storms on Stanley Park cannot be determined by scientific fieldwork alone. I contributed my own archival and historical newspaper research to demonstrate the regularity of windstorms in the Lower Mainland and their effect on the forest. Environmental history research provided basic information regarding past forestry practices, including underbrushing, tree-topping, reforestation, and the use of insecticides. I was even able to help uncover the earliest forest surveys of Stanley Park, which were buried in the Park Board's own records in the city archives. This historical research on Stanley Park offered the Park Board a better understanding how the environment of the park has changed since it opened in 1888 and how knowledge of the park's past should inform new policies.

As it turns out, environmental historians have a lot to offer as consultants for both public history and public policy. What we must do, however, is find more ways to connect our skills and expertise with those in our communities who are seeking a better understanding of past environments.

⁶ Alan MacEachern, *Natural Selections: National Parks in Atlantic Canada, 1935-1970* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 16.