

'Civilizing the warlike Indians:' A Confrontation of the Rutherford Library's Glyde Mural

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Abstract

The Glyde mural in the University of Alberta's Rutherford Library is a testament to the history of Alberta as it was understood by white society in the 1950s. A contemporary viewer described the painting as depicting "the civilizing influences in the early life of the Province." The prominent historical heroes in the mural represent the main institutions that were involved in this process of 'civilizing the savages'. An artefact of modern colonial racism, it has overshadowed the threshold of the library's South reading room since 1951. This article brings the ideas of several historical theorists to bear on the impact and implications of the historical memory invoked by the mural.

In 1951, the University of Alberta Alumni Magazine, *New Trails*, published an article on the opening of the new Rutherford Library. The enthusiastic author, Edith Park, recounts her tour of the building, stating that to be "vastly impressed" with the design and detail of the building would be an "Anglo-Saxon understatement."¹ Matter-of-factly placing herself in the white majority, Park gives a detailed description of the mural "dominating" the "magnificent" reading room lined with "oak panelling and walls of empire green" (now in Rutherford South). The accompanying plaque states that the mural was painted and donated to the

library by H.G. Glyde. According to Park, the composite work depicts “the civilizing influences in the early life of the Province,” especially the “Edmonton district around the period 1850-1870.”



H.G. Glyde, *Glyde Commemorative Mural*, 1957

In the foreground of the mural, Father Lacombe, a prominent Catholic Oblate of Mary Immaculate (OMI) missionary, stands over a group of seated Indian men in loincloths, he hold a crucifix in one hand and the flag of St. George in the other. Behind them, a York boat arrives at Fort Edmonton where a group of settlers are coming down the hill to meet the traders. On the left, a North-West Mounted Police officer stands by as Methodist missionary Reverend John McDougall preaches to a group of Indians on the outskirts of their encampment. The background hills are dotted with groups of tipis as well as

institutional buildings such as Fort Edmonton, a Morley church, the McDougall Church, and Father Lacombe's Chapel. Entitled "Alberta History" by the University Art Collection, the mural depicts the institution of white religious, economic, and judicial authority in Alberta.

The painter, Henry G. Glyde (1906-1998) was educated as an artist in England, arrived in Canada in 1935, and headed various art departments at post-secondary schools in Alberta until his retirement in 1966.² *The Canadian Encyclopedia* interprets his murals as "classical with sombre colours and figure groupings that are mythological and symbolic in mood and content."³ Biographer Patricia Ainslie described the involved process Glyde and several of his students undertook to produce this approximately 20'x8' work. She describes a "Canadian" rhythm in the otherwise "basically classical" mural, flowing "through the groups of figures and followed through in the undulating landscape."⁴ As the painter and donor of the mural in Rutherford South, Glyde occupied a position of institutional power and held the authority inherent in the founder and head of the University's Art Department.

To viewers in the 1950s, its chronicle of scenes represented the challenges faced by earlier settlers in

the developing province of Alberta.⁵ The painting captures a sense of the passage of time as figures move from the background into the foreground, from the past into the future. In the context of its unveiling on May 15, 1951, the mural took part in a triumphal narrative emphasizing progress towards an ideal of a White, civilized society. As an historical monument, this image tells a particular story of settler/native interaction, narrating the White conquest of an ‘untamed’ and ‘savage’ land. In this story, Catholic and Protestant white missionaries, supported by “the forces of law and order”⁶ as personified in the mounted officer, shoulder the “white man’s burden” to evangelize and educate the heathen, “warlike Indians.”⁷ The Hudson’s Bay Company outpost at Fort Edmonton led by Chief Factor John Rowand introduces a capitalist economy, trading furs for the amenities of a ‘civilized’ lifestyle.

The mural employs a binary dependent upon racial and civilizational difference. Whites and Indians are clearly distinguishable from each other by physical features, skin colour, and clothing. The Indians are generally placed below Whites, and face away from the viewer. The missionaries, on the other hand, face the future, arms upraised in the proclamation of truth. Similarly, the structures of the settler society occupy

the hills and higher ground with a sense of permanence. While the tepees are not yet peripheral, they are placed around the buildings and do not command the same presence as the solid wooden structures.

For a certain viewer, this mural would be a more or less accurate depiction of the past. The 'way of seeing' one must adopt in order to view the painting as historical closely parallels that of Herbert Butterfield's 'Whig historian.' Whig history attempts to connect the present with the past in a "combined process of organisation and abridgement" that maps out a "larger story" while ignoring or dismissing "exceptions in detail."⁸ A whiggish perspective "gives us a short cut through that maze of interactions by which the past was turned into our present."⁹ Butterfield maintains that the Whig historian "can exclude certain things on the ground that they have no direct bearing on the present," thereby removing "the most troublesome elements in the complexity" of history.¹⁰ For the Whig viewer, the mural would answer the question: "To whom must we be grateful for our [civilized society]?"¹¹ It opens windows onto the lives of 'great men' in Alberta's history. In this way, the mural "refuse[s] historical understanding to men whose attitude in the face of change" was contrary to

modernist conceptions of history.¹² For Butterfield, the proper question the ‘unbiased’ historian ought to ask of the past would not forbid the existence of other histories. Such a historian, while always mediated by his contemporary discourse, would not “keep his eye on the present” but rather try to understand the period of study on its own terms.¹³

As Steven Greenblatt stated in his introduction to *Marvelous Possessions*, it is difficult to deal with a subject without engaging with its terms. When translating the imagery of the mural into words, the vocabulary most suited to description must be contemporary and loaded with similar value. Words like ‘Indian’ and ‘civilized’ are not neutral; they “can never be detached from European projections.”¹⁴ Therefore, they are particularly appropriate in the context of this mural. However, when I describe the painting, the process of translation occurs in my present and must account for the shifts in the semantic fields of such signifiers between 1951 and 2009. The changes in Western colonial discourse and the emergence of postcolonial perspectives have added weight to such words. As Greenblatt suggests, historical vocabulary like the image of the ‘Indian’ (both picture and word) can only refer back to itself, that is, to the *European conception* of native peoples.

In this painting, one does not see Aboriginals nor First Nations people (themselves contested terms), but rather colonial representations of anonymous people who can only be named 'Indians.' In no way do I mean this insistence on the historicity of language to dilute the racism present in the mural. Rather, I am arguing that it can only be fully recognized if contextualized within the reigning discourse.

The Indians are clearly refused "historical understanding;"¹⁵ they receive a certain agency only by inhabiting the forms granted them by white imagination. The Indians depicted in the mural are scripted into pre-established roles that have little to do with their participation in historical events. The bodies, clothing, and attitudes assumed by the Indians in the mural, whether it is those bartering with furs on the left, reverently seated around Father Lacombe in the centre, or the muscular 'brave' on the right, all conform to Hollywood stereotypes. As several authors have suggested, White/Indian interactions are generally conceptualized within the possibilities available to them in the White mainstream popular discourse.¹⁶ For example, the "mythic West" invented by Hollywood participated and shaped the discourse as it "glorified the conquest and subordination of North America's indigenous populations," and "almost

without exception...conveyed unflattering portraits of Native people and distorted Indian history and culture.”¹⁷ On the other hand, while figures like Father Lacombe and John Rowand might not necessarily be portrayed ‘accurately’ in the mural, their representations hinge upon their presence as historical heroes of Alberta.¹⁸

The gender categories present in the painting are also important to consider because, as Joan Wallach Scott emphasizes, sex and gender are not historical elements exclusive to the institution of the family. Rather, gender is an “aspect of social organization...invoked and contested as part of many kinds of struggles for power.”¹⁹ While the main binary invoked by the mural separates people racially, a gender hierarchy is also implied. The White male figures are the main actors in the mural, commanding the most power, while the Indian men interact with them directly. In the background, a few White women accompany their settler husbands on the road down from the Fort. Several Indian women are scattered amongst the group clustered around Rev. McDougall, including one mother with a baby in a cradleboard. Like the Indians in general, all these women are silent. The roles they play in the mural are relevant within their respective groups, but do not occupy the focus

of the painting. Again, the specific diversities of history are subsumed into a general narrative of progress, which tends to make heroes of White men.

The way in which we see the world as depicted in artwork is not natural to the work but depends upon conventions. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger asserts that the oil painting, as an aesthetic genre, had an “original propensity to procure the tangible for the immediate pleasure of its owner.”²⁰ It reflected the wealth and property of its owner back to him, thus becoming an object of value in itself. Just as an object in a painting can stand in for the real object, the history represented in the mural stands in for a much broader past. Furthermore, it shows the particular past possessed by the ideal viewer—the history they recognized as his or her own. It speaks a symbolic language that could be understood by the owner/viewers. They recognized its significance as a testament to the magnificence of Western civilization. As I will explore more closely below, the prominence and location of the mural in an institutional library indicate that this narrow view of history *worked*; that is, it made sense to a particular segment of society in a particular time and place. The ideal viewer of the mural would be one who, like Edith Park of *New Trails*, identified with its message. To a predominantly

White student population, the mural depicted a favourable scene of success. For the proper audience, the scenes are not static. Rather, temporal movement is present in the interaction between audience and canvas. Time has transformed the images in the painting into contemporary Alberta, showing change by legitimating the viewer's presence in front of the painting.

This painting represented the past for a certain kind of present, one in which Native peoples were Indians in need of assimilation. At the time the painting was produced, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs of the Canadian government was engaged for the first time in figuring out what to do with 'the Eskimo' across the Arctic. The deep-seated paternalistic attitudes that permeated this process, termed by some the "most intense phase of colonialism" in the North, were not exclusive to Inuit/government relations.²¹ Rather, they were characteristic of the dominant view of First Nations people in the post-war period. The "all-determining force of modernization"²² saw Indians as child-like, primitive, and unsophisticated people, far behind in the evolutionary process, in need of "looking after."²³
²⁴ Forced by the media's reports of Inuit starvation in the Northwest Territories as well as concerns about

Cold War-era Arctic sovereignty, the government was making decisions to “uplift” and civilize the Inuit in order for them to live in the North as *Canadians*.²⁵ Seen in this political climate, the mural also appears to insist upon the education of Indians. Recall how, as a contemporary viewer, Edith Park stated that the mural depicts “the civilizing influences”²⁶ in Alberta’s history, again emphasizing the assimilation of Indians rather than their savagery.

The artists’ choices of central figures in the mural also indicate a similar emphasis. *The Dictionary of Canadian Biography* entries for Father Lacombe and Rev. John McDougall describe their roles in helping the natives they evangelized transition into the ‘inevitably’ White future. They became advocates for the Indians while simultaneously representing White society in the West. These missionaries were both engaged in producing Cree translations of scriptures, hymnbooks, and catechisms. McDougall “was given the task of preparing the people of the region for the [North-West Mounted Police] force’s arrival” in the Foothills in 1874.²⁷ Lacombe was involved in lobbying the government several times in relation to mission activities with Natives. They are both hailed as individuals who cared deeply for the welfare of the

First Nations, working to “improve their material well-being” in addition to their spiritual missions.²⁸

The location of the Glyde mural in the Rutherford Library is also significant. It does not stand alone: the University supports it, literally and figuratively. In this case, the University is both an institution of power with an “active role as a producer of knowledge” and a site of education and (ostensibly) of learning.²⁹ As Foucault outlines in *Discipline and Punish*, the power of educational institutions functions in a manner similar to that of the army, the hospital, and the prison by “controlling or correcting the operations of the body.”³⁰ The “chief function of the disciplinary power is to ‘train’” its subjects.³¹ In this sense, the power “makes individuals,” moulding “confused, useless multitudes of bodies” into functional, purposeful, and useful members of society.³² The tools institutional powers use to effect such changes are quite familiar: “hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, and their combination, the examination.”³³

In this context, the presence of the mural in the reading room for over half a century ought to immediately raise suspicion. It commands a stage, an elevated stature indicating an inspirational message. Although Foucault would have us see no place as

neutral, the study hall graced with this artefact of colonialism shapes the learning possible within its walls. As we saw above, it narrates a certain version of history. In this study hall, the mural also has a function in the education of historical memory. As Graham Carr discusses (in relation to war memorials and ceremonies), historical monuments teach their audience the past.³⁴ They shape the way the public is permitted to conceptualize history within the social structure. As a sentinel standing above the threshold of this site of learning in Rutherford South, the mural upholds the tenets of Western civilization. While students have come and gone, the mural clings to the fundamental principles of this university as defined by H. G. Glyde in 1951. It has overseen countless hours of study, impressing upon viewers a modernist moral code.

The brass plaque mounted beside the doorway of the reading room appears to support this view of the mural as an educator of history. It reads:

This mural is the gift of
H. G. Glyde, R.C.A.
Painted by him 1950-1951
and unveiled by Robert Newton
PRESIDENT EMERITUS
May 15, 1951.

There is significance in what is not said: the lack of description or contextualization on the plaque indicates the self-evident nature of the history presented by the mural. It may be possible to historicize the mural and plaque and concede that, at the time, this history was ‘objective truth.’ However, this cannot excuse the ongoing presence of the mural and plaque as they originally appeared in 1951. While the basic tenets of Western civilization may not have shifted significantly in the past decades, the mural is now—at the very least—politically incorrect in an uncontextualized form. Obvious incommensurabilities exist between the message of this mural and the content of many (and hopefully most) courses currently taught at the University of Alberta. The university is irresponsible to allow this mural to hang unquestioned in its halls of learning.

There are myriad possibilities when exploring ways to respond to the challenge held by this relic of colonial racism. First, however, it may be useful to examine the word “postcolonial.” As Stuart Hall elaborated in “When was the Postcolonial?” the word has different connotations in different places. In former colonies that were emancipated to various extents, ‘post-colonial’ has a very different ring than in settler

societies, such as Canada, where the colonizers never left. As the Australian poet Bobbi Sykes wrote, “Postcolonial...? What! / Did I miss something? / Have they gone?”³⁵ The concept of postcolonialism has had greater impact, according to Hall, not when it refers to a particular time period, but rather as an approach that eviscerates the binaries (Native/White) “on which the histories of imperialism have thrived for so long.”³⁶ Postcolonial history emphasizes a proliferation of histories that “rewrite earlier, nation-centred imperial grand narratives.”³⁷

The most urgently needed and responsible action with regard to the Glyde mural would replace the current plaque with a contextualizing description analogous to those found in art galleries for similar paintings. A more creative response could feature a ‘counter-mural’ by native prairie painters such as Allen Sapp or Keith Nolan.³⁸ While such an approach would respond to Glyde’s mural, it might emphasize and not break down the White/Native binary. A multiplicity of counter-murals could perhaps alleviate such difficulties. Glyde mural’s is very valuable, but a bolder response to the mural would be painting-over to produce a palimpsest-like layering of historical perspectives, with subsequent generations adding to a continual ‘work-in-progress.’

Such a counter-mural would also remove the original painting from the public gaze; minimizing the alternate impact the mural could have as a memorial focused upon the injustices perpetrated by settlers in Alberta. Other memorials to grave tragedies have similarly been characterized by a process of coming to terms with the past rather than emphasizing the permanence of the monument. For example, one of the Holocaust memorials described in James Young's *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* was an obelisk-type column coated with a thin layer of soft metal upon which visitors were invited to inscribe their names with a stylus.³⁹ The column was periodically lowered into the ground, resulting in an invisible, buried monument that memorialized through its absence. The undirected interaction of the public with the monument also resulted in unexpected responses, indicating the ever-changing meanings of the memorial and what it commemorates.

The potential responses to the Glyde mural are varied and indicate different uses of educational space. It is clear, however, that the response offered to the mural would not be objective but would occupy historical space, just as the mural itself does. The questions raised by the process of counter-memorializing,

influenced by post-colonialism and other emphases, can lead towards a more complex, nuanced, and fluid view of the past, present, and future.

¹ Edith Park, "The Rutherford Library," originally published in *New Trails*, 1951. <http://www.ualberta.ca/ALUMNI/history/buildings/51spruth.htm>, accessed December 7, 2009. All references to Park are to this article.

² *The Canadian Encyclopedia* entry on 'Glyde, Henry George', <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ART0003287>, accessed December 10, 2009.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Patricia Ainslie, *A Lifelong Journey: The Art and Teaching of H.G. Glyde* (Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 1987), 54.

⁵ The University of Alberta Art Collection's artist biography for H. G. Glyde, <http://museums.ualberta.ca/art/details.aspx?key=3577&r=2&t=1>, accessed December 8, 2009.

⁶ Park.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Ltd., 1956), 6.

⁹ Butterfield, 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 7-8.

¹⁵ Butterfield, 4.

¹⁶ T. V. Reed, "Old Cowboys, New Indians: Hollywood Frames the American Indian," *Wicazo Sa Review*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Film and Video (Autumn, 2001), 79-80.

¹⁷ Nicolas G. Rosenthal, "Representing Indians: Native American Actors on Hollywood's Frontier," *The Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Autumn, 2005), 330.

¹⁸ See, for example, Henry Simpkins' 1947 painting entitled "John Rowand Halts the Blackfoot Charge," which, among other aesthetic moves, features a taller, slimmed down, more heroic version of the short, heavy-set HBC Chief Factor. http://www.canadiana.org/hbc/_popups/PAMp411_e.htm, accessed December 9, 2009.

¹⁹ Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 6.

²⁰ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1977), 92.

²¹ C. S. Mackinnon, "The 1958 Government Policy Reversal in Keewatin," in *For the Purposes of Dominion: Essays in Honour of Morris*

Zaslow, edited by Kenneth Coates and William Morrison (North York, Ontario: Captus Press, 1989), 168.

²² Steven Feierman, "Colonizers, Scholars, and the Creation of Invisible Histories," in *Beyond the cultural turn: new directions in the study of society and culture*, edited by Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn A. Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 182.

²³ See Gontran de Poncins' view of Inuit in *Kabloona* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1941). "...the 20,000 years of evolution—or was it more?—that separate the Eskimo and me" (133).

²⁴ Mackinnon, 166.

²⁵ R. J. Diubaldo, "You Can't Keep the Native Native," in *For the Purposes of Dominion: Essays in Honour of Morris Zaslow*, edited by Kenneth Coates and William Morrison (North York, Ontario: Captus Press, 1989), 171-188.

²⁶ Park.

²⁷ *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online* entry on 'McDougall, John Chantler', accessed December 9, 2009.

²⁸ *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online* entry on 'Lacombe, Albert', accessed December 9, 2009.

²⁹ Scott, 7.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Random House, 1995), 136.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Graham Carr, "War, History, and the Education of (Canadian) Memory" in *Memory, History, Nation: Contested Pasts*, ed. Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (New York: Routledge, 2003), 57-78.

³⁵ Anna Green and Kathleen Troup (ed.), *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 278.

³⁶ Stuart Hall, "When was the 'Post colonial'? Thinking at the Limit" in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (New York: Routledge, 1996), 247.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ As suggested by Dr. Andrew Gow, private conversation, November 2009.

³⁹ James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).