

Canadian History Website Review

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[The Canadian West Virtual Exhibition:](#)

[Gateway Through Time](#)

Review by: Juanita MacDonald

Viewed: December 3, 2002

[Can you do serious history on the web?](#) Carl Smith, curator of the [Chicago Fire and the Web of Memory](#), takes “*serious history*” to mean “original work that is responsibly based on primary sources, is intelligently informed by relevant scholarship, and makes a clear argument or group of arguments.” He contends that the only way for historians to determine if it is possible is to look at various sites and judge for ourselves. We should keep in mind, Smith suggests, that websites are no substitute for other ways of doing history; that there may not be a better way to reach such a large potential audience outside or within the academy, and that most successful history website projects require institutional support for their creation and maintenance.

Three poignant visual representations of people of the Canadian prairie introduce *The Canadian West*, a site mounted in 2001 by the National Archives of Canada. A Saukteaux Indian family from Upper Assiniboine River, Manitoba, 1887; a Galacian immigrant family arriving at Quebec City, ca. 1911; and Charles Bracke, a Dutch settler with horse and plough at Torfield, Alberta, in the 1920’s set out the exhibit’s three themes: *Anticipation, Contact and Accommodation*, which are organised round a set of sub-themes. A list of supplementary materials (*Reading List, Thematic Research Guides, Links*, and *ArchiviaNet*, the national archives on-line catalogue) is located at the bottom left hand side of the page; and six community of interest categories (*Index, About, New, Search, Site Map*, and *Contact Us*) are located along the top and repeated in smaller font at the bottom of all pages in the exhibit.

Scope and Content A mission statement is found on the [About](#) link. The National Archives of Canada is committed to providing public access to its collections through the World Wide

Web and takes every opportunity to digitize its holdings. To its credit, the archives allow documents to direct its interpretation of western settlement history. The “Scope of the Exhibition” states: “This exhibition does not attempt to be a rounded history of western Canada nor a chronicle of pioneer life. Instead, the exhibition concentrates on those aspects of the settlement process that are documented in the collections of the National Archives of Canada.” It covers a period from the 1880s to the 1930s in which the history of western Canada and the ethnic makeup of Canada's three prairie provinces was dramatically changed. It centres on the arrival of a “multitude of ordinary men, women, and children from across Europe on the western frontier”.

Authority and Bias: Although the focus is on population growth from a massive influx of Europeans, a substantial amount of material is available for any researcher/viewer who wishes to examine the impact of other groups on the landscape and culture of the Canadian west. A [reading list](#) of scholarly articles and books is organized to parallel the exhibit themes. [Links](#) to pertinent websites and appropriate research guides are numerous. No specific audience is mentioned: “. . . the intent is to give a general impression of the nature, variety, and vastness of the records that relate to western Canada, and in doing so, show how these records might be used by researchers.” By showcasing historic documents held by the National Archives, they contribute to the understanding of the experience of national expansion.

Value Added Features: Website design and development was contracted to Imatics Inc of Ottawa, which also designed the Library and Archives of Canada website. The [project team](#) is listed and contact information is readily available. Viewers can ask questions or offer comments by filling out a form and submitting it to those involved with the project, or they can directly contact various departments of the National Archives, though e-mail addresses for these departments are not available. The point of view of the National Archives and the Government of Canada fosters an appreciation for the role played by immigrants in building the west and the nation, the impact of settlement on Aboriginal Peoples, and the importance of the National Archives as an institution responsible for collecting, preserving and making available documents that texture this part of Canadian history.

Timeliness and Permanence The web site is timely to the extent that with major progress being made in digitizing its holdings, the National Archives is now able to present an extensive exhibition about the west and engage citizens in western Canada unable to visit Ottawa, but who might be interested nonetheless in learning more about their history. The exhibition also has a timeless quality. Although it neglects to provide revision dates, add-ons to the exhibition can be found under the community of interest link entitled [“New”](#). Four new articles were added on September 19, 2002. The exhibition has few references that might date it or prevent it from being a permanent presence. The fact that all links work lends it a polished and enduring quality. The index allows the viewer to search by type of media, section of the exhibition or year. There is a sitemap and a search function. A search using the term “residential schools” produced hits to three specific parts of the exhibition that provide commentary, textual or visual material on the subject of native residential schools. Annotated links pepper the text for each of the three major themes (*Anticipation, Contact, and Accommodation*) and their sub-themes. Discussion of a massive advertising campaign that relied very heavily on posters and pamphlets, for example, includes links to posters and pamphlets. The pamphlet link shows a digitized item, the front cover of *Canada West* (1923) and the interpretive article situates the item in the context of western settlement history. The viewer can read the brief description of individual items or find additional information by clicking the image, which takes one to the archival record pertaining to it.

Technical Aspects: The site is easy to navigate. Three major themes and communities of interest are featured along the top of every page and at in the lower left-hand side of the page arrows direct the viewer to previous and subsequent themes. Printing pages did not prove to be problematic. Visually, it is clear, uncluttered and aesthetically appealing. A banner, featured on every page contains the title the three themes and the communities of interest, in brown earth-tone colours. Each theme has a distinctive background colour on its associated pages, aqua, mulberry, and blue. These colours, while bright, are neither gaudy nor overpowering. The least attractive feature of the exhibition is the grey National Archives, Government of Canada banner across the top of each page. The text in white and black is legible. The most visually appealing feature is perhaps the font used in titles, which reminds

one of sticks used to start a campfire in the wilds of the western frontier. Background images are screened enough not to be distracting and visible enough to serve as a reminder that the exhibition is about European arrival and settlement in the west. The overall impression of the site is favourable. Along with reference to copious and relevant links and scholarly writings, it also includes original interpretive essays by archivists at the National Archives. The jargon free text is written for the general public. It was mounted with peer review from two academics at universities in western Canada.

Primary Source Documents: Arguably the strongest aspect of *The Canadian West* is its use of primary source documents. It includes digitized archival material in a variety of media including medals, cartographic and photographic material, graphic art, and textual records. Although the exhibition deals with an earlier time period, one wonders if clips from the National Archives' extensive film and sound archives could have been incorporated. Items have been chosen not only because they tell the story of European settlement in the west but also because they "give a general impression of the nature, variety, and vastness of the records that relate to western Canada, and in doing so, show how these records might be used by researchers". A detailed description of each item is available and linked to the descriptive record found on *ArchiviaNet*, the National Archives' main searchable online database, which gives information about the creator, dimensions, and terms of use and copyright associated with each document. Although, the exhibition is bilingual, archival documents used are not always in French. A large component of the exhibition includes documents created by the federal agencies responsible for administering the settlement process and for setting its direction and the working language of these departments at the time was English. The web site was launched on October 19, 2001 in Winnipeg at the *Giving the Future a Past* conference, sponsored by the Association of Canadian Studies.

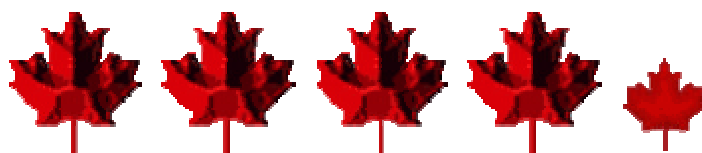
Overall Impression: Canada proclaims itself one of the most connected countries in the world. If Canadian history is to be brought to life in the classroom, sites such as *The Canadian West* make ideal learning material. *The Canadian West* is promoted on the National Archives website as a digital exhibition. It is hoped that as the National Archives continues to fulfill its mandate of community outreach, the vastness of its online resources will be

promoted to small archives, archivists and the heritage community across the country. It achieves its main objective of presenting a comprehensive if not definitive history of European settlement in the Canadian west. The holdings of the National Archives are showcased in an intelligent manner, informed by relevant scholarship in areas such as settlement, labour and aboriginal history. The digital presentation of various kinds of original archival documents, from photographs to textual records, in turn, fosters scholarly enquiry. Aesthetics and technical elements, in combination with clear and comprehensive content, form an information package capable of reaching a broad audience. To answer Carl Smith’s question, therefore, if the *Canadian West* exhibition is any indication, serious history can “be done on the web.”

Summary:

| Basic Criteria | Public History Rating Score |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Scope and Content | 14/15 |
| Authority and Bias | 13/15 |
| Timeliness and Permanence | 13/15 |
| Value Added Features | 14/15 |
| Technical Aspects | 14/15 |
| Aesthetics/Visual Clarity & Appeal | 14/15 |
| Overall Impression | 10/10 |
| Interpretation of Materials | 35/40 |
| Primary Source Documents | 18/20 |
| Education and Outreach | 15/20 |
| Community of Interests | 15/20 |

Overall score: 175/200



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