So Far, So Good: Ethics and the Government Historian

Sharon Babaian

As a historian at the Canada Science and Technology Museum, the author’s primary duty is to write historical reports on the major technological subject areas represented in the museum’s collections. Although some of these technologies have been controversial, the author’s work in the field has not yet posed any real ethical dilemmas. This is due both to the generally supportive environment in which she works and to the limited public interest in Canada in the history of technology. If, however, museums become increasingly dependent on outside funding to support core activities like research, this situation could easily change.

In the first twenty years following its opening in 1967, the museum I work for did not do much sustained historical research. Though a national museum, it had a very small staff and budget compared to other national institutions and a director who believed strongly that its relatively meager resources had to be devoted primarily to exhibitions and public programs. In the late 1980s, however, in preparation for the transition to independent status, the government told all the national museums that they had to get their burgeoning collections in order.

In response to this directive, the Canada Science and Technology Museum (CSTM) produced a Collection Development and Management Strategy, the goal of which was to create a coherent, comprehensive, and well-documented collection of scientific and technological artifacts that told the story of science and technology in Canada. The strategy mandated historical research in all
the major subject areas represented in the collection, to identify significant
trends and themes in the development of a given technology and explore the
role of that technology in Canadian society.

As a historian at CSTM, my primary duty has been to write these back-
ground reports. Over the years, I have written on a variety of topics, includ-
ing electric and electronic communication, cycles, nuclear energy, and ma-
rine navigation. At least some of these technologies have been the subject of
ongoing and often intense public and scholarly debates. Yet I have found that
working in these controversial fields poses few ethical challenges.

The Collections and Research Division of the museum has always provided
a very supportive environment for my research. That environment is the out-
growth of several factors. Like many national and other museums established
in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Canada’s national museums
were created primarily as research institutions. Their mandates stressed col-
lection, documentation, research, and publication, and their staff were gener-
ally professionally trained experts in their fields. Like their university-based col-
leagues, these researchers established a tradition of intellectual freedom which
their senior managers, who were themselves often practicing researchers, ac-
cepted and maintained. When it began its research program, the Canada Sci-
cence and Technology Museum embraced this tradition of intellectual freedom.
The ability of museum managers and staff to defend this favorable research
environment was, and is still, reinforced by the arm’s length administrative
relationship that exists between the museums and the federal government. As
Crown Corporations, they have a degree of administrative and financial inde-
pendence that other components of the federal public service do not enjoy.

Staff at Canada’s national museums, including the Canada Science and Tech-
nology Museum, are also protected by negotiated collective agreements that
include clauses relating to publication and authorship. By their very existence,
these clauses establish the importance of publication for both employers and
employees and set rules that protect both in the event of a dispute. The em-
ployer, of course, maintains the right to “suggest revisions to a publication” and,
ultimately, to “withhold approval to publish.” In the event that approval is with-
hold, though, the author/employee has the right to request a written explana-
tion. Moreover, the employer is further bound by general language that states
that it “will not unreasonably withhold permission for publication.” This pro-
vides the basis for an appeal up through the organization and eventually to an
outside tribunal. Finally, the author/employee also has the right, in the event
that the employer makes “changes to a publication with which the author does
not agree,” to request that he or she not be credited publicly for that piece of
work. All historians who are employees (as opposed to contractors) of Canada’s
federal public service are protected by contractual language of this type.¹

¹. Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, Master Agreement (PIPSC), Agreement between
the Treasury Board and the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada, Expiry date
September 30, 1990. This language has not been substantially altered for many years and, when
In addition to these administrative and legal protections, the research environment at the Canada Science and Technology Museum is further enhanced by internal policies and a corporate structure that both privileges the kind of research I do and shields it from outside interference. As I mentioned earlier, the Collection Development and Management Strategy has, since 1988, made historical research the starting point and foundation for all collection-related activities. It encourages historians to take the widest possible view of their subject areas and to consider everything from the economic and political dimensions of technology to its cultural significance. Thus, while I always work in close consultation with the curators, I have a great deal of control over the conceptualization, development, and production of my reports. At the same time, the curators provide a buffer between me and outside readers or other members of the public who may have something to say about my work.

Moreover, while the work of historians is often used by exhibit teams to help develop storylines and themes for exhibitions and programs, the final products seldom reflect the nuances, ambiguities, and critical analysis of the original reports. In the exhibit medium, artifacts, not text, play the central role. Complex and abstract ideas and arguments that make sense on the written page do not necessarily translate into compelling exhibitions. Also, since most of our exhibitions are aimed at a general audience, it is hard to recognize the scholarly work of the historian in any given text panel or thematic element. Thus, my work is seldom subject to direct public scrutiny on the museum floor.

Circumstances outside the museum also help protect me and my work from interference. Because it did not develop its research program until the late 1980s, the Canada Science and Technology Museum has had a rather low public profile as a national research institution. This lack of recognition is exacerbated by a general lack of interest in the history of technology in Canada. With few academic historians engaged in research in the field and little sustained public or media attention to the potentially controversial issues it raises, my work is much less likely to become the focus of public debate than that of, say, a historian at National Defence writing on the Second World War or a Parks Canada historian researching the Northwest Rebellion or the Acadian Expulsions.

That being said, there is a potential for ethical conflict arising from the fact that many of my research topics deal with subjects that are important to the technical communities within the federal government and in private industry. We draw on these communities when looking for outside readers for our it set out to negotiate a new collective agreement for its members at the Canada Science and Technology Museum Corporation in 1997, the Public Service Alliance of Canada borrowed the PIPSC language to include in the new contract. See Public Service Alliance of Canada, The First Collective Agreement between the Public Service Alliance of Canada and the National Museum of Science and Technology Corporation, 1 April 1997 to 31 March 2000. These two national unions represent most if not all federally employed historians in the country.
research and, more recently, for sponsors and partners to fund programs and exhibits. These scientists, engineers, and other technically trained individuals tend to have a very different perspective than I do on what is important and worth recording. Often, what they are looking for is a history rich in technical detail that documents important Canadian achievements and achievers and stresses the benefits of technology for society. This view can conflict with my professional standards and principles as a historian, which require me to place technological change in a broader social, political, and economic context that explores its costs as well as its benefits.

These differences in outlook, however, would only pose an ethical dilemma for me if the company or agency for which the reader worked could exert some political or economic pressure on me. If, for example, a company was offering to sponsor an exhibit or program at the museum and disagreed with my interpretation of their history, they might ask that my manuscript be changed or that it not be published. But, happily, this has not happened. On the contrary, critical peer review by technically oriented readers has helped me to correct technical details and descriptions, to clarify and qualify generalizations, to use more precise and sometimes less value-laden language, and to add additional references to bolster my case. Though there have been some critical comments from readers who questioned my interpretation of events, I have never been asked by a curator or a manager to alter or edit my manuscripts in any substantive way.

My most recent research project has also raised potentially challenging ethical dilemmas. In 2002 I began working on a history of the Canada Science and Technology Museum, inspired in part by the thirty-fifth anniversary of its opening. I was given a broad and ambitious mandate—I was to write an administrative history that also incorporated and highlighted notable events and personalities—which I expanded further to include the cultural and policy background of museum development in Canada.

The ambitious mandate, though, was not the most serious challenge I faced. Although it is not yet forty years old, the museum has an eventful past. Its staff, current and former, have accomplished a great deal. We have contributed enormously to scholarship in the history of science and technology in Canada and have brought many important innovations to all areas of museology, from collections and conservation to exhibits and programming. With relatively few resources—human or financial—with which to work and a huge mandate to cover, the museum quickly became, and remained for many years, the most popular of the national museums of Canada, largely because of its emphasis on innovative exhibitions and programs. In this context, it is natural to see the museum’s story as one of triumph over traditional museum dogma and official neglect. The reality, though, is much more complex and ambiguous and involves mistakes, misjudgements, and missed opportunities as well as successes.

As a professional public historian, I want to provide as complete and accurate an account of the museum’s past as possible. That means dealing with
accomplishments as well as set-backs and, more importantly, exploring cause and effect. This may prove to be controversial, because the museum is a rather small institution, and its directors and senior managers have had a direct and visible impact on its development. Two of its directors left amid controversy but have continued to follow the museum's progress with interest, as have some of its original staff. Many of these people still feel very strongly about the museum and their role in building it. As well, a few of the museum’s current senior managers have been in positions of authority for close to twenty years. If any of these people disagreed strongly with my interpretation of events or their role in them, I might be placed in a position where I would have to choose between my standards and principles as a historian and my place in the institution. There might even be legal implications for the museum. This has not happened and I have no reason to believe that it will, yet I am certainly aware of the possibility.

A more immediate dilemma for me is what to do about the most recent period of the museum’s history. I have completed a first draft of the manuscript, but it ends in 2001 and therefore does not deal with some fairly significant recent events. Although records and recollections from this period are more coherent and reliable than the evidence from earlier decades, I will have to grapple with other problems if I decide to extend the narrative. As a historian, I am not at all comfortable interpreting recent events. There is no way to assess whether all the relevant evidence is available, and so there is no firm basis upon which to judge the success or failure of ongoing policies and directives. I can suggest current trends and possible outcomes, but that is all.

Moreover, because I have been working at the museum since 1988, I have witnessed, participated in, and been affected by many of the pivotal events in its history. When examining events that took place even five years ago, I have, at least, the benefit of some time and distance to put my judgements in context and to understand my place in those events more objectively. If I extend the history to include current events, I lose that context, and it will be very difficult to separate myself and my personal interests convincingly from my analysis. The solution to this ethical dilemma is simply to end the narrative in 2001. Admittedly, for some, even that may be too close an end date.

Unlike some government historians, I work for an institution that allows me an enormous amount of freedom in framing and producing my work and has always been strongly supportive of my efforts. All government agencies and institutions, though, are becoming increasingly dependent on outside funding, partnerships, and sponsorships to carry out their core activities. This has the potential to make all kinds of independent, publicly funded research vulnerable to outside interference and pressure. If this happens, potential ethical dilemmas may become all too real.

Sharon Babaian is a historian at the Canada Science and Technology Museum in Ottawa, Canada. Her research interests vary widely and include radio communication and
broadcasting, cycles, nuclear energy, and marine navigation. Her most recent work is a history of the museum where she works, which has led to her active engagement in the debate over the place of historical research and collections in museums of science and technology. Like most public historians, she is a firm believer in the unique power of history to reach popular audiences. She has been an active member of NCPH for over 10 years and served as president from 2004 to 2005.