The Royal Proclamation: 250 years later

Anniversaries are fortuitous occasions to reflect on the ongoing significance of an event from the past. Of course, only certain events are remembered, and both what is commemorated and what has been forgotten can be equally interesting. This current project developed out of a concern that the 250th anniversary of the Royal Proclamation of 1763 would not be commemorated. We have since learned of other projects to commemorate the Royal Proclamation. I heard of preliminary discussions between Tom Peace, a former doctoral student here at York, and well-known public historian Christopher Moore, and concluded that it would be most worthwhile to dedicate an issue of Canada Watch to this project. Tom wished to link this initiative to the activehistory.ca project, in which he has played a key role.

In 2008, Tom, Jim Clifford (now in the History Department at the University of Saskatchewan), Victoria Freeman (who teaches at York University and who contributed to this issue), and Lisa Helps (now a city councillor in Victoria, BC), all then graduate students in history at York University and the University of Toronto, ran a highly successful conference at Glendon College.

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The politics of proclamation, the politics of commemoration

October 7, 2013 marks the 250th year since King George III issued what is, for Canadians, the Crown’s most famous Royal Proclamation. Over the 17th and 18th centuries, the English monarch released over a hundred royal proclamations. Some of these proclamations declared war (usually against France), others—such as the Royal Proclamation of October 23, 1759—mandated public thanksgiving and celebration, while others focused on more local laws (lotteries in Virginia in 1621, prohibiting trade in Hudson’s Bay in 1688, establishing a post office in 1711, and mandating “fast days” in England during the American Revolution). Few of these proclamations, however, carry the historical legacy of the one issued in October 1763.

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on the theme of “Active History.” They wished to demonstrate how historical research can inform current-day concerns, and indeed how contemporary issues must be set in their historical context. The peer-reviewed activehistory.ca website developed as a means of reaching a broad public, and it currently receives between 16,000 and 20,000 unique visits each month.

Tom completed his PhD in the Department of History in 2011, comparing the impact of the British Conquest of Acadia and New France on the Mi’kmaq in the early 18th century and the Wendat in the mid-18th century. He then took up a post-doctoral fellowship at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire to study Indigenous engagement with colonial colleges and day schools at the end of the 18th century. He is currently the Harrison McCain Visiting Professor in the Department of History and Classics at Acadia University. We are indebted to Tom for his initiative on this project and his efficient work in bringing together this range of specialists.

The views of the significance of the Royal Proclamation vary a great deal in the pages that follow. For some experts, the Proclamation deserves the designation as a “Magna Carta” for First Nations peoples in Canada, while others believe that the document has little relevance for today’s concerns. This debate is both informative and challenging, and that has been our goal with this publication. York University’s Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies is pleased to offer this contribution to the ongoing discussion of this important document in the history of Canada.