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Dead Indians, Power Conglomerates and the Upper Middle Class: Commemorating Colonial Conflict in Edmonton=s Rosssdale

If you drive from the University of Alberta to either downtown Edmonton or to the provincial legislature, the most convenient route will take you down Walterdale Hill, over the North Saskatchewan River and past the small neighbourhood of Rosssdale, before you make the trek back up out of the river valley again (figure 1). You might be struck, on your travels, by the oddness of seeing a large industrial power plant nestled into the river valley (figure 2), and you might miss the residential neighbourhood of Rosssdale completely.¹ Tucked next to the river just down the hill from the city center, this pretty little well-heeled Edmonton community seems an unlikely spot for a showdown between the local hydro plant and environmentalists, on the one hand, and homeowners and First Nations activists, on the other hand (figure 3). But that's the story this paper will tell. At issue is a graveyard, a power plant, and community rights, contestations over the past and debates over a sustainable future. All of this is taking place in the context of Edmonton's centenary, making the issue of commemoration more urgent than ever.



Figure 1: Walterdale Bridge leads to downtown Edmonton. Rosssdale and the EPCOR power plant are to the right.



Figure 2: The EPCOR power plant in Rossdale



Figure 3: Rossdale nestles in the North Saskatchewan River Valley

The Neighbourhood

Rossdale, originally known as Ross Flats, is Edmonton's oldest neighbourhood, the first zone inhabited by Europeans outside the walls of the nineteenth-century Forts Augustus and Edmonton. Originally Papaschase land, the Flats were inhabited in the early nineteenth century by adventurers, miners, labourers, Indian and Métis traders and trappers. After Fort Edmonton moved to higher ground, The Hudson's Bay Company sold the land to Donald Ross, for whom the current neighbourhood is named. Miners and managers alike built their houses in the area, and the land was used for industrial and commercial purposes as well as residential. There was not one but two ice companies in Rossdale, Edmonton's first hotel, a transit zone, a brewery and an orphanage. In keeping with a western city's assumption of space, undeveloped lots remained alongside developed ones, and there was a wide demographic mix.ⁱⁱ

The isolated geography of the neighbourhood is important. For most of the twentieth century, Rossdale hummed along more or less ignored by the booms and busts forming and reforming the City of Edmonton. A diverse community, just 35% of its residents owned homes as of 1975; many of the rental properties were owned by the City of Edmonton and leased below market rates. As downtown development increased, the commercial and industrial concerns gradually moved out of the district, leaving behind a mishmash of retired coal miners, hippies and students. Known as being communal, neighbourly and culturally distinct from the rest of the city, Rossdale more or less sat out the major debates taking place in Edmonton over shopping malls, thoroughfares, public transportation and oil revenues. Its residents saw it as a village inside a city.

Attention was not drawn to Rossdale until the City parkland disputes of the late 1970s. After the oil boom, the City of Edmonton decided to appropriate Rossdale properties to build a green belt through the middle of the city. Opposition to reclaiming residential land for park purposes was vocal, and soon the city found itself navigating between proponents of park land and Rossdale property owners. The parkland development won, many of the Rossdale old-timers were displaced and, predictably, aggressive gentrification followed (figure 4). Today, although there are still a few old houses standing, the area is characterized above all by a series of brand new Vinyl Victorians with an average price of approximately \$320,000, which is relatively high for Edmonton. Rossdale, then, has a peculiar character, its activism lurking just beneath its genteel facade.



Figure 4: Rossdale today

The PowerPlant

That pretty little neighbourhood is the unlikely site for a power plant. EPCOR, or the Edmonton Power Corporation, is the sole power, or hydro, producer in Edmonton and a major Alberta corporation. EPCOR was founded as the Edmonton Power and Lighting Corporation in 1903, a year before the incorporation of Edmonton as a city, and its major power plant was located in Ross Flats, just outside the limits of the old fort, where it still operates. Through most of the twentieth century it ran as a public utility with a neutral to amicable relationship with the city. In

fact, though it might be difficult to think back to pre-deregulation, the utilities company was just the organization that helped you establish, heat and hydrate a new home; as a *public* utility, it was something you felt you had a say in.

The relationship between the utility and the city of Edmonton began to decline in the 1970s and then, more precipitously, in the 1990s -- around the same time tensions in Rosedale were heating up. The company was renamed in 1970 as Edmonton Power and then again in 1996 as EPCOR. The change of name, all tarted up in that mid-90s fashion, was meant to help pave the way for privatization and deregulation. Significantly, however, the company's bid to privatize was defeated, though only narrowly, in 1998. EPCOR is now run at arm's length from the city and is managed by a Board of Directors, with the City of Edmonton as sole shareholder. The bid for privatization might have failed, but the establishment of EPCOR nonetheless marks the first merger of natural gas, power and water utilities in Canada. EPCOR now has an energy division, a water division, and a series of financial subsidiaries; in all, the corporation employs nearly 2500 people, making it one of Canada's Top 100 Employers and, so to speak, a powerhouse to be reckoned with.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Showdown

In May 1999 EPCOR announced plans to expand and update its old generating plant by replacing the mid-twentieth-century buildings on its site. Key to EPCOR's announced plans were environmental concerns: the utilities corporation insisted that the new building would house machines that were more energy efficient. In spite of carefully staged neighbourhood consultations, Rosedale residents were outraged. CONcerv, Concerned Citizens for the Edmonton River Valley, was founded and became a vocal opponent to the power company.^{iv} Hardly your everyday activist organization, the President of CONcerv is an engineer who works for Syncrude; its vice-president is a school trustee and its treasurer a Chartered Accountant. All of the CONcerv board members live in the river valley community of Rosedale. Though its name sounds like that of an environmentalist lobby, CONcerv's mandate is actually "To enhance Edmonton's economic strength and quality of life by advocating the appropriate use of Edmonton's central river valley." Hardly the argot of old-fashioned Rosedale activism.

Bizarrely enough, then, the battle took shape between the power company, which was promoting one form of environmental stewardship, and a NIMBY neighbourhood organization anxious to protect property values as well as the residential and recreational integrity of the river valley. The battle ranged from City Hall, where CONcerv held protests, to local mailboxes, which both sides liberally leafletted, to the op-ed pages of both city newspapers and numerous talking-head TV spots. Among the issues: Should the city modernize its utilities or conserve its history? Should it serve residents or industry, workers or property owners? How should we negotiate between the past (preservation of historic buildings) and a responsible future (environmentalism)?

Then the discovery that brought the whole debate to a halt: an Indian burial ground, right under the main road running past the power plant (see figure 1 again).

This revelation packed a punch. But its status as revelation is worth investigating. To say that

this graveyard was “discovered” is to misspeak. It’s been a matter of public record for ages; there is even photographic evidence, though it’s difficult to read.^v The graveyard is not ancient, but dates from the late nineteenth century, and it contains not only the remains of First Nations and Métis people, but also early fort traders, Hudson Bay Company employees, trappers, miners, explorers and translators. Bodies were said to have been exhumed before construction of the road began in the 1960s, at which time the need for speed, in the form of a direct link from the southside to the northside of the city trumped the need for historical reflectiveness. The burial grounds were discovered again in 1982, when the notion of installing the Space Sciences Centre in Rosedale was floated.^{vi} Still, when EPCOR’s own archaeologists discovered burial fragments in 2001, the story was reported as though it was brand new. One of the peculiarities of Edmonton’s history is that this graveyard gets discovered over and over again, suggesting that what is buried there is not just physical, but a deeply disturbing psychic relic of settlement.

The rediscovery of graves was the turning point in the showdown. CONcerv forced a hearing at the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board which defeated EPCOR’s petition to significantly revamp and expand its river valley power plant. In the fall of 2001 EPCOR announced that it was abandoning its plans to expand the Rosedale power plant, and multi-party talks commenced to determine how to proceed from there. With EPCOR defeated, all parties agreed that an appropriate commemoration should take place. The report of those consultations was to have been released in July 2003, then January 2004, and now the writers expect to air its findings, and hence start the really crucial negotiations over history, in April of this year.

Commemoration

In the meantime, if you come over Walterdale Bridge today, you will pass a makeshift memorial put in place in early 2001 by Blackfoot activist Duane Goodstriker and Métis activist Phillip Coutu (figures 5 and 6). This makeshift commemoration does some significant political work: first of all, it’s *there*, a physical reminder that our colonial accounts are not settled. Second, its construction -- it just *appeared* one day -- suggests a bold reclamation of public land by the people. Third, its very makeshift nature is productively shocking, especially since it is located directly alongside a major traffic thoroughfare. In a sense, this deliberately primitive memorial injects slowness into the heart of the metropolis, reminding us that history is not easily skipped over and that our development as a civic community is not simplistic, but laborious, time-consuming and multi-faceted.^{vii}



Figure 5: Makeshift memorial



Figure 6: Makeshift memorial

This point should not be understated. If this were a Mike Davis essay, it would be organized into neat dialectics: native organizations against the city planners, the neighbours against the power plant.^{viii} However, there are too many parties and too many issues for a simple dialectic to sustain them all: the residual neighbourhood activism of old Rosssdale coexists uneasily with its emerging wealthy and environmentally conscious liberalism. Although the makeshift memorial was erected by two Blackfoot and Métis activists, other First Nations organizations B including the Papaschase B have sided with EPCOR in recent debates. Even the meaning of the river valley itself has changed profoundly over the last three decades as it=s been shaped to manifest a peculiarly urban form of nature. The showdown over the Rosssdale power plant is instructive not least, then, because it suggests a reorientation of conventional politics.

It=s also an important test for Edmonton as a city. With the informal commemoration in place, the power plant on the road to decommissioning, and the Rosssdale land use report imminent, various stakeholders have sat down to figure out what proper commemoration might look like.

Henri Lefebvre reminds us that commemorative space, like all city spaces, is actively produced by the action of groups, factors within knowledge, within ideology, or within the domain of representation; social space, he argues, is the outcome of a sequence and set of operations and therefore implies a great diversity of knowledge.^{ix} It is not at all clear what the contours of commemoration in Edmonton will look like, especially given that Edmonton has no culture of commemoration. Like all cities, we name streets and parks after famous individuals – our most famous is probably Wayne Gretzky Drive – but that’s about as far as it goes. Famously, lived culture in Edmonton tends to take shape around festivals rather than around street life. There is virtually no architectural record: Edmonton tears down old buildings to make way for the new. There is no cultural record: the rediscovery of the Rosedale graveyard has spurred into being the *first* oral history of the area. There is barely even an archaeological record: witness the continual rediscovery of graveyards at the heart of the old trading post. And finally, there is no literary record. Histories of Edmonton are scant (and some of them unreadably racist or poorly written); fiction, even fiction by Edmontonians, is almost always set elsewhere; and municipal poetry is only just emerging.^x

The Rosedale commemoration process, then, will be a watershed. There are already some depressing signs of predictability: echoing the debates of the 1960s, an editorial in the *Edmonton Journal* last September insisted that a commemorative burial ground should not get in the way of a brand new multi-lane bridge to replace the aging Waltherdale.^{xi} The possibility of such a bridge has, just this month, emerged as a major issue in the upcoming municipal election. Also predictable was the disappointment engendered by the first architectural model for the memorial, which was found to be cold and generic, too Christian and not attentive enough to the cultural diversity of those buried at the site.^{xii}

But in the middle of these predictable moves there are also suggestions of an exciting model of collaboration, a recognition of space in Lefebvre’s sense, where the many disparate stakeholders negotiate different forms of belonging with each other, the official city serving as facilitator. I mentioned at the beginning of this paper that these negotiations are taking place in the context of Edmonton’s 100th birthday. The Centenary has spurred a notable number of activities into gear: some of the buildings on the EPCOR site have received protection as historical sites, for instance. In addition, the major oral history project I mentioned earlier is now underway, and the first collection of Edmonton citizens’ written narratives is currently being edited. Ian McGillis’s recent novel *A Tourist’s Guide to Glengarry*, set in Edmonton, is enjoying modest fame, and a couple of local Edmonton poets are making it big.^{xiii} Perhaps I’m too optimistic about municipal politics. But with luck – and care and attention, persistence clear-sightedness and the hard work of honest negotiation – the model of commemoration adopted in Rosedale can begin to build the new spaces and collectivities so urgently needed for future cities.

ⁱ As Alex Mair noted in 1989, “Today motorists drop down into the river valley, drive across the James MacDonald Bridge and back up to the top of the river bank without giving a great deal of thought to the part of Edmonton through which they’ve just traveled.” (*Real Estate Weekly* Nov 2-8, 1989: 3). I will return to this notion of speed and inattention in the section called “Commemoration.”

ⁱⁱ For histories of Edmonton, see J.G. MacGregor, *Edmonton: A History* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1967), Bob Hesketh and Frances Swyripa, ed., *Edmonton: The Life of a City* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1995), and Alex Mair, *Gateway City* (Calgary: Fifth House Publishing, 2000). For popular history, see Tony Cashman, *The Edmonton Story: The Life and Times of Edmonton, Alberta* (Edmonton: The Institute of Applied Art Ltd., 1956), Tony

Cashman, *The Best Edmonton Stories* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1976), Tony Cashman, *Edmonton: Stories from the River City* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2002), and Peter Collum, ed., *Voice of a City: The Edmonton Journal's First Century* (Edmonton: Edmonton Journal Group, 2003).

ⁱⁱⁱ See details of EPCOR at <http://www.epcor.ca>.

^{iv} CONcerv's homepage is at <http://www.concerv.com>.

^v The Edmonton Archives is an excellent resource, and I am in debt to the excellent archivists there for assistance with research for this project. Many of their photographs are available online at <http://archivesphotos.edmonton.ca/>.

^{vi} At that time, local activist Linda Duncan wrote, in a document housed at the Edmonton Archives, "Slightly northwest of the original power house near the present 105th street traffic circle is the site of a graveyard containing the graves of both local natives and Hudson Bay Company employees. Graves were marked by granite tombstones and monuments brought all the way from Scotland. Once enclosed by a picket fence the graveyard was left to ruin when a new cemetery was established near Alberta College. In 19 [spacing sic] the graves were exhumed and moved to another site." *Duncan Report* ca. 1982.

^{vii} Lily Cho's dissertation *On Eating Chinese* (University of Alberta, 2003) helped me think about the implications of slowness for metropolitan life.

^{viii} The quintessential Mike Davis book on cities is *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage, 1992), but see also *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage, 1999), *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the U.S. City* (New York: Verso, 2000), and *Dead Cities and Other Tales* (New York: New Press, 2002).

^{ix} Henri LeFebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) pp 77, 73.

^x MacGregor's history is marred by disparaging representations of First Nations subjects, and Mair's *Gateway City* (published, it should be noted, shortly before his death after a long struggle with cancer) is very awkwardly written.

^{xi} *Edmonton Journal* 15 September 2003 A12.

^{xii} Again, not a point to be underplayed: Cree, Blackfoot, Metis, Sarcee, Dene, and French are buried here. Some are Christian (Catholic and Protestant) and others are not. For one discussion of early responses to the memorial, see the *Edmonton Journal* 26 November 2003.

^{xiii} Ian McGillis, *A Tourist's Guide to Glengarry* (Erin, ON: Porcupine's Quill Press, 2002). Erin Knight, an Edmontonian poet, recently won the CBC National Prize for Emerging Poets. See also Darrin Hagen's memoir of Edmonton drag queens, called *The Edmonton Queen: Not a Riverboat Story* (Edmonton: Slipstream Books 1997).