

The exploration into a site of memory for the history of anti-slavery has opened my eyes to the ways in which memory can serve to commemorate, or forget, certain aspects of the past. Having the portrait of John Graves Simcoe from the Sage Room at Huron as my site of memory has allowed me to reassess my own conceptions about Canada and its involvement in slavery, but also the way in which Canadian society as a whole interacts with this part of our national history.

John Graves Simcoe has come up in past courses that I have taken, but in those courses I have never explored his work in the same capacity that the video diary called for. The background knowledge that I had of Simcoe was all related to the new political institutions he brought to Canada, such as the Legislative Assembly. Through the entirety of both Canadian history courses I've taken, there was no mention of Simcoe's connection to anti-slavery, or slavery in general. This observation sheds light on the fact that many Canadians are reluctant to discuss or acknowledge that Canada was once a slave owning country. It is widely known and taught that the slave trade was primarily made up of countries like Britain, Africa, Brazil and America. While there is a slow progression to more scholarly work being done to expand the study of slavery into countries like Canada, it has yet to become a main focus. Perhaps this is due to the relatively small numbers of slaves in Canada compared to the millions enslaved in the American South. However, that kind of justification proves problematic, as the slaves in Canada were enslaved just like those in America, and deserve the same amount of attention, study, and sympathy. This neglect of acknowledging Canadian slavery led me to believe that the main reason slavery or anti-slavery movements directed within Canada, are not discussed

often is due to the fact that it tarnishes the image of the country. With Canada being seen as a “Canaan” for runaway slaves, the recognition of Canadian slaves would contradict the image the country wishes to present.

While doing the background research on the project and obtaining a more rounded view on what Canada was like during that time, I became more impressed with Simcoe and the immense influence he had. Simcoe’s dedication to the Act Against Slavery demonstrates his strong belief in the ending of slavery, and the type of man that he was. The initial draft of the act called for an outright abolition of slavery, yet was rejected by the numerous members of the Legislative Assembly, who had brought enslaved people with them from the United States following the American Revolution. Similar to what President Lincoln would later do, Simcoe compromised and called for a more gradual emancipation. The process of gradual emancipation encapsulates the struggle of any conversation regarding slavery between pro-slavery and anti-slavery supporters. Simcoe’s ability to maneuver the political system to get the act passed was very inspirational, and only made me respect him more.

In my opinion, Simcoe is not remembered enough for the creation of the Act Against Slavery of 1793 and the influence this had on the formation of Upper Canada. The various statues that are erected in his honour demonstrate that he is

recognized as an important figure, yet there is a lack of knowledge surrounding the reasons why Simcoe is being commemorated. As the study of Canadian slavery grows, I would hope that more light is shed on Simcoe and the Act Against Slavery to help Canadians get a better picture of their own national past, as well as an appreciation for important figures such as Simcoe.

Overall, the video assignment challenged me to question the historiography of Canadian slavery and the anti-slavery movement within Canada. It called into questions related to Simcoe and how he is being remembered, but also what he is being commemorated for. While the Act Against Slavery was instrumental in helping to end slavery within Canada, recognizing the act would also mean acknowledging the fact that many Canadians were slave owners at one point in their lives. The video diary assignment has opened my eyes to being more critical of commemoration practices, but has also invited me to be more questioning and explorative when looking at other sites of memory. Going forward, I will undoubtedly take the time to investigate more into what I am presented, and perhaps what is being left out.