In 1990, at the request of the Weasel Moccasin family, the Glenbow first returned a sacred bundle, in the form of a loan to the Kainai Nation. It was a quiet, uncelebrated, and precedent-setting event in the museum’s history. Hugh Dempsey, then the Glenbow’s chief curator, and I made the decision to return the bundle through a series of discussions in the fall of 1990. Dempsey made the arrangements with the Weasel Moccasin family, and we proceeded with no senior management discussion, policy development, or board approval. In retrospect, our low-profile approach in these untested waters was sensible, since repatriation was either contentious or ignored among mainstream Canadian museums at the time. The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and Canadian Museums Association (CMA) Task Force on Museums and First
Peoples first met in 1990, and their work was just beginning (see Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums Association 1992, 1–11).

The task force would eventually recommend the repatriation of all Aboriginal human remains in museums, as well as other approaches including restitution, transfer of title, replication, and co-management of Aboriginal cultural patrimony. None of these, however, was part of mainstream museum practice when the Glenbow loaned the sacred bundle to the Weasel Moccasin family. As co-chair of the Central Working Committee of the AFN/CMA task force, I sensed from many of my colleagues that sharing museum authority, responsibility, and collections with Aboriginal peoples was fraught with risk and even constituted a slippery slope with unknown consequences. Nonetheless, the task force persevered, and its progressive recommendations are a matter of record, even if they have not been fully embraced by most museums in Canada.

In this essay, I provide an epilogue on the repatriation work at the Glenbow and its importance in the Glenbow’s history as a public institution, with the intention of revealing more of the context and motivation for this work than normally appears in the public record. This includes an overview of the various personal and professional considerations underlying the decisions that were made, as well as a description of the vagaries of what actually happened.

**Personal Readiness**

Museums, as organizations, develop distinctive traits and characteristics over time, and these, in turn, have their origins in the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the people who lead, manage, and work in these institutions. The result is a complex interplay of personal and professional experiences and knowledge, a process that unfolds continuously throughout the museum at all levels. Given the tradition of positivism that largely guides the thinking of those who are academically trained, it is commonplace to assume objectivity in all actions and events that transpire in learned settings, museums included. I suggest that this assumption of objectivity is, for the most part, false and limiting: there is much more personality and subjectivity at play than one might care to admit. This is certainly the case with respect both to the origin and development of repatriation at the Glenbow and to my role in these events. My values and
beliefs concerning the interaction between museums and communities are best understood within the context of the perspective I brought with me when I became the president and CEO of the museum in 1989. I had a certain mental readiness and willingness to listen that can be traced back to both professional and personal experiences.

My education and early experiences as an archaeologist were seminal ingredients in my later work in museums, and this essay is a welcome opportunity to recognize their value. I earned an undergraduate degree in anthropology and a doctorate in archaeology. Perhaps the most important guiding principle that I recall from my university experience was attributed to the eminent anthropologist Sol Tax, who was said to have had “the respect not to decide for others what is in their best interests” (Hinshaw 1971, vii). This fundamental principle requires that we allow people the dignity to make their own decisions about those things that affect their lives. This cogent advice has remained with me as a lodestar, although my fealty to this imperative has been uneven, especially as the CEO of the Glenbow, when I had no choice but to make certain decisions on behalf of the organization.

In the course of doing the archaeological research for my PhD, I spent a considerable amount of time in the Northwest Territories. Early on in my research, it occurred to me that, even though I was devoting five years of my life to researching and writing a dissertation on the archaeology and ethnohistory of the Dene (Northern Athapaskans) of the western Northwest Territories, I had actually never met one of these individuals. This was the early 1970s, and most scholars assumed that the archaeological record alone was a sufficient source of knowledge: there was no need to interact with the people whose legacy it was. My field research included doing archaeological survey work for what was then the National Museum of Man, in Ottawa (now the Canadian Museum of History, in Gatineau, Québec), as part of a mitigation program in advance of the proposed Mackenzie Valley pipeline.

Our field crews consisted entirely of students and archaeologists from museums and universities in southern Canada, who were never encouraged or advised to gather information from the residents and Elders who lived in the small villages along the colossal Mackenzie River. This region has been inhabited for millennia by one of the world’s last great hunting cultures, and the local and traditional knowledge of the contemporary inhabitants was obviously of
inestimable value in the search for the archaeological record. Instead of con-
sulting with them, however, we ignored such knowledge, steadfastly committed
to, and blinded by, the positivism and ethnocentrism that accompany academic
and scientific training. I struggled to ignore this as we travelled the length of
the river, observing the Dene going about their lives while we remained secure
in our detached, scientific bubble.

After two summer field seasons, I was distinctly uncomfortable with this
method of doing research. In retrospect, our approach to field research was
not dissimilar to the British Royal Navy’s sojourns into the Canadian Arctic in
search of the Northwest Passage. Materially self-contained and largely dismissive of the accumulated knowledge of the Indigenous peoples, Franklin and his crew blundered their way into oblivion. The decision was clear—I had to meet the people whose archaeology I was studying. Unlike Franklin and his men, my hardship was mental, not physical (starvation and exposure), and I left graduate school temporarily to spend six months in the bush near the Arctic Circle—northeast of Tulita (formerly Fort Norman) in the Northwest Territories. Living with seven families of North Slavey Dene in a large hunting camp on Willow Lake, my wife, Priscilla, and I were humbled daily by the ease with which they navigated intricate lakes and rivers without benefit of map or compass (much less GPS), endured the cold of all-night beaver hunts, created beautiful beadwork, fished and hunted for their food, and taught their children the formidable challenges of life in the bush (Janes 1983a).

The Willow Lakers’ personal and social values stressed individual
autonomy, egalitarianism, decision making by consensus, and limitations on
the exercise of power. They welcomed us with generosity and humility, and I
observed all of these traditional values as the Willow Lakers went about their
lives. We gained a profound respect for the importance of cultural diversity
embodied in the Dene way of life—their world view, values, and competen-
cies—having been given an intimate glimpse of their masterly adaptation to
one of the most unforgiving environments in the world. At the same time, the
Willow Lake Dene were not pristine hunters suspended in time—they were
individuals and families who were playing out their lives in the midst of pro-
found cultural and environmental change. These lessons gained from life on the
land were to shape, unwittingly, not only my archaeological research but also
my approach to organizational life and museum practice.
PROFESSIONAL READINESS

Having finished graduate school in 1976, my personal and scholarly interests in the Dene and the Northwest Territories led me to apply for the position of founding director of the Northwest Territories’ first professional museum—the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre (PWNHC), in Yellowknife. Thus began my next apprenticeship in learning outside the dictates of convention. In the mid-1970s, about 60 percent of the Northwest Territories’ population was Native born, that is, Métis, Dene, or Inuit. These individuals held key positions in the bureaucracy, as well as ministerial posts as members of the legislative assembly, and, as director of the PWNHC, I therefore reported to various Aboriginal individuals. Unlike the marginalization experienced by so many Aboriginal people in urban settings, these Indigenous northerners were the ones who wore the “three-piece suits,” who were elected to the legislative assembly, and who made many of the decisions governing life in the Northwest Territories. Unlike the provincial and federal governments in the rest of Canada, the territorial government is based not on political parties but on consensus building among the elected members of the legislative assembly. This led naturally to the practice of consulting the diverse population of the region as an integral part of decision making. Equally as important at that time was the activism among Aboriginal political organizations, who were insisting upon their rights and responsibilities and the need for self-determination. The eventual founding of Canada’s newest territory, Nunavut, is testimony to this early activism and the desire for full participation.

Living and working in this unusual environment, where nine Aboriginal languages are simultaneously translated during the proceedings of the territorial legislature, also left me with an unorthodox understanding of collections—at least with respect to the normative thinking of mainstream museum professionals. I have always been fascinated by the potent quality of objects and their mute stories, and this undoubtedly underlies my lifelong commitment to museums. But working from 1976 to 1989 as the director of the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre introduced me to various complexities and considerations that had not yet occurred to me as an aspiring museum professional. In the entire Northwest Territories, for example, there were sixty-five communities, only about twenty-five of which could be reached by road. Visiting the...
remainder required boat or aircraft. Many of these communities wanted museums to preserve and highlight their cultural traditions but not in a manner that conformed to professional museum practice—that is, not in a permanent collection in an environmentally controlled building.

Mainstream museum practice dictated, however, that a proper museum had to have environmental controls, because without them the collections would deteriorate. It was my duty to convey this requirement to communities, which I did with full conviction until I began to listen more carefully. It soon became clear to me that the majority of people in the Northwest Territories’ remote communities were not interested in adhering to professional museum practice, not out of disrespect but because of their particular world view and the consequences of geographic isolation. They used objects from their cultural patrimony every day, while also celebrating the traditions and value of these objects. It was not uncommon for hunting tools to be “curated” and used for generations (Janes 1983a, 99–100). In addition, replicas of bygone material culture were thought to be perfectly satisfactory for museum exhibitions. In many cases, the preservation and celebration of intangible cultural heritage—music, dance, and storytelling—were the focus of concern, not the preservation of objects.

With the advice and guidance of Dene and Inuit Elders, I, too, developed a more informed understanding of the role of objects in the lives of these peoples. My apprenticeship was a rich one, unfolding wherever I travelled in this vast region. For example, the Inuit Cultural Institute in what is now Arviat, Nunavut, wanted to establish what was described as “a museum-based learning centre,” and I served on their advisory committee as a museum “expert.” One of the Inuit Elders at a planning meeting, the renowned Eric Anoee, listened attentively to the long list of concerns that my colleague and I had about the preservation and interpretation of objects and specimens in their learning centre. He replied succinctly, “We are not a materialistic people; we live by muscle, mind and spirit” (Heath 1997, 156).

I listened, I learned, and I lost my preoccupation with the assumed permanence of objects. This was replaced with a growing concern about how objects that end up in museum collections are used and valued by the people and cultures who made them. My appreciation for the situational meaning of objects was to become a decisive ingredient in the decision to embark upon the
The Blackfoot Repatriation: A Personal Epilogue

Blackfoot repatriation. My new perspective on traditional museum practice was a marked departure from conventional wisdom, and I felt compelled to share this thinking more broadly with the profession. I published several papers during this period (Janes 1982, 1983b, 1987) in an effort to explain my unorthodox perspective. My hope was to engender some debate about the limitations of the museum profession’s normative understanding of objects, but instead a resounding silence ensued.

Organizational Readiness: The Glenbow Museum

Although our decision to return the first bundle was seminal in retrospect, various other factors and influences coalesced to bring about a change in conventional museum practice at the Glenbow. The Blackfoot were pushing for the return of sacred material, and the Glenbow was in a position either to listen deeply, and respond accordingly, or to maintain the status quo. The decision to listen to the Blackfoot and encourage them was, in part, a result of various organizational factors discussed below; these are also important in understanding the genesis of the eventual repatriation.

When I arrived as the new director of the Glenbow in 1989, attracted by its multidisciplinary composition and considerable reputation, there were major changes in the offing. I have written about the Glenbow’s organizational changes elsewhere (see Janes 2013) and will summarize here only several salient points that are germane to understanding organizational readiness for change. The provincial funding agreement with the museum had come to an end at the time of my arrival, and there was no agreement in place to ensure ongoing provincial support. In fact, by 1992, provincial funding for the Glenbow had declined by 26 percent, which prompted the development of a strategic plan as a means of securing multi-year funding from the province. More on this later.

Although financial concerns were a major stimulus for change, several other factors contributed to a perceptible, albeit largely unspoken, need for change at the Glenbow. To begin with, the museum had been without a director for well over a year prior to my arrival, and all important decisions and initiatives had been put on hold. As a result, the museum was seriously drifting by the time I assumed the position. In addition, there was an undercurrent of staff
frustration with the size and rigidity of the Glenbow’s management committee. The financial uncertainty with regard to the Alberta government, the organizational drifting pending the appointment of an executive director, and the feeling among staff that they were being overmanaged had combined to create dissatisfaction among the staff. Strategic planning was adopted to define and chart the organizational change required.

The strategic planning was inclusive and comprehensive, and it identified five key areas as a framework for the Glenbow’s ongoing growth and vitality (see Janes 2013, 8–132). One of the key areas—the Glenbow mandate—included a commitment to Native involvement: “Glenbow will identify Canada’s native peoples as key players in developing balanced programs and services, recognizing that this represents both a continuation and an enhancement of current programs and services for native communities” (Glenbow Museum 1991, 7). As vague and modest as this may seem, this constituted a formal recognition of the role of Native peoples in the work of the museum and signalled the opportunity and responsibility to “enhance” this work, whatever form or expression that might take.

As a final consideration in this assessment of organizational readiness, I must note that the Glenbow had a strong tradition of hierarchical management, which gave me a great deal of unquestioned authority and influence as the director, and later as the president and CEO when my title changed. This organizational context allowed me the opportunity to align my personal perspective with the status and resources of the Glenbow. In Gerry Conaty’s words (pers. comm., 18 June 2012), “Glenbow’s CEO has a great deal of authority and, unlike government museums, the personality of the CEO really does affect what the museum is and does.” It is only in retrospect, however, that I am able to acknowledge the benefits of this power relationship and its importance for the work we did with the Blackfoot. I have never been a strong adherent of hierarchical management and have been openly critical of it in my writing. In fact, I think that the societal worship of hierarchy and the lone CEO model of leadership are unquestioningly detrimental to organizational commitment and creativity. However, it is questionable whether repatriation would have unfolded as it did in the absence of an empathetic director with sufficient authority, since time, resources, and attention were required to build and sustain the growing relationship with the Blackfoot. This we did.
**PRELUDE TO REPATRIATION**

As noted above, I arrived at the Glenbow at a difficult time, but uncertain finances, organizational drifting, and a desire for change were not the only challenges. The museum’s staff members were variously exhausted, exhilarated, and puzzled in the wake of “The Spirit Sings” exhibition. The relationship between museums in general and Aboriginal peoples was fragile—marked by controversy, protest, and accusation, as well as by a general dislike and mistrust of museums on the part of Aboriginal peoples. In the words of George Erasmus, former national chief of the Assembly of First Nations:

> The Spirit Sings exhibition sparked a fair amount of controversy in Canada. It raised questions that museums had to deal with and a lot of questions that Native people had to address. . . . What kind of role should Native people play in the presentation of their own past, their own history? (Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums Association 1992, 3)

“The Spirit Sings” served as the critical catalyst to launch the work of the Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums Task Force mentioned earlier, but, meanwhile, museums were left to manage their Aboriginal relations as best they could. This became clear to me when, not long after I had started work at the Glenbow, two Blackfoot men came to my office to reveal a dream they had had that required them to acquire certain objects from the Glenbow’s collections. I was taken aback by the novelty and sincerity of this request, and I had no experience to draw on. I knew about the overall importance of dreams in First Nations cosmology, but, in my experience, they had never been connected to the return of museum objects. I also had no reason to mistrust the legitimacy of this request. Having no precedents to draw on, I consulted with various members of the Glenbow staff, who were all of like mind. “We don’t do that sort of thing,” I was told.

This admonishment was at odds with my own curiosity and also precluded any further learning that might assist in repairing the fractious relationship between museums and First Nations. The Glenbow happened to be in the homeland of the Blackfoot and held world-renowned collections of their material...
culture. Simply rejecting this request with no committed follow-up was facile and unreasonable, for all of these reasons. At the same time, the Glenbow did not have any processes, procedures, or collective thinking in place that could guide the decision making with respect to the return of First Nations objects. Nor did any other museum in Canada.

Coincidentally, we had also been searching for a curator of ethnology, and the decision was now clear to me. We needed an individual who not only was sensitive to the increasing ambiguity surrounding the stewardship of First Nations collections but was also energetic and well-trained and who possessed a track record that demonstrated a commitment to rethinking traditional museum practices. This person was Gerald Conaty, and he assumed the position in the fall of 1990. One of the most obvious requirements of sound leadership is to hire the best people you can find. This we did. The Glenbow was now committed to a new course of action, one based on the alignment of several key factors, including the recognition of Native involvement in the new strategic plan, the hiring of Conaty, and my personal and professional predilections.

THE RELATIONSHIP UNFOLDS

As mentioned above, the Glenbow’s first loan of sacred material to the Blackfoot people took place in the fall of 1990. This was a loan, not a transfer of ownership. The Weasel Moccasin family was to keep the Thunder Medicine Pipe Bundle for four months to allow them time to undertake various ceremonies. After this period, the bundle was to be returned to the museum for four months before going back to the family. This cycle was to continue for as long as both parties agreed. Hugh Dempsey, then the Glenbow’s assistant director of Collections, oversaw these arrangements, but the loan was not widely discussed in the museum. As noted earlier, we did not have any framework of procedures, values, and long-range plans to support and guide this initiative. This was a work in progress.

Although this early initiative was an unofficial and isolated one, it was important. It was both a catalyst and a demonstration of what the Glenbow could become as an institution if serious attention were paid to the meaning and importance of First Nations’ needs and aspirations. This commitment
needed to be embedded not only in the Glenbow’s purpose and strategic goals but also in everyday practice. There were unknown opportunities for the experimentation and innovation that would be necessary if we hoped to develop mutually constructive working relationships with First Nations, but, in order to accomplish this, we needed a senior curator with the willingness, passion, and time to create and maintain these relationships. This work began with the appointment of Gerald Conaty.

At the time, even the loan of sacred objects, much less the outright transfer of ownership, was new and experimental, both for the Glenbow and for the museum profession in general, given that the prevailing perspective on repatriation was conservative, if not reactionary. There was widespread concern that any repatriation would be precedent setting and would result in a “run on the collections,” with unforeseen and calamitous consequences. Among the Glenbow’s senior management, however, repatriation was not especially a topic of interest or concern, although some individuals were skeptical and viewed this work as a personal interest of mine. In retrospect, I don’t think the nature and meaning of this pioneering work were widely recognized, either by those doing the work or, more broadly, throughout the Glenbow. This is not really surprising: events often take on meaning only in retrospect, when time and reflection are brought to bear. Although our commitment to developing enduring relationships with the Blackfoot was groundbreaking, it was not broadly celebrated by the institution in the same manner that a successful exhibition, program, or fundraising event would have been celebrated. I assume personal responsibility for this lack of internal promotion.

I also think that the Glenbow’s Board of Governors would have resisted had we tried to transfer the ownership of objects and collections at the outset. In fact, it took roughly ten years of mutual education and trust building among the Blackfoot, the board, Gerry Conaty, various other members of the Glenbow staff, and me before we decided to repatriate the sacred material. Maintaining the trust and the confidence of the board, as well as building their awareness, was a task in its own right, since board membership changed regularly under a policy of limited and staggered terms. In 1990–91, we also developed the First Nations Advisory Council (FNAC), which provided a critically important context for our evolving work. The FNAC was made up of representatives from the Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, Nakoda (Stoney), Tsuu T’ina, and Cree First Nations.
(see appendix 1). Their role was to guide the Glenbow in all aspects of our work that touched on First Nations issues. Two of the FNAC members did not agree with the idea of returning sacred material, since they were not involved in traditional ceremonies and were critical of the “old ways.” While we respectfully acknowledged their counsel in this instance, we chose not to follow it. Nonetheless, the FNAC was a formal recognition of the role of First Nations in a mainstream museum and of the importance of their guidance, knowledge, experience, and counsel in museum affairs.

Thus began a decade of building relationships in a variety of forms, including hiring Blackfoot staff in the ethnology section, allowing ritual smudging in the collection storage areas, and attending sacred ceremonies on the reserves. We also signed a memorandum of understanding with the Mookaakin Cultural and Heritage Society, a Kainai organization, concerning access to sacred material, the co-management of collections, and the repatriation of ceremonial items (fig. 30). Most importantly, we were getting to know Blackfoot individuals personally. Dozens of small and seemingly inconsequential interactions became the building blocks of mutual trust and respect. Underlying this process of learning and growth was my trust in Gerry Conaty—a prerequisite for the freedom, authority, and responsibility he required to nurture our relationships with the Blackfoot. His official title did not adequately herald his work: he was one of those informal leaders who have yet to be sufficiently acknowledged in the conduct of organizational life.

Our evolving relationship with the Blackfoot had much to do with risk taking—an uncommon activity in mainstream museums. We were not always successful. One of the early sore points was how to deal with individuals who had borrowed sacred items and then severed ties with the museum. After much reflection, we concluded that this was the price of learning and growing, and we consciously rejected the slippery slope argument—the reasoning that continues to be used by organizations and individuals to defend the status quo for fear that moving even slightly from one’s position risks the loss of everything. We endorsed a different perspective, namely, that “the abuse of a thing does not bar its use” (Hardin 1986, 62–63). Because one person failed to return a loan for renewal did not mean that we should stop making loans. Risk taking and failure are unavoidable when one embraces work that is new, unfamiliar, and free of established precedents.
Our risk taking with the Blackfoot mirrored a similar attempt to encourage risk taking throughout the Glenbow as an organization. Staff members were encouraged and enabled to take risks in their daily work and to identify habits of thinking, routines, and ruts that discourage new ways of thinking and working. With this in mind, we installed a principle in our strategic plan stating that rules or procedures would not be enacted to protect people from making mistakes. Without this proviso, the lowest common denominator prevails. The permission to make mistakes was a key ingredient in our First Nations work, and it helped model the behaviour that is so necessary to a mindful and progressive museum.

Figure 30. A blanket exchange at the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the Mookakin Cultural and Heritage Society (Kainai First Nation) and the Glenbow-Alberta Institute, 6 March 1998. Left to right: Robert G. Peters, chair of the Glenbow Board of Governors, Robert Janes, Premier Ralph Klein, and Narcisse Blood, chair of the Mookaakin Society. Photograph by Ron Marsh, courtesy of the Glenbow Museum.

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990172.01
It is revealing to reflect on the meaning and complexities of the Glenbow’s evolving relationship with the Blackfoot. For example, it became apparent that the reason why the Blackfoot invited us to medicine bundle openings and other traditional ceremonies, such as the O’kaan and the Kano’tsisissin (All Smoke) ceremony, was to familiarize Glenbow staff with their way of life. The assumption was that if we became more familiar with the richness of their traditions, our trust and respect would grow, and this is precisely what happened. I was deeply moved when, in 1995, Daniel Weasel Moccasin and his family gave me one of Daniel’s father’s Blackfoot names. This further cemented my interest in this family, in Blackfoot ceremonies, and in the well-being of the whole Blackfoot Confederacy. Giving me the Blackfoot name of a renowned ceremonialist had guaranteed them a long-term ally. All of these events clearly indicate that although the Glenbow and the Blackfoot were working in concert with mutual interests, it was the Blackfoot who were actually driving the process.

In 1998, Daniel Weasel Moccasin had a severe stroke and was taken to Foothills Hospital in Calgary, where many of his family and friends travelled to be with him. They wanted to have ceremonial smudges for him, but, of course, the hospital’s fire regulations prohibited fire or smoke of any kind for any purpose. I was told that this was a growing concern among both the family and the many visitors who came to see Daniel, and I advised Dr. Alastair Buchan, professor of stroke research and head of the Calgary Stroke Program at Foothills Hospital, of these particular circumstances. Buchan proved to be a compassionate practitioner, and he arranged for the hospital to turn off the sprinkler system for the duration of Daniel Weasel Moccasin’s stay, allowing family and friends to smudge ceremonially in the hospital chapel.

At the same time, Buchan advised hospital security that this was a special situation and that the Blackfoot way of life was different and required respect, given that large numbers of Blackfoot were travelling to the hospital to pay their respects to the dying ceremonialist. I relate this story for the simple reason that Dr. Buchan’s intervention on behalf of the Blackfoot was apparently unprecedented at this large university hospital. Such instances of goodwill, understanding, and mutual regard were occurring regularly, with no empirical explanation other than our relationship with the Blackfoot, which was by now well established. Leonard Bastien, then chief of the Piikani (Peigan) First Nation, offered a more compelling explanation:
Because all things possess a soul and can, therefore, communicate with your soul, I am inclined to believe that the souls of the many sacred articles and bundles within the Glenbow Museum touched Robert Janes and Gerry Conaty in a special way, whether they knew it or not. They have been changed in profound ways through their interactions with the Blood and Peigan people and their attendance at ceremonies. (Bastien and Bastien 1992, 6)

POSTERITY HAS ARRIVED

I still recall realizing how important the sacred objects from the Glenbow’s collections are in the conduct of various Blackfoot ceremonies, and I also remember the Blackfoot repeatedly expressing their appreciation for being able to use them. The fact that these objects are instrumental in enhancing the well-being of their communities was the critical motivation in our decision to repatriate them. The museum profession is fond of saying that “museums keep things for posterity.” By 1998, we had concluded that posterity had arrived—both for the Blackfoot and for the Glenbow. My personal perspective was grounded in a moral, or ethical, imperative, although I cannot speak for other Glenbow staff or the Board of Governors. Such considerations were not part of mainstream museum practice at the time. By “ethical,” I have in mind principles such as justice, right conduct, and duty. I agree with Janet Marstine’s (2011, 8) observation that “the new museum ethics stresses the agency to do good with museum resources.” Although I often use the terms ethics and morals synonymously, it seems useful to think of morals as beliefs and values about the nature of right and wrong and ethics as the implementation of those beliefs in society and in one’s life. In short, returning sacred objects was the right thing to do. The time had come.

I cannot recall whether there was a defining moment when Gerry Conaty and I decided that it was time to unconditionally transfer the ownership of sacred objects to the Blackfoot. In retrospect, the decision to act was born of our accumulated experiences with the Blackfoot and was grounded in our growing trust and respect for them and their culture. These feelings were the result of spending time among them at ceremonies, of eating together and
meeting together, but they were also the product of the less tangible influences described by Leonard Bastien above. To write of souls and the sacred, and of their silent impact on individuals, obviously transcends the positivist tradition, but I cite these influences here because I have no reason to doubt their existence.

By March 1999, the work had begun in earnest, with the establishment of a staff repatriation group and the preparation of a proposal to the Glenbow’s Board of Governors. Because this initiative was a significant departure from established policy, the board’s approval was required to begin the repatriation process. The members of the Glenbow’s Board of Governors merit a great deal of credit: they listened deeply and responded accordingly. In April 1999, the Executive Committee of the board gave unanimous approval to our proposal to repatriate 251 sacred objects to the Blackfoot Confederacy. The decision to repatriate was unprecedented in the Glenbow’s history, and, as it turned out, the Blackfoot repatriation became the largest unconditional repatriation of museum objects in Canadian history.

Having succeeded in gaining the board’s support, I reluctantly advised them that the Alberta government’s cultural bureaucracy was opposed to repatriation: I feared that the government’s position would erode the board’s support. Although the Glenbow is an independent nonprofit corporation, its collections have been owned by the provincial government since 1966. At that time, Eric Harvie, the museum’s founder, donated his collection of art, artifacts, and historical documents to the people of Alberta, which marked the beginning of the Glenbow as a public institution.

From the outset of our work with the Blackfoot, our thinking on the loan and repatriation of sacred objects was antithetical to the provincial government’s perspective. To some extent, this gap in understanding was a reflection of the Glenbow’s poor relationship with the provincial government, a legacy that I inherited from my predecessor and that proved immune to repair, despite the efforts we collectively made to improve it. This was doubly perplexing to me, since my counterpart for these negotiations was Assistant Deputy Minister William Byrne. Bill Byrne, whom I’d known for years, was a highly intelligent, deadly articulate, and accomplished administrator, with a PhD in archaeology from Yale University and a demonstrated track record in the innovative preservation of Alberta’s heritage. Despite my degree of respect for Byrne, I was
unable to convince him and his colleagues of the need, wisdom, and timeliness of repatriating the Blackfoot material. Despite our sincere efforts to communicate, the provincial cultural officials were adamant that repatriation was not acceptable. The senior officials were inexplicably entrenched, and I concluded after over two years of meetings and telephone calls that repatriation would not occur during my tenure at the Glenbow, if ever.

The fact that provincial officials were simply not open to dialogue about the possibility of repatriation marked the most frustrating and disappointing episode in my ten years as CEO of the Glenbow. I still struggle to account for the intransigence of these officials. Generously, I attribute their position to a strict interpretation of their fiduciary responsibility for provincial collections: it was simply irresponsible to give back collections—where would it end? There may also have been a genuine feeling that the Blackfoot were being given preferential treatment, which, in fact, was true, inasmuch as we lived in their homeland. We were always explicit about this. I understand fiduciary responsibility, but it is brittle and intractable and does not serve changing societal needs. In a bureaucracy, however, the system is closed and slippery-slope reasoning is all pervasive.

Less generously, our differences may have stemmed from the contrast in our institutions. The Glenbow had severed its ties with the provincial government in 1996 and become an independent, nonprofit corporation. No longer a provincial Crown corporation, it was entrepreneurial and the most economically self-sufficient of the ten largest museums in Canada at that time, complete with an international public profile. The Glenbow’s organizational goals, values, and method of operation were categorically different from those of other provincial museums, and, overall, we seldom agreed on anything with the Alberta government. A case in point was the province’s rejection of our strategic plan mentioned earlier, and, with it, our request for multi-year funding from the province (Janes 2013, 29).

The Glenbow’s relationship with the province was, in short, problematic. This led me to wonder how far Byrne’s intransigence was born purely of a rigid commitment to stewardship. It didn’t matter what we said; it didn’t matter that we had developed substantive and trusting relationships with the Blackfoot; it didn’t matter what we aspired to do as anthropologists and as museum workers. There was no forward motion, no progress in dialogue or understanding.
Government officials held the power because the province owned the Glenbow’s collections (our administrative autonomy notwithstanding), and, according to them, they were exercising their fiduciary responsibility.

During this period, the province did, in fact, offer an alternative to our repatriation initiative. They suggested that key artifacts, such as medicine bundles, be replicated, using authentic, albeit contemporary, materials, and that these replicas be the focus of our efforts. The Provincial Museum of Alberta had just such an experiment underway with a Blackfoot ceremonialist when this proposal was made to us. Since it seemed a sensible alternative, we inquired among our Blackfoot colleagues about the advisability of such an approach. The consensus indicated that this was unknown territory—replicating a sacred object bereft of its original contents. In view of this uncertainty, we had neither the knowledge nor the authority to determine the wisdom of such an approach, and we declined to pursue the province’s alternative.

By early 1999, it was abundantly clear that provincial cultural officials would simply not approve the repatriation of the Blackfoot objects. We had spent an inordinate amount of time and energy with these officials in an effort to promote our thinking and our plan, and it finally occurred to me that repatriation would never be possible unless we adopted a new approach, a new strategy, and different tactics. I advised the Glenbow’s board of our failure to enlist the support of provincial officials, and a seemingly endless round of meetings and telephone calls with board members and the Executive Committee of the board ensued. The result was the decision to arrange a meeting with the premier of Alberta, Ralph Klein, so that we could make the case for repatriation directly. This meeting was facilitated by a Glenbow board member who had personal and political ties to the premier. This, of course, was a hazardous strategy—bypassing the bureaucratic hierarchy in search of a political solution. Having done their due diligence, however, including obtaining an opinion on the legality of deaccessioning the Blackfoot material, the board was committed to resolving this matter. We also met with representatives of the Blackfoot Confederacy in November 1999 to advise them of the strategy. On 22 December 1999, I was advised that the premier had agreed to the repatriation and would attend a formal ceremony at the Glenbow on 14 January 2000.

I can only speculate on the premier’s decision to support our initiative in opposition to his officials. An important factor was undoubtedly his personal
relationships with a number of Blackfoot individuals. Premier Klein was also well aware of our relationship with the Blackfoot, having attended the official signing of the Glenbow’s memorandum of understanding with the Mookaakin Society in 1998. All that remained was to plan a formal event and answer a call from a furious provincial official in early January who had just been told of the premier’s decision. The formal repatriation signing ceremony was held at the Glenbow on 14 January 2000, preceded by a private ceremony with smudging, prayers, and the exchange of gifts between the Glenbow and the Blackfoot. The premier of Alberta and the chiefs and ceremonialists of the Blackfoot Confederacy (Piikani, Kainai, and Siksika) were in attendance, as were members of the press. A public reception at the museum followed. The repatriation ceremony was my last official duty as president and CEO of the Glenbow and marked not only the conclusion of unfinished business but also hopefully a legacy that will continue to benefit the Blackfoot people.

With the repatriation now official, provincial officials were given the task of developing the legislation and the regulations to support it, which they did. My intention here is not to embarrass or anger anyone but to record the events that brought about the repatriation legislation that the Province of Alberta eventually enacted. I regret that we were forced to disregard the provincial officials and gain the political support of the provincial premier, but there was no alternative. The corporate records of the Glenbow’s Board of Governors and the essays in this volume authored by Blackfoot individuals attest to this.

**The Legacy**

The interest in Glenbow’s work with the Blackfoot continues. Since leaving the Glenbow in 2000, I have responded to numerous inquiries and requests for interviews about the repatriation and about the Glenbow’s relationship with the Blackfoot. At least a dozen dissertations and theses have been written, and, despite ongoing debates about repatriation, the international museum community recognizes the importance and originality of Glenbow’s work. The museum’s partnership with the Blackfoot and its institutional commitment to such collaborative relationships culminated in the opening of the exhibition “Niitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life” in 2001. The authority and responsibility for
the research and development of this groundbreaking exhibition rested with a group of eighteen Blackfoot Elders, who received technical support from Glenbow staff (see Blackfoot Gallery Committee 2001).

I firmly believe that our experience with repatriation contributed to the Glenbow’s resilience as an organization. Resilience is about the ability to deal with change, and one source of resilience is diversity. The relationships we developed with the Blackfoot diversified our perspective, skills, values, and knowledge, as well as our museum practice. It made the Glenbow a stronger institution—irrespective of whether these relationships were valued by all senior managers and staff at the time. Repatriation has been profoundly important, but it is also only one way of developing authentic relationships with First Nations peoples. The enduring values of trust, respect, and interdependence, upon which authentic relationships are based, began to reveal themselves as we replaced our assumed museum authority with both vulnerability and humility. As an institution, the Glenbow changed: its staff became more mindful of the essential role of museums in society. The future of museums does not lie in a preoccupation with the financial bottom line or with efforts to make museums more popular. Rather, it lies in these institutions embedding their work so deeply in the communities they serve that museums will eventually embody and reflect the wisdom, courage, and vision that distinguish the lives of so many people everywhere. I will always be grateful to the Blackfoot for sharing their wisdom, courage, and vision and for guiding the Glenbow and me through this rare and wonderful opportunity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I will always remain grateful to Gerry Conaty for the invitation to contribute to this book and for his editorial guidance and valuable comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. I am indebted to numerous Blackfoot colleagues who guided me through the intricacies of their culture with kindness, patience, and generosity. Special thanks go to Frank Weasel Head, Jerry Potts, Allan Pard, Martin Heavy Head, Narcisse Blood, Leonard Bastien, Pat Provost, and Daniel Weasel Moccasin. I also want to thank my colleagues at the Glenbow who supported and assisted with the details of repatriation, particularly Patricia
Ainslie, Daryl Betenia, Beth Carter, Clifford Cranebear, Camille Owen, Nancy Cope, Gwenyth Claughton, Evy Werner, and Christine Chin. Gerry understood how much I valued his commitment to repatriation, and I thank the members of the Glenbow’s Board of Governors who shared that commitment.

NOTE

1 At the time, the federal government still retained significant authority over territorial affairs. The devolution of political and administrative powers from the federal government to the Northwest Territories is in process, and a final Devolution Agreement is pending.

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