EXHIBIT REVIEW

Permanent Exhibit, The Fort Pitt Museum, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

With the 250th anniversary of the Seven Years’ War now arrived, the Fort Pitt Museum decided that the time was ripe to redesign their principal permanent exhibit. Rather than simply an interpretation of Fort Pitt in the French and Indian War, the new permanent exhibition, which opened in April 2004, is a much broader examination of the prominent role which the several different forts at the forks of the Ohio played in shaping the history of western Pennsylvania and the early frontier, and examines the history of the region throughout the eighteenth century.

The exhibition includes the expected collections of arms, powder horns, and a rare Revolutionary War flag carried by Proctor’s Battalion in the Revolutionary War. There is also a good collection of Native American material and the artifacts of the ordinary soldiers who manned the garrison. However, it is the interpretation of
this material that is most striking. What is most refreshing about the exhibition is the manner in which it portrays the interaction among the different peoples who at various times came to the Forks of the Ohio, otherwise known simply as the Point. In particular, Native American peoples emerge as active participants in the region's fate, rather than passive victims. This is done in part by allowing the different peoples to speak for themselves. In each section of the exhibition there is a brief biography of the different participants including a brief quotation and portrait. This allows even the casual visitor to relate to many of these people. In addition, the exhibition makes good use of the work of modern artists such as Robert Griffing and John Buxton. The artwork provides the backdrop for much of the interpretation and brings the material to life in a way that would be difficult with eighteenth-century engravings. The result is a visually appealing, as well as intellectually stimulating, display.

The main theme of the exhibition is described as "whose land is this?" This theme provides a clear focus for the exhibition. The visitor enters past some of the older displays providing an insight into the fur trade and the life of British soldiers in the Fort Pitt garrison, before being shown a video that explains both the origins of Fort Pitt and its "preservation" and "rescue" in the twentieth century. The visitor then proceeds upstairs to the main, and new, exhibition. The nature of the building forces the visitor to follow the display in a defined and chronological pattern. However, the design of the interpretation panels, which provide the most salient information briefly in the first paragraph and then go on to provide much more elaboration below, allows those merely browsing to move quickly through the displays while also providing much more detail for those who seek it.

The first room of the main exhibit discusses the contest for control of the region in the early eighteenth century. The display is supplemented by a video that provides a very good discussion of the competition for the fur trade. The next section places the French and Indian War in western Pennsylvania in both a North American and a global context. This then leads into possibly the most popular part of the exhibition, the interactive touch screen display of the history of Fort Pitt and the other forts that have been built near the Point. With three separate touch-screen displays, which are also projected onto a large screen, the interactive display allows the visitor to investigate many of the different aspects of the history of Fort Pitt, from the construction of the fort to the day-to-day lives of the inhabitants of Pittsburgh. This allows the visitor to get as much or as little detail on specific themes as they like, and particularly appeals to younger visitors.
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The next section, and perhaps the weakest, discusses the role of Fort Pitt during the Revolutionary War. The section, and the video that accompanies it, could do more to tie events in the west to better known events in the east, and do not explain fully why so many Native American communities came to support the British. Indeed, much of the section (and the video in particular) appears to be a rather breathless stream of battles and conflict. However, it is perhaps a little unfair to expect an exhibition with rather limited space to provide a detailed interpretation of such complex events. Finally the exhibition discusses the last struggle to determine “whose land is this,” by examining the rival claims to parts of Pennsylvania in the early republic region between Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Connecticut.

If there is any area of weakness in the exhibition it is possibly in the lack of discussion about the lives of women and children in the early west. With the exception of a section on the touch screen display, there are few artifacts and little interpretation of the lives of the women and children who lived in and around the fort. This is a little surprising considering how far the exhibition has attempted to appeal to children in particular.

Overall, the exhibition successfully caters to a wide range of ages and interests. Considering that the museum must interpret a fort, the only surviving part of which is owned by the Daughters of the American Revolution and is not part of the museum, and where most of the site is buried under modern highways, this is no mean feat. The resulting exhibition is much more than a display of weaponry and an interpretation of the French and Indian War, and succeeds not only in portraying the history of Fort Pitt in the French and Indian War, but also a wider picture of the western Pennsylvania frontier in the second half of the eighteenth century. It should appeal to visitors with a wide range of interests, including those with an interest in military history, but also those with a broader interest in life in eighteenth-century western Pennsylvania and western Pennsylvania’s role in early American history.

MATTHEW C. WARD
University of Dundee, Scotland