

The Purposes of Teaching Canadian History

Peter Seixas

CANADIAN SOCIAL STUDIES
VOLUME 36, NUMBER 2, WINTER 2002

Canada Research Chair in Education,
University of British Columbia
Address at "Giving the Future a Past" Conference,
Association for Canadian Studies, Winnipeg, October 20, 2001

Defining the purposes or goals or objectives of any enterprise is a crucial task. Without knowing our ends, choosing our means, becomes impossible. As BC educator Roland Case has put it, "Without a clear and conscious direction, our teaching is aimless — likely amounting to little more than a string of activities leading nowhere in particular and serving no important purposes." (Case, 1997, p. 290). What are our purposes — what should our purposes be — in teaching Canadian history?

Let me start by *disagreeing* with Canadian historian W.L. Morton who once argued that both the historian and the poet are makers of myths, "only" as he wrote, "the historian has neglected his job of making myths in this decadent, analytical age." (Morton, 1943, quoted in Dick, 1991, p.92). His voice echoes in many of the recent projects aimed at raising the profile of Canadian history in schools and universities (see, e.g., Allen, 2001, pp. 331-334). Indeed, a Vancouver *Sun* editorial following the last Canada Day Dominion Institute Survey urged that every community needs, and I quote, "a kind of tribal memory", one that will provide an "anchor of common values, outlook and loyalties." (*Vancouver Sun*, July 4, 2001, p. A10) This is, indeed, the function of myth.

I want to argue that we need something quite different. We live with an abundance of myths, from the victory at Vimy Ridge to the death of Diana. American historian Michael Kammen charged recently that "we live in age of naïve nostalgia" (Kammen, 2000, p. 233). Some of our myths feel crusty and irrelevant, some of them don't work particularly well any more, and many of them contradict each other in their social and moral messages. But they surround us, nevertheless. Neither historians nor school history teachers should think of their job as making more of them. Distinguishing between myth and history can help to clarify what the job should be.

Myths evoke strong feelings. They do, as the *Sun* editorial noted, reinforce collective identities, social values, and moral orientations. But there is no way to challenge them. We don't revise them on the basis of new evidence. The whole point of myths is to pass them on unchanged to the next generation. Heritage is similar. It involves myth-like narratives in which people can believe deeply and faithfully.

In our own early 21st century predicament, with different pasts, different cultures butting up against one another, traditional practices are no longer adequate for supplying meaning, largely for this reason: they provide no way of reconciling differing stories, different accounts in a multicultural society. This is the promise of critical *historical* discourse: that it provides a rational way, on the basis of evidence and argument, to discuss the differing accounts that jostle with or contradict each other.

And it would be self-defeating to attempt to *resolve* those arguments *before* we get into the classroom, in order to provide students with a finished truth. Rather, we need to bring the arguments into the classroom. Students need guided opportunities to confront conflicting accounts, various meanings, and multiple interpretations of the past, because these are exactly what they will encounter outside of school, and they need to learn to deal with them.

Intensified historical consciousness: the heritage impulse

All around us, there are signs of intense and intensifying interest in the past. As historian, David Lowenthal (1996) put it in *Possessed by the Past: the Heritage Industry and the Spoils of History*:

All at once heritage is everywhere — in the news, in the movies, in the marketplace — in everything from galaxies to genes. It is the chief focus of patriotism and a prime lure of tourism. One can barely move without bumping into a heritage site. Every legacy is cherished. From ethnic roots to history theme parks, Hollywood to the Holocaust, the whole world is busy lauding — or lamenting — some past, be it fact or fiction.

Interpretations of the past in museums, movies and monuments—as well as in schools—have recently aroused bitter controversies, not only in Canada around the world. The storm over the CBC television production of "The Valour and the Horror" pales in comparison to the United States Senate's overwhelming condemnation of proposed History Standards which paid insufficient attention to George Washington. The debates have raged on every continent: What should Hollywood's *Braveheart* mean for Scotland? What should the new South Africa do with the old Boer Trekkers' Monument to racism triumphant? What will a Holocaust memorial mean in Berlin? Who will take the place of Lenin in Russia's history classrooms? If Jack Granatstein's (1998) "killing" of Canadian history is a consequence of a breakdown of consensus in which story to tell, with which moral, then the phenomenon is not unique to Canada. As Dutch historian Chris Lorenz (1999) pointed out in a review essay in the journal *History and Theory*, the same thing is happening around the world.

There are many other less contentious signs of intensified interest in the past. The phenomenon in the US has been documented by authors Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen (1998) in their study of popular uses of history in American life. These include the massive popular use of genealogical tools on the Internet; the History Channel (which promises "All of History, All in One Place,") and History Television; and a plethora of popular film playing with time, history, and the past. These are all signs of intensification of interest in the past.

Why now?

Why is this happening now?

1. According to French historian Pierre Nora, interest in the past — in the form of history — emerges, paradoxically at exactly the moment when tradition falls apart. As he put it somewhat enigmatically:

Our consciousness is shaped by a sense that everything is over and done with, that something long since begun is now complete. Memory is constantly on our lips because it no longer exists. (Nora, 1996, p. 1)

A society that lives comfortably and unconsciously with a traditional past does not expend the effort on constructing what Lowenthal calls "heritage" and Nora calls lieux de memoire.

2. A second reason, related to the first, is the migration and mixing of peoples and cultures. In Vancouver, Toronto, and around the world, people whose pasts, cultures, and traditions are radically different from each other, are living in close proximity to each other. In neighbourhoods, schools, and workplaces, people come with different histories, and thus, in some ways, different visions of the present and the future.

3. Third, in many areas of the world, old regimes have been toppled. When educators assembled recently in the Russian Far East, to revise regional history curricula, they had to confront the questions of the history of communism, but also with the history of relationships of their region to the central state, of Russia to its neighbors, and of the dominant culture to Native peoples in the region. Writing history always involves hindsight. Hindsight from 1999 in Khabarovsk, was very different from hindsight in 1989. Similarly in Eastern Europe, in South Africa, and throughout the post-colonial world.

4. And this brings us to a fourth reason for the heightened historical consciousness at this juncture: the empowerment of previously disempowered groups. Thus, in those world regions, as well as throughout North America, Western Europe, and other places, the new position of women and ethnic minorities, even in regimes that have not undergone radical political changes, has forced a re-examination of the stories of the past.

5. Finally, globalization and its technologies have brought different peoples of the world into communication with each other in new ways, even where they are not physically closer to each other. These changes intensify historical consciousness. People now puzzle and stumble over questions that used to have easy answers supplied by myth.

Questions of Historical Consciousness

I have been speaking of the reasons for a heightened historical consciousness. But "historical consciousness" needs to be defined. It revolves around some very basic, but often implicit and unarticulated questions, which all memory practices—that is, both history and myth—attempt to answer:

1. How did things get to be as we see them today? Which aspects are signs of continuity over time and which, signs of change? Is the Taliban's interpretation of Islam something new, or is it rooted in an ongoing tradition? Why is Vancouver's ethnic composition different from Seattle's? These questions, and the accounts that they demand, are not morally neutral or disinterested. They ask for accounts of the past to explain the present, and their answers have implications for the future.

2. What group or groups am I a part of, and what are its origins? In fact, my identity has various aspects which take me to various different points of origin.

3. How should we judge each other's past actions, and therefore, what debts does my group owe to others and/or others to mine? At a recent UBC symposium entitled "Politics and the Past: On Repairing Historical Injustices", historians, sociologists and legal scholars discussed reparations, land claims, restitutions, and apologies as attempts to explore the nature of these judgments. The BC government's threatened referendum on land claims merely gives new shape to the question of who owes what to whom in a way that rests on our historical interpretations.

4. Are things basically getting better or are they getting worse? This is the question of progress and decline. Should we have believed, with Robert Heilbroner (1993), that "the worst is yet to come?" Does September 11 mark a turning point in the trajectories of world history, as many now believe?

5. What stories about the past should I believe? On what grounds? Should I believe Oliver Stone's account of *JFK*? Simon Schama's account of Rembrandt's life and times? Daniel Goldhagen's explanation of the Holocaust? On what grounds? What counts as evidence?

6. Which stories shall we tell? What—about the past—is significant enough to pass on to others, and particularly to the next generation?

From myth and heritage to history

Though asking these questions is natural in the Canada of 2001, formulating good answers to them is anything but. To answer them well, people have to move beyond the simplicity and faith of myth and heritage, to the complexity of history. They have to understand the distance between the present and the past, and the difficulty in representing the past in the present.

Good answers have to move beyond myth and heritage, that is they must

1. Comprehend the interpretive choices and constraints involved in using traces from the past to construct historical accounts.
2. Understand the pastness of the past, the distance between the present and the past, and the difficulty in representing the past in the present.
3. Acknowledge complexity and uncertainty; deal with multiple causes, conflicting belief systems, and historical actors' differing perspectives.

These criteria allow a distinction here between *intensifying* historical consciousness and (excuse the term) *advancing* it. Films, historical sites, historical fiction are excellent at *intensifying* historical consciousness, arousing interest, involvement, and imagination. Schools are in the best position to *advance* it.

Let's look at an example of what it might mean to advance historical consciousness. It has always been a challenge to construct a mythology of Canadian origins around the Fathers of Confederation. The late nineteenth century was simply not a heroic moment for politicians, in Canada or elsewhere. Here is a selection from a speech by John A. Macdonald in the House of Commons, May 4, 1885:

The Chinese are foreigners. If they come to this country, after three years' residence, they may, if they choose, be naturalized. But still we know that when the Chinaman comes here he intends to return to his own country; he does not bring his family with him; he is a stranger, a sojourner in a strange land, for his own purposes for a while; he has no common interest with us, and while he gives us his labor and is paid for it, and is valuable, the same as a threshing machine or any other agricultural implement which we may borrow from the United States on hire and return it to the owner on the south side of the line; a Chinaman gives us his labor and gets his money, but that money does not fructify in Canada; he does not invest it here, but takes it with him and returns to China; and if he cannot, his executors or his friends send his body back to the flowery land. But he has no British instincts or British feelings or aspirations, and therefore ought not to have a vote. (Commons Debates, May 4, 1885, p.1582)

The image, which most deeply shocks our Year 2001 sensibilities, is the comparison of Chinese labour to the threshing machine. But there are other markers of the distance between Canada's first prime minister — with his reference to "British instincts" as the essence of Canadian identity — and our own times. The richness of this document as a text for historical study is made clear by the questions of historical consciousness that I posed earlier: in what ways has there been change between 1885 and now? Does the change represent progress in racial attitudes? How should we judge Macdonald?

In considering students' answers to these questions, the criteria for advanced historical consciousness become useful for framing goals for history teaching. Students who, on first reading the document, simplistically condemn Macdonald as a racist villain, should be taught to identify the rhetorical strategies which are responsible for its impact today, and to imagine, through historical contextualization, how those strategies might have worked differently in 1885. A sophisticated response would thus require an understanding of Macdonald's milieu, including the political games in which he was a player. At the same

time, it would question the legacy of these attitudes for Canadian national identity: it would acknowledge complexity and attempt to come to grips with the problem of looking across the chasm of time. Students should also come to understand that one document — or one excerpt from one document — can contribute to historical understanding, but is insufficient for reaching a robust historical judgement. Much of the "history" taught in schools has failed promote these capacities in students. In a rapidly changing, fractured, mobile, multicultural, globalizing society, we can no longer hope to equip students by teaching them heritage and myth: one coherent story as "what happened" in the past. Nor is the task simply to make new, more progressive myths. Students are exposed to too many competing claims and narratives outside of school — in their families, film, community commemorations, and popular music.

These — like the successful Heritage Minutes — are excellent vehicles for *intensifying* historical consciousness, but not for advancing it. They arouse interest, involvement, and imagination by propagating myth and heritage. They are often — indeed almost always — more dramatically convincing, more appealing, more technologically current, or more persuasive than what can be offered up within the walls of a classroom.

But schools do have an important advantage that extracurricular purveyors of history lack. If advancing historical consciousness were its central aim, then schools' sequence of graded courses over ten or more years could provide the time and focus for students to become increasingly proficient at, and increasingly committed to, the difficult work of looking at the past critically. Schools actually have the time to develop thoughtful and subtle complexity in students' historical thinking. Discussions about school history would no longer be framed, as if the key questions were "which story should we tell?" and "how can we make it interesting?" The whole task would be conceived differently.

Denis Shemilt, the British history educator responsible for the evaluation of the highly successful Schools History Project, summed it up at a conference in Pittsburgh three years ago (see Stearns, Seixas & Wineburg, 2000). He noted that the goal of history in the schools should be *both* a) a deep understanding of the past *and* b) a deep understanding of history. That is, a) students should gain facility with understanding the variety, the difference, the strangeness of life in the past, the interplay of continuity and change, the multiple causes and consequences of events and trends, the role of individuals, collectivities and states, and so on. But b) they should also understand the processes of knowledge-making, the construction of a historical narrative or argument, the uses of evidence, and the nature of conflicting historical accounts. This second level of understanding acts as the best insurance against dogmatic transmission of a single version of the past, a practice which violates the core tenets of the discipline.

Will we lose students to relativism, once we tell them that history is not "just the facts"? There is considerable reason to believe not. Students are already exposed to conflicting historical interpretations. They need the means to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the myths they encounter all around them. For this reason, schools' *failure* to teach history's disciplinary procedures is more likely to lead to relativism. The British schools' history program is already structured along these lines, and several jurisdictions in the United States are grappling towards it as well (Seixas, 2001; St. John, Ramage, & Stokes, 1999). There is reason, as well, to be cautiously optimistic about the possibilities opened up by new media for this approach to teaching history.

The very conditions of a pluralistic society that give rise to intensified concerns with the past, make the practices of myth and heritage unsuitable to address those concerns adequately. Knowing what happened and what it means for us is more complex and more multilayered than the paradigms of myth and heritage can sustain. Young people are bound to poke around, under, and through the kinds of mythic narratives that once provided national cohesion, identity, and sense of purpose. We should delight in that. The purpose of teaching Canadian history in the schools should be to help them do it better.

References

- Allen, Gene. (2001). Canadian history in film: A roundtable discussion. *Canadian Historical Review*, 82(2), 331-46.
- Case, Roland. (1997). Course, unit and lesson planning. In Roland Case & Penney Clark (Eds.), *The Canadian Anthology of Social Studies: Issues and Strategies for Teachers*. Burnaby, BC: Simon Fraser University.
- Dick, Lyle. (1991). The Seven Oaks incident and the construction of a historical tradition, 1816-1970. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 2, 91-113.
- Granatstein, J. (1998). *Who Killed Canadian History?* Toronto: Harper-Collins.
- Heilbroner, Robert. (1993, Feb. 14). *The worst is yet to come*. New York Times Book Review, 1-25.
- Kammen, Michael. (2000). Review of Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*. *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History*, 39(2), 230-42.
- Lorenz, C. F. G. (1999). Comparative historiography: Problems and perspectives. *History and Theory*, 38(1), 25-39.
- Lowenthal, David. (1996). *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Industry and the Spoils of History*. New York: Free Press.
- Nora, Pierre. (1996). *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*. (Arthur Goldhammer, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rosenzweig, R., & Thelen, D. (1998). *Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Seixas, Peter. (2001b). A district constructs history standards. In Peter Lee & Rosalyn Ashby (Eds.), *International Yearbook of History Education (Vol. 3)*. London, UK: Woburn Press.
- Stearns, P., Seixas, P., & Wineburg, S. S. (Eds.). (2000). *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*. New York & London: New York University Press.
- St. John, Mark, Ramage, Katherine, & Stokes, Laura. (1999). *A Vision for the Teaching of History-Social Science: Lessons from the California History-Social Science Project*: Inverness Research Associates.