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Great Questions Topic:

Does History Matter?

Imagining Past, Present, and Future: Why History Matters

by Morgan Ring

Jack Granatstein and Michael Ignatieff disagree both about the way in which history should be taught and about the fundamental goals of studying history. The former argues that schools give an undue focus to the dark side of Canada's past, even though one of the main benefits of history is that it provides students with "common cultural capital," allowing voters to understand their political system and immigrants the society into which they are trying to integrate. The latter emphasizes the need for an inclusive history, not overly-focused on Central Canada, and suggests that while historical awareness can be a part of citizenship, it does not have to be. Neither Doctor Ignatieff nor Doctor Granatstein advances a convincing argument for the importance of history, and both take a pedestrian approach to the debate about how young people should study the past, treating political and social history as if they were unconnected fields and restricting their discussion to high school and university classrooms. Yet history does matter, and so does the way in which we learn it: it compels us to recognize that not all connections are obvious; it is fundamental to any discussion of Canada's place in the world, and above all, it demands and fosters empathy and imagination in a way that no other discipline does.

History asks students to see connections, and both Dr Granatstein and Dr Ignatieff create a false dichotomy between social and political history that obscures those connections. More problematic than the fact that political history loses out to social history in Canadian classrooms - which a glance at the curriculum of "Canadian History Since World War I" suggests that it does (Note 1) - is that while the writers agree that history must include politicians and generals as well as labourers and women, neither acknowledges that all these people are part of one story, and that its most exciting moments are the moments when no single "social" or "political" framework can capture that story in its entirety. The extension of the franchise to women by the Wartime Elections Act, for instance, must be considered in a social historical context, for it makes little sense if students are unfamiliar with the suffragist movement, the conscription debates, and evolving immigration patterns, but it can hardly be removed from its politico-military context of Unionist government and troop shortages in Flanders. These pressures were not experienced in tidy "social" and "political" boxes: for suffragettes, the Act was a victory achieved after years of activism, but it was achieved through their connection to the war. Studying history without labels allows us to see otherwise

unapparent connections between forces and people.

The real issue, however, is not how history is taught to teenagers but rather with how people are introduced to history in the first place; as both writers observe, many students are convinced before the courses begin that history is irrelevant. Personal connections with the past help to challenge that idea and are sometimes obvious - resources like the Canadian Virtual War Memorial let students learn about veterans from their schools, and the history of immigrants, from Chinese labourers to United Empire Loyalists, is naturally compelling for their descendants. Yet, as Dr Granatstein notes, such links do not always exist. The odds are that nobody in the class will be related to Borden, and in increasingly multicultural schools, what is personal for one student is just a set of facts for another. The challenge, then, is engaging everyone's imagination in as much of Canadian history as possible, and the best way to do that is to remember that much of history is story-telling. Canada's past is bursting with gripping tales, with ghosts and pirates and all the characters that make for wonderful narrative; the ideal time to learn them is not in high school, where students are meant to grapple with complex socioeconomic and political connections, but in elementary school, where children can learn all the legends, anecdotes, and songs that make history so exciting. If somebody had told me when I was fifteen that Mackenzie lost his dog while exploring Canada's west coast only to find it again, by some miracle, in the wilds of British Columbia, I would have dismissed it as apocrypha, probably not true and certainly not relevant to me. Fortunately, I came across Mackenzie's dog in a picture book when I was six, and I thought it was a great story; nine years later, studying explorers academically, I was already connected to the history. History must be based in facts, but it also can and should be fun.

Of course, how history is taught only matters if history is important. Dr Granatstein sets out three arguments for the field's value: first, it requires its students to master complex material, evaluate it, and write about it convincingly. Second, it is key to political awareness. Third, it helps immigrants to understand Canada. Each of these reasons is unsatisfactory. The grimly utilitarian view that history's value lies in the skills its students learn is flawed, for in terms of reading, writing, and arguing, history demands nothing that politics or law do not also require. It is untrue that citizens cannot be informed voters if they have no idea what the BNA Act is: any Canadian who has read party websites, spoken with constituency candidates, and kept up with media coverage is quite capable of casting a rational vote, even if he or she has never heard of the Statute of Westminster. While it may be that those who pay close attention to present-day politics are more likely to be those who understand the politics of the past, Dr Granatstein does not prove this or even suggest it. Finally, immigrants are, in fact, required to study Canadian history in order to secure citizenship, and Dr Granatstein offers no rationale for his assumption that immigrants' children require special historical "force-feeding." Dr Ignatieff identifies many of the difficulties with these arguments, but beyond the idea that history can illuminate families' pasts and contribute to citizenship, he does not explain why it "must" be studied.

The question remains: is history worth studying, and if so, why? The answer is absolutely yes, for not only does it require students to think and feel in challenging new ways, it is essential knowledge for anyone who wants to think seriously about how Canada sees itself and how it is seen by others. It demands imagination, for without

imagination, and without empathy, deep historical understanding is impossible. Dr Ignatieff's discussion of anglophone-francophone antipathy is a case in point. Wolfe and Montcalm have been dead for two and a half centuries; an end to tension between French and English Canadians would not merely be pleasant, it would be logical. Yet it has not come about, for there is an emotional element to the story which no analysis of economic and political inequalities can account for fully, and without which no future unity strategy can hope for success. History compels students to try to experience a mindset that is not their own, to combine fact with feeling, an invaluable ability when it comes to understanding the contemporary world. This is connected to the broader question of Canadian identity, for while voters can make rational choices without knowing Canada's constitutional history, there are some political issues which require historical awareness if there is to be any informed debate. The Afghan mission, for instance, raises a series of questions that can only be answered with some knowledge of history: why is Canada in NATO? Why has NATO survived the collapse of the Warsaw Pact? Why have many Canadians come to see peacekeeping as our appropriate international role? Is this a justified perception? Present-day policy need not be based on the actions of people fifty years ago, but it cannot ignore them, either.

In 1513, the exiled Niccolò Machiavelli wrote a letter lamenting his days spent catching birds and chopping trees, but delighting in his evenings spent reading history: "I enter into the ancient courts of ancient men...and there I am not ashamed to speak to them, to ask them the reasons for their actions; and they, in their humanity, answer me; and for four hours...I dismiss every affliction...I become completely part of them." (Note 2) That letter is a vivid demonstration of why history matters and why debates about the balance of social and political history in classrooms are missing the point. It shows that history can give a sense of belonging, an understanding of an individual human's place in the broader narrative; it offers insights into politics that no other source provides, and above all, it is an exercise in imagination. Plutarch was dead, but the combination of his stories and Machiavelli's mind returned him to life. History will always matter for everyone, regardless of age, not just because it offers compelling stories and reveals so much about the world around us, but because it teaches us to look for connections and to experience passions that we would otherwise never find or feel.

Notes

Note 1: Ontario Ministry of Education, "The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 and 10: Canadian and World Studies," (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2005), 45. War and politics feature in the curriculum, but the course's stated aims are social history-focused, with students "[investigating] the challenges presented by economic, social, and technological changes."

Note 2: Niccolò Machiavelli, "Letter to Francesco Vettori," in *The Portable Machiavelli*, ed. and trans. Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa (London: Viking Penguin Inc., 1979), 69.