

Animating the Past
Canada's National Narrative and the Social Utility of History
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Topic: Does History Matter?

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Throughout the debate, there exists one persistent point of contention between Jack Granatstein and Michael Ignatieff. Regarding the social utility of history, the views of the two historians wildly diverge. Granatstein, on the one hand, maintains that history can be used as a tool to educate and integrate immigrants, to craft citizens, and to create uniting “common cultural capital”. Ignatieff, on the other, doubts the value of a society conscious of its history, pointing out that one can both be a good citizen and ignorant of the past. To him, history should be a “lesson in truth”, and not a means of manufacturing unity.

While Granatstein's proposed social engineering is unnerving, Ignatieff goes too far the other way in denying history's utility. Although we must beware the lure of teaching exclusive history for the sake of national unity, we should equally recognize the major role history can play in shaping a better society; a public aware of its past is not only better informed, more engaged, and more understanding, but better able to function within civic society. Before this type of public is created, however, the way history is taught must become more personal, relevant, and engaging. It is only once this takes place that Canada will be able to find a truly inclusive national narrative that informs a unique and confident national identity.

In response to Granatstein's suggestion that history should educate about the values and traditions of Canada, Michael Ignatieff is quick to retort that history is not a civics course. In claiming the two are mutually exclusive, however, Ignatieff throws away some of the strongest arguments for why history matters; civics, as the study of our civil society, our system of

government, and our shared institutions, should never be studied separately from history. In a country like Canada, where the understanding of our parliamentary system is decaying at the same rate as our voter turnout, history has a social utility in informing us as to why the country functions the way it does. Granatstein is right; when it comes to “Provincial Powers” and “Social Union” it is the citizens armed with a knowledge of the past who are best equipped to understand, appreciate, and participate in civic life.

Moreover, a society conscious of history is better able to deal with conflict. If more people recognized the centuries-old story behind each First Nations land claim, we would be better able to avoid the Okas and the Ipperwashes. If English Canadians better grasped the complicated history of Québec, fewer would dismiss separatism as the whining of sore losers. If Canadians in general better understood our eternal evolution as an immigrant nation, more would accept diversity as a cornerstone of our identity. Just as ignorance leads to conflict, knowledge leads to greater understanding. Put in the Canadian context, it is the knowledge of our history that will animate a truly national character, tempered by understanding and an acceptance of difference. A society aware of all sides of a story is a society better able to come to terms with fundamental issues, issues with which Canada has always struggled.

So why have we not yet created this type of historically-aware society? Both Granatstein and Ignatieff offer the same response; not enough history is taught in our schools. Professor Granatstein especially seems to think that simply adding more mandatory history courses to the high school curriculum will do the job. This top-down approach to history, however, is destined to produce the same results as Canada’s top-down approach to bilingualism. Even Ignatieff, who admits that history needs to be more personal, is missing half the point. In their debate over how

history is taught, neither historian mentions how history is learned. Both are under the impression that if we just teach the right kind of history, the discipline will be revitalized. They are both mistaken. You cannot teach someone to be interested, you cannot teach someone to be engaged, and you cannot teach someone relevance. It is this approach that has produced “a tuned-out generation”. If we make history a chore, people will think of it as a chore.

This does not mean that engaging people is impossible. It is, in fact, quite easy. The simple truth that educators have been missing is that people love history. It’s why we follow television serials, savouring character development, plot-twists, and allusions to past episodes, it’s why we follow sports, always watching those old rivalries, and it is why we follow celebrities. Humans love to make connections, to spot continuity and change, and to predict future patterns. All educators need to do in order to transfer this passion for history from the world of sports and into the classroom is to demand less and offer more. We need to offer more opportunities to get outside to where history happened, more possibilities to discuss, debate, and dissent, more chances to break from the strict chronology imposed in schools in order to explore Canadian history’s more interesting tangents. Most importantly, we need to let students decide for themselves which stories matter.

Some will say that this approach is destined to cut out much of what is most crucial in Canadian history, but the truth is that we face a choice. Either we continue trying to hammer the entirety of Canadian history into students’ heads, knowing that most will remain disinterested, or we let students pursue the stories that grip them, even though some narratives will be left out. This second option, however, has one advantage which the first lacks. In actively determining what they are to learn, students will become invested in their studies, and will gain a sincere desire to better understand the past. Whether they choose to study Granatstein’s “politics,

diplomacy, and warfare” of British North America, or, like Ignatieff, prefer the history that will help them “make sense of the photographs in their family albums”, the more students become engaged in any one facet of history, the more they will want to continue making connections to bigger, broader concepts, and the more they will be struck by the relevance of what they are learning.

Such an approach can bring a profound change in the way individuals relate to history. As they become connected with the past, people will begin to collect the stories that are relevant to them, just as someone would gather up threads running through the past. A Métis might pick up a thread for Louis Riel, as might any Manitoban. A Quebecer might collect the thread for Lévesque, Mercier, or Champlain. An Anglophone Islander, cultivating the red soil around Crapaud, might still feel enough of a connection to gather up a thread for the Acadians who did the same hundreds of years ago, just as a boy living in Hamilton might collect a thread for the Neutral Indians who once walked the same paths as he does now. Once collected, all of these threads, each one representing a profound connection to history, will be woven together to create a personal tapestry reflecting all the characters, all the ideas, and all the stories an individual considers relevant to their life experience.

Except, of course, these tapestries will not be truly personal. The majority of threads will be shared among vast numbers of people. While not every Canadian will consider the Fathers of Confederation, the Famous Five, Jacques Cartier, or the MS St. Louis relevant enough to study, enormous numbers of people will, and these threads will be repeated countless times across the country. It is when these threads converge, when people all over Canada consider the same story relevant enough to learn about, that true common cultural capital is created. It is in this way that

Canada will weave one tapestry representative of all the country. The simple truth is that the state cannot dictate the populace's historical identity; if we are ever to achieve a truly inclusive national narrative, it must be the other way around. We cannot, as Jack Granatstein suggests, "force-feed" anyone a national identity, as these attempts would meet with hostility or indifference. A national identity must instead be stumbled upon by a society actively engaged by the past. Only once we stop telling people what Canada means will we actually be able to find out.

The benefits are clear. Despite what Ignatieff says, citizens conscious of their country's past are more informed, more engaged, and better able to live with one another. We cannot, however, as Granatstein proposes, simply continue teaching more of the same in the hope of engaging Canadians. Instead, it is by letting students freely explore the history of Canada that we will create a generation passionate about history, and a society that is able to independently produce a national narrative inclusive of all Canadians. We must remember that an identity is not built, just as a tree is not built, but grown. When Canada stops trying so hard to create unity through a common history, it will just happen organically.