

HISTORY AND THE FABRIC OF LIFE:

CONCLUSIONS AND MEDITATIONS

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Why bother with history? It is past. We do not contemplate sour milk or eggs that have expired. We do not spend our time – other than that composting or taking out the trash – worrying about our refuse. We purchase a bag of potato chips or a carton of orange juice, and then abandon the cartons and packaging. It is heaped upon other artifacts, and we hope that it will decompose. Or, we hope nothing, and forget.

So Spartans died at Thermopylae. The Mongols were gifted archers. So-called pioneers built log cabins and used all parts of the animals that they killed to survive, boiling down the bones to make soup in more difficult times. Canada was confederated in 1867. Tony Danza starred in a sitcom where he was a male housekeeper. The Toronto Maple Leafs last won the Stanley Cup in 1967. I learned about computers in the second grade when Apple PS2 machines were popular in the Scarborough District School Board, which is now defunct, having been amalgamated into an administrative leviathan that encompasses the greater Toronto area.

I can go on. Each of us can participate in a trivia show and draw from the scrap heap that is our working memory artifacts personal and cultural. I have much in my heap, and yet there is a lot missing. Do not ask me about most of Asia and the African continent. I do not have a single scrap of knowledge to draw upon relevant to Scandinavia, or to the reign of Henry the Seventh. I assume there was such a monarch because I keep hearing about Henry the Eighth. Why does this Eighth Henry matter? He killed many wives. Abominable. He founded the Church of England. That's a matter that evokes ambivalence particularly in this secular age. Why do I keep hearing about this king and why can I picture his ruffled costume, even as I do not care to contemplate him at any length?

History is far too subjective. I don't know what Germans say about Hitler, but I conjure his likeness in near juxtaposition to my imagining of the Boogie Man. What happened in Nanking? I think that I know, but I am quite certain that my reckoning and that of a schoolteacher in Beijing will differ. How about the invasion of Cyprus in 1974? That is an illegal act in my view, supported by United Nations decrees that followed; that perspective is contested, I know.

Why do elementary school children have to learn about knights, moats, coats of arms, and the like? Do the roots of democracy really matter when so many

Canadians feel alienated from the democratically elected government that rules? Is Louis Riel a traitor or a hero?

So may things seem much more practical – and definable – than history. $2+2=4$. The letter c is sometimes pronounced ‘s’ and sometimes ‘k’. Hydrogen is the lightest element, followed by Helium and Lithium. My garage door is not closing properly because the aging motor that drives it has succumbed to age and to the bluster of winter cold. My computer has 500 GB of hard drive space available to me for various usages. Ontario can be located between Manitoba and Quebec. These are certainties, albeit with varying degrees of applicability to living.

Why bother with history? It has no relation to the knowledge and skills we seem to value most when measuring the successes of educational institutions or systems. Are we literate? Can we compute? Are we entrepreneurial?

Yet history does seem to matter and sometimes matter a great deal. When documentary filmmakers Brian and Terrance McKenna made a series of films in the early 1990s titled *The Valour and the Horror* that called into question iconic versions of Canadian participation in World War 2 veteran’s groups and others were outraged. The controversy led to an investigation in the Senate and several court cases. A similar scenario unfolded in 2007 when a display at the new Canadian War Museum raised questions about the morality of Allied bombing missions in the same war. These are just two Canadian examples of so-called history wars that have unfolded around the world causing politicians to bluster, historians to rage, curators to loose their jobs, and teachers to run for cover (MacMillan 2008; Taylor and Guyver 2012).

And, as the song says, the beat goes on. Canada’s federal government has recently decided to reorder the Museum of Civilizations in order to found a Museum of History. The same government also recently redubbed key elements of the military “Royal”, hearkening to a British imperial past and sponsored a War of 1812 bicentennial gala. All of which have raised the ire of some historians, minority groups, and other members of the public.

History seems to matter in a popular sense as well. Bookstores teem with books that treat historical content. Historical fiction is a popular genre with Hilary Mantel recently winning her second Man Booker Prize in five years for a novel about the life of Thomas Cromwell, erstwhile advisor to Henry the Eight. Millions on both sides of the Atlantic sit glued to their television sets every week for the third season of the British period drama *Downton Abbey*.

People that I encounter daily do not hesitate to recount the stories of their lives, the histories of their homes, or the glories of their past experiences. Perhaps history survives in the formal curriculum of schools because we feel a collective compulsion to tell the story of our lives, the narrative describing this place, and the common countenance of our encounters within the nation state. We have a mythology. We also have a material past. We have a mountain heap we must dig into in order to understand ourselves and make ourselves understood.

We are Canadian. We are, more foundationally, human. We need to understand ourselves as Canadians, but that does not suffice. We must understand what it means to be in this place, in this time, in our own skins. We tell stories as a means of understanding. The evidence we offer validates our tales. It offers us security to know that what we say about our own humanity has some material and tangible basis.

History is primordial. We are caught in the current of time, and we situate ourselves within the temporal stream by telling ourselves about our past. We tell the stories of our selves out of an existential necessity to elucidate and to explain our presence and purpose.

We are here, we live, and breathe, and we pass away. There is a long tradition of scientific thinking about history – it is a discipline, it is a concept, it can be broken down into component parts or habits, etc. – but history is the offspring of the humanities. It helps us understand who we are. Literacy does not serve the same purpose. Mathematics may, as Plato preached, tell us something of absolutes and of eternal forms, but it does not sketch out our likeness. Science helps us to command the spheres of space, but it tells us nothing of our soul, other than, perhaps, to deny its material existence.

History turns the investigative gaze inward and tells us about our humanity, and it makes us reflect upon the heap of artifacts that we would otherwise neglect. We teach history out of necessity. Even as we breathe, we must tell stories and inquire into our place within the world. As we dig through our past, we write ourselves into the narrative of the world.

References

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Biography

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