

Taming Memory

Phil Ryan

Presented to the opening plenary of the Canadian Studies Association annual conference.
Toronto, 4 November 2010.

1 Intro

I find it rather intimidating to give a talk about history

I have no expertise in the area, and so I'm not sure what is obvious for you
If I get it wrong, and waste your time telling you what you already know, please feel
free to meditate, or send text messages to your beloved: "Wish I were with you,
right now"

Today, we are told, is the beginning of Veterans' week

I want to use the experience of one particular veteran to lead us into a reflection on
our uneasy relation to historical memory

And, eventually, to something that might seem far removed from much of what we are
discussing at this conference:

The competing understandings of patriotism that underlie our struggles over
memory.

2 Grandfather

My grandfather was the 38th person to enlist in the Royal Newfoundland Regiment at the
start of WW1.

He survived Gallipoli:

His shrapnel wounds, he later wrote, led him to "a very comfortable bed on the
hospital ship" where "all the discomforts and the misery of the trenches were
washed away with plenty of soap and water"

[JJ Ryan, "A resume of some of the wanderings of the Blue Puttees by one who was there," 1978]

Spending Christmas 1915 in a London hospital, Corporal Ryan considered himself "one
of the lucky ones" ["A resume"]

In the spring of 1916, he and his regiment then found themselves in France, preparing for
what was to be a "big push" against the German lines.

2.1 Beaumont-Hamel

On June 30, they were preparing for the next day's battle

'I remember when the Battalion formed up to march off the evening before the Drive, the peasants were standing by the side of the road watching us and some of them were crying'...

'Some of them were crying... We didn't know why.'

(Cave, 159)

The next day, he knew

On the morning of July 1, the first day of the battle of the Somme

His regiment left its trenches and tried to advance against German lines
Near the village of Beaumont-Hamel

The Regiment was quickly annihilated.

At the roll call on June 30, there had been 800 officers and men (Cave, 12)

48 hours later, at the roll call of July 2, less than 70 were present.

The *Royal Newfoundland Regiment War Diary* records that

"During the night and evening unwounded survivors managed to crawl back to our own lines and by next morning some 68 had answered their names..."

(Cited in Cave, 44-45)

Nearly half of the regiment died within 30 minutes that morning of July 1, almost everyone else was wounded.

2.2 Survivor

My Grandfather survived Gallipoli

He survived Beaumont-Hamel

After being wounded twice, he returned to Newfoundland, to the quiet of civilian life

He had been a wireless operator before the war, and he took up the job again aboard the S.S. Erik, an old ship doing cargo runs between St-John's and Canada.

And on August 24-25, 1918, his boat was torpedoed and sunk off the island of St.-Pierre

Given how many of his comrades had died fighting Germany, it is ironic that his life was

saved by the captain of the German submarine

The survivors reported that “The crew of the Eric were given coffee... and the officers were given coffee, brandy, and cigarettes.” [*Tin-Pots*, 267]

The crew of the Eric spent the night on the submarine, and were transferred to a Newfoundland fishing schooner in the morning, which took them to St. Pierre.

And so, rather improbably, John Joseph Ryan lived to have children

And to see his children’s children

And even to hold the hand of a great-grandson.

2.3 Interview

Sixty years after Beaumont-Hamel, on Remembrance Day 1976, my Grandfather was interviewed on CBC Radio, along with an English woman who had just written a book about the battle.

At one point in the interview, he commented on the tactical mistakes that had contributed to the catastrophe.

This led the English writer to counter:

“possibly, but this is hindsight, isn’t it?”

“I hate to think that all those Newfoundlanders were killed for nothing, and I don’t think they were. Because, in the end, of course, *the war was won*. They did do something, something positive.”

The “something positive,” of course, was to walk forward in the face of machine gun fire.

A Major-General at the Somme wrote to Newfoundland’s prime minister:

“It was a magnificent display of trained and disciplined valour, and its assault only failed of success, because dead men can advance no farther.”

The Danger Tree, 184

2.4 Lesson

But in their exchange, between the hesitant words of the old soldier and the confident declarations of the writer filled with patriotic sentiment, we see a very old conflict, between memory and a certain form of commemoration, between truly listening to the

past, and *putting it to work* for us, making history *useful*

Historical memory has always made some people nervous

Even 60 years after a battle, an old soldier's musing that maybe all those comrades did die because of stupid mistakes *must* be answered.

We must keep intact a narrative in which heroic death served a larger purpose.

Lived memory must be smothered in bromides

Just last year a federal cabinet minister praised the Newfoundlanders' "brave and significant contribution to this battle," a fill-in-the-blanks statement that can be made about any battle, anywhere.¹

Perhaps the best way to forget is to *commemorate* in this vapid way, because it gives us the illusion of memory.

Memory itself, the real deal, is unruly, and must be tamed.

3 History education

Not only in Canada, of course.

If we look around the world, the past decade alone has seen many attempts to tame memory and put history to good use.

Naturally, these efforts are often aimed at history education.

3.1 Texas

Thus, in Texas, history students must now be taught that the allegations thrown about by Joseph McCarthy's (House) Un-American Activities Committee were eventually confirmed by documentary evidence.²

They must also be taught to "evaluate efforts by global organizations to undermine U.S. sovereignty through the use of treaties"

3.2 Florida

The Florida education act of 2006 stipulates that history courses will instruct students about “The nature and importance of free enterprise to the United States economy.”

To emphasize the point, students must also learn how the Declaration of Independence enshrines the “inalienable rights of life, liberty, and property.”

You will recall that the “life, liberty, and property” formulation belongs to John Locke. The authors of the Declaration replaced “property” by “the pursuit of happiness.”

Florida’s elected leaders have evidently decided that Locke had it right, and have taken it upon themselves to correct the ideological deviation of the Founding Fathers.

Finally, perhaps in order to hide their fingerprints, as it were, the Florida law also stipulates that “American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed”

This is, so far as I know, the first time in history that social constructionism has been banned by legislative fiat.

3.3 France

Crossing the ocean, we have France’s *loi du 23 février 2005*.

Article 4 stipulates that university programmes must
“recognize the positive role of the French overseas presence, particularly in
North Africa”³

In the words of Dominique Borne, head of the General inspectorate of national education,

“En France, l’histoire sert à construire des Français.”⁴

“In France, history serves to construct French people.”

To be truly French, in this view, one must feel a warm glow when thinking about French colonialism.

3.4 India

In India, after the BJP took power, a supporter declared: “Now it’s our turn to write the history.”⁵

And so, for example, history students in the state of Gujarat found themselves learning

that

“Aryans were the most illustrious race in history. They were a tall, fair complexioned, good-looking and cultured people.”⁶

And that Hitler “instilled the spirit of adventure in the common people”

I am not sure, BTW, if the students still learn this about Hitler.

But the Aryan stuff is still in wide circulation

4 Conscious political project

These efforts to tame history confirm the wisdom of the old Russian proverb, “You never know what yesterday may bring.”

The examples I’ve given reflect a conscious political project

We are fearful of an untamed history when we want history to *do something* for us

To support a war effort

To bolster our ideological position

To justify national or ethnic chauvinism.

I’ve already discussed the Canadian manifestation of this in my *Canadian Issues* article, distributed at this conference.

5 More than that

But I think there’s also something else at work here.

In a democratic context, politicians reflect their society in one way or another.

They may not give us the policies we want, nor those that our society really needs

But through their rhetoric and actions, our own hopes and fears are reflected back to us

Perhaps in a distorted fashion, as in a funhouse mirror

As a wonderful *New Yorker* cartoon once put it

“Look, Nixon’s no dope. If the people really *wanted* moral leadership, he’d give them moral leadership.”

So rather than cringe at the Texas school board revisionists, for example, we need to look for the original that lies behind the funhouse mirror

To try to understand the people, and the emotions, to which the taming of memory seeks to appeal.

5.1 Unease: Various claims

And here I’ll leave aside the rest of the world and return the discussion to Canada

In my research on opposition to multiculturalism, I frequently came across a certain type of claim:

“When will we be permitted to stop apologizing for our traditions and historical pride?” (GM950913).

‘next Canada Day, let the heirs of Western civilization once again be proud to be us’ (NP060705).

These sorts of claims are often linked to complaints about the teaching and writing of history

Historian Michael Bliss laments that ‘history and tradition lose their meaning except as the record of the bad old days’ (NP060524).

Daniel Stoffman claims that

‘In the name of multiculturalism, the achievements of Canada’s founders have been all but eradicated from school books. Multiculturalists believe English-Canadian schoolchildren should not be allowed to have English historical heroes’ (Stoffman 2002b, 126).

Our history is now portrayed, says Richard Gwyn, as if “all earlier Canadians were uncaring, discriminatory brutes” (1995, 115). Our history has become “an unending chronicle of racism, sexism, homophobia, militarism, environmental degradation” (283).

5.2 Pride and anger

I will leave aside the question of whether these sorts of claims are fair or not.

Note, though, that in all the laments about history teaching, it is unusual to find any direct citations from actual textbooks

This is odd, given that the teaching of history, unlike many government policies, is not exactly hidden from public view: millions of Canadian kids are exposed to it.

Any parent can check for themselves just what sort of history their kids are learning

So one might expect more documentary support for the critiques.

But let's leave that aside, and consider the passions behind these sorts of claims.

In these frequent laments, we hear a desire for *pride* in our history, and *anger* at those who somehow thwart the fulfilment of this desire.

5.3 National identity

This desire for pride in our history is obviously linked to a desire for a positive sense of our collective identity

What could be more natural?

But there's a problem here.

5.4 Problematic Implications

This very desire for a loveable collective identity, even an *innocent* identity, doesn't just airbrush our past, it makes many discussions about our *present* unfruitful.

We are a land of 'boundless tolerance,' declares a *Calgary Sun* writer⁷

Or as Neil Bissoondath puts it, "Nasty things happened years ago in Canada. But that is a Canada that no longer exists" (166).

Thus, if members of a minority ethnic group are more comfortable socializing with one another, that's their strange choice

we couldn't possibly have any responsibility for that choice.

If immigrants tend to congregate in certain neighbourhoods, that's because a misguided multiculturalism policy has led them to spurn our warm and generous welcome

It is often claimed that political correctness prevents Canadians from publicly criticizing multiculturalism, immigration policy, or members of minority groups

But, at least in terms of the sorts of things that find their way into the mainstream media, we are more seriously constrained by the need to avoid saying anything that might threaten our conceit that we are a fundamentally generous, tolerant, loveable people.

6 Can we do better than this?

Can we do better than this?

I don't know.

But, at least, we can have an answer to those, like historian Jack Granatstein, who ask

“why should any nation's texts stress the ‘black marks’?” (Who killed Canadian history?, 94)

Or to those, like a certain Stephen Harper, who charge people who engage in discomforting critiques of the nature of Canadian or American society with “deep resentments, even hatreds, of the norms of free and democratic western civilization.”
[2003 Civitas speech]

Here is one possible answer

6.1 Self-esteem and self-confidence

Let's shift gears for a moment to an individual level. The teachers among you will often have been told that you must foster the self-esteem and self-confidence of your students.

And yet we all know people who suffer from an overdose of those attributes.

Self-esteem and self-confidence are not unqualified goods

This is true at a national level as well

Apart from the obvious danger of national chauvinism,

An overdose of self-esteem and self-confidence can be particularly dangerous when we are faced with momentous decisions, such as whether to go to war.

We can suffer from an unwillingness to challenge leaders' motives for going off to war

Because, of course, *we* never engage in unjust wars

And *we* would never be stupid enough to march into a quagmire

And we and our allies will always, one way or another, come out on top

The Athenians, wrote Thucydides, “thought that nothing could go wrong with them” (§ 4.65)

And his whole history portrayed just what resulted from that delusion

6.2 Health

Now what does healthy self-respect look like at an individual level?

An awareness of our strengths, also of our failings.

The courage to face our failings, understanding ourselves with the same compassion and honesty we might expect from an intimate friend

And thus an openness, a willingness to grow by listening as others tell us about ourselves.

6.3 Social level

And is it conceivable that we could develop at a social level the healthy self-awareness that we value at the individual level?

I hope that it is, but I have no “how to” instructions

Yet, and this is something our very practical society often fails to get, we need to think about where we want to go, even before we know how to get there.

And even a utopian idea can influence our lived reality

In the present case, by offering us an answer to those who peddle a different, more dangerous vision

Defending a revisionist history textbook that triggered angry protests in China and Korea, a member of Japan's Society for the Reform of History Books declared that

"It is high time we were able to love our country in a normal way."⁸

But if 'normal' love requires that we distort our history, ignore the pain that our past actions have inflicted,

We need to aim higher than that.

6.4 Love because...

We love our children, not because they are exceptional geniuses or saints, but simply because they are ours and they are dear to us

Yet we also try as we can to help them grow, to become better people

In the same way, we need to love our country simply because it is our country
Not because it is exceptionally virtuous, or tolerant, or heroic

That sort of love always demands illusions, and a refusal truly to listen to those who would talk to us of our collective shortcomings

We need the courage, compassion, honesty, to look upon our country with all its beauty and failings

and to struggle to make it better

and not silence the voices we need to hear

voices from the past,

voices of the present.

Thank you.

Notes

1.CIC Press release

Minister Kenney's trip highlights Canada's commitment to combating Anti-Semitism and recognizing the evils of communism; honours Newfoundland's sacrifice at Beaumont-Hamel

2.Texas: "describe how Cold War tensions were intensified by the arms race, the space race, McCarthyism, and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), the findings of which were confirmed by the Venona Papers"

3.French law:

"Les programmes de recherche universitaire accordent à l'histoire de la présence française outre-mer, notamment en Afrique du Nord, la place qu'elle mérite.

Les programmes scolaires reconnaissent en particulier le rôle positif de la présence française outre-mer, notamment en Afrique du Nord, et accordent à l'histoire et aux sacrifices des combattants de l'armée française issus de ces territoires la place éminente à laquelle ils ont droit."

4.LMD

NOVEMBRE 2001 Page 31

[Review of]

Comment on enseigne l'histoire à nos enfants

DOMINIQUE COMELLI

Rev'd by:

MAURICE T. MASCHINO

5.Sacred geographies

India: A History by John Keay HarperCollins

Reviewed by William Dalrymple

The Guardian Weekly 25-5-2000, page 16

6.Anger at India textbook bias

Stephen Bates

The Guardian Weekly 3-2-2000, page 5

See also:

<http://indiansaga.com/history/aryans.html>

7.CS060611a

Byfield, Ted. We may be naive but we're not soft.

8.The Guardian Weekly 26-4-2001, page 30

School textbook rewrites Japan's role in second world war

Brice Pedroletti