Establishing Historical Significance

The past is everything that ever happened to anyone anywhere. There is much too much history to remember all of it. So how do we make choices about what is worth remembering?

Significant events include those that resulted in great change over long periods of time for large numbers of people. World War II passes the test for historical significance in this sense.

But what could be significant about the life of a worker or a slave? What about my own ancestors, who are clearly significant to me, but not necessarily to others? Significance depends upon one's perspective and purpose. A historical person or event can acquire significance if we, the historians, can link it to larger trends and stories that reveal something important for us today. For example, the story of an individual worker in Winnipeg in 1918, however insignificant in the World War II sense, may become significant if it is related in a way that makes it a part of a larger history of workers' struggles, economic development, or post-war adjustment and discontent.

In that case, the "insignificant" life reveals something important to us, and thus becomes significant. **Both "It is significant because it is in the history book," and "It is significant because I am interested in it," are inadequate explanations of historical significance.**

Poor, rural and female. Could this person's life have any historical significance? In the past, most historians would have said no, but recently, definitions of historical significance have changed. C.N.R. / Library and Archives Canada / C-085103

Keys Aspects of Significance:

a) **Resulting in change** (the event/person/development must have deep consequences, for many people, over a long period of time)

b) **Revealing** (the event/person/development must shed light on issues in history or was important in the history of a group or groups)

Taking an Historical Perspective

"The past is a foreign country" and thus difficult to understand. What could it have been like to travel as a young fille du roi to New France in the 17th century? Can we imagine it, from our vantage point in the consumer society of the 21st century? What are the limits to our imagination?

Understanding the foreignness of the past is a huge challenge for students. But rising to the challenge illuminates the range of human behaviour, belief and social organization. It offers surprising alternatives to the taken-for-granted, conventional wisdom, and opens a wider perspective from which to evaluate our present preoccupations and biases.

Taking historical perspective means understanding the social, cultural, intellectual, and emotional settings that shaped people's lives and actions in the past. At any one point, different historical actors may have acted on the basis of conflicting beliefs and ideologies; so understanding diverse perspectives is also a key to historical perspective-taking. Historical perspective is more than just being able to identify with another person. Indeed, taking historical perspective demands comprehension of the vast differences between us in the present and those in the past.

Living in the era of body piercing and tattoos, we need to adopt a historical perspective to understand why women of the past endured corsets and sported bustles. Library and Archives Canada / C-115931

ASPECTS OF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE-TAKING:

a) Taking the perspective of historical actors depends upon evidence for inferences about how people felt and thought (avoiding presentism—the unwarranted imposition of present ideas on actors in the past). Empathetic leaps that are not based in evidence are historically worthless.
b) Any particular historical event or situation involves people who may have diverse perspectives on it. Understanding multiple perspectives of historical actors is a key to understanding the event.
c) Taking the perspective of a historical actor does not mean identifying with that actor.

Identifying Continuity and Change

Students sometimes misunderstand history as a list of events. Once they start to understand history as a complex mix of continuity and change, they reach a fundamentally different sense of the past.

There were lots of things going on at any one time in the past. Some changed rapidly while others remained relatively continuous. The decade of the 1910s in Canada, for instance, saw profound change in many aspects of life, but not much change in its forms of government. If students say, "nothing happened in 1911" they are thinking of the past as a list of events.

One of the keys to continuity and change is looking for change where common sense suggests that there has been none and looking for continuities where we assumed that there was change. Judgments of continuity and change can be made on the basis of comparisons between some point in the past and the present, or between two points in the past, such as before and after Confederation in Canada. We evaluate change over time using the ideas of progress and decline.

La plus ça change, la plus c'est la même chose. Schools may have changed in the past century, but we can recognize many ingredients that have endured. Library and Archives Canada / A-028095

ASPECTS OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE:

a) Continuity and change are interrelated: processes of change are usually, continuous, not isolated into a series of discrete events.
b) Some aspects of life change more quickly in some periods than others. Turning points, perhaps even tipping points, help to locate change.
c) Progress and decline are fundamental ways of evaluating change over time. Change does not always mean progress.
d) Chronology can help to organize our understanding of continuity and change (you cannot understand continuity and change without knowing the order in which things happened.)
e) Periodization can help to organize our understanding of continuity and change.

Analyzing Cause and Consequence

In examining both tragedies and accomplishments in the past, we are usually interested in the questions of **how and why**. These questions start the search for causes: what were the actions, beliefs, and circumstances that led to these consequences?

In history, as opposed to geology or astronomy, we need to consider human actions. People, as individuals and as groups, play a part in promoting, shaping, and resisting change.

People have motivations and reasons for taking action (or for sitting it out), but causes go beyond these. For example, the Vancouver anti-Chinese riot of 1887 certainly involved the racial attitudes and motivations of the white workers who rampaged. Did the workers cause the riot? In some sense they did. But the causes must be set in the larger context of employers paying Chinese workers a fraction of the regular wage rate and the desperate situation of Chinese Canadian workers after the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railroad.

Causes are thus multiple and layered, involving both long-term ideologies, institutions, and conditions, and short-term motivations, actions and events. Causes that are offered for any particular event (and the priority of various causes) may differ, based on the scale of the history and the approaches of the historian.

The historian, like the insurance investigator, sifts through evidence to determine the causes of events — often from a multitude of possibilities. Unlike the investigator, though, the historian is also interested in the event's consequences. Western History/Genealogy Department, Denver Public Library

ASPECTS OF CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCE:

a) Human beings cause historical change, but they do so in contexts that impose limits on change. Constraints come from the natural environment, geography, historical legacies, as well as other people who want other things. Human actors (agents) are thus in a perpetual interplay with conditions, many of which (e.g., political and economic systems) are the legacies of earlier human actions.
b) Actions often have unintended consequences.

Understanding the Moral Dimension of History

Are we obligated to remember the fallen soldiers of World War I? Do we owe reparations to the First Nations victims of aboriginal residential schools, or to the descendents of those who paid the Chinese Head Tax? In other words, what responsibilities do historical crimes and sacrifices impose upon us today?

These questions are one part of the moral dimension of history. Another part has to do with the moral judgments we make about historical actions. This creates a difficult paradox. Taking historical perspective demands that we understand the differences between our moral universe and those of bygone societies. We do not want to impose our own anachronistic standards on the past. At the same time, meaningful history does not treat brutal slave-holders, enthusiastic Nazis, and marauding conquistadors in a "neutral" manner. Historians attempt to hold back on explicit moral judgments about actors in the midst of their accounts, but, when all is said and done, if the story is meaningful, then there is a moral judgment involved. We should expect to learn something from the past that helps us to face the moral issues of today.

Japanese Canadians being relocated to internment camps during World War II. Today, we recognize that Canada's actions are not morally defensible, and the government has officially apologized and made reparations. Library and Archives Canada / C-057250

ASPECTS OF THE MORAL DIMENSION:

a) All meaningful historical accounts involve implicit or explicit moral judgment.
b) Moral judgment in history is made more complex by collective responsibility and profound change over time. In making moral judgments of past actions, we always risk anachronistic impositions of our own standards upon the past.
c) Historians often deal with the conflict between a) and b) by 1) framing questions that have a moral dimension; 2) suspending judgments in order to understand the perspectives of the historical actors; finally 3) emerging from the study with observations about the moral implications, today, of their narratives and arguments.

Using Evidence and Interpretation

The litter of history —letters, documents, records, diaries, drawings, newspaper accounts and other bits and pieces left behind by those who have passed on — are treasures to the historian. These are primary sources that can give up the secrets of life in the past. Historians learn to read these sources.

But reading a source for evidence demands a different approach than reading a source for information. The contrast may be seen in an extreme way in the difference between reading a phone book — for information — and examining a boot-print in the snow outside a murder scene —for evidence. When we look up a phone number, we don't ask ourselves, "who wrote this phonebook?" or "what impact did it have on its readers?" We read it at face value. The boot print, on the other hand, is a trace of the past that does not allow a comparable reading. Once we establish what it is, we examine it to see if it offers clues about the person who was wearing the boot, when the print was made, which direction the person was headed, and what else was going on at that time.

A history textbook is generally used more like a phone book: it is a place to look up information. Primary sources must be read differently. To use them well, we set them in their historical contexts and make inferences from them to help us understand more about what was going on when they were created.

An editorial cartoon is one kind of primary document that can reveal the social, political and intellectual climate of a past period. Cartoonist Arthur Racey portrays Mackenzie King as a political opportunist with policies "made to suit all tastes." Library and Archives Canada, Acc. No 1971-65-31

ASPECTS OF EVIDENCE:

(Note: "author" here is used broadly to mean whoever wrote, painted, photographed, drew, or otherwise constructed the source.)

a) Good questions are necessary in order to turn a source into evidence, the first question being, "What is it?"
b) Authorship: the position of the author(s) is a key consideration.
c) Primary sources may reveal information about the (conscious) purposes of the author as well as the (unconscious) values and worldview of the author.
d) A source should be read in view of its historical background (contextualization).
e) Analysis of the source should also provide new evidence about its historical setting.