PUTTING THE MYSTERY BACK INTO HISTORY

ABSTRACT

This article argues that our history can only be boring if we make it that way. History contains the sum of human crises, suffering, triumphs and challenges. Yet, despite having the richest palette of any discipline to draw upon, we have taken the fascination and fun out of 'doing history' in the classroom in the rush to cover a vast syllabus.

New directions in student-centered learning, in historical methods, and the availability of new technology offer many possibilities to put the 'mystery' and fun back into Canadian history. The article introduces one such attempt to marry the fun and the serious, using digital technology: the "Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History" project.



Did the whole village know that one little girl, Aurore Gagnon, was living a nightmare that culminated in her death in Fortierville, Quebec in 1920? Who should have been held responsible?
Photo courtesy of: Alliance cinématographique canadienne/France-Film Archive.

Should learning history be intriguing, challenging, intellectually stimulating, and even – enjoyable? James Joyce, whom some high school students read in English, captured the sentiments of many when he wrote: "history is a nightmare from which I must awake!"

History class is a nightmare to many students, not because it is scary – they would like that – but because it is dull. The present is not dull. We have terrorist attacks, wars, armed confrontations between First Nations and armed soldiers, threats of new diseases, or from climate change or weapons of mass destruction, famines, natural disasters, corrupt and philandering politicians and celebrity romances.

The past, by contrast, is made of, well... . come to think of it, – terrorist attacks, wars, armed confrontations between First Nations and armed soldiers, threats of new diseases…. Tomorrow, those same stories that rivet us today are part of our past. The work of history is selecting the most interesting and relevant parts of the past. Blood, gore, love, sacrifice, bravery, cowardice or betrayal infuse almost every document box in every archive.

The past is not boring so history can only be dull if we make it that way. We have taken the fun out of it by teaching a desiccated "Coles Notes" version, already pre-digested by others. Typically, we ask students to commit this to memory and regurgitate it at exam time instead of teaching the detective work: the critical skills of the historian applied to evidence from the past. In our enthusiasm to cover the syllabus, to show the big picture, the vast canvas of history, we have squeezed both the fun and the fascination out. To go from "Plato to NATO" we take the flesh from the stories and deliver only the skeleton.[1] It need not be this way, as the most able teachers, historical writers and many writers of historical fiction have shown us.

JOHN LUTZ

Dr. John Lutz is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Victoria specializing in Aboriginal-Settler relations in the Pacific Northwest and is one of the three co-directors of the Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History Project.

History becomes dull when we take the mystery out of it and deprive students of the real work of the historian: finding clues and solving puzzles. Philosopher R.G Collingwood knew this a half century ago: "The hero of a detective novel is thinking exactly like an historian when, from indications of the most varied kinds, he constructs an imaginary picture of how a crime was committed, and by whom."[2] CanadianMysteries.ca says it this way: "'Doing History' is the work of the detective, the gumshoe, the private eye. As historians, all we are left with is traces, clues, hints and allegations. Putting those together, weighing the evidence, assessing the credibility of witness accounts, sorting out contradictions, and showing how your solution to the mysteries is the best of all the alternatives – that is 'Doing History'. "

Not that history is the same as 'entertainment'. Quite the opposite. History is serious business. Deadly serious. Many of the current wars and civil wars are the result of historical myths passed off as truths to a populace without the tools to critically evaluate and 'deconstruct' those stories. Writing about America, historian Richard Slotkin pointed out that these historical myths "are 'stories' drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness." Another historian, Richard White, observed that, "as people accept and assimilate myth…the myths become the basis for actions that shape history." Our imagined history has the power to "cast the future partly in its own image."[3]

The ability to critically recall and evaluate the past is so fundamental to the functioning of society that it is imperative for us to teach it well. Our students, indeed all of us, need to understand the path taken to get to where our society is today. History explains where racism comes from, what causes wars and what their outcomes usually are. It shows, for example, how thriving wealthy societies have consumed their way to extinction in the past. History tells us who we are, where we have come from, and reminds us when we are lost, where we thought we wanted to go.[4]



Racism, slavery, judicial torture and fire all emerge as themes when students investigate whether the slave Marie-Josèphe Angélique deliberately set Montreal on fire in 1734 to cover an escape with her white lover.
Painting by Annie Beaugrand-Champagne, 2005.

As individuals we cannot function with no memory. Each morning we would have to start fresh, not knowing who was in the bed with us, how to wear slippers, what in our house was edible, what coffee was or how to make it. Without memory we as individuals, and as a society, cannot reason based on experience or learn. Quoting R.G. Collingwood again, "historical knowledge is no luxury, or mere amusement of a mind at leisure from more pressing occupations, but a prime duty, whose discharge is essential to the maintenance, not only of any particular form of reason, but of reason itself." Teaching history is a serious undertaking but the learning can and should be fun.[5]

Storytellers have long since known how to combine the fun and the serious. Scholarly historians turned their back on these 'popular historians' three centuries ago; but three decades ago, the craft of conveying the big picture in small stories, was recaptured by European scholars in a method called 'microstoria' or 'microhistory'. Microhistory is a return to the story of real people with all the messy, fascinating, sometimes microscopic details of their lives. But the goal in exploring the details is to see the larger forces at work, forces which are invisible when the scope is much larger. Microhistory is the asking the big questions of history and looking for the answers in small places.[6]

Teachers, and those who teach teachers, have in the last decade begun to re-discover the fun of asking their students to be detectives and solve historical puzzles by engaging with primary source materials from the past. This is sometimes known as "document-centered learning." It is part of the larger goal of turning the classroom from a place

where students sit and listen to a teacher who tells them what they need to know, to a place where the teacher guides the students in "student-centered learning". The underlying idea is that the undergraduate degree and even a high school diploma, become more active and research-based rather than based on taking notes.[7]

At the same time, the computing technology has evolved and become so widespread that we can begin asking the questions: How can we deploy the new technologies to best teach historical thinking? Can we imagine ways to teach history that we could not before? Can we use the new technologies to make the serious matter of teaching history fun?[8]

The Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History project is one attempt to answer these three questions. The premise is simple. Take an intriguing mystery – a story that has no single, clear resolution, put all the kinds and range of evidence you can find on the internet, and challenge students and others to solve the mystery. In fact we provide the first part of the story, and the tools for students to write the ending. The method is micro-historical so the mysteries are not random. They involve some of the big issues that concern Canadians: race, gender, ethnicity, immigration, religious intolerance, terrorism, war, climate change, aboriginal–non-aboriginal relations, wrongful convictions, and child abuse to name a few.

Ruth Sandwell and I accidentally started the project with Ruth's discovery of the mysterious death of William Robinson, a Black man killed in his cabin on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia in 1868. An all-white jury convicted an aboriginal man after a short trial and a five-minute deliberation when the evidence was totally contradictory and an alibi disregarded. We put the documents regarding this case on the Internet back in 1997, primarily for our own classes, and were taken by surprise when the experiment was picked up all over the country and in other countries too. As the world was riveted to the O.J. Simpson trial where race was a an overarching factor, this case spoke to race and justice in Canada as well as the importance of land to colonial-era immigrants. By chance, we had made the link between active learning, an intriguing story, and the new technology. And it was fun, or at least it seemed so at first.

We might have left it there but the student feedback asked us to rethink some of our basic assumptions. Most students loved the mystery but were ill-equipped to do historical work. They had trouble creating a story out of documents that were not already laid out for them in a chronology. They did not know what to do if two documents contradicted each other. They did not even all know the difference between a primary source (created at the time) and a secondary source (an interpretation built on primary sources.)

We thought the "William Robinson" method was sound but that a series of such assignments was necessary to build the skill levels of an historian, so we invited Peter Gossage to work with us on two new mysteries. The series was born. Ruth, Peter and I continue to co-direct the series which has been funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage, with help from the University of Victoria, Université de Sherbrooke, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Sheridan College, The Critical Thinking Consortium, Arius 3D and other private and public sector partners.

For the fall of 2006 we have six mysteries available for students, as well as teachers' guides with lesson plans, and a companion website, MysteryQuests.ca which has shorter assignments aimed at Middle and High Schools. Three more mysteries are under development. All online content is available in French and English.



Who attacked the Donnelly family in their home near Lucan, Ontario, setting it on fire and killing four in February 1880? Trying to understand why no one was convicted in this mass murder leads students into history of immigration, popular justice, ethnocentrism and the violence of everyday frontier life.
Creator: W.A. Winter (Maclean's Magazine).

These are great mysteries, not because they are famous, but because of the amazing access they give us to the lives and issues of real people facing dramatic and often violent crises. New for this fall are three mysteries: "Torture and the Truth" which looks at whether the Black slave Angélique actually did set fire to Montreal in 1734 to cover an intended escape with a white lover, as a way of exploring slavery, racism, judicial torture and the ever present danger of fire in pre-industrial

Canada. "Heaven and Hell on Earth: The Massacre of the "Black " Donnellys" looks at the religious tensions in late 19th century Ontario that culminated in the vigilante deaths of the Donnelly family, and why no jury would convict the murderers. "Explosion on the Kettle Valley Line," provides new forensic evidence that may help solve the death of Peter 'Lordly' Verigin, leader of the Doukhobors, whose train car blew up in southern British Columbia in 1924, killing him and seven others. Each of these mysteries takes advantage of the web's capacity for multimedia with three dimensional reconstructions of key historical events.

These new mysteries join "Who Killed William Robinson?", the mystery of what caused and who won the Chilcotin War of 1864, and how did little Aurore Gagnon die in the small Quebec village of Fortierville in 1920, all already online. In the spring of 2007 they will be joined by an archaeological mystery, "Where was Vinland?" the Viking 'land of grapes in North America', as well as "The Mystery Man of Baie St Marie" about a mute man who washed up with no legs in Acadia in 1864, and the mystery of "Who Really Discovered Klondike Gold?"

The project represents a new kind of interdisciplinary scholarship involving a team of historians, programmers, designers, webmasters, teachers, teacher-trainers, translators, students, and private sector firms. At any one time as many as 30 people are working on the project, spread between Victoria, British Columbia, where the project is based, to L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, and from southern Ontario to Dawson City, Yukon Territories.

The Mysteries Project shows that the fascinating stories from our past can be used as a window to the big questions of then, and now. It is just one example of how learning history can be serious and fun at the same time.

Endnotes

1 Ruth Sandwell "School History vs. the Historians," *International Journal of Social Education*, (vol. 30, no. 1 Spring 2005).

2 R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, (Oxford University Press, 1951) 243.

3 Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century America*, (NY: 1992 5-6); Richard White, *Its Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, (Norman Ok and London 1991, 616, 623); thanks to John Herd Thompson, "Canadianizing the Myth of the West," *Canadian Issues/Thèmes Canadiens* (Winter 2005) 38-40 for reminding me of these writings on myth.

4 Keith Barton, "Committing Acts of History: Mediated Action, Humanistic Education and Participatory Democracy" in W. Stanley, ed. *Critical Issues in Social Studies Research for the Twentieth Century* (Greenwich CT: Information Age Publishing, 2001), 119-48; Peter Seixas, ed. *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, (Toronto: UTP, 2004).

5 Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 227-8; Suzanne De Castell and Jennifer Jenson, "Serious Play." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* (35(6): 2003) 649-665.

6 George G. Iggers, "From Macro- to Microhistory: The *History of Everyday Life*," *Historiography in the Twentieth Century from Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*. (Hanover/London: Wesleyan University Press,1997). Two classics of the genre include: Carlo Ginzburg, The Cheese and the Worms: *The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, Trans. John and Anne Tedeschi. (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, Original in Italian 1976. English 1980.); and Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

7 Chad Gaffield, "Primary Sources, Historical Thinking, and the Emerging Redefinition of the B.A. as a Research Degree," Facsimile, 23-25, (200-2001), 12-17. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

8 John Lutz, "Riding the Horseless Carriage to the Computer Revolution: Teaching History in the Twenty-first Century," *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, (Vol. 68. November 2001), 427-436.

9 Ruth Sandwell, "Who Killed William Robinson? Exploring a Nineteenth Century Murder," *Social Education*, (vol. 68, no. 3, April 2004).