

On History Education and the Moral Demands of Remembrance

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The wish of all in the camps, the last wish: know what has happened, do not forget, and at the same time never will you know.

— Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

INTRODUCTION

Every fall schools in Canada and elsewhere begin preparations for their annual Remembrance Day ceremonies.¹ On November 11 students across the country will travel in buses to their city center to lay a wreath at the cenotaph. If they live in Ottawa they might visit the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and in smaller communities they will pin poppies on their shirts and assemble in the gymnasium to hear a local war veteran recount his or her experiences in battle. Students might also write letters of thanks to a soldier or watch a film about the Battle of Vimy Ridge in World War I — the moment held up as Canada’s coming of age as a nation.

According to historian Jay Winter, such Remembrance Day rituals have a “didactic function.” Implicit in children’s participation in these events is a lesson about our relationship to the past and about what the past can teach us about the present and the future. In Winter’s view the events surrounding Remembrance Day have “a by-word that dominates the message. It is ‘never again,’ the phrase we frequently associate with the Holocaust.” But the phrase “never again” actually comes out of the First World War — “the war to end all wars,” the war that was supposed to make war impossible. In contrast to earlier times, where rituals of remembrance served the dual purpose of honoring the war dead and preparing the next generation to take their turn, during the inter-war period of the 1920s and 30s the purpose of Remembrance Day was to come together as a community to remember the sacrifices of those who died so that their children would never have to go to war again. “But then,” Winter asks, “what do you do in 1939? How many times can you say ‘never again’?”²

Winter’s observations about the pedagogical complexity of rituals of remembrance and the words cited by Blanchot in the epigraph pose challenges to us as educators and philosophers of education. What and how ought we to teach students about the past? And, more importantly for our purposes here, what bearing will this historical knowledge have on how we conceive of our moral agency now and in the future?

In this essay, I begin to take up these questions by briefly sketching three conceptions of history education and their respective conceptions of the “historically educated person.” I look first at the traditional approach, which aims to produce rational agents who possess a breadth and depth of historical knowledge sufficient to guide them in their moral decisions and actions. Next, I consider the cognitive strand of the educational literature on historical consciousness. History education on this view seeks to produce “historically literate citizens” who are knowledgeable

about the past but who also have a capacity for “historical empathy” and other salient disciplinary and moral dispositions. Finally, I look at critical historical consciousness, which departs from the previous conception in its emphasis on historical knowledge as a “difficult inheritance” we cannot refuse regardless of what we can know or understand.³ This latter conception draws on continental philosophy and psychoanalysis, and seeks to foster a Levinasian/Derridean kind of moral agency. It is not my intention here to argue for one conception of history education and the historically educated person as inherently better than the others. Rather, I want to suggest that each conception works well for particular educational ends. However, while the traditional view and cognitive historical consciousness have had considerable impact on K-12 history education, neither helps us to respond to the pedagogical and ethical challenges posed by the (seemingly impossible) demand to know and remember what we can never really know. Therefore, in the last section of the essay, I suggest that the radical critique of the knowing subject that underpins critical historical consciousness might help us to reframe history education in schools in a way that opens the possibility of a response to that demand. First, however, let us look at the two better-known approaches.

TRADITIONAL HISTORY EDUCATION AND THE RATIONAL AGENT

I use the term “traditional history education” here to refer to the dominant way of teaching history in Anglo-American schools up until about the mid 1990s. History education is central to a liberal education and it rests on a conception of the educated person consistent with R.S. Peters’ ideal of the “educated man” and a conception of historical knowledge as a distinct form of disciplinary knowledge in keeping with Paul H. Hirst’s “forms of knowledge” thesis and, to some extent, Michael Oakeshott’s discussion of history, historiography, and the philosophy of history.⁴

Put simply, a traditional conception of the discipline of history emphasizes the rational pursuit of a universal, objective truth about what happened in other times and places, and traditional history education involves the transmission of that knowledge and the initiation of students into their “intellectual, imaginative, moral and emotional inheritance,”⁵ or what Oakeshott calls the “conversations of mankind.”⁶ The intergenerational feature of Remembrance Day ceremonies is a prime example of such initiation; and while children do most of their history learning in schools, these informal pedagogical events are key to the continuity of national or social identity. That is to say, public practices of remembrance function in much the same way as family stories and the narratives surrounding family photos do to ensure an ongoing family identity.

A sometimes overlooked aspect of traditional history education is the fact that for both Peters and Hirst, and especially for Oakeshott, the intellectual content of history education must be accompanied by moral knowledge such that what one knows transforms and enhances the quality of one’s whole life.⁷ In Peters’ words:

[H]ow a man lives depends on what he sees and understands. In schools and colleges, there is, of course, a concentration on activities like literature, science, and history, which have a high degree of cognitive content. But an educated person is ... one whose whole range of actions, reactions, and activities is gradually transformed by the deepening and widening of his understanding and sensitivity.⁸

This conception is fine as far as it takes us, but on closer examination, as Michael Katz and others have noted, Peters' conception of a traditional liberal education emphasizes the pursuit of truth and reason over the social, political, and cultural aspects of education. Students educated within a traditional liberal framework are not taught, for example, to "see the gaps between public rhetoric and reality, to explode cultural myths, to notice how textbooks provide a distorted view of social history, and to question official forms of political indoctrination in society."⁹ The risk, for Katz and other critics, is that traditional history education has tended to cash out into cultural transmission because the rules and parameters of the conversation are predetermined in a way that encourages students to take the official story of the past as the truth about what happened in those other times and places.

Now, this is not to say that the traditional approach serves no useful purpose; in fact, it works very well for cultivating collective memory and a sense of national identity. The problem is that those benefits come at the cost of a fuller and more nuanced understanding of history that includes the perspectives of women and other marginalized groups whose experiences did not make it into the official record. In the 1980s and 90s, pressure from these underrepresented groups and critiques by feminist, postmodernist, and postcolonial scholars took hold in educational theory and called into question the way that history was typically taught in schools.¹⁰ But the philosophical challenge and the resulting changes to curriculum were not universally welcomed. Some advocates of traditional history education saw the shift to multiple perspectives as the erosion of historical knowledge itself and called for a return to the traditional approach. J.L. Granatstein, for instance, in his 1998, "Who killed Canadian history?" wrote:

If Canada is to be worthy of its envied standing in the world, if it is to offer something to its own people and to humanity, it will have to forge a national spirit that can unite its increasingly diverse people. We cannot achieve this unanimity unless we teach our national history, celebrate our founders, establish new symbols, and strengthen the terms of our citizenship.... We have a nation to save and a future to build.¹¹

Thinking more recently of the highly charged textbook controversy in Texas, it is obvious that questions of what to teach children about the past, how, and who gets to say so, are far from resolved.¹² Despite claims that the shift to a more inclusive representation of the past undermines efforts at a cohesive national identity, educational scholars writing in the historical consciousness stream argue that the traditional approach is no longer defensible.¹³ Instead, they contend, preparing students to become knowledgeable and active citizens requires teaching them to engage critically with the past by examining historical documents first hand, weighing the evidence before them, and delving deeply into the received stories about those who came before us.

HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE HISTORICALLY LITERATE CITIZEN

In the past fifteen years or so in North America, partly in response to postmodernist critiques of what counts as knowledge, but also drawing on the increasing body of literature on the moral significance of memory, there has been a shift in many schools from traditional history education to a historical consciousness perspective.¹⁴ Within the literature on historical consciousness itself, however, there are

different frameworks and strands of research. Of the scholars who focus on education, I draw here on Peter Seixas, whose cognitive approach seeks to cultivate “historically literate citizens,” and Roger Simon, whose Levinasian and Derridean approach seeks to cultivate “historical witnesses.”¹⁵ Despite their differences, Seixas and Simon agree that learning facts *about* the past no longer constitutes a good history education. Instead, they say, we must learn *from* the past — seeing the past as something that makes demands on us here and now. For Seixas the demands are cognitive, and for Simon the demand comes to us as an existential encounter and a radical questioning of our self-conception as knowing subjects. I return to Simon’s work in the next section, but first let me say a bit about the cognitive approach.

Central to the cognitive view of historical consciousness is a belief that students should learn to “think historically.” For Seixas, thinking historically involves six core capacities or “benchmarks of historical thinking”: the capacity to establish historical significance, use primary source evidence, identify continuity and change, analyze cause and consequence, take historical perspectives, and understand the ethical dimensions of history.¹⁶ History education on this view is much more “hands-on” than the traditional approach. It requires students to weigh competing narratives about the past, and to “ask critical questions about the authenticity of the primary source documents and the validity of the interpretations in secondary source analyses.”¹⁷ Who created the primary document, for what purpose, and from whose perspective is it written? Whose perspectives are missing, and what kind of evidence is used in each case?¹⁸ Students learn that it is not simply a matter of believing the most compelling story, but of weighing the evidence and learning to think like an historian.

Since what we know about the past goes a long way in shaping who we are as a community, a society, and a nation, Seixas includes the cultivation of certain moral dispositions as central to history education. In particular, he emphasizes “historical empathy” — not in its affective sense but rather as a cognitive capacity for perspective taking that enables one to understand how and why certain decisions and actions may have been taken in the past and how those decisions and actions have impacted the way things are today.¹⁹ Within a conception of historical empathy, the more we learn about the past — for example, who benefitted from particular social and economic arrangements and who was disadvantaged — the better equipped we will be to make moral decisions about our own role as citizens now and in the future.²⁰ It is not about judging the lives and actions of those who came before us through the lens of our twenty-first century knowledge, beliefs, and values, but about learning from those past lives in order to work toward the kind of society we want now and in the future.

A current example of educating for historical consciousness (though not explicitly tied to Seixas’s work) is “Walking Home Carrall Street,” an experiential education project in Vancouver, Canada, where high school students go on guided half-day walks of streets in their own city.²¹ Accompanied by local historians and architects, students learn to stop and look closely at decaying facades, back alleys, no longer used railway tracks, paved roads that once served as Aboriginal portage

routes, and so forth; and they learn about the day-to-day life of those streets and spaces in earlier times. In contrast to traditional history education, which seeks a coherent national identity, one of the aims of the Walking Home Carrall Street Project is to produce citizens whose historical knowledge will enable them, for instance, to weigh competing arguments about urban development and historical preservation, and, more generally, to guide them in their civic actions long after formal schooling.

Seixas's work in historical consciousness in Canada and similar curricular initiatives in the UK and the US have been influential in K-12 education, especially in their emphasis on the contested nature of history and historical knowledge, and on critical thinking and rational moral deliberation as a way to engage with the stories we have inherited about the past. Cognitive historical consciousness has thus gone a long way toward addressing the postmodern and postcolonial critiques of what counts as knowledge and to equipping students with the cognitive tools to become historically literate citizens. But what this approach has left untouched is the prevailing conception of the knowing subject in pursuit of the truth(s) about what went on in other times and places. Like traditional history education, the cognitive approach to historical consciousness hinges on the pursuit of knowledge and understanding as a precondition for moral agency and a moral response to the demands of the past. However, even though both approaches serve important educational ends, they leave us little recourse to respond to the ethical and epistemological challenge implied in the words cited by Blanchot — to know and remember that which we can never really know. Therefore, let me now turn to critical historical consciousness, which rests on a radical reframing of our relationship to the past and of our self-conception as knowing subjects.

CRITICAL HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE HISTORICAL WITNESS

“One consequence of the recent ‘turn to ethics’ in social and political thought,” Roger Simon writes, “has been a return to the question of what it could mean to live historically, to live within an upright attentiveness to traces of those who have inhabited times and places other than one’s own.”²² Living historically, as Simon conceives it, is not a matter of acquiring knowledge about the past, but about allowing ourselves to be “touched by the past” and living as if those past lives mattered.²³

Simon’s work in critical historical consciousness draws on the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, on Jacques Derrida’s “gift of the ghost,” and on recent work in psychoanalysis.²⁴ Therefore, in contrast to traditional history education and cognitive historical consciousness, both of which rest on a modernist conception of rational autonomy, Simon’s approach rests on a conception of subjectivity wherein we come into being only in responding to the Other.²⁵ This radical other-centeredness is also evident in the language he uses to talk about what it means to learn from the past. Rather than starting from a position of the knowing subject who *acquires* knowledge or *masters* content, critical historical consciousness calls for a particular kind of passivity in which one *encounters* and *receives* the past as teacher.

Learning from the past on this view is about acknowledging the ethical claim the past has on us here and now regardless of what part we may or may not have played in those events and lives, and regardless of our ability to know or understand them. To see learning as an encounter with that which we cannot really know is thus not a process of making the unfamiliar familiar, but rather of unsettling our culturally inscribed habits of reading, listening, and attending to the voices and stories of the other.²⁶ It means being open to questions we did not even know we had, and to learning not only what we seek to learn, but also that which might shatter our knowledge, our identities, and our self-understanding as knowing subjects. In Simon's words,

Such an endeavour engages us fundamentally in the difficult problems of hearing, understanding, and knowing.... This means remembrance must find a way to initiate a continual unsettling and an interminable asking of pedagogical questions regarding what it means to be taught by the experience of others. Taking this unsettling seriously creates an ongoing problem of how to attend to and hold on to remembrance of the past without foreclosing the possibility that this attempt to remember will rupture the adequacy of the very terms on which a memory is being held.²⁷

While critical historical consciousness has been well theorized especially in terms of its implications for public pedagogy and adult education (for example, in Holocaust education and memorialization projects around the Montréal Massacre) it does not yet seem to have had a significant impact on history education in schools.²⁸ One possible reason is that the literature on critical historical consciousness has focused mainly on situations of historical violence and trauma whereas history education in schools has tended to present history either as an objective, universal story of progress or, more recently, as an expanded story of progress that includes the contributions that women and other marginalized groups have made to the society we have today. But it seems to me that if students are going to grapple with some of the more unsettling realities of the past, they will need a different kind of history education and a different experience of our ethical obligations to and for the past. They will need a way to move beyond the dichotomies of praise and blame, hero and villain, or perpetrator and victim in order to learn a way of engaging with history that does not attempt to fit the unthinkable and unimaginable into our existing frameworks for knowing, or reduce others' experience to some version of our own.

I have not yet fully fleshed out the practical details of using a critical historical consciousness approach in K-12 classrooms, but one of the key features of Simon's conception of historical consciousness is that he sees it not as an individual awareness that takes place within one's mind, but as "always requiring another, as an indelibly social praxis."²⁹ So instead of thinking about history education as a process of individual knowledge acquisition, what if we were to see the history classroom as a space where students and teachers come together as a community of memory?

Similar to Alphonso Lingis's "community of those who have nothing in common,"³⁰ Simon and Eppert describe a community of memory as a community of

learners who are bound not by shared experience or a common understanding of what went on in the past, but by a shared commitment to living together in the tension of conflicted and contested memories.³¹ They caution, however, that such work will not be easy: “There should be no pretension that communities of memory are necessarily harmonious spaces.... The greater the diversity of social identities, the greater the likelihood that commitments to remembrance ... will conflict.”³² But in today’s classrooms where Indian students sit next to Pakistani students, Palestinians next to Israelis, and Bosnians next to Serbs, history education and the work of remembrance cannot be reduced to the pursuit of a universal story about what went on in the past. Rather, engaging with the past as a community of memory would allow students to participate in rituals of remembrance in ways that acknowledge the “difficult inheritance” of the past regardless of our ability to know or understand it. Commemorative events such as the Remembrance Day ceremonies I mentioned at the beginning of the essay could thus become pedagogical moments in which we commit ourselves to the endless task of reopening and learning from the past³³ so that we might work toward the possibility of a hopeful future and a community that can say “we” without collapsing the differences between us.³⁴

1. Remembrance Day, as it is called in Canada and the rest of the Commonwealth, and Veterans Day in the US, is the date originally set aside to commemorate the end of battle on the Western Front, on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918. More recently it has become an occasion to commemorate all who have lost their lives in the service of their country.

2. Jay Winter, “Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning,” *YaleCourses*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpH516EA1t0>.

3. Roger I. Simon with Claudia Eppert, Mark Clamen, and Laura Beres, “Witness as Study: The Difficult Inheritance of Testimony,” in Simon’s book *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning, and Ethics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 112.

4. Richard S. Peters, “Education and the Educated Man,” in *A Critique of Current Educational Aims*, eds. R.F. Deardon, P.H. Hirst, and R.S. Peters (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 1–16; Paul H. Hirst, “Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge,” in *Knowledge and the Curriculum: A Collection of Philosophical Papers* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 30–53; and Michael Oakshott, “What Is History?” in *What Is History? and Other Essays*, ed. Luke O’Sullivan (Exeter, U.K.: Imprint Academic, 2004).

5. Anthony O’Hear, “Michael Oakshott,” in *Fifty Modern Thinkers in Education: From Piaget to the Present*, ed. Joy A. Palmer (London: Routledge, 2001), 46.

6. Michael Oakshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962).

7. Hirst, “Liberal Education,” 46.

8. Richard S. Peters, “The Aims of Education: A Conceptual Inquiry,” in *The Philosophy of Education*, ed. R.S. Peters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 19–20.

9. Michael S. Katz, “R. S. Peters’ Normative Conception of Education and Educational Aims,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 1 (2010): 105.

10. Peter Seixas, “Schweigen! Die Kinder! Or, Does Postmodern History Have a Place in Schools?” in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, eds. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 22. See also Jon A. Levisohn, “Negotiating Historical Narratives: An Epistemology of History for History Education,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 44, no. 1 (2010): 1–21.

11. J.L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1998), 148–49.

12. See, for example, Michael Bimbaum, "Historians Speak Out Against Proposed Texas Textbook Changes," *Washington Post*, March 18, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/17/AR2010031700560.html>.

13. See, for example, Peter Seixas, *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Simon, *The Touch of the Past*; Keith Barton and Linda Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004); Jürgen Straub, ed., *Narration, Identity, and Historical Consciousness* (New York: Berghahn, 2005); and Stearns et al., *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning*.

14. As Sam Wineburg notes, British educators were a good ten years ahead of their North American counterparts in undertaking a reconception of history education. He cites in particular the work of Peter Lee, Alaric Dickinson, Peter Rogers, and Denis Shemilt. In Stearns et al., *Knowing, Teaching and Learning*, 324. For the North American literature on memory studies see, for example, Jeffrey Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2008); William J. Booth, *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity, and Justice* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006); Deborah Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1998); and Martha Minow, *Breaking the Cycles of Hatred: Memory, Law, and Repair* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

15. Seixas and Simon are but two of many scholars writing on historical consciousness in Canada, the UK, and the US. However, since their views are sufficiently representative of their respective strands of work, due to constraints of space I focus on their writings here. A third important strand, which I take up elsewhere, is Jörn Rüsen's narrative approach to historical consciousness.

16. <http://www.histori.ca/benchmarks/>.

17. Darren Bryant and Penney Clark, "Historical Empathy and *Canada: A People's History*," *Canadian Journal of Education* 29, no. 4 (2006): 1039–63.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*; see also Peter Lee and Rosalyn Ashby, "Empathy, Perspective Taking, and Rational Understanding," in *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies*, eds. O.L. Davis Jr., Elizabeth Anne Yeager, and Stuart J. Foster (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 21–50.

20. Seixas, *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*; and Bryant and Clark, "Historical Empathy."

21. <http://www.walkinghomeprojects.com/>.

22. Roger Simon, Mario di Paolantonio, and Mark Clamen, "Remembrance as Praxis and the Ethics of the Interhuman," in *The Touch of the Past*, 133.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Simon, *The Touch of the Past*; Roger I. Simon, Claudia Eppert, and Sharon Rosenberg, eds., *Between Hope & Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981); Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other [and Additional Essays]*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne, 1987); Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994); Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Claudia Ruitenberg, "Education as Séance: Specters, Spirits, and the Expansion of Memory," *Interchange* 40, no. 3 (2009): 295–308; Britzman, *Lost Subjects*; and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

25. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*.

26. Simon, *The Touch of the Past*, 105.

27. Simon et al., *Between Hope and Despair*, 6.

28. Roger Simon and Claudia Eppert's chapter "Remembering Obligation" in *The Touch of the Past* begins to lay the groundwork for classroom practice, but to the best of my knowledge it has not yet been taken up in schools.

29. Simon et al., *Between Hope and Despair*, 2–3.

30. Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); and see also Gert Biesta, "The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common: Education and the Language of Responsibility," *Interchange* 35, no. 3 (2004): 307–24.
31. Simon and Eppert, "Remembering Obligation," 61–64. See also W. James Booth, *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity, and Justice* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).
32. Simon and Eppert, "Remembering Obligation," 61.
33. Simon et al., "Witness as Study," 112.
34. Simon and Eppert, "Remembering Obligation," 62.