

### Reading Log #9

The study of history and historical thinking combines many elements to form a view on a particular place and time. Histories can be interpreted in different ways depending on the individual doing the interpretation. History requires researchers to constantly ask *how do we know* and this is where the evidence plays an important role<sup>1</sup>. John Douglas Belshaw makes it easier to understand by thinking “about the study of history as a combination of the ‘what’ and the ‘how’”, as in “*what* happened and *how* [do] we know it happened”<sup>2</sup>. Three major key points arise when studying history, and those are “what is history?”, “how do we *do* history?”, and “what are things to be cautious of when doing history?”.

What is History? History is anything that happened in the past up to the present moment. Yes, even reading the previous sentence can be considered a part of history. History can be depicted through text, image, music, art, food, oral stories, and more. With oral storytelling it is important to remember that not all stories are considered history. This is the reality between true histories and fables<sup>3</sup>. For example, some stories are made up to encourage certain behaviours in children. Although these stories are not history themselves, they may have an impact on the culture or history of the people being studied. Everyone has an individual history that is unique to them. Even though the same event may have occurred to two different people, their individual backgrounds allow them to experience that event differently. An example of this could be the Cariboo Gold Rush of 1858, and how the miners experienced the gold rush differently than the Indigenous communities that inhabited the land prior. History is not static, meaning that history has the ability to change over time through new discoveries and different interpretations of the

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<sup>1</sup> John Douglas Belshaw, *Canadian History: Pre-Confederation*, (BC Open Textbooks, 2018), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

same material. Different interpretations are based on the worldviews and notions different researchers carry with them, and may have either a small or big impact on their research. Similar to how people have different histories, people also interpret different histories. This leads to the next question.

How do we *do* history? We can do history by examining and interpreting the past through text, image, music, art, food, oral stories, and anything else that comes from the time period and place being studied. This also includes other research done on the topic of interest. When using text documents, it is important to be able to differentiate between primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources are original documents from people in the time period being studied<sup>4</sup>. These can be either first hand accounts such as diaries and letters, or documents such as newspaper articles and government reports<sup>5</sup>. Secondary sources are documents written from an outside perspective basing their opinions on other primary sources<sup>6</sup>. It can be beneficial to use both primary and secondary sources when conducting research to gain an understanding from multiple perspectives. Since history includes a wide variety of events, it is useful to narrow down research to a specific time and place in order to get the most out of the research. This allows the researcher to examine one aspect in more depth rather than a wider range of aspects in less depth. Archaeologists do history by examining artifacts found in the area they are studying. Examining objects and images can be more difficult because there is not a direct answer given for the questions being asked. This process can become easier when collected with other sources and information on the topic being studied. Another aspect that can make doing history difficult is the interpretation of carvings or languages that are no longer in circulation. It is possible, depending on the area of study, to come across languages that are

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<sup>4</sup> John Douglas Belshaw, *Canadian History: Pre-Confederation*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

extinct, and although interpretations can be made, the outcome may not be exactly what was meant from the original author. A researcher may be limited in their analysis, however there are many things that should be asked to get better quality results.

What are things to be cautious of when doing history? First off, the researcher always wants to make sure that the most reliable and verifiable evidence and documents are being used for analysis<sup>7</sup>. This is to ensure that the information is as accurate as possible to the true histories. It is also important to remember that for most events, there are multiple stories to be told based on the different perspectives and worldviews of the different people involved. For example, the missionaries would have different views than the Indigenous peoples when looking at the push for Christianity in New France. One of these views also has a louder voice when it comes to documents left behind. The Indigenous peoples relied more heavily on oral storytelling whereas the Europeans wrote down their accounts of what was happening at this time. Most of the written documents from this time are courtesy of upper class white men, lending a bias to their view of history. Similarly, it is important to examine the author of the source to understand their worldview and how that could impact their writing and opinions. Another aspect that is important to consider is who is the intended audience for the document. For example, if someone was reporting back to the Crown with the intent of growing the population in New France, the document may highlight only the good things and leave out the bad. On a similar note it is important to ask *why*, as in why was the document written or why was the image taken. Belshaw states that “[h]istorical writing is never without purpose” so it is helpful to understand the author’s reasoning<sup>8</sup>.

In conclusion, it is important to have reliable and verifiable sources that relate to the topic being studied. It is helpful to narrow down a topic to a specific time and place in history, allowing

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<sup>7</sup> John Douglas Belshaw, *Canadian History: Pre-Confederation*, 5-6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

the researcher to gain a more thorough look at a certain topic in history. Finally, when examining evidence it is important to also examine the ethos, pathos, and logos of a document. This includes looking at the author, the intended audience, the reason behind the document, as well as the evidence and logic within the document. Overall, history is a subject that requires hard work and attention to detail, and in order to do history to the fullest, researchers must remember to examine sources from every possible angle.