
Murals as Monuments: Students' Ideas about Depictions of Civilization in British Columbia

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Around the world people confront monuments that celebrate historical origins, movements, heroes, and triumphs no longer seen as worthy of celebration. While an analysis of these *lieux de mémoire* themselves can reveal historical consciousness, the sites become particularly interesting at the moment when they inspire debate, namely, when people ask what can be done with these artifacts of earlier power configurations, outdated modes of understanding, and bygone identities. Recent protests over a series of murals depicting the origins of civilization in British Columbia, located in the central rotunda of the British Columbia Legislative Buildings, offer this opportunity. This article analyzes a sample of 53 essays written by senior high school students, responding to the dilemma of what to do about the murals. It explores four different orientations toward the past implicit in the student responses, using theoretical frames adapted from Nietzsche and Rûsen. These have implications for identities, public policies, and the teaching and learning of history in the present.

Around the world people confront monuments that celebrate historical origins, movements, heroes, and triumphs no longer seen as worthy of celebration. The Voertrekker's monument in South Africa, the southern American high schools named for Confederate heroes, and the statues of imperial conquerors were erected to pay homage, to teach young people desirable character traits, and to provide a positive sense of heritage and identity for a citizenry defined to exclude blacks, natives, women, colonials, and others. What is to be done with these artifacts of earlier power configurations, outdated modes of understanding, bygone identities? Destroy them? Maintain them but strip them of their monumental status? Erect alternative monuments to celebrate those who were excluded (Coombes 1999; Gillis 1994; Klein 2000; Phillips 2002; Vance 1997)?

Public monuments, along with memorials, school history textbooks, mu-

Online enhancements: color figures.

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seums, and commemorative holidays, occupy an arena where modern societies define themselves most explicitly in relation to their pasts. They are quintessential examples of what Pierre Nora (1996) has called *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory. They are, as well, pedagogical sites whose messages are intended to convey values to the next generation.

The sites become particularly interesting at the moment when they inspire debate and contention. These moments potentially offer an opportunity to examine how people are thinking about their collective pasts and, thus, how they seek to position themselves for the future. Contemporary historical consciousness is uncovered, not so much by an interpretation of the *lieu de mémoire* itself as by the analysis of its reception. Such analysis, moreover, can tell us about the tools that people have—and need—in order to construct meanings of the past in a conflict-ridden present. Recent controversies around a mural series located in the central rotunda of the British Columbia Parliament Buildings offer a prime example of these debates.

A crucial dimension of the study of historical consciousness involves how cultural practices and tools for understanding the past are handed down to the next generation. While this work happens in its most formal and organized way in schools, recent research has interrogated other sites of transmission and construction, including families, film, television and commemorative celebrations (Barton and Levstik 1998; Seixas 1994; Welzer 2001; Wineburg 2001). Most frequently, these sites operate interactively to build, or challenge, continuity in historical consciousness. The public press was not alone in its focus on the British Columbia murals controversy: the debate entered the

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schools in the form of a high school essay contest written by 553 students, the products of which fortuitously provide a rich set of sources for investigating young people's ideas about contested monuments.

The Murals Controversy

In April 2001 a storm of controversy erupted in the press of the province of British Columbia. The catalyst was the publication of a report by an advisory panel set up by the provincial government to consider the fate of four murals which had been hanging in the Parliament Buildings for the past 65 years. The panel had recommended that the murals be removed.

The initial impetus for the appointment of the panel had been concerns expressed by a First Nations group, whose main objections centered around the mural called "Labour," which depicted bare-breasted aboriginal women helping to build Fort Victoria, under the supervision of white men. In a letter to the province's attorney general, this group stated:

These paintings of bare-breasted Aboriginal women and of Aboriginal persons in subservient positions are, we are sure you will understand, highly offensive, demeaning and degrading to First Nations people in the province. (Archibald et al. 2001, p. 7)

Hemas Kla-Lee-Lee-Kla (Bill Wilson), one of the letter writers, elaborated on the message in the letter at a later date:

[These murals] may be reflective of attitudes of white people at the time [they were painted] but that doesn't make it right. . . . [They] depict a relationship with Aboriginal people that, if it ever existed, is over. The murals give the impression that the relationship still exists. . . . [They] are one of the most blatant examples of white superiority that exists in this province. (Archibald et al. 2001, p. 7)

The Speaker's Advisory Panel delivered its report on March 28, 2001. The panel considered five options for the murals: maintain the murals as they are, maintain the murals as they are with the addition of other materials, alter the murals, cover the murals, and remove the murals. In support of its decision to remove the murals, the panel pointed to the overriding importance of the Parliament Buildings as a place where all the people in the province have a right to feel included. It also suggested an ongoing program of displaying contemporary art in the Parliament Buildings as a way of showcasing contemporary views. These displays would also provide a balance to other statuary and decorations within the buildings, which, along with the murals, "celebrate

imperial expansion and proclaim the superiority of European civilization over the indigenous” (Archibald et al. 2001, p. 33).

Response to the Speaker’s Advisory Panel recommendation was divided. The province’s then premier, Ujal Dosanjh, agreed, saying, “It would be a fundamentally sound goodwill gesture of all British Columbians to accede to the request made by the First Nations” (*Daily News* 2001, p. A04). However, some members of the public vehemently objected. One letter writer compared removal of the murals to a “Cromwellian rampage through Catholic churches” (Blumenschein 2001, p. A11). Another facetiously suggested that the government “bring in the artillery and raze the legislature complex . . . as it is the most blatant reminder of Vancouver Island’s ‘politically oppressive’ colonial past” (Spratt 2001, p. A11). A third offered as a solution that a new mural be added to balance the collection, this one depicting “white men, wearing no pants, building a First Nations village” (O’Connor 2001, p. A15).

In May 2001, a change of government took place. At the time of writing, the new government has made no decision about the fate of the controversial murals.

The Murals

The four murals were commissioned in 1932 as a personal gift to the province by Provincial Secretary S. L. Howe and completed by British Columbia artist George Southwell three years later. Howe asked the artist to illustrate “the historical qualities necessary for the establishment of a civilization” (Segger n.d., p. 68, quoted in Archibald et al. 2001, p. 11). According to the *Daily Colonist*, “the contribution that Colonel Howe is making towards the cultural advancement of the province and public appreciation of pioneer life will remain as a tribute to his ideals as long as the Parliament Buildings stand” (April 6, 1933, p. 1, quoted in Archibald et al. 2001, p. 11).

The four murals (see figs. 1, 2, 3, and 4) were described by Martin Segger, in his history of the Parliament Buildings (n.d.), as:

1. *Courage*. The meeting of Captains Vancouver and Quadra at Nootka Sound in 1792.
2. *Enterprise*. Hudson’s Bay Co. Chief Factor James Douglas landing from the *Cadboro* at Clover Point to select the site for Fort Victoria (1843).
3. *Labour*. The building of Fort Victoria (1843; alternately described as the building of Fort Langley [late 1820s]).
4. *Justice*. Colonial Chief Justice Sir Matthew Baillie Begbie holding court in Clinton during the Cariboo gold rush [early 1860s]. (Quoted in Archibald et al. 2001, pp. 11–12.)

Each mural is in two parts, with a rectangular section below, which includes

COURAGE



Captains Vancouver and Quadra meet on the west coast of Vancouver Island in 1792.

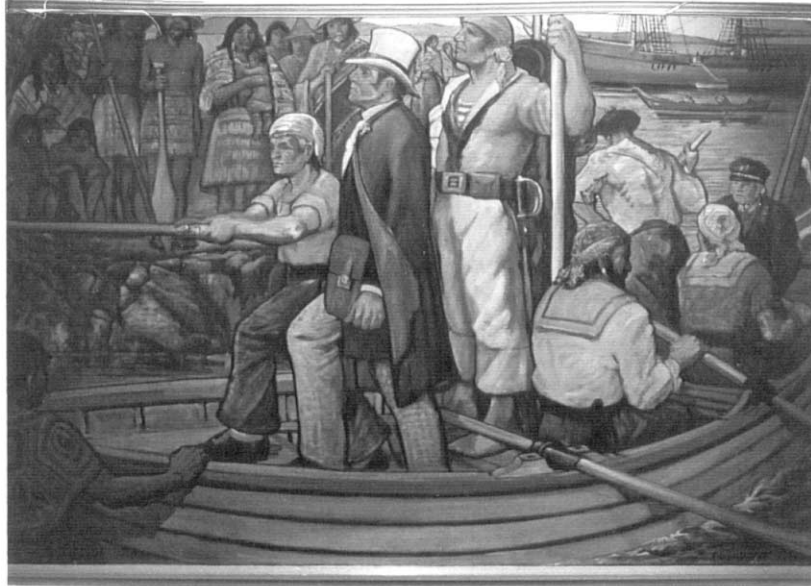
FIG. 1.—Black-and-white version of “Courage” (color version available as an online enhancement).

the human figures, and an upper section in the vault of the rotunda, which depicts the top part of each scene—the masts of a ship, the sky, and the ceiling of a room. Originally, the title of each mural appeared on the strip of wall separating its two sections. Prior to 1977, the strips were painted over.

The Begbie Canadian History Contest as a Research Site

Eleventh-grade students from 40 British Columbia schools participated in the Begbie Canadian History Contest in April 2001.¹ In this year, the eighth in which the contest has been offered, it was also made available to schools in other Canadian provinces. One school in Prince Edward Island and one in Manitoba participated. A range of urban, suburban, and small town schools, both public and private, from various geographic locations is represented. In most schools, it was individual students’ choice whether to enter the contest. In some cases, however, teachers decided that their entire class would write. The test consisted of 30 multiple-choice questions, the paragraph question on

ENTERPRISE



HBC Chief Factor James Douglas lands at Fort Victoria in 1843.

FIG. 2.—Black-and-white version of “Enterprise” (color version available as an online enhancement).

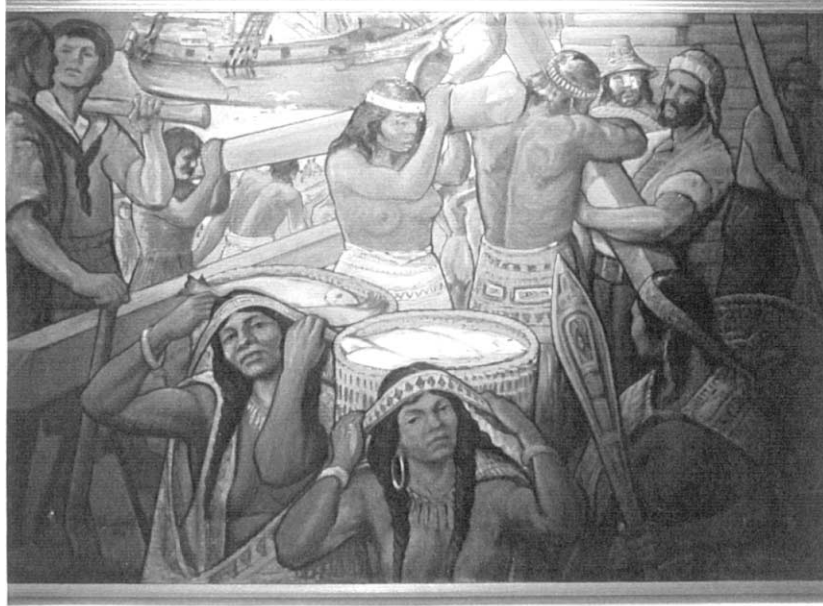
the murals, and an extended essay question. The suggested time for the murals paragraph was 10 minutes.

Accompanying a color photocopy of the four murals, including their titles, was the statement “In the rotunda of the BC Legislative buildings in Victoria are four paintings intended to show the four qualities necessary for the establishment of a civilization: *Courage, Enterprise, Labour, and Justice.*” Instructions for the paragraph then followed:

There is currently a controversy about the way First Nations people are portrayed in four paintings found in the Legislative buildings in Victoria, BC. Consider the titles of the paintings and identify the elements that likely caused the controversy. Write a paragraph supporting either the retention or the removal of the paintings, or suggesting some way to resolve the problem. (Begbie Contest Society 2003, p. 220)

This article is an exploratory analysis of the responses. Its purpose is largely to refine a scheme for analyzing the forms of students’ arguments and, thereby, to begin to understand the resources they used (or failed to use) in making

LABOUR



The construction of Fort Victoria in 1843.

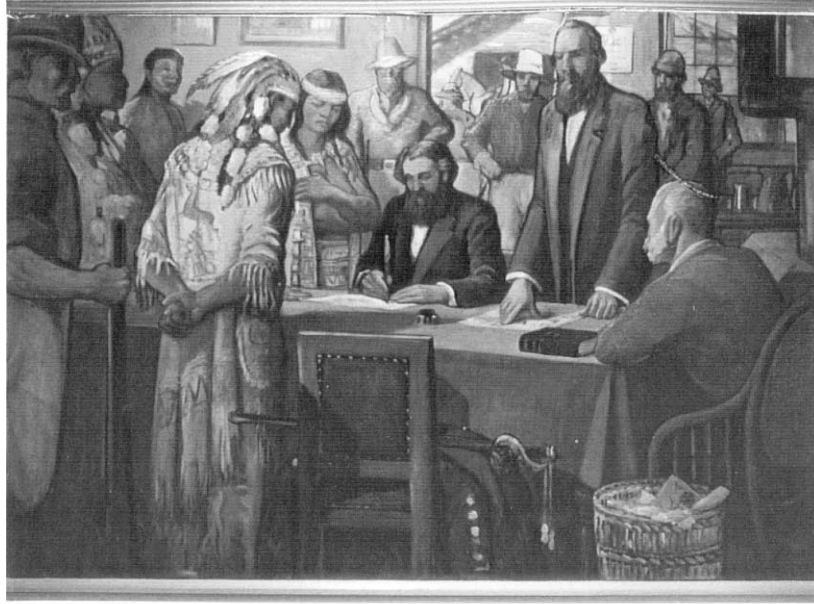
FIG. 3.—Black-and-white version of “Labour” (color version available as an online enhancement).

sense of the murals. The two coauthors read 53 test responses from the total of 553 and devised preliminary analytical categories (see the appendix for a discussion of the sample). Next, we each started coding individual sentences and phrases but quickly encountered ambiguities in the categories, a process which led to two successive revisions of the coding categories. Then we each coded the entire sample, selecting and recording key passages from every response that supported our categorization, along with annotations. We discussed discrepancies and reached a consensus in every case. We were left, however, with four students who spanned two categories each (so that the 53 entries became 57 records) and two students whose responses were impossible to categorize.

Sites of Memory: An Analytical Starting Point

Our initial analytical scheme came not from students’ responses but from philosophy on uses of the past. Germans are responsible for the useful term

JUSTICE



Chief Justice Begbie holds court in the interior of BC in 1866.

FIG. 4.—Black-and-white version of “Justice” (color version available as an online enhancement).

Vergangenheitsbewältigung: coming to terms with, or overcoming, the past (Coetzee 2001; Torpey 2001). Nietzsche offers a typology of history which suggests a way to categorize the uses of the past, even if his evaluation of the types is wrong from our vantage point: “History pertains to the living man in three respects: it pertains to him as a being who acts and strives, as a being who preserves and reveres, as a being who suffers and seeks deliverance” (Nietzsche 1997, p. 67). These three approaches to the past, he calls “monumental,” “antiquarian,” and “critical.” While Nietzsche argues that there is a constructive and appropriate time for each of these three uses of history, he rages that a fourth, the “modern,” has superseded them all. Most of his article is a polemic against rationality, objectivity, and other modern approaches to the past. As a way of countering Nietzsche’s radical antimodernism, we introduce the work of contemporary German philosopher Jörn Rüsen, who also proposes four types of orientation to the past. Reversing Nietzsche’s valuation, Rüsen favors the modern (which he calls “Genetic”) as the most useful type in contemporary culture (Rüsen 1989, 1993). Each of these types bears a *prima facie*

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relationship to policy recommendations concerning monuments like those in the British Columbia legislature.

<u>Nietzsche's Type</u>	<u>Action</u>
Monumental	Build the monument
Antiquarian	Preserve the monument
Critical	Destroy the monument
Modern (Rüsen's Genetic)	Historicize the monument

Build the Monument: The Monumental Type

Nietzsche's (1997) monumental use of the past is for man "as a being who acts and strives":

Of what use, then, is the monumentalistic conception of the past, engagement with the classic and rare of earlier times, to the man of the present? He learns from it that the greatness that once existed was in any event once *possible* and may thus be possible again. (P. 69)

Monuments are constructed to embody founders of the nation, heroes of the race. Extraordinary people, whose deeds should be celebrated and whose characters should be emulated (in the eyes of the monument builders), are the subject of grand edifices, constructed in a way that they will last, presumably indefinitely, into the future. The individuals celebrated in monuments are bound up, moreover, with a collective historical trajectory, the founding and progress of the nation. Thus, where monuments do not celebrate individual heroes, they mark victories and other key events from the national past. And because monuments and their referents help to define socially sanctioned virtues, they also foster solidarity and demarcate inclusion and exclusion in the social collectivity.² In order to serve a monumental function, a *lieu de mémoire* occupies a public space. A hierarchy of public places, articulated by urban planners, architects, and others, helps to confer greater or lesser status on particular monuments. Thus monuments are often located in central urban spaces and, even more crucially, at the seats of regional and national governments.

This monumental impulse formed the original intention of the legislature murals, both in terms of their content and their setting. Their purpose was to celebrate the establishment and progress of European civilization on the west coast of North America. They embody the laudatory qualities of justice, enterprise, labor, and courage, in the form of European colonizers. These are sea captains and explorers George Vancouver and Juan Francisco de la Bodega

y Quadra, fur trader and governor James Douglas, and Judge Matthew Baillie Begbie. This celebratory purpose, evident in the content of the murals, was reinforced by the public nature and political importance of their setting, the Legislative Building, the seat of the provincial government. Not surprisingly, no student writing the contest in our own postcolonial age articulated this type of historical consciousness. Rather, their writing can be characterized by one or more of the other three types.

Preserve the Monument: The Antiquarian Type

Nietzsche's (1997, p. 72) second use of the past is seen in the antiquarian, who "preserves and reveres" the past. Nietzsche describes the antiquarian:

By tending with care that which has existed from of old, he wants to preserve for those who shall come into existence after him the conditions under which he himself came into existence—and thus he serves life. . . . This antiquarian sense of veneration of the past is of the greatest value when it spreads a simple feeling of pleasure and contentment over the modest, rude, even wretched conditions in which a man or a nation lives. (Pp. 72–73)

Nietzsche's antiquarian can be seen today in what David Lowenthal (1996) has called the heritage impulse, the drive to save even "the modest and the rude": quotidian artifacts, neighborhoods, historic sites, tenements, graveyards, or factories. Heritage seeks preservation for the sake of continuity.³

It is important, for our purposes, to note that heritage campaigns may include grand architecture of the state and symbols of the nation (as in the Legislature murals), though they are not limited to them. The key difference is that the identities promoted through heritage preservation are less didactic, convey a less overtly moral message than do the monumental, and are tied less exclusively to projects of national identity. Indeed, John Bodnar (2000) has argued that the move to heritage has been largely severed from the idea of the nation as the vehicle for collective progress:

I would argue that [the past] is now scattered into a thousand preservation projects and commemorative sites that are frequently seen as part of a world that has disappeared never to return, rather than as part of a long-term quest for reason and justice. (P. 958)

The memorial impulse also falls within the antiquarian type. Memorials, like monuments, establish continuity with the past and identity with the collective, but they do so by invoking a debt of remembrance to forebears, victims

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of injustice, founders, protectors, and leaders who contributed or sacrificed. If monuments celebrate, memorials generally mourn: loss and sacrifice trump conquest and victory. Although some antiquarian *lieux de mémoire* may be physically located at symbolic centers of state power, they can be found in an eclectic range of settings.⁴

In the responses to the Begbie Contest question about the murals controversy, 18 (of 57) student responses expressed the view that we have a responsibility to respect the past, regardless of whether we endorse the perspectives represented in its visual remains. They recommended that the murals be kept in their present location or be moved to a museum or art gallery. In either case, they suggested that the murals not be altered in any way. These students did not make provision for any sort of critical analysis of the murals on the part of viewers. As one student put it:

The Government and people have appoligised over and over but there is the simple fact that it did happen. . . . These paintings are a part of our heritage and it would be a horrible thing if so many people objected about this that they had to take these beautiful pictures down. (Student 15)⁵

Destroy the Monument: The Critical Type

Nietzsche's third use of the past, the critical, is seen in one "who suffers and seeks deliverance." Those whom history oppresses seek liberation through disrupting continuity and destroying the sites and symbols that preserve it. Nietzsche (1997) thus writes:

If he is to live, man must possess and from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve a part of the past. . . . The best we can do is to confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge, and through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and [implant] in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away. (Pp. 75–76)

In this case, what we have inherited is vile and wrong and needs to be razed and renewed. Heritage should be overcome and eliminated, so that we can create new lives without the burden of the past. Much of modernism, following Voltaire's "*écrasez l'infame*," has sought to tear down tradition in order to build a more perfect order. In this spirit, as John R. Gillis (1994) reminds us, French revolutionaries sought to build an entirely new beginning by declaring 1792 to be Year 1.

By far the greatest number of student recommendations in response to the murals controversy fell within this type of historical consciousness. Twenty-nine of the 57 responses suggested in various ways that the monumental status of the murals, as an expression of the colonial tradition and values, must be destroyed in order to move toward a more just society in which every member enjoys equal respect. The most extreme enactment of this view entailed the literal destruction of the murals. Only one student made this recommendation, and even then, for only one of the four paintings. This student said of “Enterprise,” that “with such a racist message, this painting does not belong anywhere but in a trash heap” (student 6). Other students made the milder suggestion that the murals be moved out of the legislature, presumably into storage, as in this example:

The scene [“Justice”] is not a showing of justice, but a showing of the unjust treatment of natives, who, years after Douglas landed at Victoria, still treat natives as second-class people, inferior to white men. For just such a contradiction (justice shown by an unjust practice) this painting also deserves to be removed. (Student 6)

Other recommendations involved providing written explanations; altering the pictorial representation in various ways with the intent of depicting aboriginal people in a more positive light; or changing the titles, for instance, renaming “Justice” as “We Get Our Way” (student 39).

Historicize the Monument: The Modern Type

Nietzsche’s fourth type, modern scientific history, is the only use of the past in which he places no positive value. Scientific history, according to Nietzsche, gives rise to a “disorderly, stormy and conflict-ridden household [that] gradually becomes second nature, though this second nature is beyond question much weaker, much more restless and thoroughly less sound than the first” (p. 78). Historical knowledge overtakes lived life in this situation: “The war is not even over before it is transformed into a hundred thousand printed pages and set before the tired palates of the history-hungry as the latest delicacy” (p. 83). Knowledge is not produced in the service of life but, rather, vice versa: “The work never produces an effect but only another ‘critique’; and the critique itself produces no effect either, but again only a further critique” (p. 87).

We need not subscribe to Nietzsche’s valuation of the modern in order to use it to define a fourth type of historical consciousness. Perversely, perhaps, it is exactly that type that may be the most useful, for a variety of reasons,

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for our purposes in our time.⁶ This type subverts the original intentions of monuments and memorials, not by destroying them, but by studying them as products of their time, by historicizing them. It achieves a connection with the past, not by preserving an unchanging continuity, but by studying and understanding change from a particular historical moment: the present. The moral regnum of the monument is dethroned, at least as thoroughly as in the critical approach. Debts to forebears remain unpaid. And yet the traces of the oppressive past remain to help us in constructing a postcolonial future. The identity projects of the first three approaches are thus left unresolved, explaining, from a new standpoint, Nietzsche's unease.

It is necessary to go beyond Nietzsche in fully developing the fourth category. Rösen (1993) implicitly celebrates the Genetic type and thus helps to subvert Nietzsche's evaluation of historical consciousness in the modern era.

It is change itself which gives history its meaning. Temporal change sheds its threatening aspect, instead becoming the path upon which options are opened up for human activity to create a new world. The future surpasses, indeed "outbids," the past in its claim on the present—a present conceptualized as an intersection, an intensely temporalized mode, a dynamic transition. (P. 75)

Along with the consciousness of ceaseless change, the historicized subject subscribes to a "morality of values conceptualized in terms of a pluralism of viewpoints and the acceptance of the concrete 'otherness' of the other and mutual acknowledgement of that 'otherness,' as the dominant notion of moral valuation" (p. 75).

Eight students responded to the murals controversy questions with a modern type of historical consciousness. Most of these, like the antiquarian type, favored preserving the murals, but unlike the latter, they explicitly articulated distance from the ideas of the murals (often recommending policies that would convey that distance). According to these students, the fact that we no longer endorse views held in the past does not mean that we should not retain their traces, and glean lessons from them. For instance, one student recommended that the murals "be retained for their historical significance and used as a teaching tool" (student 10). Another student "put a plea forth for their retention in our legislative building in Victoria" and eloquently supported this position:

I feel that these pictures although biased are needed to be seen and not hid away. Pictures such as these serve to remind us of how we treated the First Nations people. To remove the pictures is not to remove the problem but to only cover it up. The pictures give an excellent repre-

sentation of common day views of that era. A plaque perhaps explaining the points I have put forward would perhaps help people of today to understand where many of our racist views came from and why they should be changed. Remember, those who are not aware of the past are doomed to repeat it. (Student 34)

Three Temporal Moments and Students' Reasoning

In turning to the reasoning behind students' judgments of the murals, our analytical task became considerably more complex (see table 1). We considered their statements related to three distinct but related temporal moments. The first temporal moment involves the colonial past, the time portrayed in the

TABLE 1

Students' Reasoning and Judgments

Moments	Reasoning
The colonial past (1792–1860s)	<p>The colonial relationship was unequal, and involved domination of natives by whites, but this was ultimately for the benefit of civilization.</p> <p>The colonial relationship involved a meeting and sharing of cultures, to the benefit of both.</p> <p>The colonial relationship involved unjust and destructive domination of one people by another.</p> <p>The colonial relationship itself receives no comment; the students' entire analysis focuses on the 1930s pictorial representation.</p>
Pictorial representation of the past (1930s)	<p>The murals present an unbiased, true, or accurate picture of the past: "It's what really happened."</p> <p>The murals present biased, unfair, or inaccurate representations of the past.</p>
Judgments	
Monuments in the present (2001)	<p>Build the monument.</p> <p>Preserve the monument.</p> <p>Destroy the monument.</p> <p>Historicize the monument.</p>

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murals, between 1792 and the 1860s. The second temporal moment focuses on the 1930s paintings themselves, as a pictorial representation of the past. The third temporal moment is the present. The contest question asked about “some way to resolve the problem,” that is, asking explicitly for a judgment about action in the present. But, in their arguments in support of these judgments, students unavoidably included reasoning about the colonial past and the pictorial representations of the past. An additional piece of the essay question asked for “elements of the paintings that likely caused the controversy,” explicitly demanding that students analyze the pictorial representations of the past, even if students had not felt that they needed to do so to support their judgment about what should be done in the present. In the analysis that follows we examine the reasoning that lay behind the judgments about action in the present, based on a variety of configurations of statements about the colonial past and its pictorial representation in the murals. We also discuss students’ judgments about action in the present with reference to the typology of historical consciousness explored above. The reasoning regarding the colonial past and the pictorial representation of the past allows us to examine systematically what lay behind students’ judgments for what to do with the murals in the present. We arrived at this scheme through the recursive process described above: developing categories, coding some of the sample, revising the categories, recoding, and so on.

Positive Colonial Past; Fair and Accurate Pictorial Representations

The small number of students—four—who expressed positive evaluations of the colonial past did so from two different positions. One student (48) saw, without any critique, a colonial relationship of unequal power. Thus the student argued that domination was necessary and ultimately beneficial: “It is showing how we treat them like slaves, and that we have the power to do what we want with them.” Significantly expressed in the first person, the student extended the circle of “we” to include George Vancouver, James Douglas, and Mathew Baillie Begbie. And, not only are “we” powerful (in the present tense, flattening historical time) but “we” also did what was necessary. As the student puts it, “It shows what you need to establish a colony.” Cecil Rhodes himself would not have seen the colonial relationship differently. The pictorial representation received no explicit comment from this student. It is no surprise that she/he recommended that the murals be preserved as monuments in their present setting:

I think that if these paintings are accurate then they should keep them up. If it shows that white men are stronger then the natives then let

them stay. Just because it shows them at a lower level than us doesn't mean the paintings are wrong. (Student 48)

This student was concerned about maintaining links with a past that she/he finds quite acceptable and, therefore, worth preserving.

Three other students who saw early native-white relations as positive did so because they saw give-and-take in a mutually beneficial convergence of two civilizations. Thus, student 23 thought Canada came into being "through much effort and compromise":

In the painting, *Courage*, it represents the joining of two cultures. The handshake shows that they are willing to work together. In *Labour*, it shows the two cultures working equally and helping each other out.

Formally, these sentences look like they are discussions of the pictorial representation of the past, but the student uses the representations transparently to recount how two cultures came together in the colonial past. Indeed, these statements show how tangled the reasoning about the colonial past and its pictorial representation in the 1930s is, despite our attempts to separate them, conceptually. In the following, again, we can read through the statement about the pictorial representation of the past to reasoning about the colonial past itself: "They should have named it 'Uniting' or something like that to show how whiteman and First Nations began to live together and work together" (student 39). Admittedly, however, the separation of the past and its later pictorial representation with statements like these requires a high level of inference.

All four students recommended that the murals be kept in their present location, with no alteration. Accuracy of pictorial representation combined with a positive view of the colonial past supported a judgment of preservation of the murals as a link with the past.

Negative Colonial Past; Fair and Accurate Pictorial Representations

Unlike the examples above, many students understood the colonial situation negatively, as one of unjust domination. For these students, the murals were a fair or accurate portrayal of an unjust chapter in history:

Even though these paintings seem racist, it does show historical accuracy for the Europeans defeated the natives and took their land. (Student 1)

There is the fact that this is history and it did happen, there is no

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denying the fact that First Nations people do get discriminated against often and more commonly through history the farther back you go. (Student 15)

The courage is shown in Vancouver to actually shake the hand of his enemy, not to meet the natives. And that was how it was back then. The Europeans took over the land and fought amongst themselves for it, ignoring the natives that lived there. (Student 32)

These paintings represent two very different cultures meeting, and because one culture was more civilized, that culture over powered the other. (Student 38)

Among these statements, there is an acceptance of the correspondence between an unequal and unjust representation in the paintings and the injustice that took place in the colonial past.

The 11 students in this category were split in terms of their judgments for action in the present. The majority (six) took an antiquarian position, recommending that the paintings be preserved unchanged in order to maintain links with the province's past. As one of these students (25) put it, "It is not a question of whether or not the paintings are racist and discriminatory but a question of history. These events took place and we cannot turn our backs on them."

Four students took a critical position, seeking to destroy the murals' monumental status by severing the links with the past represented by their presence in the legislature. One student (38) thought the paintings should be removed and replaced with "new paintings of pride, progress, multiculturalism and the willingness to compensate and succeed in our province and its heritage." The problem for student 42 resided in the murals' titles: "The names are the most insulting because they inaccurately explain the paint." In this student's view, the titles provided a misleading textual interpretation of the content of the visual portrayal. For instance, "the title Courage suggests that Captin Vancouver has some threat on his life from the natives." "If the Labour painting would be renamed as 'Salavery', it would then show the injustice of the settler's and suggest that the natives were being treated wrongly." This student concludes by saying, "They are showing history, but they are suggesting the wrong theme in them." She/he seems to be saying that the titles reflect the European perspective on events. Perhaps this student would have appreciated student 39's suggestion to rename "Justice" with the title "We Get Our Way."

Finally, one student (32), while recommending that the murals be saved, explicitly recognized our present distance from them and thus involved historicizing. This student deplored the colonial perspective, saying that Europeans "treated the people they met . . . shabbily." However, the student took

the position that the murals form “part of our heritage, and we need to show the public what we did, so we do not make the same mistake. Learn from the past, so it does not repeat itself.”

For six students here, accuracy was sufficient grounds for a judgment of preservation, as it was for students in the previous category. However, the other five put more weight on their view of the past as morally corrupt. For them, accuracy could not provide sufficient support for a preservationist position.

No Statements about the Colonial Past; Unfair or Inaccurate Pictorial Representations

Over half of the responses (30 out of 57) avoided the question of correspondence between an unjust colonial past and an unjust representation of that past by analyzing the paintings themselves, without any explicit reference to the moral order of the colonial past that they represented.

The four paintings appearing in the BC legislative buildings depict First Nations people as unintelligent, violent people only useful for slave labour . . . the Native peoples are shown gawking at the travellers. They are shown looking scared and unintelligent. The person who drew the piece was not around at the time and his interpretation of the event is unflattering and potentially inaccurate. It seems to say that Captain Vancouver was being courageous to step onto the shore where these “barbarians” were and yet the Natives look more scared than anything else. (Student 11)

This strategy allowed for a detailed textual examination of the paintings, with scrutiny of their various elements: position of the characters and composition of the painting, colour, posture and gesture, activities, clothing, and technology. While these examinations were part of other students’ paragraphs, for students in this category, they formed the core of the argument. Hesitant, like student 11 above, to focus on historical inaccuracy in the details, students concentrated on the kinds of messages that they conveyed to the viewer. Thus, looking at the composition of “Courage,” student 30 observed:

First Nations people are on the ground . . . this positioning could be interpreted as a representation of the First Nations people as a base and backward people. As well, the positioning of the ships in the upper area while the art and technology of the First Nations’ remains on the very bottom further accentuates the feeling that the British Captains and

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their technology are “courageous” and superior over the “backward” First Nations people.

Students noted the pictorial location of the “qualities necessary for the establishment of civilization” exclusively among the white characters in the paintings. “In the picture entitled ‘Justice’ the honourable Chief Justice Begbie is holding a native man on trial. This could be implying that the aboriginal people have a criminal nature and make the European settlers look good by giving them the position of keeping justice” (student 8).

The reproductions of the murals included in the Begbie Contest reflected the lighting in the legislature dome, with the centre of each panel lit more brightly than the periphery. Since white figures occupy more of the central places, they tend to be more brightly lit, while, as student 18 noted, “the First Nations appear to be relegated to the more shadowy parts of the picture.” Students generally interpreted this literally highlighted Eurocentrism to be painted into the murals themselves. Student 2 observed that “Courage” portrayed “First Nations huddled into the background where the colours make them harder to see and Douglas bright and ‘heroic.’”

These students saw posture, gesture, clothing, and technology contributing to unbalanced and unfair representations: in “Courage,” we “can see the white men standing proud and strong while the native peoples are shown sitting down” (student 43). In “Enterprise,” the “way the natives are dressed and the awe and interest in which they seem to be looking at James Douglas (also the way he is arrogantly holding up his head) shows the natives as lesser people” (student 9).

Student 29 sums up the problem: “Courage? Enterprise? Labour? Justice? Where the ‘four qualities necessary for the establishment of a civilization’ extended to all people over every descent? No! The First Nations people were portrayed unjustly, uncourageous, uninvolved and as a cheap work force.”

The majority of students using this kind of reasoning (20 out of 30) exhibited a critical historical consciousness, advocating the destruction of the monumental status of the murals. Fourteen of these vigorously recommended their removal. As 9 put it, “The four paintings found in the Legislative buildings in Victoria by George Southwell should be removed because of the degrading way they portray the First Nations people.” The remaining six of this group advocated destruction of the monumental status of the murals through provision of written explanations, changing the titles, or altering the paintings themselves. As 40 suggested:

Perhaps a plaque describing the many wonderful things First Nations helped to accomplish would constitute as a supplement, or even a paint-

ing of “Justice” with both a First nations and non-First-Nations man both being tried, rather than the singled out version currently used.

These additions would provide a *counternarrative*, in Rüsen’s (1989) sense of this term, that is, a way to “unmask a given story as a betrayal, debunk it as misinformation” (p. 47).

Given these students’ recognition of the unfairness of the monument’s portrayal, it might be expected that they would recommend its destruction. Nevertheless, 10 of the 30 made other recommendations. The recommendations of five of these students arose from a perspective of uncritical preservation. Two of these five recommended that the murals stay where they were, and three recommended that they be put on display in a museum or art gallery (e.g., “They are an artifact and deserve to be displayed” [41]).⁷ The other five responses historicized the monument, incorporating a temporal dimension and emphasizing deconstruction of the latent messages within the murals’ representations of the past:

The paintings do represent the point of view of the times they were created in, and while these racist attitudes should by no means be endorsed, it is important that we remember they existed, and in many cases still exist. (Student 12)

The person who drew the piece was not around at the time and his interpretation of the event is unflattering and potentially inaccurate. It seems to say that Captain Vancouver was being courageous to step onto the shore where these “barbarians” were and yet the Natives look more scared than anything else. . . . These four paintings are only useful to show the faults in Canadian history, the mistakes of the past. They should only be put up if this is their objective for they show nothing of the qualities necessary for the establishment of a civilization. (Student 11)

Because the artist was brought up and lived during a period when native people did not have the same status as other Canadians, the paintings would not be controversial at the time they were first put up, but since 1961 when Native people were given the vote and considered “people” the paintings should have been removed long ago. (Student 8)

Negative Colonial Past; Unfair or Inaccurate Pictorial Representations

Unlike the group of comments above on the paintings themselves, a substantial group (10 out of 57) analyzed the paintings as being unfair but combined

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their observations with references to and reasoning about injustice in the past itself. Some among this group introduced questions of accuracy. Thus, student 22 examined “Enterprise” and doubted “the accuracy of the event.” Similarly, she/he questioned a portrayal that showed that “natives didn’t mind having their land seized by Europeans” and claimed this “was incorrect.” But other students in this group combined judgments of the pictorial representation with statements about fairness or justice in the past, without making an explicit statement about correspondence or accuracy. Student 6 objected to the interpretation conveyed in the titles. Of “Justice,” this student opined, “The scene is not a showing of justice, but a showing of the unjust treatment of natives, who, years after Douglas landed at Victoria, still treat natives as second-class people, inferior to white men.” She/he judged not only the historical representation but also the historical reality. Many students using this strategy move back and forth without much awareness that they were moving between judgments of the paintings and judgments of the past that the paintings portray.

The uneducated native people were not accustomed to European style courts and had no way of defending themselves properly. The title “Justice” is grossly misused and portrays Chief Justice Begbie as perhaps racist and cites native people as major contributors to crime. (Student 7)

Three of the 10 responses in this category made a judgment to preserve the monument. “Although [they] are biased, they are still a part of history” (student 51). Student 7 advocated preservation of “Courage” and “Enterprise” on the basis that they were “both arguably well intended and represent respectfully the bravery and ambition shown by European explorers and settlers in coming to an unknown land and dealing with a foreign civilization.”

Five of the 10 responses advocated a destruction of the monumental status of the murals through removal. One student suggested the addition of another painting that “displays the First Nations’ triumph rather than manipulation by the British” (student 28). Again, this additional painting would serve as a counternarrative, in Rösen’s sense.

Only two students whose assessment of the murals fell into this category made a recommendation that involved historicizing them. As one of these students put it:

The public needs to recognize that these paintings are not only depicting four admirable elements of human nature, but also a time in our history. A time where the white man was the central theme because they were seen as superior. We cannot change these past ideas, but today we know

better, we know that it was as much the Aboriginal people that made this country as the white people who came from overseas. (Student 53)

Conclusion

In assessing the responses, it is necessary to keep in mind that students wrote these paragraphs in a very short time: one 10-minute paragraph question, as part of a larger, two-hour exercise. Nevertheless, they reveal something about how students use the resources they have at hand to reason about the past, its representation, and its uses in the present.

As we have seen, the majority of paragraph responses considered the historical portrayal, the pictorial representation of the past, to be unfair or inaccurate, and made no direct reference to the moral order of the colonial past itself. Students used this reasoning as a basis for recommendations about what to do with the monument, the majority of which advocated its destruction. This line of reasoning was the basis for many of the strong arguments to historicize the monument as well. It is worth considering how the contest exercise itself contributed to this kind of response.

The documents that the students had to work with were the pictures of the murals, which were created in the 1930s. They were not given transcripts of Begbie's court proceedings or journals of Vancouver's voyage, from the nineteenth century. Those who approached the question most competently did so by mining the text (i.e., the murals) and its visual vocabulary in such a way that they could make claims about the representation, the meanings it conveyed, and the fairness of those meanings. Though there were many other potentially successful strategies for argument, this was one of the most straightforward and useful. Most students tackled the visual text that had been presented to them with considerable sensitivity and skill. Had they been provided with documents from the colonial period (which they were not), then they would have had the tools at hand for making a different kind of argument.

But we also need to look beyond the exercise itself, to ask questions about the preparation for the exercise provided by students' schooling and the larger culture of which they are a part, even if we are not in a position to answer them fully. These young people were apparently fairly comfortable with the idea of controversy over historical representations. The textbooks they use are peppered with such issues: "Is today's government responsible for injustices of the past?" asks one of them (Cranny 2001, p. 10). Another uses controversial issues as the organizing framework for the text (Francis et al. 1998). If their history teachers have perhaps paid less attention to issues of historical interpretation and representation than they might, such ideas are at least circulating

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in literature for teachers (Stearns 1993; Werner 2002; Wineburg 2001). In the larger culture beyond schools as well, they have grown up on “fractured fairy tales” that undermine the morals of the old stories and popular films that challenge foundational myths (Gopnik 2002; Seixas 1994). So the students in this sample were at ease judging the murals on the basis of moral baggage that the pictures carry forward into the present. And the majority waded into the controversy using more or less close readings of the pictures themselves. Though some made other kinds of claims about the accuracy of the paintings, they generally did not get far with these arguments, because they had only the most generic sense of the history of the colonial era that the paintings depicted.⁸

Despite recent calls for the creation of engaging narratives as the staple of public and school history, our exercise points in a somewhat different direction (Allen et al. 2001; Clark 2002; Stille 1998). Where there is public controversy over the meaning of the past, where the definitions of the nation, civilization, and moral progress are contested, *lieux de mémoire* become central nodes in the debates. In this age, it will not serve us well to conceive of the central obligation of the older to the younger generation as the handing down of knowledge of the past in the form of memorial narratives. Rather, in an era when the meaning of memory is openly debated, preparing students to engage in those debates assumes center stage. Such preparation, moreover, requires students to be provided with texts that they can read analytically, as many of the students did the murals. But teachers, curators, and media artists, as creators of contemporary *lieux de mémoire*, should all be clear about what kinds of texts generate what kinds of readings. Examining a statue of Christopher Columbus or George Vancouver may generate a rich discussion about monuments. Viewing a play about 1776 in the United States or 1837 in Canada may generate a lively talk about theater. And reading *Austerlitz* may stimulate important thinking about historical fiction. But additional texts are necessary in order to generate a similarly rich discussion of conquest and empire, the patriots and the *Patriotes*, or the Holocaust. These exercises require a variety of textual traces—those from the historical moment under discussion as well as historical representations constructed at various later times. With an array of traces from different moments in the past, teachers can lead young people to engage knowledgeably in debates about continuities and critical breaks in moral sensibilities over time (perhaps even more knowledgeably than some of the politicians who initiate them). And it is participation in these ongoing public debates—not inheritance of mythic, foundational narratives—that nurtures the “postconventional identities” that can sort through the moral dilemmas of our time (Wood 1999, pp. 39–60). With such preparation, students (and the adults they will become) will be in a position to construct the history of

memory which will provide perspective on the past and orientations for the future in this, our conflict-ridden present.

Appendix

A Note on the Student Sample

Our ability to use the Begbie Contest entries for the purposes of this research was serendipitous but came with certain limitations that restrict the kinds of claims we can make. The entire population of 553 contest entries does not comprise a scientific sample of the grade 11 school population of British Columbia. Rather, it is composed of students from 43 B.C. schools where teachers chose to promote participation in the Begbie Contest. Moreover, schools are not equally represented. In some cases, teachers turned contest participation into an assignment for one or more classes. Thus, in the school with the highest participation, 112 students wrote the essay. In schools where participation was voluntary, fewer students wrote it—in three schools, only one student entered the contest. Finally, no individual demographic data were collected as a part of the contest. Thus, any attempt to draw a scientific sample from among the 553 contest entries would be flawed from the outset. Faced with these limitations, we drew a sample from the 553 entries that would reflect (albeit roughly) the geographic regions of the province. We used all the entries from eight schools: two schools from the large metropolitan school districts of the Lower Mainland (nine entries), two from midsize districts of Vancouver Island (14), three from midsize districts of the B.C. interior (25), and one from a small northern district (five). We are confident that this number and range of responses enables us to construct a comprehensive and valid set of analytical categories. They do not support claims about proportions of students that might fall into these categories in a larger population, nor do we make any.

Notes

1. The Begbie Canadian History Contest, named after Matthew Baillie Begbie, the first judge in the colony of British Columbia, is an annual test available to British Columbia students in grades 10–12. Developed by teacher Charles Hou and sponsored by the provincial Social Studies Teachers Association, the test consists of multiple-choice and essay questions. Monetary prizes are awarded to the top three contestants.
2. Rüsen has called this the “exemplary” function in history.
3. Rüsen’s (1989) “traditional” type of historical consciousness, with similar intent, fosters “a continuity of obligatory cultural and life-patterns over time” (p. 44).
4. On monuments and memorials, see Young (1993), pp. 3–4, who objects to the distinction, but also Brigham (1999).
5. Students’ misspellings and grammar mistakes are left uncorrected and without editorial commentary.
6. Nietzsche points to the dangers of historicism. He says, “The young man has become so homeless and doubts all concepts and all customs. He now knows: every age is different, it does not matter what you are like. In melancholy indifference he lets opinion after opinion pass him by” (p. 98).

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7. We recognize that the change of location itself might constitute a subversion of the murals' monumental status. Yet these students' paragraphs emphasized the goal of preservation and made little if any mention of the goal of critical, historical distance.

8. This article is provisional, preliminary, and exploratory. With these data, we need to do more work to refine our categorizations of students' remarks. We need, as well, to take these analytical schemes and work with them with data that are less messy than the Begbie essays. We need to do more in providing an evaluative scheme so that we might begin to articulate the markers of students' flexibility, complexity, and sophistication. And we need to conduct similar studies with samples about whom we know a lot more than we know about these students so that we might develop a better understanding of the conditions that foster those characteristics.

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