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PROLOGUE

Primary Sources and How We Read Them

What Is History?

Many students believe that the study of history involves simply memorizing dates, names, battles, treaties, and endless numbers of similar, usually uninteresting facts with seemingly no relevance to their lives and concerns. After all, so they think, the past is over and done with. Historians know what has happened, and all that is left for students is to absorb this body of knowledge, for reasons known only to educators.

But these notions are wrong—totally wrong. History involves discovery and interpretation, and its content is vitally relevant to our lives. Our understanding of history is constantly changing and deepening, as historians learn more about the past and shed new light on its meaning. Just as significant, each person who studies the past brings to it a unique perspective and raises questions that are meaningful to him or her. Although there is certainly an objective past, which we all should endeavor to discover and understand as fully as possible, each of us also must explore a past that has personal meaning in order to find in it insights and truths relevant to our own concerns. The drive to understand what has gone before us is innately human and springs from our need to know who we are. History serves this function of self-discovery in a special way because of its universality. Contrary to the opinion of many people, the study of history does not focus exclusively or even primarily on politics. It deals with all aspects of past human activity and belief, for

there is no subject or concern that lacks a history. Therefore, each of us can and should explore the origins and historical evolution of whatever is most important to us.

Regardless of our individual interest or questions, the study and interpretation of our historical heritage involves coming to grips with the dynamics of the historical process. It means exploring the ways in which human societies reacted to the environments in which they found themselves and the ways in which they sought to reshape those environments to meet their needs. It means exploring the complex interplay of geography, technology, religion, social structures, and a myriad of other historical factors. It means exploring the ways in which societies change in response to stimuli and the ways in which they resist change, as well. It means exploring the traditions that have imprinted themselves upon various cultures and the ways those traditions have provided continuity over long periods of time. It means exploring the roles of individuals in shaping the course of history and the ways in which individuals have been shaped by historical circumstances. Indeed, the questions we ask of the past are limited only by our imaginations; the answers we arrive at are limited only by the evidence at hand and our ability to use that evidence thoroughly and creatively. Our answers, no matter how partial or tentative, certainly reveal the inner dynamics of whatever historical culture we are investigating. More than that, those insights help us better understand the

challenges we face in our own day by enlarging our field of vision. When applied to the global community, historical perspective enables us to appreciate the richness of human experience and expression and the factors underlying the striking similarities and differences that exist among the world's peoples.

This collection of sources will help you discover some of the major lines of global historical development and understand many of the major cultural traditions and forces that have shaped history around the world. As editors we will not hand you answers; you will have to work for them because hard work lies at the heart of historical study. The word history, which is Greek in origin, means "learning through inquiry," and that is precisely what historians do. They discover and interpret the past by asking questions and conducting research. Their inquiry revolves around an examination of evidence left by the past. For lack of a better term, historians call that evidence primary source material.

Primary Sources: Their Value and Limitations

Primary sources are records that for the most part have been passed on in written form, thereby preserving memories of past events. These written sources include, but are not limited to, official records, law codes, private correspondence, literature, religious texts, merchants' account books, memoirs, and the list goes on and on. No source by itself contains unadulterated truth or the whole picture. Each gives us only a glimpse of reality, and it is the historian's task to fit these fragments of the past into a coherent picture.

Imagine for a moment that some historian in the mid twenty-first century decides to write a history of your college class. Think about the primary sources this researcher would seek out: the school catalogue, the registrar's class lists, academic transcripts, and similar official documents; class lecture notes, course syllabi, examinations, term papers, and possibly even textbooks; diaries and private letters; school newspapers, yearbooks, and sports programs;

handbills, posters, and even photographs of graffiti; and recollections written down or otherwise recorded by some of your classmates long after they graduated. With a bit of thought you could add other items to the list, among them some nonwritten sources, such as recordings of popular music and photographs and videotapes of student life and activity. But let us confine ourselves for the moment to written records. What do all these documentary sources have in common?

Even this imposing list of sources does not and cannot present the past in its entirety. Where do we see the evidence that never made it into any official record, including long telephone calls home, all-night study groups, afternoons spent at the student union, or complaints shared among classmates about professors and courses? Someone possibly recorded memories of some of these events and opinions, but how complete and trustworthy is that evidence? Also consider that all the documents available to this twenty-first-century historian will be fortunate survivors. They will represent only a small percentage of the vast bulk of written material generated during your college career. Thanks to the wastebasket, the "delete" key, the disintegration of materials, and the inevitable loss of life's memorabilia as years slip by, the evidence available to the future historian will be fragmentary. This is always the case with historical evidence. We cannot preserve the records of the past in their totality. Clearly, the more remote the past, the more fragmentary our documentary evidence. Imagine the feeble chance any particular document from the twelfth century had of surviving the wars, worms, and wastebaskets of the past eight hundred years.

Now let us consider the many individual pieces of documentary evidence relating to your class's history that have survived. As we review the list, we see that no single primary source gives us a pure, unvarnished, and complete picture. Each has its perspective, value, and limitations. Imagine that the personal essays submitted by applicants for admission were your only sources of information about the student body. Given this, would you not conclude that the school attracted only the most gifted and interesting people imaginable? Also consider that these essays by aspiring students are not the only potential sources available to you

that are, at least in part, exercises in creative advertising. You certainly are aware of how every college catalogue presents an idealized picture of campus life.

Despite their flaws, however, essays composed by applicants for admission and the school's official catalogue are still important pieces of historical evidence—when used judiciously. The essays certainly reflect the would-be students' perceptions of the school's cultural values and the types of people it hopes to attract, and usually the applicants are right on the mark because they have read the school's catalogue. That catalogue, of course, reflects the values of the faculty and administrators who composed it. It also provides quite a bit of useful information concerning rules and regulations, courses, instructors, school organizations, and similar items. That factual information, however, is the raw material of history, not history itself, and certainly it does not reflect the full historical reality of your class.

What is true of the catalogue is equally true of the student newspaper and every other piece of evidence generated by or pertinent to your class. Each primary source is part of a larger whole, but as we have already seen, we do not have all the pieces. Think of historical evidence in terms of a jigsaw puzzle.

Even though many of the pieces are missing, it is possible to put most, though probably not all, of the remaining pieces together in a reasonable fashion to form a fairly accurate and coherent picture. The picture that emerges might not be complete (it never is), but it is useful and valid. The keys to fitting these pieces together are hard work and imagination.

Each is absolutely necessary.

Examining the Sources

Hard work speaks for itself, but students are often unaware that a historian also needs an imagination to reconstruct the past. After all, many students ask, doesn't history consist of strictly defined and irrefutable dates, names, and facts? Where does imagination enter into the process of learning these facts?

Again let us consider your class's history and its documentary sources. Many of those documents provide factual data—dates, names, grades, statistics. And while these data are important, individually and collectively they have no historical meaning until they have been interpreted. Your college class is not a collection of statistics and facts. It is a group of individuals who, despite their

Here's the Point . . .

How to Write Essays Effectively

- Prepare your notes and research ahead of time!
- Keep track of all your sources
- Pace your writing: don't write all 10 pages the night before the due date. Do a little bit everyday.
- Review your essay before submitting at least one day before it is due, to catch any errors

differences, share and help mold a collective experience. It is a community evolving within a particular time and place. Influenced by its environment, it is in turn an influence on that world. Any valid or useful history must reach beyond a mere list of dates, names, and facts and interpret the historical characteristics and role of your class: What were its values? How did it change and why? What impact did it have? There are some of the important questions a historian asks of the evidence. The answers the historian arrives at help us gain insight into ourselves, our society, and our

human nature.

In order to arrive at answers, the historian must examine each and every piece of relevant evidence in its full context and wring from that evidence as many inferences as possible. Facts are the foundation stones of history, but inferences are its edifices. An inference is a logical conclusion drawn from evidence, and it is the heart and soul of historical inquiry.

Every American schoolchild learns that “In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.” That fact is worthless, however, unless the individual understands the motives, causes, and significance of this late-fifteenth-century voyage. Certainly a historian must know when Columbus sailed west. After all, time is history’s framework. Yet the questions historians ask go far beyond simple chronology: Why did Columbus sail west? What factors made possible Spain’s engagement in such enterprises at this time? Why were Europeans willing and able to exploit, as they did, the so-called New World? What were the short- and long-term consequences of the European presence in the Americas? These are some of the significant questions to which historians seek inferential answers, and those answers can only be found in the evidence.

One noted historian, Robin Winks, has written a book entitled *The Historian as Detective*, and the image is appropriate although inexact. Like the detective, the historian examines clues in order to reconstruct events. However the detective is essentially interested in discovering what happened, who did it, and why, whereas the historian goes one step beyond and asks what it all means. In addressing the question of meaning, the historian transforms simple curiosity about past events into a humanistic discipline.

As a humanist, the historian seeks wisdom and insight into the human condition, but that wisdom cannot be based on theories spun out of fantasy, wishful thinking, or preconceived notions. Like a detective interrogating witnesses, the historian must also carefully examine the testimony of sources, and both investigators must ask similar questions. First and foremost the historian must evaluate the validity of the source. Is it what it purports to be? Artful forgeries have misled many historians. Even if the source is authentic (and most are), it still can mislead

the historian. The possibility always exists that the sources’ author lied or otherwise deliberately misrepresented reality. Even if this is not the case, the historian can easily be led astray by not fully understanding the perspective reflected in the document. As any detective who has examined a number of eyewitnesses to an event knows, what each individual reports he or she saw often differs radically due to a number of factors. The police detective has the opportunity to re-examine witnesses and offer them the opportunity to change their testimony in the light of new evidence and deeper reflection. The historical researcher is usually not so fortunate. Even when the historian compares a piece of documentary evidence with other evidence in order to uncover its flaws, there is no way to cross-examine it in detail. What is written is written. Given this fact, it is absolutely necessary for the historian to understand as fully as possible the source’s perspective. Thus the historian must ask several key questions: What kind of document is this? Who wrote it? For whom and why? Where was it composed and when?

What is important because understanding the nature of a particular source can save the historian a great deal of frustration. Many historical sources simply do not address the questions a historian would like to ask of them. That twenty-first-century historian would be foolish to try to learn much about the academic quality of your school’s courses from a study of the registrar’s class lists and grade sheets. Student and faculty class notes, copies of old syllabi, examinations, papers, and textbooks would be far more fruitful sources.

Who, for whom, and why are equally important questions. The official school catalogue undoubtedly addresses some issues pertaining to student social life. But should this document—designed to attract potential students and place the school in the best possible light—be read and accepted uncritically? Obviously not. It must be tested against student testimony and discovered in such sources as private letters, memoirs, posters, student newspapers, and yearbooks.

Where and when are also important questions to ask of any primary source. As a general rule, distance in space and time from an event colors perceptions and can

adversely affect the validity of a source's testimony. The recollections of a person celebrating a twenty-fifth class reunion could be quite insightful and valuable. Conceivably this graduate now has a perspective and information that were absent one-quarter century earlier. Just a conceivably, that person's memory might be playing tricks. A source can be so close to or distant from the event it documents that its view is distorted or totally erroneous. Even so the source is not necessarily worthless. Often the blind spots and misinformation within a source reveal to the researcher important insights into the author's attitudes and sources of information.

The historical detective's task is difficult. In addition to constantly questioning the validity and particular perspectives of available sources, the historical researcher must often use whatever evidence is available in imaginative ways. The researcher must interpret these fragmentary and flawed glimpses of the past and piece together the resultant inferences and insights as well as possible. While recognizing that a complete picture of the past is impossible, the historian assumes the responsibility of recreating a past that is valid and has meaning for the present.

You and the Sources

This book will actively involve you in the work of historical inquiry by asking you to draw inferences based on your careful analysis of primary source evidence. This is not an easy task, especially at first, but it is well within your capability. Moreover, along with your professor, we will be helping you all along the way.

You realize by now that historians do not base their conclusions on analyses of single, isolated sources. Historical research consists of laborious sifting through mountains of documents. We have already done much of this work for you by selecting, paring down, and annotating important sources that individually allow you to gain some significant insights into a particular issue or moment in the

long and complex history of our global community. In doing this for you, we do not relieve you of the responsibility of recognizing that no single source, no matter how rich it might appear, offers a complete picture of the individual or culture that produced it. Each source that appears in this book is a piece of valuable evidence, but it is only partial evidence. You should never forget this.

You will analyze two types of evidence: documents and artifacts. Each source will be authentic, so you do not have to worry about validating it. We will also supply you with the information necessary to place each piece of evidence into its proper context and will suggest questions you legitimately can and should ask of each source. If you carefully read the introductions and notes, the suggested Questions for Analysis, and, most important of all, the sources themselves—and think about what you are doing—solid inferences will follow.

To illustrate how you should go about this task and what is expected of you, we will take you through a sample exercise, step by step. The exercise consists of our analyzing two sources: a document from the pen of Christopher Columbus and a reproduction of an early sixteenth-century woodcut. By the end of this exercise, if you have worked closely with us, you should be ready to begin interpreting sources on your own.

Before we begin we want to offer a cautionary note. Please understand that we will wring from this sample document many more inferences that we or your professor should expect from you. After all, we bring to this task quite a bit of background that you do not yet have. We have read books on Christopher Columbus that you might never have the opportunity to view, and that reading inevitably has had an influence on how we interpret this particular document. Nevertheless, we believe that leading you through this exercise has value, insofar as it will demonstrate the general way to go about drawing historical inferences and the rich possibilities for insight that lie within a piece of documentary evidence. So please do not be intimidated by what follows. Take from it whatever of value you find in it.

“Luxuries are the only necessities.”

--Oscar Wilde

That noted, let us now look at the document. We present it just as it would appear in any chapter of this book: first an introduction, then suggested Questions for Analysis, and finally the source itself, with explanatory footnotes. Because we want to give you a full introduction to the art of documentary source analysis, the excerpt in our example is a bit longer than the average document in this book. The notes that comment on the text are probably also fuller than necessary, but we prefer to err on the side of providing too much information and help, rather than too little. Again do not let the length of the document or its many notes intimidate you. Once you get into the source, you should find it fairly easy going.

Your first step in analyzing any source in this book is to read the introduction and the Questions for Analysis. The former is intended to place the source into context; the latter should provide direction when it comes time to analyze the source. One important point to keep in mind is that every historian approaches a source with at least one question in mind, even though it might be vaguely formulated. Very much like the detective, the historian wants to discover some particular truth or shed light on a given issue. This requires asking specific questions of the witnesses or, in the historian's case, of the evidence. These questions of course should not be prejudgments. One of the worst errors a historian can make is setting out to prove a point or to defend an ideological position. Questions are simply starting points, nothing else, but they are essential. Therefore, as you approach a source, have your question or questions fixed in your mind, and as work your way through a source, constantly remind yourself what issue or issues you are investigating. We have provided you with a number of suggested questions for each source. Perhaps you or your professor will want to ask other questions. Whatever the case, keep focused on these questions and issues, and take notes as you read each source. Never rely on unaided memory; it will almost inevitably lead you astray.

Needless to say, you must be honest and thorough as you study a source. Read each explanatory footnote carefully, lest you misunderstand a word or allusion. Try to understand exactly what the source is saying and what its author's perspective is. Be careful not to wrench items,

words, or ideas out of context, thereby distorting them. Above all, read the entire source so that you understand as fully as possible what it says and, just as important, what it does not say.

This is not as difficult as it sounds. It just takes concentration and a bit of work. To illustrate the point, let us read and analyze Christopher Columbus's letter and in the process try to answer this core question: What evidence is there in this document that allows us to judge Columbus's reliability as an objective reporter? By addressing this issue, we will answer questions 3–6 and 8.