

Measuring Source Reliability

Both historians, and readers of history, must continually measure the reliability of their sources of information. Not all sources are equally reliable. The problem of source reliability is particularly significant when it comes to the use of online resources, i.e. people are drowning in the sheer amount of information available; moreover, it is easy to find websites that confirm a person's bias or assumptions. Therefore, it makes some sense to test and measure the reliability of information before incorporating it into our essays or presentations.

Scholars developed the OPVL approach to analyzing sources to assist them in making judgements about the origin, purpose, value and limitations of resources. In addition to definitions, some potential guidance questions have also been included. The answers to these questions might provide the student with a place to start writing or create a useful framework to complete an OPVL assessment.

Origin: refers to the setting, time, and personality (or culture) that created a source. Some potential questions a student of history could ask to explore origin are listed below:

- When was the document created?
- Who created it?
- Where did it first appear?
- Are there any special cultural considerations to take into account when reading this document?
- Is it a primary or secondary source?
- What was the historical context in which it was created?

Purpose: focuses on the intention or purpose behind the creation of the source in the first place. Some potential guidance questions are:

- Why did the author/culture create the document?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What was the intention of the author?
- Is the document intended specifically for fellow scholars or for popular consumption?

Values & Limitations: although these two attributes can be treated separately they cover essentially the same ground. Specifically, the values relate to ideology or beliefs of the document's creator while limitations make reference to the boundaries or potential problems affecting a document.

- What information was available to the author that might not be available elsewhere?
- What important information was *not* available to the author? For example, consider when the document was created and if any subsequent scholarship has revealed something new about an event or personality.
- Did the author get information from a reliable source?
- Does the author have reasons to emphasize certain facts over others to a particular audience? Might the author present the story differently to a different audience?
- What specific information might the author have chosen to leave out?
- Does the author concede a certain point that is inconvenient to him/her to admit to?
- How might the historical context in which the document was created influence the document's author?
- How might the document's original historical context affect our own understanding of the document's reliability?
- Could the document's author have made use of better, more reliable sources?
- To what extent is this resource reliable or relevant to incorporate into an essay or presentation?

If you use the OPVL method, odds are you'll answer several of the questions listed above. If you do use these questions, ensure that the paragraphs you produce aren't just composed of disconnected answers to the questions that don't transition or segue efficiently from one to the next. Students must ensure at all times that ideas flow logically and smoothly from one to the next.

Purpose: evaluate and analyze a historical document to test its reliability using OPVL.

Procedure

- 1). Read the *Letter to the Inhabitants of Quebec* (1774) and the associated biographical information.
- 2). Create a *Google doc*. Entitle it **History 30 Assignment 2**. Share the document with your teacher (rdelainey@lcbi.sk.ca).
- 3). Write a response to the *Letter* analyzing it according to the OPVL approach articulated above; that is, your composition should contain a one paragraph response *per* category, e.g. origin, purpose, values, limitations. Each paragraph should be a minimum 50 words in length (and 200 words maximum per paragraph).

Note: *ensure your sentences in each paragraph entails efficiently, i.e. do not just answer the different questions listed in the OPVL approach above and organize them one after the other, etc. If you do this, your paragraphs will end up being essentially nonsense because sentences will not transition logically from one to the next. Use the OPVL questions only to brainstorm ideas.*

- 4). Write a fifth paragraph. In this paragraph, explain whether or not you would feel comfortable (and why) using the *Letter* as a primary source as part of a formal essay or presentation. Explain your position fully.

Some Biographical Information on the Letter and Its Author

In the *Letter to the Inhabitants of the Province of Quebec*, the delegates of the First Continental Congress, then presided by Henry Middleton, address the people of Quebec following Britain's passing of the *Quebec Act*. The *Quebec Act* was considered by the Americans as the most "intolerable" of the numerous Intolerable Acts, e.g. Stamp Act, Boston Port Act, Quartering Act, etc. Britain passed these various measures to exert its authority over the Thirteen Colonies who were demanding greater autonomy. Two provisions of the *Quebec Act* the Americans found unacceptable: firstly, Britain expanded Quebec's boundaries to include the Ohio Valley (a region the Thirteen Colonies had long wanted to expand into); and secondly, in an effort to ensure French Canada's neutrality in the coming war with the Thirteen Colonies, Britain granted legal protection to the language, religion and laws to the French. The United States was predominantly English and protestant making them natural enemies, as opposed to natural allies, of the French.

The First Continental Congress used the letter to try and convince the French to make common cause with them against Great Britain. Thus, Congress informed the people of Quebec that they were an oppressed people despite Britain's attempts to make them "British subjects equal in rights to all other British subjects." The people of Quebec were invited to send representatives to the next planned continental Congress held in Philadelphia in 1775. Ultimately, the French ignored the letter deciding it was better to side with the devil they knew (the British) as opposed to the devil they did not (the Americans); moreover, if recent history was any sort of guide it was evident the Americans could not be trusted to not simply invade Quebec once Britain was pushed out. The French were content to let the British and Americans slug it out and remain essentially neutral through the whole affair.

Henry Middleton, an influential political leader, was Speaker of the Commons, Commissioner for Indian Affairs, and a member of the Governor's Council until he resigned his seat in 1770 to become a leader of the opposition to British policy. Henry was chosen to represent South Carolina during the First Continental Congress and on October 22, 1774, was elected its first President. Middleton did not necessarily pen the *Letter* but instead added his name to it to give it authority. During Middleton's tenure as President the Congress also sent a letter called *The Petition of Congress* directly to King George III. This letter was a last ditch effort by the First Congress to avoid war with England while asking for greater autonomy and rights. Both letters failed to achieve anything tangible. Ultimately, Middleton was a moderate-

mindful reformer who opposed declaring independence from Great Britain. He resigned from the Second Continental Congress in February 1776 when more radical delegates began pushing for outright independence. After resigning he returned to South Carolina where he served in the colony's government. When Charleston was captured by the British in 1780, Middleton accepted defeat and status as a British subject. This apparently reversal in loyalty did not damage his reputation. Following the American victory in 1783 Middleton did not suffer the same fate as many other Loyalists did after the war.

Henry was among the wealthiest landholders in South Carolina with more than 50,000 acres and approximately 800 slaves. For the last twenty-three years of his life he lived at The Oaks, returning there after the death of his wife in 1761. Henry twice remarried, but his five sons and seven daughters were all children of his first wife. Middleton Place was relinquished to Arthur, his eldest son and heir.

SOURCE A: Letter to the Inhabitants of Quebec (1774), Henry Middleton

October 26, 1774,

Friends and fellow-subjects,

We, the Delegates of the First Continental Congress of Philadelphia, have consulted together on how best to bring our grievances on this continent to England. We thought it proper to address your province as a member therein deeply interested.

In 1763, and according to the King's *Royal Proclamation*, Quebec was officially incorporated into the British Empire. We rejoiced here in the Thirteen Colonies at Quebec's inclusion (both on our own and your account). For we were once enemies but fortune suddenly made us hearty friends. And God, in His wisdom, saw to it to extend to you the advantages of being governed under a free English constitution (which it is the privilege of all English subjects to enjoy).

Thus, we felt safe assuming our French brothers would always enjoy the God-given irrevocable rights to which they were justly entitled. However, from 1763 until the present day, the King's Ministers and Governors of Quebec have governed you under a military government; whereas being loyal and good British subjects you deserve to live under a democratic-style government. Therefore we, feel it is our duty—for weighty and noble reasons—to explain what you are missing:

"In every human society," says the celebrated Cesare Beccaria, "there is an *effort, continually tending* to confer on one segment the height of power and happiness while reducing the other to the extreme of weakness and misery. The intent of good laws is to *oppose this effort* [to divide society into slaves and masters]."¹ History illustrates how elites have continuously attempt to dominate government while the People, who would not suffer being made slaves, resist. History certainly demonstrates the following truth: that to live by the will of one man, or a set of men, produces misery to all men.

Thus it was in this spirit—preserving liberty while checking the ambitions of elites—that Englishmen in 1215 and in 1689 created constitutions with such strength that they should for all ages defy time, tyranny, treachery, internal and foreign wars: and as one of your own philosophers has observed, "They [England] gave the people of their Colonies, a [democratic] form of their own government, carrying prosperity along with it, growing great nations in the forests they were sent to inhabit."

In this form of government, the **first grand right** to which all loyal British subjects are entitled, is to be governed locally by representatives chosen by the People themselves; and it follows we should also be ruled by *laws* which our representatives approve as opposed to governed by the *edicts* of men over whom they have no control. This is the principle that helps us justify our property from illegal seizure. No portion of our land can be legally taken from us without our full and free consent; also, the influence of this first right extends still farther. If money is wanted by Rulers, and if those Rulers oppress the People in any way, the People have every right to withhold that money because laws, not whims, form the basis of a genuinely liberal society.

¹ Cesare Beccaria (1738-1794) was an Italian criminologist, lawyer, philosopher, and politician, who is widely considered as the most talented jurist and one of the greatest thinkers of the Age of Enlightenment.

The **next great right** is that of trial by jury. This provides that neither a man's life, nor his liberty or property, can be taken from him unless a judgement is rendered against him during a trial considered fair; that is, a man has a right to be tried by 12 of his peers who are acquainted with his character and the character of all the witnesses; and if after a full hearing of the facts is given and the jury passes sentence, we have some assurance the fundamental principles of justice—objectivity, truth and the rule of law—will be upheld.

Another right relates merely to the liberty of the person. If a subject is seized and imprisoned, though by order of Government, he may, by virtue of this right, immediately obtain a writ, termed a Habeas Corpus², from a Judge, whose sworn duty it is to grant it, and thereupon procure any illegal restraint to be quickly enquired into and redressed.

The **last right** we shall mention relates to the freedom of the press. The importance of this consists, besides the advancement of truth, science, morality, and arts in general, in the press's ability to publicly criticize the administration of Government. For it is by publicly shaming Ministers who act selfishly, corruptly or ineptly, etc. that these potentially oppressive officers are shamed or intimidated into governing more honorably and justly.

These are the invaluable rights that form a considerable part of our English system of government; that, defends the poor from the rich, the weak from the powerful, the industrious from the rapacious, the peaceable from the violent, the tenants from the lords, and all from their superiors. These are the rights, without which a people cannot be free and happy, and under the protecting and encouraging influence of which, the Thirteen Colonies have hitherto so amazingly flourished and increased. These are the rights England is now, by force of arms, attempting to take from us. The only way we would resign to accept such tyranny is if we were dead and no longer had a choice.

These are the rights *you* are entitled to and ought at this moment in perfection, to exercise. And what is offered to you by the recently passed *Quebec Act*? The freedom to follow your own religion? No. God gave it to you; and no temporal power, however constituted or powerful, can grant or take it away; and besides according to the English Constitution of 1689 you were already granted this freedom granted you so recently. England's Ministers, by pretending to grant you something you already enjoyed, are trying to manipulate you into following them blindly.

Did the *Quebec Act* guarantee the people of Quebec the cultural right to enjoy their own civil law?³ It *seems so*. But closer examination reveals otherwise; that is, the Minister's in England's Parliament are pretending to be your benefactors. For if you read the words of the statute⁴ "laws shall be the rule, until they shall be *varied or altered* by any ordinances of the Governor and Council." Does this sound like you hold your rights with the certainty an English law should carry? No. Your civil law will be subjected to arbitrary "*alterations*" by the Governor and Council; moreover, the colonial government of Quebec reserves the right to itself to appoint judges for criminal, religious *and* civil matters. Such is the precarious tenure of mere *will*, by which you hold your lives and religion. The Crown and its Ministers are empowered, as far as they could be by Parliament, to establish even the *Inquisition* itself among you.

Do you have an Assembly composed of worthy men, elected by yourselves, and in whom you can confide, to make laws for you, to watch over your welfare, and to direct in what quantity, and in what manner, your money shall be taken from you through taxation? No. The power of making laws for you is lodged in the governor and council, all of them dependent upon, and removable at, the *pleasure* of a Minister.

Also, quite unlike your English-speaking counterparts, you are not authorized to raise your own taxes save to make roads or fix public buildings. Why are you given such a degraded position? Ought not the property, honestly acquired by *Canadiens*, be held as sacred as that of *Englishmen*? Have not Canadians sense enough to attend to any other public affairs, than gathering stones from one place, and piling them up in another? Unhappy people! You are not only injured,

² *Habeas Corpus* is a legal document requiring an arrested be quickly brought before a judge or into court to decide whether or not there are lawful grounds for a the person's release or detention.

³ Civil laws are those that apply to property, contracts, and agreements. Britain retained control over criminal law in Quebec. Criminal law covers serious crimes like murder, rape, assault, and the like.

⁴ A *statute* is literally any law passed by a legislative assembly. In this case, Middleton is talking about the House of Commons in England. The Governor of Quebec (Guy Carleton) and his Council (the English and French elite), possessed the power to modify laws—including the French civil law—if circumstances required it; thus, the common people in Quebec did not truly retain their full control over land holding rights.

but insulted. Not only that. The very same Ministers who treat you like children persuade themselves that with the *Quebec Act's* passage, you will ignore the insults offered to you, and engage to take up arms with England against other freedom-loving peoples; and if liberty is extinguished first in the Thirteen Colonies—and we even share the same blood as England—does it not stand to reason the English will destroy it in French Quebec thereafter?

What would your countryman, the immortal Montesquieu⁵, have said to such a plan of domination, as has been framed for you? Hear his words, with an intenseness of thought suited to the importance of the subject: in a free state, every man has the right to participate in his own government; thus, the power to make a law resides in the whole body of the *people through their representatives*. In order to safe guard his liberty, no man should exist in a state where he has to be afraid of another man. When the power of *making laws*, and the power of *executing* them, are *united* in the same person [the Governor], or in the same body of Ministers [or Magistrates], *there can be no liberty.*" This is because the Governor or the Minister will act in their self-interest while ignoring the public interest; this is the state the people of Quebec live in when a colonial Governor possesses more power in his colony than even the King possesses in England itself. There are no limits to his power despite appearances to the contrary.

What advice would Montesquieu, that advocate of freedom and humanity, give you if he was alive and understood how the interests of Quebec and the Thirteen Colonies are so aligned? Americans and French alike oppressed by England are united by indissoluble bands of affection and interest. You owe it to yourselves and your children to join with us in our righteous contest. Make common cause with us and take the noble chance of emerging from a humiliating subjection under English Governors, Intendants and Military Tyrants. Join us and enter the ranks of freemen whose custom it is, derived from their ancestors, to make those tremble, who dare to think of making them miserable?

Seize the opportunity presented to you by God Himself. You have been conquered into liberty, if you act as you ought. This work is not of man. You are a small people, compared to us who with open arms invite you into a fellowship. A moment's reflection should convince you which will be most for your interest and happiness, to have all the rest of North-America your unalterable friends, or your inveterate enemies.

We understand our two nations differ in language and religion but we hope these differences will not prejudice you against a hearty friendship with us. Ultimately, the transcendent nature of freedom elevates those, who unite in her cause, above all such low-minded divisions. For example, the Swiss Cantons furnish a memorable proof of this truth. Their union is composed of Roman Catholic and Protestant States, living in the utmost concord and peace with one another, and thereby enabled, ever since they bravely vindicated their freedom, to defy and defeat every tyrant that has invaded them.

We do not ask you, by this letter, to commit acts of hostility against England. We simply invite you to no longer suffer under the capricious⁶ government of His Majesty's Ministers or His colonial Governors. Rather, we invited you to unite with us on the generous principles of equal and enduring liberty. In order to complete this highly desirable union, we submit the following for your consideration: meet together in your towns and districts and elect regional Deputies who in turn might meet in a Provincial Congress; and from this Congress elect Deputies to send to the Second Continental Congress held at Philadelphia on the tenth of May, 1775.

That Almighty God may incline your minds to approve our equitable and necessary measures, to add yourselves to us, to put your fate, whenever you suffer injuries which you are determined to oppose, not on the small influence of your single province, but on the consolidated powers of North-America, and may grant to our joint exertions an event as happy as our cause is just, is the fervent prayer of us, your sincere and affectionate friends and fellow-subjects.

By order of the Congress,
Henry Middleton, *President*

⁵ Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755) was simply referred to as Montesquieu. He was a French lawyer, man of letters and political philosopher who lived during the Enlightenment. He is mainly credited with being the first to argue for the importance of establishing checks and balances to governmental power and the need to divide up the responsibilities of government—passing laws, enforcing laws, and interpreting laws—into three branches, e.g. a legislative branch, executive, and judicial branch.

⁶ Capricious: given to sudden and unaccountable changes of mood or behavior.