

The Battle of Québec, 1759

Concept(s) Primary Source Evidence, Cause and Consequence

Prepared for Grade(s) 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12

Province NB

By Ernest Wasson

Time Period(s) 1700-1800

Time allotment 4 x 60 minutes per class period

Brief Description of the Task

In this unit students interpret, value and interact with primary source evidence as they try and answer why the English won the Battle of Québec in 1759. The attachments include a range of primary and secondary sources: letters, memoirs, historical accounts, paintings, and maps.

Objectives for Historical Thinking:

Students will be able to

to analyze primary sources by considering the source and seeking corroboration;
use several primary sources to construct an explanation of a historical event.

Required Knowledge & Skills

It would be helpful if students were to be given a brief overview of the Seven Years War and introduced to basic military strategy, weaponry, etc. of the era. They might also benefit from an understanding of issues relating to warfare (high ground, advantage to the defender, etc.).

The lessons do not assume an understanding of primary and secondary sources, but this too would further student ability to answer the inquiry question.

Detailed Instructions

1. As a springboard activity to develop curiosity and model the interpretation of evidence, show students Benjamin West's *The Death of Wolfe* (1770) in **ATT 2**. Explain to students they will be looking at a turning point in Canadian history, the Battle of Québec on September 13, 1759, that led to Britain taking control of Canada from the French. Explain that the goal of the unit is to use a number of sources to decide "Why did the British win?"

Explain that the battle was not a "done deal." Québec stood behind walls on top of tall cliffs and the French had resisted the British attacks throughout the summer. As September began, the British General in the painting, James Wolfe, was sick with dysentery. Winter when the St. Lawrence freezes was coming soon.

Alternatively, you could ask students to generate their own questions about the battle and use the sources in the attachments to answer them.

2. Give students a bit of context to the painting, that it shows the death of the British General James Wolfe at the battle site. Ask them to list all the important details that they can observe in the painting. This could be done in small heterogeneous groups.

Give them prompts as necessary to note the composition of the painting, e.g., the lighting, the placement of Wolfe, the grouping of figures into triangle with the British flag at the top, the action sequence from the landing of British troops to their firing a volley at the French, and the messenger running to Wolfe with the announcement of victory.

3. Ask them questions that model the use of evidence such as the following:

What does this clearly tell us about the battle and James Wolfe?

What does this suggest to us about the battle and Wolfe? What inferences can we make?

What does (name detail such as the lighting) suggest to us about the painter, Benjamin West? How did he want the viewer to think about Wolfe?

What does it suggest about the audience?

Do you think that this is how the battle happened? Is this a reliable source?

How useful is this painting to help us understand why the British won?

4. At some point, give students a bit more context about the painting itself. As word of West's work on it spread throughout London in 1770-71, excitement grew. Hours before it was to be exhibited at the Royal Academy Exhibition Gallery on April 29, 1771, crowds had formed. Royalty entered the gallery first including Lord Grosvenor who had paid the outrageous sum of 400 Guineas to purchase the painting. King George III also arrived.

Perhaps it was West's use of light – the clouds parting to bathe Wolfe in radiant light – or perhaps it was the staging of Wolfe to resemble a dying Jesus Christ with the British flag in the position of the cross, composition so familiar to the audience from religious paintings, but *The Death of Wolfe* was a stunning success. Thousands of reproductions were made. It appeared on tea trays, mugs and cloth. In the years following, it was a common illustration in school social studies and history textbooks. It may be the most popular historical painting ever.

It certainly made West's reputation. The King soon ordered him to paint a copy of the original. West was officially designated the court history painter to the King and went on to make another fifty paintings for George III.

Yet as early as 1793, Robert Bromley observed that the painting comes "so near to the truth of history, that (it is) almost true, and yet not one (element) is true in fact." The painting is full of romanticized but inaccurate details such as the soldier with the French flag, the Native kneeling – when the Natives were on the French side and Wolfe despised them -, the background battle at the same time as the soldiers are climbing the cliff face, and so on.

5. If students have not yet noted the date of the painting, 1770, and the date of the battle, 1759, then draw it to their attention. Although students may think that because a painting is old, that it makes it a primary source, but this particular painting is not. West was not at the battle eleven years earlier. Ask students if this influences their answers to the earlier questions about reliability.

6. Distribute copies of **ATT 1 Interpreting Sources** and **ATT 5 written sources**. Explain that they will be looking at a number of other sources to decide why the English were able to win.

7. Model a reading of one of the print documents combined with completing the chart of questions. Depending on the group you may have to do this for 2-3 sources before they are comfortable. Student difficulty tends to be with inferential thinking and applying their information to the specific question as to why the English won.

8. At this point students should be able to read through the sources with minimal teacher assistance. Again, some groups will need more attention. You may also prefer to do some of this activity as a whole class with the teacher leading.

9. Introduce the other visual sources as appropriate. The maps in **ATT 3** and **4** could be given early on to establish context. **ATT 6, View of the Taking of Quebec, 13 September, 1759**, is by an unknown artist, published in London, 1 November 1797. It gives a narrative of the entire battle much like West's painting and for that reason might be also worth showing early on to help students visualize the setting. You may also wish at any point to supplement this inquiry with secondary sources such as the textbook or *Canada: a People's History*.

10. Once students have analyzed most or all of the sources they should respond to the focus question. For grade 9 and below I would suggest a paragraph answer and for grade 10-12 I would expect a full page. It is important to remind students that they should provide parenthetical citation throughout their answers.

Distribute and explain the rubric.

11. As a final task students need to rate the sources. List the three best and worst sources with an explanation for each. Best and worst may be changed to reliable and unreliable or helpful and unhelpful. At this stage, one hopes that the writing of the paragraph and the ranking of the sources can be done independently.

Outcomes

Students will be able to

make inferences from print and visual primary sources about the beliefs and values of the author and audience and about how well the sources answer the focus question;

write an answer to the focus question using these sources in support.