

# The Rise and Fall of the Dauntless Hero

Tom Morton<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Retired Teacher, British Columbia

E-mail: tmorton1027@gmail.com

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Even before Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe* was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1771, word of mouth had made it famous. Lines formed down the street for admission but at first the crowd could only watch as the nobility came to see it first. Lord Richard Grosvenor attended, of course, because he had already paid the excessive sum of 400 guineas for the painting. King George III also arrived but he disapproved of West portraying the figures in modern dress rather than the togas of classical Greece and Rome and he had no intention of buying it.



Figure 1. "The Death of General Wolfe."

Nonetheless, the public found it to be a masterpiece. Eventually, the King changed his mind and commissioned a copy. West was officially designated court history painter to the King and produced another 50 paintings. *The Death of Wolfe* was reproduced on porcelain jugs, cups, and teapots; in prints and even a pantomime.

*The Death of Wolfe* became a blockbuster, an 18<sup>th</sup> century *Starwars*, and a powerful icon of the British Empire. When British children were taught about the decisive triumph over the French at Quebec, it was West's scene of James Wolfe's death that they imagined, even though it was painted more than ten years after the Battle and full of historical inaccuracies.

Moreover, for the many years that English Canada identified with the Empire, *The Death of Wolfe* was an icon for Canada as well. The once popular and patriotic song, “The Maple Leaf Forever” begins with the lyrics: “In days of yore, from Britain’s shore, Wolfe, the dauntless hero, came.”

The mythic narratives of Wolfe and the Battle of Quebec, the painting’s rich detail, and its curricular links to competencies and course content made it one of my staple primary sources. As with any source, to make well founded inferences students need some context about the source. I tell stories of the Battle and the popularity of Benjamin West’s painting before presenting the preliminary inquiry: “Why was *The Death of Wolfe* such a big deal?”

The next step is close reading. Accustomed to fast paced and ephemeral images, students are not used to lingering over the content and composition of a painting. Hence, I ask them to scan the painting slowly: to move their eyes from side to side, top to bottom, and corner to corner, for 30 seconds to two minutes. Then I ask, “What do you see?” Almost every student can answer this question. If they neglect what I think are key features, I can still direct their attention: “Can anyone find...?”

The next stage is to invite students to draw inferences with time and praise to consider contrasting and conflicting inferences: “What’s going on in the picture? What story is it telling?” The best quality to bring to reading a source is curiosity so I try to build on student observations and context as we discuss their inferences, moving between the source, background knowledge and inferences while asking, “What is there in the painting or context that makes you say that?”<sup>34</sup>

If the students have not already raised the topic, my next step is to draw attention to Benjamin West’s purpose and techniques:

- Who were the audience for *The Death of Wolfe*?
- What are the feelings that Benjamin West wanted the audience to have about Wolfe?
- What tricks did he use to get his audience to feel that way?

In an article in the *New York Times*, Simon Schama argues that “(i)t was the light that did the trick; a clean, shrewdly directed radiance illuminating the face of the martyr and bathing the grieving expressions of his brother officers in a reflection of impossible holiness.”<sup>35</sup>

Schama goes into West’s composition more than I ever did with students but there were other key features that I wanted my students to note and again historical context is important especially for non-Christian or secular students. Students need some familiarity with religious paintings of the Crucifixion. Wolfe’s pose reflects Christ at the foot of the cross and the Union Jack is positioned where the cross would have been in a sacred painting. I would introduce the concept of icon and hero and quote West: “Wolfe must not die like a common soldier under a bush... To move the mind there should be a spectacle presented to raise and warm the mind and all should be proportioned to the highest idea conceived of the Hero.”<sup>36</sup>

The painting can also be read as a story of the battle. On the right, the British troops are still in their boats, then landing and climbing the cliffs. At the extreme left the British infantry unleash the ruinous musket volley on the advancing French and the messenger runs to Wolfe with news of victory.

*The Death of Wolfe* is also evidence for identifying the historical perspective of the colonial powers towards First Nations. At Wolfe’s feet a Mohawk Haudenosaunee warrior strikes a reflective pose, yet Wolfe thought First Nations to be cruel and depraved savages. What is more, they fought for the French. So why is the warrior there? What was the role of First Nations in the Seven Years’ War?

The final stage in my use of this painting was to reflect on Wolfe’s historical significance and the role of media in remembrance - why did Wolfe become an icon in both Britain and Canada? Why is he little known today? – and ethical questions about how we should remember him. As Canada slowly sheds its self-identification with empire, Wolfe slunk to a footnote of our national narrative. Even in England he has lost his mythic lustre. According to

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<sup>34</sup> This question is one of the thinking routines to encourage reasoning with evidence explained in more depth in Ron Ritchart, Mark Church, and Karin Morrison, *Making Thinking Visible*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 165-170.

<sup>35</sup> Simon Schama. “ART; ‘Wolfe Must Not Die Like a Common Soldier,’” *New York Times*, May 12, 1991, <https://nyti.ms/29vWvNg>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

historian and broadcaster Dan Snow, “Everyone (in the Victorian age) knew who Wolfe was, because it was all about Empire and Britain’s imperialistic past. Now no-one has a clue who he is, because in schools and in museums and galleries, we celebrate anti-slave traders and engineers...It’s about modernity, science, and progress.”<sup>37</sup>

The rise and fall of Wolfe as the undaunted hero and the role of *The Death of Wolfe* in that narrative echo contemporary ethical controversies such as the removal of the statue of Macdonald in front of Victoria’s City Hall.<sup>38</sup> Neither the painting of Wolfe nor the statue of Macdonald is history. They are commemorations, ways to express a particular remembrance of the past linked to somewhat mythic and certainly partial narratives, that tell us more about the historical period and sponsors of the commemoration than the person or event being commemorated. The same close reading, contextualization, making inferences and reflection on how we should remember Wolfe are essential steps for reasoned discussion of contemporary debates of what and how we should remember the past.

### **Additional Resources**

Geoghegan, Tom. “The heroes Britain accidentally forgot,” *BBC NEWS Magazine*. November 17, 2009, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/8363153.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/8363153.stm).

West, Benjamin. *The Death of General Wolfe*. Oil on canvas, 1770. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Benjamin\\_West\\_005.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Benjamin_West_005.jpg).

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<sup>37</sup> Simon Schama, “ART; ‘Wolfe Must Not Die Like a Common Soldier,’” *New York Times*, May 12, 1991, <https://nyti.ms/29vWvNg>.

<sup>38</sup> Matthew Sears, “Monuments aren’t museums, and history suffers when we forget that,” *Macleans*, August 10, 2018, <https://www.macleans.ca/opinion/monuments-arent-museums-and-history-suffers-when-we-forget-that/>.