

# Canadian Primary Sources in the Classroom

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Properly selected primary sources are a great way to interest students in a subject, and many of the best are ones that people come across in their everyday lives. They provide the authentic thoughts and ideas of the person who created them and reflect the biases or perspective of their creator. Students have to analyze and interpret these sources before making use of the information they present. It is this challenging, engaging and demanding process that makes history interesting.

Over the years I developed a set of basic questions students need to ask as they evaluate a source for its reliability and accuracy. The easy way to remember them is to use the five Ws: what, when, where, who and why. Students use the information they gain from the sources to make inferences and ultimately develop interpretations concerning the subject under study. I used the same questions in my regular classes and in teaching my Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes, both of which make frequent use of primary sources.

Students would use the five Ws to answer the following questions:

## **Text**

What kind of source is it: photograph, editorial, political cartoon etc.?

What is the source about: people, places, ideas, time, or events?

## **Context**

Where did the event depicted take place? Where was the source created?

When was the source created: during the event, soon after or much later? What do we know about the cultural, social, political and economic context of the time period in which it was created?

## **Subtext**

Who created the source? What credentials does the writer or artist have?

What can we infer about creator's perspective or point of view [bias] by studying the source? Look for emotionally charged words or devices.

Why was the source created? For whom? What point is the source trying to make?

The five Ws work particularly well in the case of political cartoons, which are visually arresting and usually present topics in black and white terms. The accompanying two cartoons will serve as an example. They were published within a week of each other, and would be an interesting way to conclude a unit on the opening of the Canadian West. At that point students would be familiar with the historical background or context needed to understand the cartoons. They could use what they had learned about the settlement of the West, including the extermination of the buffalo, the problems faced by First Nations and Metis, the effect of the National Policy on farmers, the government's decision to make large land grants to the Hudson's Bay Company and the CPR, the granting of a twenty-year rail monopoly to the CPR, and the Riel Rebellion of 1885.

In July 1886 Sir John A. Macdonald and his wife travelled across Canada on the newly completed Canadian Pacific Railway, stopping at various places along the way. One cartoon about the trip appeared in a Liberal-leaning

publication and the other in a newly established Conservative publication. An interesting exercise would be to have the students analyze the two cartoons and explain which cartoon was which.



J. W. Bengough, *Grip*, Toronto, 24 July 1886  
 “The North-West Welcomes Sir John!” J.W. Bengough, *Grip*, Toronto, 24 July 1886.

In the first cartoon a diverse group of people appear to be welcoming Sir John A. Macdonald when he arrived in the North-West Territories on the recently completed Canadian Pacific Railway [what, where]. The cartoonist has portrayed Macdonald as a larger than life maypole. This cartoon appeared in the Liberal publication *Grip* on 24 July 1886, and presents the viewpoint of a resident of Toronto [when, where]. All of the westerners shown had strong reasons for opposing Macdonald's policies: under them many Indians starved, the Métis were driven to rebellion, settlers paid high prices for land in desirable areas, and farmers paid high freight rates to the CPR monopoly. These issues were still hot-button issues a year after the Riel Rebellion [when?]. The Liberal-learning cartoonist John W. Bengough [who] is in fact using satire to attack Macdonald for his hypocrisy and his treatment of residents and business interests alike by wildly exaggerating his size and the welcome he received [why].



Samuel Hunter, *The Arrow*, Toronto, 31 July 1886

“The Great Pow-Wow.” Samuel Hunter, *The Arrow*, Toronto, 31 July 1886.

The second cartoon shows Macdonald visiting with a group of First Nations people on Crowfoot's reserve [what, where]. Macdonald had stopped at the reserve in order to thank Crowfoot for his support during the Riel Rebellion [when]. This cartoon appeared in the Conservative publication *The Arrow* on 31 July 1886, and also presents the viewpoint of a resident of Toronto [when, where]. A dignified prime minister presents Crowfoot, who holds a wildly exaggerated list of grievances, with a peace pipe, provisions and supplies as well as an amnesty for some who had been imprisoned after the Riel Rebellion [what, when]. There is even a bag containing more inducements to be used if necessary. The Conservative-supporting cartoonist Samuel Hunter [who] is suggesting that Macdonald had done his best to look after the First Nations people [why].

Together the two cartoons provide a more critical look at Macdonald and the settlement process than is found in many outdated textbooks, and illustrate the controversial nature of the solutions Macdonald came up with in dealing with western settlement. Primary sources dealing with colonization from a First Nations perspective can be found under the theme First Nations on the Canadian Primary Sources website at <http://begbiecontestsociety.org/>.

## Acknowledgements

The Canadian Primary Sources website provides a wide variety of material from multiple perspectives, as well as many teaching ideas.