



Lesson 2: Other Narratives

This lesson builds upon the previous one by asking students to consider other narratives that might have been told about Sheldrake Island and the experience of people with leprosy in New Brunswick. In so doing, this lesson will provide students with a better understanding of the challenge of working with evidence and the construction of historical narratives.

Teachers will begin the lesson by discussing the narrative nature of history and reminding students that the artist in the Leprosy on Sheldrake Island video was telling a particular narrative. The teacher will point out that there are many other stories that might have been told. Teachers will then divide students into small groups. Each group will research another possible narrative, using materials in the **Teaching Lost Stories** section of the Lost Stories website. Once this research is complete students will propose an “artistic concept” for a **historical marker**¹ that tells another interpretation of the story. Students will then create a short oral presentation, or “pitch,” to explain the rationale behind this new historical marker.

¹ The term “historical marker” may be unfamiliar. It is similar to terms like “monument” in that a historical marker is meant to commemorate some person or event from the past. Historical markers, however, are not

Lesson 2, Part 1 (70 Minutes): Narrative, Commemoration, and History

Overview: Students participate in a brainstorming activity exploring commemoration and historical significance. In the debriefing session, the teacher guides discussion about competing and controversial evaluations of memorialized people or events. This lesson asks students to think about the narrative nature of history, and to consider, in particular, the impact of different narratives on our understanding of historically significant individuals.

Teachers begin by writing the name “Sir John A. Macdonald” on the board (teachers should feel free to use the name of another historically significant and controversial individual depending on the class and their prior knowledge). Ask students what they know about Sir John A. Macdonald and write their ideas on the board. Once students have generated a list, ask them to work in small groups to discuss the question: is John A. Macdonald an individual Canadians should commemorate? Why? Why not?

When debriefing this discussion, point out to students that they have been discussing an individual’s historical **significance**. Often, a case is made for an individual’s (or an event’s) historical significance using one, or a combination of, the following criteria:

limited to statues or sculptures, and can vary greatly in size. They include temporary art installations and other less traditional ways of drawing our attention to the past.

1. **Scope & Scale.** The event or individual had a deep impact on (scale) a large number of people (scope) in the past.
2. **Causal.** The event or individual influenced later events.
3. **Impact on present.** The event or individual is seen as relevant to future generations.
4. **Symbolic.** The event or individual is part of a larger process or narrative, such as the political or economic development of a nation.

Highlight where students have made justifications that fit with these criteria. Next, ask students to work in the same groups to answer two questions:

1. What part of Sir John A. Macdonald's life deserves commemoration?
2. What would the "ideal" Sir John A. Macdonald historical marker look like?

Groups then write down (or draw) their answers. Once the groups finish their work, they can share their ideas for a historical marker with the class. Again, point out where students' explanations make use of the criteria for historical significance outlined above.

When all of the groups have had a chance to share their ideas, explain to the students how a statue of Sir John A. Macdonald in Kingston was vandalized in 2013:

https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2013/01/11/sir_john_a_macdonald_statue_vandalized_in_kingston.html Ask students for their thoughts on why the statue was vandalized. Then share with them, if they did not bring it up in their initial brainstorming, that Macdonald has been harshly criticized in recent years for, among other things, his government's treatment of Indigenous communities.²

Ask the students to return to their small groups and discuss if this changes their position about commemorating John A. Macdonald or how they might commemorate him in a different way. Once

the students have had a chance to share their positions, they might read Christopher Pennington's article on Macdonald's legacy (<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/facing-sir-john-a-macdonalds-legacy/>). Stress that while Pennington's assessment of Macdonald is open to dispute, he does make use of an important historical thinking tool - historical perspective taking. This concept, which asks historians to take on the perspective of those living in the past when they try to explain events or individual actions, helps to encourage historians to be cautious in judging the actions of those from the past through the moral lens of the present. Conclude the discussion, by pointing out to students that Macdonald is a complicated historical figure. For some he is a hero, for others a criminal, and for many he is somewhere in between. The debate over Macdonald's legacy is likely to continue for many, many years. What is important for this lesson, however, is that John A. Macdonald's life highlights, rather strikingly, that history contains many different stories and we choose which ones are important enough to be remembered, or shared, and which ones become lost.

Lesson 2, Part 2 (140 Minutes or more, depending on the extent of research): What other Stories?

Overview: Students identify and articulate the historical narrative implicit in the Leprosy on Sheldrake Island video. Working in small groups, students conduct research (on the website and in supplementary materials provided) for evidence pertaining to one of four alternative or additional narratives that might have been told about leprosy in New Brunswick.

Begin by reminding students of the discussion about commemoration and the narrative nature of

² The Canadian Encyclopedia article on Sir John A. Macdonald

([http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/sir-](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/sir-john-alexander-macdonald/)

[john-alexander-macdonald/](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/sir-john-alexander-macdonald/)) may help with this discussion. See in particular the final section of the article which addresses his policy towards First Nations and the treatment of Chinese labourers during building of the CPR.

history from last class. The teacher can then point out that the Leprosy on Sheldrake Island video and commemorative display, while open to interpretation, were designed with a particular narrative in mind. Students can discuss, with a partner, what they think that narrative is (teachers may find it useful to re-watch the video with the class at this point). Once everyone has had a chance to share with their partner, discuss this as a class.

Next, explain to the class that they are going to work in small groups to find out more about other possible stories or narratives that could be told about Leprosy on Sheldrake Island. These are:

1. **The story of leprosy as communicated through folk beliefs.** Leprosy was not well understood in the nineteenth century, leading individuals to resort to theories grounded not in science, but in stories passed on from generation to generation. These theories often blamed the victims, who were stigmatized in the process. Reflect on how other diseases have been seen similarly in our own time.
2. **The story through the eyes of Acadians:** When people with leprosy were sent to Sheldrake Island, it had been less than a century since Acadians were deported from their homes in Atlantic Canada. There would have been people living in northeastern New Brunswick (where leprosy was a public health issue) who would have had grandparents that had been deported. How would this experience have influenced how Acadians were viewed and how they viewed their own experience with leprosy?
3. **The story as an example of public health:** Leprosy challenged authorities to contain a disease that they didn't really understand. How did they come to their conclusions regarding the actions to take? Were they more concerned with containment than with care?

Teachers should feel free to scaffold the research process in a way that fits the needs of their class. It is suggested, however, that students begin their research by making use of the **Leprosy in New Brunswick Background**, though teachers are encouraged to modify this material (e.g., break it into smaller chunks) to meet the needs of their class.

Lesson 2, Part 3 (70 Minutes): Selecting, Writing, and Delivering a Pitch

Overview: Once each group member has finished researching they should share their findings and then agree upon a “concept” or basic idea for a historical marker that tells the story they have researched. These “concepts” could take the form of written descriptions, oral descriptions, or may include student drawings (the exact requirements should be determined by the teacher and based upon the abilities and interests of the students). Once complete, these concepts will be shared with the whole class, with each group “pitching” their idea for a historical marker.

In order to help students with this task the teacher might co-create a rubric with the students for the evaluation of their pitches (**an example of such a rubric is available on the Lost Stories website: see the Historical Marker Criteria**).

Lesson 2, Part 4 (Time dependent upon number of groups): Sharing and Vote

Groups will present their concept and answer questions about it from the teacher and class. Each group member can play a role in the explanation. The class as a whole should then refer to the co-created rubric and provide feedback to the group. Teachers should structure this in a way that is suitable for their class (e.g., the feedback could be given by a whole class discussion or it could be written and anonymous).