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Touching the past: reading artefacts and the search for meaning

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For those of you who are unfamiliar with the Imperial War Museum (IWM), I would like to begin with a little background information. It has been said that we are unfortunate to have been saddled with three of the most unpopular words in the English language as our name. But we are not, as our name might suggest, concerned with the conquest of Britain's Empire. Our remit is the history of conflicts from 1914 to the present day. (So, rather than glorifying Britain's role in the world, the period with which the museum is concerned is one of Britain's decline as a great power.) In many ways the IWM is a social history museum in that it considers the impact of war on human society, on communities and on individuals. It was within that remit that the permanent Holocaust exhibition was opened in June 2000. I work on developing an education program to go alongside that exhibition. (1)

Using the Holocaust exhibition as a case study, I would like to talk about the ways that young people can work effectively within museums and what museums can bring to the learning process. When I meet with Key Stage 3, Key Stage 4 or sixth form groups before they enter the exhibition, I usually ask them why they think they have been brought to the museum when they can study the Holocaust very effectively within their classrooms. (Indeed, I think that the most important work goes on inside the classroom, not in the museum.) Hopefully the exhibition can enrich their study of this period but they should have been doing lots of pre-visit work, and hopefully will do lots of follow-up work, so why have they been brought out of school at all, probably for a whole day, and missing many other important subjects? The students will generally come to the conclusion that their reason for their trip lies in the type of evidence that they are going to see and the artefacts that they are going to be able to explore, which they do not have access to within the classroom. So I am going to talk to you about artefacts, and, in particular, the value of artefacts as evidence.

Sometimes it is hard to get young people to move beyond seeing written sources as just sources of information. Sometimes they will slip into a 'hunt for bias' mode, which can lead to scepticism and to cynicism. Artefacts do not entail the same kind of problem; I do not think that you look for bias in a trace of human activity in that way, so you can move beyond those sorts of questions quite quickly, and start really to use the artefacts as a historical source, as evidence of the past. What particularly interests me is the interplay between the evidence and the narrative. We often see these two aspects, narrative and historical sources, being separated out in a fairly artificial way and even placed in competition with one another. Yesterday [David Starkey](#) was advocating a purely narrative approach to history, calling upon history teachers to focus more on telling a gripping story of the past. [Sean Lang](#) defended an evidential approach but gave us some examples from examination papers of the ways in which sources are sometimes looked at in isolation, highlighting the artificiality of source work removed from historical context. It is my view that the debate that sets a narrative approach against a disciplinary approach to history is a false dichotomy. The two approaches should be reconciled, and museums can offer one of the most transparent ways of seeing the interplay between the evidence and the historical narrative. In this enriched learning environment, you are immersed in the narrative, and that narrative is driven forward by the evidence which is put on display. You move from display case to photographs to film to documents, and each individual piece of evidence is used to drive a part of the narrative. So there are clearly opportunities for us to work with young people to help them to see that neither historical narrative nor historical sources can really be meaningful in isolation. It is only when we construct a narrative out of the fragmentary evidence that we begin to make sense of history, and this process is driven by our search for meaning in the past.

In constructing a Holocaust exhibition we face particular challenges. Unlike most exhibitions, we are not displaying beautiful objects, cultural artefacts. That is not our function; we are telling a story of destruction. Our objects are the remnants of a process of destruction, and not only a destruction of people, of communities, but of a wholesale and deliberate destruction of the evidential record itself, as the perpetrators attempted to cover all trace of their crimes. So much of what we rely on in our display could appear to be fairly trivial or banal - piles of old shoes, a cheese grater, pots and pans, combs, umbrellas, just ordinary aspects of every day life. Viewed in isolation, they are wholly unremarkable. But, of course, it is the narrative and the historical context which give these objects meaning. These are objects which people brought with them to death camps. Why did people bring potato peelers to Auschwitz-Birkenau? It highlights both the ordinariness of the victims - a trace of their everyday lives - and also the process of deception that was going on in that it shows us something of what people believed awaited them in these camps - a life of sorts, however hard that life was likely to be. The objects themselves become immensely powerful, meaningful, and evocative once narrative and context have been established.

But how do we teach young people how to read objects, to reach conclusions and find meaning in the past? I have developed a schema (see figure 1) for students at Key Stages 3 and 4 and for sixth formers who come to the museum. Many of them have not visited museums before, so we try to give them some skills for working with objects and interpreting artefacts.



Fig.1 How do we 'read' historical artefacts?

There are broadly three levels of interpretation that go on as visitors walk through exhibitions. The first is quite straightforward: you have to know what it is that you are looking at. Potato peelers and shoes are obvious, but many other items on display will be unfamiliar, and visitors need to slow down and read the captions to find out what they are looking at. The second level is more important, and concerns the reasons why the object is where it is and what part of the

story it tells. Why has the museum chosen to conserve this object? Why is it displayed in this exhibition? Why is it positioned at this particular point in the exhibition and how does it move us on in our knowledge, in our understanding? How does it add to what we have already seen? Does it raise new questions and lead on to things that we have not yet come across within the exhibition narrative? These first two levels are what most people consider, at least on a conscious level, most of the time when they visit an exhibition. But I want to suggest to young people that there is more that we can do with these objects. There are deeper layers of meaning within the artefacts themselves, and these objects can stand for particular things. They may be iconic or they may ask new questions. They lead us to relate to the past in a different way to other forms of evidence.

To give an example, the exhibition displays an archival photograph of a pair of callipers that were used by race scientists in Nazi Germany and more broadly across the western world by those involved in eugenics. So it can tell one part of the story – that is, that callipers like these were used by race scientists. But there are deeper layers of meaning. Starting with an object like the callipers, we can talk about Nazi ideology, the race science itself. We can go further, though, and look at the objectification of human beings, the dehumanisation of human beings. Human beings were diminished by being turned into objects that could be measured and calculated. The essence of what it is to be human is seen in terms of the distance between the eyes, the shape of your skull or the size of your nose. This objectification of the human condition is something which may resonate with students. Or the callipers may draw forth the idea of the harnessing of science and technology to this project of destruction. Or students might see in the callipers the process of the rationalisation of hatred: how it was possible to hate in a ‘modern’ way, in the modern world, and the way that hatred changes its form and becomes almost justified by this apparently rational world view. These are examples of what students might find in just one object.

As students go through the exhibition, we ask them to choose three objects that are particularly meaningful to them. These objects form the focus of their discussions later. During the discussion session, we give them various tasks. To begin with, in small groups students share what they have found interesting or significant about their chosen objects. Then, still in their groups, they must then imagine that they are curating a travelling exhibition on the Holocaust that will move around the country, visiting town halls, schools, libraries and other public spaces, taking what they feel is significant about the history of the Holocaust to people in the wider community. From all the objects that each individual brings to the group, they have to choose just three for their exhibition. This involves collaboration, negotiation, compromise, explanation of ideas, the putting forward of reasoned arguments, a working out of what they feel is most important and meaningful in this history. A representative from each group writes the final three objects on a flip chart, and the whole class come back together to compare the different narratives that emerge from their different exhibitions.

I can give two examples from some students who did this activity a couple of weeks ago. One group chose the gas pellets (the tins of Zyklon-B which were used in the gas chambers); a sign saying ‘you are entering the showers’ which hung outside the gas chambers in Belzec, telling people, after undressing, to tie their shoelaces together and to remember the number on their clothes peg so that they could find their belongings more quickly when they returned from the showers; and finally a photograph of soldiers shooting Jewish people. In contrast, another group chose a book containing a poem written in the ghetto by a twelve-year-old Jewish girl for her Catholic friend; and a spoon which is the only evidence we have of a young girl – we do not even know her name – who was in hiding in Poland. One day she went out with her mother and did not come back; all that remains is this spoon. Their final object was a small cello carved from a stolen piece of Bakelite by a young woman in a labour camp for her friend there who had always dreamed of becoming a musician. The present was to remind her of her hopes and dreams from before the war and to give her some kind of comfort and hope for the future. It shows us something of the continued spiritual resistance within the camps, of the way that friendship supports people and how, even in the most degrading and dehumanising situations, people were prepared to take great risks. These two exhibitions are both valid interpretations of the Holocaust but from very different perspectives. One is concerned with the process of killing and chiefly, perhaps, with the perpetrators. The other centres on the response of the victims and how people coped in extraordinary circumstances. I want to argue that each object itself carries part of the story, that the broader historical narrative informs our understanding of these objects and gives them context, and that there is an interesting dialogue between the source and the narrative which helps us to discover meaning in the past, as we order the evidence and begin to construct our own interpretations.

To summarise, David Starkey’s clarion call for a narrative approach to history ignored the fact that there are many possible narratives. Narrative is constructed; it is dependent on the positionality of the historian, as well as the questions that are asked of the evidence. Narratives do not come ready-made as a set body of knowledge. Dr Starkey made much of the confidence that we should have in what we know of the past and nothing of the exciting journey we can take into how we know that past. History is the process by which we find and impose meaning on a meaningless past by organising, constructing and shaping the evidence that forms our narratives, reflecting our personal interests and preconceptions. Rather than handing down a grand narrative to our students, students should be given the opportunity to explore history as a form of knowledge, placing sources in historical context, constructing their own narratives from the evidence, and discovering their own meaning in the past.

Notes

1. The Holocaust education webpages contain information about the education programme and information about visiting the exhibition and the museum [<http://london.iwm.org.uk/server/show/nav.00b005001>, accessed 5 Sept. 2005]. [Back to \(1\)](#).