Looking through a Josephine-Butler-shaped window: focusing pupils' thinking on historical significance

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Christine Counsell draws upon her recent work in developing definitions and practice concerning pupils' thinking about historical significance.[1] Here she tries out those ideas in relation to the 19th century campaigner against the Contagious Diseases Acts, Josephine Butler. Counsell explains why she developed her own set of criteria for structuring pupils' thinking about historical significance and she encourages other history teachers to do likewise. She focuses chiefly upon one possible criterion that might inform judgements about historical significance – the extent to which an event, person or development is historically '*revealing*'.

Amongst the package of concepts, skills and understandings listed in the National Curriculum for History since 1995, we find a reference to historical significance.[2] Plenty of teachers, education researchers and textbook authors have addressed this but when these contributions are taken together, the overall picture is confused.[3] Some authors write about what different pupils *already* appear to think; others focus upon where they would like to take them. Some authors talk about significance as a type of historical thinking for pupils to engage in; others appear to be writing about which areas of content they think pupils should be studying, and ways of simply teaching pupils that this content *is* significant. To complete the confusing picture, as far as teachers in England and Wales are concerned, the National Curriculum Attainment Target ignores significance completely, whilst the National Curriculum 'Programme of Study' states its importance, giving it a Key Element all of its own.[4] No wonder explicit work with significance on departmental workschemes is patchy and debate about it muddled. As a professional history education community, this is a conceptual area where we have yet to find some common terms of reference.

It is also an area where we all have opportunity to contribute. Surely anyone with knowledge of the practice of history and experience of teaching can and ought to be able to theorise this for themselves? Surely, as professionals, we should look to the discipline of history, to other, related parts of the history curriculum and to our beliefs and values concerning what pupils *might* achieve? From these places, we can apply an historian's reason and a teacher's imagination to give the idea some meaning and start to see what activities and outcomes might look like in practice. Thinking about historical significance is everyone's business and it is every history teacher's right to contribute to the debate.

We want pupils to *think about it*

To start with, let us keep the focus on 'thinking about'. This immediately discounts a few red herrings and common distractions.

One red herring is the view that teaching historical significance is about teaching pupils the significance of a particular event (or person or situation) as though this were a matter of fixed consensus. 'They need to know why this event is so significant' I hear some history teachers say. Fine, such a view may well be defensible, and each of us selects content for study within the massive freedom of the National Curriculum and assorted specifications at GCSE and A Level on precisely that basis. But we should not confuse our own views, as teachers, about what is significant, with activities to secure *pupils'* reflection on the issue. This would suggest that the significance of an event is something uncontested, something about which we all agree. It also suggests that pupils just have to know why something is significant, rather than engage with the very idea of significance itself, which is surely the point of naming it as Key Element of the current NC. Its position there suggests that we treat it as a process of reasoning, something that is up for grabs, not a given condition.

Historical significance is not a property of the event itself. It is something that others ascribe to that event, development or situation. As far as the design of learning activities is concerned, this gives us a clearer sense of direction.

Getting beyond 'relevance to today'

A second red herring is easy appeal to 'relevance to today'. Whilst pupils' grasp of an event's supposed link with today might be a useful realisation, it does not necessarily take pupils closer to thinking about historical significance.

Of course, the history teacher constantly helps pupils to make sense of why studying the past matters and, of course, they will often use relevance of events to today or impact on our own lives and values. This is a good way 'in' to a topic or a useful way of reflecting on it afterwards. But we lay ourselves open to charges of presentism if our conception of *historical significance* is intrinsically or necessarily related to this. Relevance to today is just one possible consideration in a judgement about the significance of an event. It is one possible criterion that might lie behind someone else's judgement.

On its own, however, it would leave pupils with an incomplete picture of the idea of historical significance. It certainly does not explain why many events and developments are judged so significant that they live on in the history books, in scholarly debates, in TV history, in a theme park or in a heated, sensitive argument in a pub.

The nineteenth-century campaigner against the Contagious Diseases Acts, Josephine Butler, is a good example of this.[5] We could say that that we can interest children and teenagers in Josephine Butler because the issues at stake are eternally relevant. There is no shortage of opportunity to find a motivating resonance between Josephine Butler and modern issues. For example:

- Josephine Butler was wrestling with what she saw as unjust taboos attached to certain diseases. Given current debates about HIV and AIDS, for example, all over the world, this certainly has enduring resonance.
- Josephine Butler was an individual fighting for what she saw as a moral cause, in the face of prejudice, demoralising opposition and threats to her health and safety. Her courage, determination and vision make her an interesting model of a campaigner, in any age.

These are points of resonance or kick-off points a teacher might well use. But they do not provide a full explanation of why an event or person is *historically* 'significant'. Indeed they might be distractions. Such connection with the present is useful, intriguing and a great opportunity to motivate and engage pupils, but by itself it is not an adequate guide to the factors that have made people judge an event to be more or less significant.

Getting beyond consequences

A third distraction occurs when we fail to get beyond 'consequences' or 'results'. Plenty of consequences, short-term and long-term, attach to the First World War, the Russian Revolution, the Glorious Revolution, the emergence of the railways. These easily explain their significance. But the few, negligible short-term results that might attach to the Tolpuddle Martyrs, to the Children's Crusade, to the poetry of Walt Whitman or to the Jarrow March do not explain the significance of these phenomena.

One might reply that this is simply because, relatively speaking, these things are not so significant. But these things have still ended up in the history books, having been plucked out from thousands of other events and phenomena that collapsed into private worlds and never entered that public domain of history.

Why did these things end up discussed in public domains long after the event? That is the issue. This is what needs to be examined by pupils. Perhaps these things are iconic, perhaps they reveal things about their age, perhaps they have personal significance for particular groups, perhaps they had indirect results, perhaps subsequent interpretation changed things more than the event itself. Whatever the reason, the simple idea of results or consequences being an equivalent of historical significance will not do. If it can simply be reduced to consequences, we do not need the concept of historical significance at all.

Martin Hunt is clear about this: 'There is also a danger in what may be an apparent overlap with the "second order" concept of consequence. Greater understanding of historical significance is more likely to be achieved if there is a clear distinction between the two.'[6] Hunt argues that significance is a 'wider concept' than consequence – a kind of meta-concept. When pupils work on significance, they are really standing outside all the usual concepts and could be drawing upon any of them. Whether cause or change or consequence or diversity – any could be functional in a judgement about what is historically 'significant'.

Tim Lomas: linking historical significance and historical thinking

Of the teachers and theorists who have attempted to examine what the history teacher might try to achieve under the umbrella of historical significance, I have found Lomas the most theoretically consistent and practically realistic.[7] These are the thinking processes and understandings that he sees as central:

1. To understand that history operates on the basis that some events are more important than others.
2. To establish criteria for assessing the significance of events, people and issues in the past.
3. To understand that some events, which may have seemed significant at the time, were not, while the significance of other events is only recognised later.
4. To understand that different people will have different ideas about which people, events, changes and issues are significant.
5. To be able to understand why people may hold different ideas about what has been significant.
6. To understand that the significance of an event is determined by the nature of the historical enquiry.
7. To understand that relatively minor events can be highly significant (e.g. they have symbolic significance).

Anyone with knowledge of the practice of history and experience of teaching can theorise this for themselves.

This is a view of historical significance that is relative and contingent.

8. To be able to distinguish between the consequences of an event and its significance.
9. To understand that an event or change usually becomes significant because of its connection with other events.

This is a view of historical significance that is relative and contingent. Significance is shifting and problematic, rather than fixed. If this is our direction then pupils will need opportunity to see what influences judgements about significance and also to engage in such judgement themselves.

Towards objectives and activities

Lomas's list might identify the domain but it is still quite a mixture. Some points are understandings to be gradually constructed, some are straight pieces of knowledge that might be internalised simply after exposure to a modicum of material and some are modes of analysis we might ask pupils to employ. Activity, learning path and eventual learning outcome are not at all easy to separate out from that list.

It may not even be desirable to separate them out. Historical learning is not that tidy, and the interplay with knowledge and maturity is so tight that it would seem reductive to try to isolate some hierarchy of 'skill' to be achieved. What we can do, however, is identify types of thinking, in that domain, that we want to foster. What types of thinking – *thinking that pupils might not do naturally* – do we need to try to secure? What types of activities and teaching interventions might then foster that thinking, pushing pupils to challenge assumptions and to reflect on their own, former ideas?

What any history teacher needs to do – and I think each history teacher needs to do this for him/herself (my effort is merely one model) - is to think about the reflective and processing activities pupils will be engaged in.

Figure 1: Five 'R's for thinking about historical significance

Five 'R's for thinking about historical significance

Remarkable
(the event/development was remarked upon by people at the time and/or since)

Remembered
(the event/development was important at some stage in history within the collective memory of a group or groups)

Resonant
(people like to make analogies with it; it is possible to connect with experiences, beliefs or situations across time and space)

Resulting in change
(it had consequences for the future)

Revealing
(of some other aspect of the past)

Drawing upon Lomas's ideas I want to suggest four:

- applying **given** sets of criteria for judging historical significance;
- devising (and applying or testing) sets of criteria **of their own**;
- discerning **implicit** criteria in others' judgements about historical significance;
- using any of the above to challenge or support others' judgements about significance

Existing sets of criteria

If pupils are going to be enabled to tackle the second, third and fourth of those bullet points, it is likely that they will need plenty of the first, as models, to get them going. In textbooks, and in professional and academic literature, there are plenty of examples of sets of criteria that might be applied in a judgement about historical significance.

One such example is supplied by the late Robert Phillips.[8] Working on the First World War he generated a mnemonic for thinking about significance, using the word GREAT:

Groundbreaking
Remembered by all
Events that were far reaching
Affected the future
Terrifying

This is extremely useful. It is just the sort of model that pupils can understand, discuss and experiment with.

But Phillips' did not intend his criteria for universal application. He did not go so far as to suggest that pupils should test the model out by applying it to other events, nor that they should explore whether it matches others' reasons for attributing significance. Had he done so, I think we might have got a bit stuck. If we are to get at some of the other questions that Lomas presents, and especially if we are to get beyond 'consequences', then perhaps we need to put other kinds of exemplar criteria in front of pupils. Perhaps we need to go back to the drawing board and think through for ourselves what kinds of things cause people to attribute historical significance in the first place.

The G.R.E.A.T. model does not help us with why events like the Children's Crusade (or the Jarrow March or the Pilgrimage of Grace) or people like Josephine Butler or Mary Seacole found their way into the history books. Nor do they get us close to the many reasons why phenomena like the pyramids of Ancient Egypt have been judged historically significant. One might not expect all the criteria to apply equally across different events or phenomena, of course. But in the case of the Children's Crusade, none of them apply, except, possibly, at a far stretch, 'Groundbreaking'. It is hardly this, however, that has

made the Children's Crusade enter the history books. So why *has* it been judged historically significant?

If we are to explain why Josephine Butler ends up in a few works on the nineteenth century or if we are to make a case for her appearing more often, if we are to explain why people still single out the Children's Crusade and not the hundreds of other medieval processions in which children figured, if we are to comment upon the historical significance of the Egyptian pyramids, and, above all, if we are to give pupils richly transferable models to apply, test (and ultimately extend and critique) we need another set of working criteria.

Five 'R's

In the quest to find some more all-purpose criteria that might allow pupils to experiment with a model across a range of events and developments, I found myself striving to get closer to the meaning of the word '*historical*' in '*historical* significance'. If something is 'historically' significant, one might argue that it has helped us in some way with *carrying out* the practice of history, with making sense of other aspects of the past or with shining a light on another puzzle or question thrown up by the past. This accounts for the word 'revealing' in my own 'five Rs' model shown in Figure 1.

The five Rs is not perfect but it is a formula that a pupil could apply to the First World War, to the Children's Crusade, to Josephine Butler and to the pyramids of Ancient Egypt alike. Some 'R's are more relevant than others for each event or person, but as a collection it gives me a rich and widely transferable profile for talking about significance. It certainly includes an emphasis on consequences - directly in one 'R' and indirectly in some others - but it does not place consequences at the centre.

It is also, chiefly, a set of words to support pupils' thinking. Teachers could focus on just one of these words as part of a wider journey to develop pupils' thinking about historical significance. This is intended as a pedagogic model – a starting point for devising rigorous and purposeful activities *for pupils*, not as a pure philosophical statement about the nature of historical significance. It is also intended as a focus for furthering current history teacher debate.

Pupils need some examples to work with in the first place. My experience suggests that a narrow and tight focus upon specific criteria can be very profitable in unlocking pupils' critical thinking about those criteria and subsequent creativity about their own. The Cunning Plan in this edition attempts to do just that (see pages 34 and 35) by focusing upon one 'R' only, 'revealing', in the context of the life of Josephine Butler.

I will say something here about the two 'R's that are perhaps the most novel in the collection.

Remarkable

Many events or people in history were remarked upon by contemporaries in ways that point to unusual qualities, to contemporary concern and expectation, to personal response or to value judgements made at the time. Such remarks are in abundance, for example, on the Children's Crusade. Thirteenth-century chroniclers all over Europe were remarking upon it – some condemning it, some terrified by it, some rejoicing in it.[9] All were puzzled or amazed by it. Their remarks suggest that contemporaries noted the event as exceptional. In this sense they were *affected* by it. Likewise with a character like Josephine Butler, there is no shortage of contemporary comment. Many were provoked to love or loath her. And many have remarked since. The quotation by Margaret Forster in Figure 2 is an example of subsequent fascination in Josephine.

Margaret Forster may well be claiming too much here (I think she probably is). In another kind of historical activity, another type of exercise in historical thought, I might want pupils to critique Forster. But if I just have a criterion of 'remarkable' I can use this, in its own right, to assess an aspect of her significance. It neither muddles up significance with consequence nor limits it to value. Historical significance certainly includes these ideas but it also transcends them. We can simply say that Josephine Butler has been remarked upon, both then and now. Margaret Forster happens to be offering a value-laden comment on Josephine's significance but here we are asking pupils to note and to gather *the fact of Forster's remarking* as opposed to her substantive judgements.

This gives rise to all kinds of manageable and interesting activities for pupils. At the lowest level, pupils can simply search for 'remarks'. They can classify those remarks, in all kinds of ways. They can examine whether or not there has been a change in the amount or type

A narrow and tight focus upon specific criteria can be very profitable.

Figure 2: Remarking upon Josephine Butler

Remarks THEN

The Master of Balliol college remarks upon Josephine Butler:

'Mrs Butler takes an interest in a class of sinners whom she had better have left to themselves'

Remarks NOW

Margaret Forster remarks upon Josephine Butler:

'She succeeded. She made all women who heard her care about what happened to some women. She made most men who heard her ashamed of some of their sex. She made everybody examine the existing moral basis to society and, if she failed to make them totally reform it, she at least encouraged them to begin to think that they should do so.'

Source: Forster, M. (1986) *Significant Sisters: The Grassroots of Active Feminism 1839-1939*, Penguin Books.

Cunning Plan

Homework: Preparatory mini-research: pupils select, structure and organise some background material on 19th century women. This will make them ready to contextualise JB next lesson, and to cope with the prediction activities.

TIP: But DON'T reveal Josephine Butler's name yet!!

Lesson 2: 'FIND SOME PAIN KEENER THAN MY OWN'

2

Build pupils' interest in the story of Josephine Butler by starting with the devastating story of the death of her 5-year-old daughter, Eva. Use this to get pupils to *care* about what happens to JB, from the outset.

Prediction game. After telling the story, give pupils enough information about Josephine Butler's background, education, early concerns and interests to be able to *predict* what JB might do with the rest of her life. Present as mystery, giving groups snippets on cards and a few sources about JB's early life up as far as Eva's death.

For example:

- JB's concern to do something useful with her life.
- JB's unusual education and how it taught her to argue and question.
- How JB annoyed Oxford society and introduced distasteful topics at her husband's tea parties.
- JB's husband – liberal, tolerant, religious, educated, supportive. Not afraid to have a wife standing out against the crowd.
- JB's public concern for a young girl imprisoned for murdering her baby. The girl had been abandoned by the baby's father – a tutor at Balliol College.
- The reaction of the Master of Balliol College to her interference: 'Mrs Butler takes an interest in a class of sinners whom she had better left to themselves.'

Conclude lesson with the story of the Quaker woman who said to JB that she would only recover from her bereavement by losing her sorrow in other people's.

JB's reaction:

'I became possessed with an irresistible desire to go forth and find some pain keener than my own.'

Explain Contagious Diseases Acts. Pupils will instantly guess what JB's reaction to these would be. But leave what she actually DID as cliff-hanger for next lesson...

Lesson 4: SUCCESS

4

Compare ideas on reactions to JB. What do these tell us about attitudes at the time? Build up web on board of reactions and non-reactions. What are we learning about 19th society – going well beyond women's experiences – by looking at JB?

Prediction again: given all this opposition, will she succeed? Can she succeed on her own, or might she need other forces or changes to make it possible? If she doesn't succeed, does this make it all a waste of time? *If she doesn't succeed will she be historically insignificant?*

Conclude lesson by telling story of JB's final triumph. 20 April 1881, a week after her 55th birthday and 21 years after she began fighting, she went to the Ladies Gallery in the House of Commons to hear the outcome of the vote. At 1.30am when the voting figures were called, it was 182 to 110 in favour. She had won.

Lesson 5: THE JOSEPHINE-BUTLER-SHAPED WINDOW

5

Come in bearing empty window frames. Return to idea of 'revealing'. Ask pupils for initial ideas on what her story *reveals*.

In pairs, pupils make Josephine-Butler-shaped windows. Cardboard contraptions are fun, but consider ICT too (see figure 3). Make time for substantial discussion of windows. As we look through our story, as historians, what have we seen, and what further *historical* questions might it raise?

Homework : Pupils write a short article for an historical journal on how the extraordinary reveals the ordinary. Pupils make a case for Josephine Butler's historical significance by writing a few paragraphs for an historical journal showing what her *extraordinary* life and work reveals about *ordinary* 19th century social and cultural experiences and attitudes. Use the windows for ideas.

Pupils must conclude the article with some new historical questions to which the historical analysis of her life gives rise.

Christine Counsell,
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Cunning Plan

Cunning Plan on the fifth 'R'

What does studying Josephine Butler reveal about Britain in the nineteenth century?

This five-lesson sequence gradually builds overview understanding of aspects of 19th century social history through a depth study of the campaigner and reformer, Josephine Butler. Through the sequence, pupils build on earlier work on historical significance, first, by reviewing their understanding of the huge range of reasons why things get judged significant; and second, by focusing closely upon one, new, specific criterion: the extent to which an event or person might be judged historically *revealing*.

1 Lesson 1: Why does anything in history matter?

Choose random historical topics from earlier work in Years 7, 8 or 9. Ask pupils why they think these topics get studied in school, end up in history books, appear on TV or generally get talked about.
Why have they been judged *significant* enough for special attention?
Why have they been judged *significant* enough for historians to write about or for pupils to learn about?

With your help, pupils build up range of factors. Across lesson, move from individual, to pair to substantial whole-class discussion using whiteboard at end.

Pupils gradually realise there is a wide and often conflicting range of factors why people judge things significant. Help them to construct this understanding for themselves.

TIP: Keep the emphasis on why *people have judged* the event or topic significant, not why it *is* significant. This 'distancing' will help a great deal. Remember, significance is not a property of the thing itself.

Towards end of lesson, introduce enquiry question, but without revealing JB's name.
Explain carefully:

(i) This sequence of lessons will look at the life of a woman whom some might say was significant, and others might say was not.
(ii) We are going to look at just one possible criterion for significance, one we've never looked at before: the extent to which the study of this character's life and work is historically *revealing*.

Conclude lesson by sharing ideas on other characters in history who might fit this description. Introduce idea that sometimes an extraordinary person reveals ordinary things. This is one important thing that makes them *useful to the historian*. We can see *through* this one person to the lives, experiences and changes of many. Their extraordinary lives give us a fresh insights into more ordinary things and regular ways of life or attitudes.

3 Lesson 3: This isn't just about prostitutes

Tell story of JB, from the setting up of the Ladies Association to campaign for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts to the eve of the final success (but don't reveal that ending yet!).

Divide story into four or five sections. Punctuate its telling by asking pupils to decide, as the story unfolds, whether they think JB was working for:

- working-class women?
- all working class people?
- very poor women?
- prostitutes?
- upper-middle class men?
- all women?
- all men?

Their choices from this list will gradually expand as the story unfolds and as you share more and more of JB's own comments on what she *thought* she was doing. They can do this in pairs, every 7 or 8 minutes.

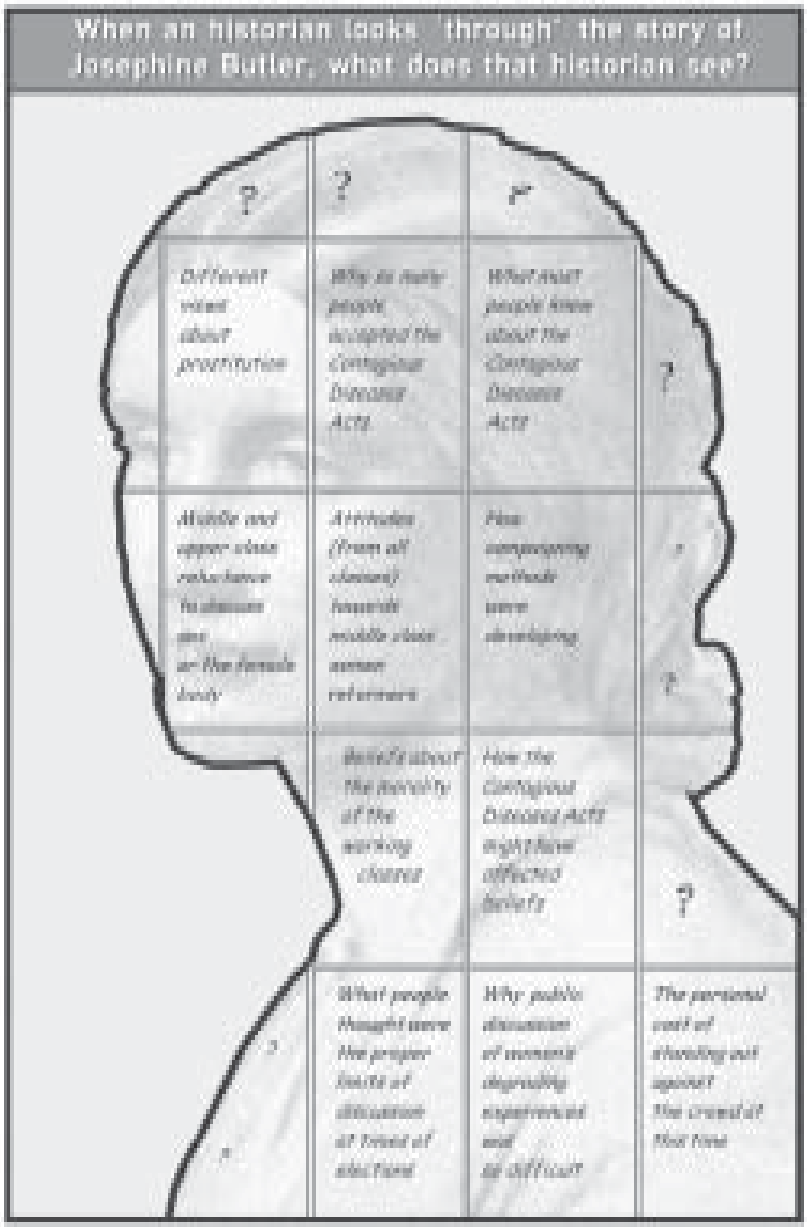
During the story, emphasise JB's campaigning methods and how unusual these were.

Homework: Pupils draw together their knowledge on how people *reacted* to JB during her campaign. This will have been raised in the story, but supply pupils with a fuller 'reaction sheet' so that they get a broader picture. Include, for example:

- The brothel-keepers of Pontefract tried to set fire to a hayloft that she was hiding in.
- Her letters and pamphlets were usually ignored.
- She gave evidence to a Royal Commission but the men on the commission treated her as though she were making a fuss about nothing.
- She went on speaking tours, travelling 3,700 miles and attending 99 meetings in the first year alone, but no action was taken by the government.

Pupils find words to summarise these reactions. What conclusions can they draw from these reactions? What do these reactions tell us?

Figure 3: Using a Josephine-Butler-shaped window to comment upon what her story reveals about the past



of remark over time. They can consider the sheer volume of 'remark' and what this might tell us.

Revealing

Historians try to find out what happened in the past. Thus a past event can become historically significant because of the light it sheds on *some other facet* of the past. I think this is a crucial way in which the Children's Crusade, for example, is significant. It is revealing. It suggests or tells us things about ordinary and hidden lives. The staggering fact of thousands of children leaving their homes to go on an impossible journey must be indicative all kinds of conditions and changes – material and spiritual – in lives and beliefs. It might suggest something about the nature of religious fervour, about the influence of popular preachers or, by inference, about economic and social changes that had made people particularly desperate or suddenly with less to lose. The *extra*ordinary can reveal the ordinary. Our topic becomes historically significant because it is revelatory. The idea that an event or development creeps into the history books because it is revealing, gives us a fuller concept of historical significance to work with.

It also gives rise to practical activities that allow pupils to focus in on this criterion – to use it, discuss it and ultimately to test the criterion itself. Elsewhere I have devised and trialled a range of activities in relation to the Children's Crusade, central among which is the idea of a Children's-Crusade-shaped window.[10] The historian gains historical value from looking at – or 'through' - the Children's Crusade, value that extends beyond the Crusade itself because it reveals other phenomena. Like a window, it *points* our gaze to those phenomena. It enables us to theorise about the possible causes of phenomena, thus suggesting new places to look. Until we have a theory, we cannot know where to look.

In figure 3, I have applied this idea to Josephine Butler, creating a finished window showing the sorts of things a really successful class might end up with in their window panes. The Cunning Plan on pages 34 and 35 outlines a possible enquiry leading up to the creation of such a window.

But we must try out all these ideas in our own heads first. So history teacher, when you look through *your* Josephine-Butler-shaped window, what can you see?

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