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Some Reflections on the Teaching of History in South African Schools

by C. T. GORDON

HISTORY-teaching today in South Africa is "news". It is virtually impossible to write an article, as I have been requested to do, on the attitude of the English-speaking community in South Africa to the teaching of history, without being controversial. However, I proceed on the (I hope not unwarranted) assumption that we are not living in a frozen Metternichian society, but in a developing one in which honest criticism and controversy are not only tolerated but welcome. Further, if I appear to stress the importance of "general" as against national history, it is not because I am unaware of the latter's vital importance; but because it is not national history that is in danger, and because our whole "western" outlook is incomprehensible except in the light of "general" history.

There have been too many warnings by visiting educational experts from overseas for us to pretend that there is nothing to criticise or deplore. English-speaking parents and teachers— and not only they — are seriously worried at the increasing trend towards narrow exclusiveness; and it would be a misinterpretation to construe silence as consent. The growing tendency in influential educational circles, to regard our own local history as the consummation of human history, and all other history as a mere background, to be studied in outline, and then only insofar as it throws light upon our own, constitutes a real threat to the educational standards of this country.

Do I exaggerate? Well, in the Transvaal, at any rate (which under any new centralised education policy is more likely than, shall we say, Natal or the Cape, to set the educational pattern of the future) our European child does not hear of anything, in either history or geography, beyond the confines of South Africa until he is eleven, and then it is only to burst into the unknown new world of the Central African Federation. This is the position in the new Social Studies syllabus for primary schools, which, from this year, takes the place of History and Geography. The syllabus has many undoubted excellences; but this narrowness of vision is not one of them.

Moreover, it is strongly rumoured that it is opposed in obscurantist, but influential, circles because it is too "liberal." If it falls away it will, presumably, be superseded by a revised history syllabus with a more complete emphasis on „vaderlandsgeskiedenis"; history which, as one influential speaker at a conference of history teachers in Johannesburg put it, was "objective but never neutral" and in which one "could clearly see the hand of God shaping the Volk in the history of our own land." The old Transvaal primary school history syllabus was described as "incomprehensible to our children" — chiefly because it started in Standard I with cavemen and the history of early civilisation, proceeded in Standard II to stories of Greek, Roman and feudal times, went on in Standard III to stories of the Renaissance and early voyages of discovery, and to the French Revolution in Standard IV. In Standard V the South African history which had been begun in Standards III and IV formed the exclusive subject of study. A strong plea was made for the abolition of this "incomprehensible" syllabus, and for its replacement by "history which the child can understand," stories of Wolraad Woltemade, Dirkie Uys, Piet Retief, Dick King — stories of heroes of the fatherland.

No doubt, to judge by results, similar pleas were being made by teachers of the same outlook against the "incomprehensible" Geography syllabus of the Transvaal primary schools, which — although concentrating basically on South African geography — began as early as Grade I with "stories of children of other lands"; dealt in Standards I and II with "the globe" and "stories of adventure by sea and land"; went on in Standard II to broaden geographical knowledge via a study of "current events all over the world"; in Standard IV included stories of the ways of life, trades and occupations of the peoples of South America and Asia; and in Standard V did the same for those of Australia, North America and Europe.

However, as I have indicated, the issue has been decided, and no thinking parent in the

Transvaal need fear today that his child's dawning intelligence will be burdened for the first eleven years of its life by an enforced knowledge of these outlandish places and peoples. By Standard I the child has progressed from the playground and the suburb to the home district; by Standard II he is still there; by Standard III he has got as far as the industries of the Transvaal; and by Standard IV he is dealing with the history and geography of the other provinces of the Union, and with the Rhodesias. In Standard V, at the age of twelve, after first dealing with the whole of Africa, he is at last allowed to hear of his European heritage; and in a rushed course, which the fictitious American tourist would envy, he plunges wildly into the geography and history of Britain, Western Europe, the United States and Canada. The comprehensive nature of the intellectual experiences which now befall him are indicated by the following quotations from the new syllabus for Standard V, which deals with Great Britain:—

"The birth of the machine age: Industrial Revolution; British settlers. Manufacture, 'Made in England', trade: Import of raw materials and export of finished products. London, Birmingham. Clyde. Shipping, air-lines, cables. Oxford, Cambridge, Elizabeth I, Francis Drake, Nelson, Wellington, Wilberforce, John Knox (Andrew Murray), Florence Nightingale, Caxton, Shakespeare, Dickens and others. Steam power (James Watt). Penicillin (Fleming); Jet engines (Frank Whittle). Houses of Parliament; Big Ben; democracy, the Commonwealth, the Welfare State. Cricket, Rugby."

Are matters any better in our High Schools, in which syllabuses have also been revised during the last three years? Nothing can be said against the new syllabus for Standards IX and X, which should leave pupils with a fairly sound knowledge of world and South African history from 1848 to modern times; but most English-speaking teachers feel very perturbed about the scanty treatment afforded to the vast and fascinating background from which our western civilisation is sprung. Mr. R. Hohmann, in an article published in the "Transvaal Journal of Secondary Education" (September 1958), made a series of pungent comments on the syllabus, then still tentative. Under a series of apt headings ("Scurrying briskly through the Centuries", "Perish all deviationists", and "The means defeat the end") he made a strong plea for flexibility, for the right of enthusiastic teachers to modify the syllabus according to the needs and interests of their own schools — a policy which, up to the introduction of the new syllabus, was being followed with great success in many English and Afrikaans schools. He quoted from the resolutions of the Sèvres Conference (1951) of teachers from 32 leading countries:—

"Children love detail, and this method (the 'patch method') enables them to get a real grasp of plentiful detail about the life of a human society at a particular age in the past . . . They soak themselves in a different age, and therefore gain something vital — a real understanding, in depth, of the way in which different ages differ from one another."

Mr. Hohmann stressed the need for a sound knowledge of national history, but pointed out that our present syllabuses are defeating their own object; for the main causes given by both Afrikaans- and English-speaking children for their dislike of South African history was just simple boredom—the constant repetition of the same themes in succeeding school years, and the inclusion of long stretches of South African history which are neither interesting nor significant. As an example of such a "stretch", he quoted topic 4 of the new syllabus, "Expansion and exploration up to 1700", which discusses, he says,

"(a) Jan Wintervogel, who penetrated 50 miles to the north and found only Bushmen, instead of what he was supposed to find, viz: meat and gold.

(b) Willem Muller, whose food supplies unfortunately ran out.

(c) Abraham Gabemma, who bought some livestock near the Groot Bergh River.

(d) Jan van Haarwaerden, who achieved the same commendable object in 1658."

"We then hear at equal length," he continues, "of the activities of Jan Danckaert, Pieter Cruythoff, van Meerhof, Jerome Croese, Gerrit Muys and Oloff Bergh. I do not recollect having heard of many of these gentlemen before; nor have I ever felt the lack. Looking at their achievements, it seems unlikely that our pupils will be particularly impressed. Their omission from the syllabus will not, I think, leave a serious gap in their cultural development."

It is now nearly two years later, and we may well ask what position we find ourselves in today. The answer can be given very shortly. The suggested High School Syllabus has now become the compulsory syllabus. South African history

is now done in its entirety, some of it twice over in the secondary course. World history from the earliest civilisations to the French Revolution, which, with all its depth, meaning and colour, formed the very stuff of life in the syllabuses followed in Standards VI to VIII in most English-speaking Transvaal High Schools, has become a pale shadow of its former self. Teachers are lucky if they can sketch it in even its barest outlines. The syllabus for Standard VI sweeps from "the cradle of Western Civilisation" to the 16th Century, before proceeding to "South African history 1652-1795" (which includes the topic quoted by Mr. Hohmann above). A teacher can spend, perhaps, up to half a dozen periods (i.e. a little over 3 teaching hours) on such topics as "The heritage of Greece and Rome to mankind" or "Main features of the Middle Ages" — topics on each of which many schools used, often with richly rewarding results, to spend a term or more. In two terms of Standard VII the teacher must now cover the Renaissance, the Reformation, the 80 Years' War, the rise of France and Russia or Prussia, the American War of Independence, and the Industrial Revolution in Britain — topics which previously occupied the major portion of both Standards VII and VIII (without South African history being unduly neglected.)

The text-books so far published for the junior forms of the high school, needless to say, follow the pattern now laid down. One of the best of them, now perforce used in English schools, deals with Greece in some 8 pages of print, and with Rome in 5½. So much for a thousand of the most glorious years of our history and heritage. The expansion of the Cape between 1657 and 1700 has 13 pages devoted to it. The Cape is being done for the second time; Greece and Rome — like the forgotten civilisations of the Indus and Ganges valleys — here receive their first and last cursory tribute.

What of Mr. Hohmann's plea for flexibility, and for some place for the teacher's own "infectious enthusiasm"? It was repeated again recently in a resolution of the Transvaal High School Teachers' Association Conference held in Pretoria during October 1959, but it was rejected with the words "The Department is not prepared to agree to this resolution."

I have concentrated on the situation of history in the schools of the Transvaal for two reasons, besides my own familiarity with the position: first, because a very large percentage of the European children of the Union receive their education in that province; and secondly because the Transvaal is economically and politically (as the Cape used to be) the pace-setter for South Africa. Is one being pessimistic in suspecting that, under a centralised national education policy, what the Transvaal does today South Africa will do tomorrow? Certainly many English-speaking parents, and many others concerned for wider values. suspect and fear that this will be so.

The picture is, perhaps, not quite so dark as I have painted it. There is much in the new Transvaal "Social Studies" syllabus for primary schools that is both liberal and humane. By the time a Transvaal child has matriculated, certainly, he or she will (particularly in Standards IX and X) have been given a fairly thorough picture of the main historical trends in the outside world of the last two hundred years. Even in our Standards VII to VIII an imaginative and inspired teacher who generously interprets his mandate can contrive (though "contrive" is the word) to deal. in something more than the skimpy fashion laid down by the syllabus, with many historical topics which intrigue and interest his class.

Furthermore, some other provinces still maintain a less rigid approach to history-teaching. The Cape primary syllabus (1959) includes in Standard III such topics as "Early Cave Man, the earliest civilisations, primitive transport, the Crusades, and voyages of discovery." Standard IV includes "Inventions and their influence on Man, the development of modern transport and communications, stories of the leaders of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and the building of Canada, Australia and New Zealand." In Standard V we have "The development of medicine over the last hundred years, nation-builders of the last hundred years (Lincoln, Bolivar, Cavour, Bismark, Lenin) and voyages of discovery in the last century." In each of these standards. moreover, the last topic invariably contains the blessed words, "Any other approved topic in general history." The Geography syllabus is equally broad, and starts as early as Standard III with stories and descriptions of people and ways of life in a wide variety of countries. Even more welcome, in the Cape history syllabus, is the insistence on the teacher's right to choose the topics suitable to the special needs of the school. On page 100 the syllabus specifically states (I quote in Afrikaans as I have only the Afrikaans version at my disposal):

„Kenmerk van die leerplan vir Geskiedenis is gevolglik dat dit besondere rekbaarheid toelaat."

In Natal, similarly, the Standard I syllabus includes stories of Leonidas, Horatio, Hannibal, Joan of Arc, Florence Nightingale, Grace Darling, Elizabeth Fry, Scott, Stanley, Livingstone and Stephenson. Standard II includes stories of how men lived in ancient times; Standard III the rise of Christianity, stories of the Middle Ages and of the voyages of discovery; and Standard IV the story of the struggle between the British and French in India. Standard V concentrates exclusively on South African history; and Standard VI (the final primary school standard in Natal) deals, in outline, with the development of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and India, goes on to "important figures in the Elizabethan era, the Napoleonic era, and in Polar exploration", and concludes with a survey of the achievements of the great discoverers in industry, technology and medicine. Neither the Cape nor Natal, incidentally, neglects South African history.

The Natal J.C. syllabus for Social Studies which comes into effect this year, to be done in Standards VII and VIII, and is designed for pupils leaving school at 16, is most liberally and imaginatively drawn up. Space, alas, precludes detailed quotation; but perhaps some indication of its quality can be gathered from a summary of Topic 1 of "History" (the suggested number of periods is indicated in brackets.)

"1. ANCIENT PERIOD:

(a) (i) *Story of writing* (2)

(ii) *Architecture and engineering*— Greek and Roman Temples, baths, amphitheatres, basilicas, aqueducts, bridges, roads. (6)

(iii) *Agriculture and industry* — Techniques, implements, irrigation etc. as practised in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome of the 1st and 2nd Centuries A.D. (6)

(iv) *Transport*—The wheel, chariot, horse. Ships of the ancient Mediterranean. Oar and sail. (3)

(v) *Weapons and warfare* — Primitive weapons of war and hunting, bow, spear and armour, the Macedonian phalanx, the Roman legion. (2)

(vi) *Religion* — Pagan religions of Egypt, Greece and Rome. Judaism. Moses, the prophets. The rise and spread of Christianity. (6)

(vii) *Government* — Democracy in Athens. Administration of the Roman Empire. Roman Law. (4)

(b) Representative historical figures (e.g. Pericles, Julius Caesar, St. Paul). (3)

Total of periods suggested 32."

The syllabus states, further, that, as the essential purpose of history teaching is to arouse interest and encourage reading, "the teacher may extend and add to these wherever the interest of the class may be stimulated by his doing so."

I venture to suggest that a pupil emerging from this deliberately technically-oriented course will have a more real understanding of the essence of our classical past than the Transvaal child from an "academic" high school who has scurried through his 4 to 6 periods of Greece and Rome. Similarly, I suggest that the primary school child who has been educated on the lines indicated in the Cape and Natal syllabuses will have a wider general knowledge and appreciation of our European past than those who for the first eleven years of their lives have never progressed. in school at any rate, beyond stories of Etienne Barbier, Hennie van Aswegen, Alexander Biggar, Bertha de Beer, Hendrik and Annatje Boom, Guilluame Chenut, Ferdinand van Gas, Japie Greyling, Thomas Halstead, Moroko, Jopie Fourie, Emily Hobhouse, Mampoer, Fred Struben, Tannie Oosthuizen, Chard and Bromhead, Barney Barnato, Dr. J W. B. Gunning, Sammy Marks, J. Z. de Villiers and Landdrost A. F. du Toit (to choose at random from the new Transvaal primary syllabus)—estimable as the achievements of these ladies and gentlemen no doubt were.

The question at issue is whether, under a centralised national education policy, the Cape and Natal will be allowed to retain their broad and enlightened outlook, or whether, as I have suggested, the Transvaal is setting the pattern of the future for the rest of South Africa.

A brief glance at the syllabuses of Australia and New Zealand, whose historical development has closely paralleled ours, will show that in both these countries children start world history at an early age (at six in Australia and seven in New Zealand). In Ontario, Canada, for example, a study of people famous in world history and of

the lives of people in other lands starts at the age of eight. By ten they are doing the age of discovery, and by eleven a survey of Latin America and of current world events. In all three countries, of course, a detailed study of British history from pre-Roman times to the present day is made.

In Quebec, which is predominantly French-speaking, the picture is rather different. The full position is not given in the Unesco summary of syllabuses from which I have drawn these details, beyond the statement that "the history of Canada is studied throughout the primary school", that at 13 the child proceeds to "a more detailed study of the French régime in Canada" and at 14 to "a detailed study of the British régime in Canada."

This, if it is a correct summary, exceeds in parochialism even the trends I have been deploring. But Quebec is well-known in Canada for its obscurantism, and is hardly to be held up as an educational example. The South African English-speaking child has the same right as the child in Ontario to be aware of, and proud of, his English and European traditions. Why should he be deprived of it? Quite apart from anything else, the whole of his literary heritage — the whole wealth of English poetry, drama, biography and novel-writing — becomes, without this historical background, incomprehensible to him.

The brief comparison of syllabuses which I have here made shows that in all other areas of the Commonwealth, as in the United Kingdom, and as in even the Transvaal up to this year, the child's imaginative curiosity about other lands, peoples and historical events was allowed a far wider — and a far more natural — range, than the comparatively narrow field of purely local history and geography can provide.

This has been the English-speaking tradition in history teaching; and it is one which has not been without its value for our Afrikaans-speaking compatriots, and for our non-White fellow South Africans. Is it to be lightly cast aside, together with so many other things the English gave to this country? I suggest we shall all lose something of inestimable value. Surely our European heritage is something to be sedulously preserved rather than deliberately diminished.

In John Gunther's "Inside Africa" (1955) there is a good deal that many South Africans would regard as controversial; but there is one paragraph about which few could disagree. It is this:—

"The Union may have grave and perplexing crises, but it is very important to make the point that it is a strong country, not weak. This is by far the richest and most advanced nation on the continent, utterly different from any we have seen in Africa so far. It is virile, energetic and ambitious. It has gold, diamonds, uranium, two-thirds of all the railway mileage on the continent, a thriving industrialisation, and great economic power. We have come a long way now, from, let us say, Tanganyika. This is Europe."

It is that last sentence that is the crux of the matter. For it is not only on the technological front that we draw our sustenance and strength from our links with our European motherlands; it is even more true on the spiritual side. All that is most truly alive, progressive, free-minded and forward-looking in our people — and this goes for us all, White, Black, Coloured and Indian — is drawn from the Western European tradition, liberal, Christian, humane and scientific. And that tradition can only be understood through its history. To cut ourselves off from that tradition, to minimise its importance instead of glorying in its sweep and greatness, is not patriotism, but spiritual suicide — a cutting off of our very roots. We need to be careful, I think, that some John Gunther does not find it necessary to say, in 2005 if not sooner, "This *was* Europe."

Of course, nothing, not all the syllabuses in the world, will prevent the primary school English-speaking (or English-reading) child who has any sort of intellectual curiosity and access to a library from reading about the heroes of Greece and Rome, about Knights and Crusades, about Marco Polo and Joan of Arc, Drake and Raleigh, the Cavaliers and Roundheads, Richelieu, Peter the Great and Frederick, about Clive and Wolfe, and about the French Revolution; nor, on the geographical plane, will he be held back from reading about the lives and countries of Eskimoes and Indians, Chinamen and Australians, Hollanders, Germans and Japanese. The skimpiest syllabus, similarly, will not prevent the thoughtful high-school boy or girl from becoming fascinated by the stories of Greece and Rome, and suspecting that the history of these civilisations contains more, perhaps, than is revealed in the dozen or so hurried pages which are allowed it by their text-book.

But this is to admit that the true education of our children is taking place outside our schools; that our schools, in fact, are insulating rather than educating our children. Is this what we really want?