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A plea for a more Vital Teaching of History

By

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"CULTURE is activity of thought", affirms Professor A. N. Whitehead in his essay, "The Aims of Education". When we think of school history, a so-called cultural subject, we may wonder whether history, as it is so frequently taught today, does promote activity of thought.

These doubts arise from the concept of history as a school subject and the teaching techniques used. There is indeed reason to fear for the future of history in our schools. History appears to be degenerating into a mere catalogue of events—wars, treaties, trivial details of constitutions and dates. History has become a series of exercises in memorising a mass of data. The recent announcement that twenty percent of the University Entrance examination and forty per cent of the Secondary School Certificate examination will consist of short factual questions is further proof of this tendency in our school history. Time is now to be wasted in imparting and absorbing mere quiz knowledge—snippets of information. Instead of a means to an end this exercise of the memory has become an end in itself. As Professor Keppel Jones once put it, if this is history, one may as well learn in sequence the names of all the railway stations between Cape Town and Johannesburg.

There is a widespread, but erroneous belief in "the value of a discipline based on the criterion of memorability".(1) The authors of *1066 and All That* with a sense of fun defined history as "all that we remember". Unfortunately there is so much truth in this that we are not amused.

Professor Whitehead in the essay referred to earlier has warned educators to beware of inert ideas: "Education with inert ideas is not only useless: it is, above all things, harmful". Again in stressing the unimportance of barren knowledge, he asserts, "The importance of knowledge lies in its use, in our active mastery of it".

Although in some countries the position has improved since the days of our grandparents, C. F. Strong, formerly Director of Education for Tottenham, avers that the criterion of memorability is not dead, and that facts learnt by rote and remembered in isolation are little more than "intellectual lumber".(2)

The accumulation of historical knowledge, declares Professor M. C. Jeffreys, Professor of Education in the University of Birmingham, should not be an end in itself: this is barren antiquarianism.(3) Most teachers of history have to face the fact that most of the factual knowledge, much of it of a trivial nature, when consumed by their pupils and regurgitated for examinations, fades in a remarkably short space of time. In spite of this teachers, through sheer force of habit perhaps, continue to cram their pupils in preparation for the external examination which demands this sort of knowledge. "Education would be healthier if children were expected to absorb less and allowed more opportunity for doing themselves justice in the recording and presentation of what they learn—that is to say, if children were to learn less and do more with what they learn."(4)

This approach to history in schools is a hopelessly inadequate preparation for our young people faced with many complex problems in this age of change. There is need to infuse more life and purpose into our teaching of history.

What is history? The different answers to this question over the last sixty years are a reflection of the change which have taken place in the world of historians and their concept of their subject. In the nineteenth century Leopold von Ranke declared his aim as historian was "simply to show how it really was" (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). History became a body of ascertained facts. Then Professor Bury, in an inaugural address, asserted,

"History is a science, no less and no more". The emphasis was on "the hard core of facts". This assertion Bury's critics declared "denuded the past of all meaning, and put a premium on the mechanical assembling of facts".(5) The nineteenth century fetishism of facts produced a growing mass of dry-as-dust factual histories. E. H. Carr in a series of lectures delivered in the University of Cambridge in 1961 expressed it rather well when he referred to these historians as men "knowing more and more about less and less, sunk without a trace in an ocean of facts".(6)

Lest the reader should conclude that these remarks imply that facts are unimportant in history, I hasten to add that it is an essential duty of the historian to be accurate in collecting his facts, but facts themselves do not constitute history. Certain basic facts form, as it were, the raw material of the historian, but these facts do not speak for themselves: the facts speak only when the historian calls on them: "it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context".(7) The historian's task is a dual one: the discovering of the few significant facts and turning them into the facts of history, and the discarding of the many insignificant facts as unhistorical.(8)

The facts of history have no meaning for us until the historian uses them. R. Collingwood, the Oxford philosopher and historian, in a volume published after his death(9) emphasised this point: history is concerned neither with "the past by itself" nor with the "historian's thought about it by itself", but with "the two things in their mutual relations". The historian should not be content with the simple discovery of past facts; he should aspire not only to say what happened, but to show why it happened. History is not just a plain record of past events but a significant record, an account in which events are connected together.

B. Croce, the celebrated Italian philosopher, once declared that all history is "contemporary history". By this he meant that history consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in the light of its problems, and that the main task of the historian is not to record facts but to evaluate. Carr has expressed this idea by saying that the facts of history can never exist in a "pure" form: "they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder".(10)

For many lovers of history this will be a disturbing thought. Will history therefore have an infinity of meanings? Must we agree with Froude when he said, history is a "child's box of letters with which we can spell any word we please"? The emphasis now being placed on the role of the historian in making history, that is when he interprets the facts, does not rule out all objectivity in history. Although no existing interpretation may be completely objective, the task of the historian is to approach as closely as possible to objective truth as is humanly possible. The good historian is one who sets this before him as his ultimate goal.

Sir George Clark in his introduction to the *New Cambridge Modern History*, published in 1957, stated that historians "consider that knowledge of the past has come down through one or more human minds, has been 'processed' by them, and therefore cannot consist of elemental and impersonal atoms which nothing can alter . . . The exploration seems endless, and some impatient scholars take refuge in scepticism, or at least in the doctrine that, since all historical judgments involve persons and points of view, one is as good as another and there is no 'objective' historical truth".(11)

Every historian is the "prisoner of his own age"(12) and cannot help expressing the ideals and the views of the group to which he belongs. Professor Keppel-Jones once referred to this as the slant directed by the state of the world at the time when the historian lives and writes. Every generation tends to have a different view of a period in history, because we view the past and achieve our understanding of the past only through the eyes of the present.(13) Indeed it has been said that there is a need for each age to rewrite its own history.

Carr sums up the situation by saying, 'Our examination of the relation of the historian to the facts of history finds us, therefore, in an apparently precarious situation, navigating between the Scylla of an untenable theory of history as an objective compilation of facts, of the unqualified primacy of fact over interpretation, and the Charybdis of an equally untenable theory of history as the subjective product of the mind of the historian who establishes the facts of history and masters them through the process of interpretation, between a view of history having the centre of gravity in the past and a view having the centre of gravity in the present".(14)

It is important that teachers of history should be conscious of this subjective element in historical writing, and that they should make the effort to reveal this characteristic of history to their pupils. The historian "mirrors the society" to which he belongs and therefore in studying and teaching history we should first consider the historian and the times in which he writes. It would certainly do no harm to make our senior pupils more critical of the varying interpretations of history. To provide the time for all this in a syllabus already

overloaded is the problem, but it can be done if we discard some of the lumber which clutters up most school syllabuses.

What is history? E. H. Carr gives the best definition for the purposes of this discussion: "The historian without his facts is rootless and futile; the facts without their historian are dead and meaningless. My first answer therefore to the question 'What is history?' is that it is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past".

Perhaps this answer to the question is too academic to be of value to school teachers, for school history is so different from history at the university level. Our main task as history teachers is to adapt this rather academic view of the subject for the immature minds of our pupils, but in this process of adaptation to the school level, a process which is certain to involve a simplification of the subject, we must attempt to preserve the essential nature of the subject and see that history does not lose its educational value. The question 'What is history?' is relevant to this account of the problems and principles involved in the teaching of history: the nature of the subject as we see it will exercise a determining effect on our teaching techniques and syllabuses; these in turn will indicate the value and purpose of the subject in education.

Professor W. H. Walsh of Edinburgh University has defined history as "the significant rather than the plain narrative of the past experience of human beings",(15) while Professor Jeffreys, the exponent of the approach to history called "lines of development", has called history, "the reasoned account of man's evolution on earth".(16) When we talk of human activity in the past we need to bear in mind the importance of understanding the motives of persons performing the actions. Collingwood explains this in simple terms by referring to all human actions as having an "inside" and an "outside" to them, the "outside" being capable of observation and the "inside" consisting of the motives and purposes which the actions express.(17)

What purpose should the study of history as a school subject serve? It has been said that anything of value in education must be of contemporary value.(18) Professor Barraclough has asserted that it is not enough to find out what actually happened in the past, for to find out what happened is only a step towards something more fundamental: we want to know what happened so that we can assess its meaning for us.(19)

There has been a significant change of outlook among leading historians on the function and purpose of their studies. Whereas in the past history was mainly a chronological account of political developments, especially in national history, with little reference to other places in the world, and with scarcely any mention of social and technical developments, today leading educationists believe that history in schools should be taught so as to give the subject social relevance, that is history must be related to the society in which we live; but this does not mean our own little country—it should be related to the larger world and the technological age in which we live. History must have relevance to the problems confronting us today, for if it is not taught in this way, it will have no meaning for our pupils. Arnold Toynbee's comparative study of civilisations, although treated scathingly by many historians, is at least an attempt to discover behind the events of history "the drift, the motive forces and the pattern of civilisation". Men like Toynbee have tried to rescue history "from the admiring contemplation of its own navel".(20)

Marc Bloch puts it this way: "The scholar who has no inclination to observe the men, the things or events around him will perhaps deserve the title, as Pirenne put it, of a useful antiquarian. He would be wise to renounce all claims to that of a historian". Again he says, "Misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past. But a man may wear himself out just as fruitlessly in seeking to understand the past if he is totally ignorant of the present". Henri Pirenne once remarked to Marc Bloch, "If I were an antiquarian, I would have eyes only for old stuff, but I am an historian. Therefore I love life".(21)

We do not study the past only for any relevance it may have for the present; we should see a period of history in the light in which it appeared to contemporaries, and attempt to recapture the thoughts and feelings of the peoples of the past as they were at the time. Nevertheless this attitude to history is no reason for neglecting to make plain the bearing which some past developments may have on current affairs. We must guard against the study of all periods or phases of western civilisation in isolation, remembering that although most of our pupils are not potential historians, they are future citizens. It is the responsibility of the historian and teacher of history to relate his subject to contemporary life whenever it is possible. School history should contribute towards an intelligent, well-informed, critical judgment of the problems of modern society.

The study of the Reformation should give us a better understanding of the relationship of the Christian Churches towards one another today, the Industrial Revolution is invaluable for an

appreciation of the economic institutions of our time, the partition of Africa enables us to understand the background to the emergent states of Africa, and above all history must show how world power, as a result of the Second World War has come to be divided into "two vast orbits dominated respectively by the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; it must include in its social survey the history of science, technology and the arts; and finally it must consider the combined effect of these political and technical forces of the new age on the problem of peace and the survival of civilised society".(22)

Our own domestic history contains many significant episodes which when related to the contemporary scene will enable us to see our problems in true perspective. The early contacts of European frontiersmen with the Xhosa on the Cape eastern frontier, a section of history which has been an ordeal for many generations of schoolboys, could be taught with more meaning for pupils of this age. This struggle for land on the Cape frontier should be related to the expansion of the Boers to the interior where a further struggle for land followed on more distant frontiers. A broad survey of this theme will help us to understand the present position of the rural Bantu and the inequitable distribution of land which was the result of European penetration.

An explanation of the contacts between Europeans and Non-Europeans in the Cape Colony, accompanied by an analysis of the policies adopted to regulate the relationships between the race groups, not only in the Cape Colony but in the Republics, will have more significance for our future citizens if this whole subject in history is related to the problems of race relations in South Africa today.

The economic development of South Africa, which is often insufficiently emphasised in teaching, will mean so much more to our pupils if linked with the economic structure of the country today. This seems to be the obvious treatment of economic history, but unfortunately teachers, who are engrossed in examination drill, frequently fail to show the relevancy of their subject to present-day conditions. The discovery of minerals in this country and the increasing industrialisation should be related to the social and economic conditions of the Bantu people today.

The fluctuating fortunes of political groups in the period after 1910 is an absorbing and enlightening part of our history, especially if related to the contempory political scene.

Constitutional developments in the Cape Colony, especially the extension of the rights of self-government, which is so frequently taught in complete isolation from similar constitutional developments in other parts of the Empire, should be related to the concept embodied in the British Commonwealth of Nations in our own times.

"The past is intelligible to us only in the light of the present; and we can fully understand the present only in the light of the past. To enable man to understand the society of the past and to increase his mastery over the society of the present is the dual function of history".(23)

The study of the past in order to understand the present has not been unchallenged. Professor M. Oakeshott has dismissed the study of past events from the point of view of their practical effects upon us in the present as unhistorical because this approach to history lacks the detachment and objectivity which should characterise the truly scholarly approach to history. History, he claims, must be written "in detachment, not involvement, dispassionately, not as a partisan, objectively and disinterestedly".(27)

There is no doubt that the teaching of the practical past, especially our South African past, may lead teachers of history into many pitfalls: in the selection of periods of history for a school syllabus it may lead us to concentrate on those periods and events whose connection with the present day is most clear, and we will select from the past only that which we want to see; events may easily be torn from their proper context because of our desire to stress their connection with the present.

Another peril of such an attempt to link past and present is that we tend to expect too much of history: we seek in history the answers to our problems forgetting that there are many things which history cannot explain. We should not expect history to provide us with a guide for the conduct of present and future affairs.

It is also unhistorical to judge the past by the standards relevant to the present: past ages should be judged by their own standards—not ours.(25)

When we study the past as the key to the present there is also the danger that we may take a purely pragmatic view of the facts, that is, if in our concern to demonstrate the practical consequences of the past, we choose as the "criterion of a right interpretation its suitability to some present purpose".(26) Herein lies the source of much distortion in history.

This warning of all the pitfalls is enough to frighten the teacher of history away from any effort to seek in history its relevancy to the present.

It may be considered safer to teach the past as it actually was, completely cut off from our own times, and not the past specially selected and used for its practical value.

W. H. Burston, however, has reminded us that while detachment is a quality of the best historical writings, "to demand a completely detached attitude to the past is surely to invite not merely a *disinterested* attitude but an *uninterested* one as well".(27)

What is the history teacher to do in his efforts to convince his pupils that history is a useful subject in school where the curriculum contains many other subjects which offer a more direct preparation for earning a livelihood?

The best guide for a history teacher is given by Carr: "history should be taught to create 'an historically-minded generation', that is, 'one which looks back, not indeed for solutions which cannot be found in the past but for those critical insights which are necessary both to the understanding of its existing situation and to the realisation of the values it holds".(28)

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