

HISTORY IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL*

Introduction

Before one can start talking on history and the teaching of history, one must establish exactly what is meant by history. The word is derived from the original Greek word "Historia", which means literally "knowledge acquired through investigation". It embraces the thing investigated — that is the object or (the past) and the investigator — the subject.

The investigator or Historian narrates the thing investigated which is the past. The point to remember is that there is always a lapse of time between the incident and the narrative. An eye witness may write down his account of an event immediately after it has taken place or an historian may investigate and record it a hundred years later.

This narrative is not the incident nor the past, it is an account by a witness or the investigator of what happened. No one can revive the incident or cause it to be re-enacted in order that he may observe and describe it. What has been, belongs to the unremitting past.

If one witnessed an incident and died without recording one's memories, there will be no surviving witness to record the event for posterity. We cannot then have knowledge of it and narrate it. Yet the event actually happened and was a reality in the sight of God. In this sense, we may speak of history as a reality, independent of an observer. We can only have an indirect knowledge of history as a reality. Any event cannot be re-enacted. We are confronted by an event that cannot be repeated in reality. It is a past reality — something that happened once and is therefore unique and non-recurrent.

By studying documents or evidence supplied by witnesses of an event such as the Great Trek, for example, we learn indirectly of the happenings of the past. Documents are written records of people's experiences. They may be letters or other written records such as diaries. Because our minds function in the same way as those of our predecessors, and because we possess the human qualities of intellect, emotion and will, it is possible for us to form a conception of their circumstances and to understand their experiences or aspirations.

What they experienced is expressed or recorded in their documents and is understood by us. An historian therefore bases his narrative on documents. His account of events must not be an arbitrary one. We know that in the process of transmission much may have been added and that a witness or letter writer may, because of his human fallability, observe or report wrongly. The historian should therefore treat his material critically, that is, he should write a critical narrative of events.

If he were to give his imagination free play, he would no longer seek actuality or truth and his representation will be purely fictitious. He should collect all material he can possibly obtain and compare the docu-

Address delivered at a symposium on the teaching of history at Port Elizabeth, October 1966.

ments with one another. If he proposes to compile a true narrative, he should proceed scientifically. In this sense we talk of History as a Science.

History as a reality is the past as it was actually enacted before God, independent of the investigator. History as a Science is the critical narration of the past events treated by a historian.

When we present history to a pupil it is already at least 4th hand. Firstly, there is the actual happening as it happened before God alone. Secondly, the account of it given in the form of a document or account of a witness. Thirdly, the scientific narration as told by the historian who studied the documents and fourthly, the narrative as related by the teacher, after having familiarised himself with the scientific account.

Because we cannot observe and have knowledge of the incident in the way God can observe and know it and because the documents do not necessarily contain the whole truth, our findings are therefore incomplete. Great responsibility, therefore, of attempting to reach the truth and representing it as correctly as possible, rests on the shoulders of the teacher.

Responsibility of the Teacher

Since knowledge of the past which is conveyed to the pupils has to be correct, it is the responsibility of the teacher to study the scientific narrative and to transmit it faithfully. Accordingly, you can see that the post of a history teacher is a very responsible one indeed.

Now just what does history contain? As far as we are concerned, it is the Science of Man. It is the science dealing with human events in so far as they belong to the past. But how far in the past?

We only take it as far as the beginning of writing, when history became written. Prior to that we call it pre-history. Remember at this stage we are not dealing with an exact science such as you find in the laboratory. If you mix certain chemicals together, you will always get the same result. Science cannot repeat or reproduce any act that has taken place. Human events taking place happen once and cannot be repeated and are unique.

We take history then for a period of about 6,000 years — beyond that we call it pre-history. The world is many million upon million of years old and life has been on this earth for, some say, 800 million years and yet in History, we only go back 6,000 years.

There are other branches of history — archeology and so on which help to throw light on life as it was prior to written history.

Already we begin to see that the teacher of history has a very difficult task. First of all, one must study, one must correlate, one must know quite a few things outside of straight history. For example, the teacher of history must know firstly, the political implications, then the ideological classification of history.

This can split into Institutional, Economic and so on. The Natural Sciences play a great part. Geography is very closely related to history. Social history, Church history, Legal history, Military history, the History

of Literature, of Arts and Science, Philosophy, Religion, all play their part in history.

To be a successful history teacher therefore, you have to have a wider knowledge than the teacher of any other subject. You must know: your chronological facts — when the event happened. You must know your geography to be able to link up the geographical factors with the historical event. You must know about coins, you must know about handwriting and many other subjects. Above all you must be a linguist because all evidence is written evidence and it is not necessarily written in your own language. If it is written in your own language, it was often written at a different time when words had different meanings.

In the handling of documents, for example, in early Cape history, they are written in Dutch but on reading these documents in the original Dutch there are words which will stump you until you realise that they are not the Dutch words at all, but French. Similarly, reading in English, you will find that much change has taken place, especially if they are written by the ordinary man, the British Tommy for example. He can mutilate a language more than anybody else I know. Take for instance his use or pronunciation of the town Ypres, wellknown in World War I. He called it "Wipers". Or the French expression "it does not matter" — "*Cela ne faire rien*", he cheerfully pronounced "San fairy ann". To any one reading a document written by a Tommy using these expressions they will cause great deal of puzzlement unless one has studied the language angle very carefully.

In addition, one must be an artist. One must be able to draw, to illustrate, to show your class exactly what you mean. To these requirements of the history teacher must be added various other subjects. One must know health and hygiene — the early history of medicine plays an important part in our syllabus. One must know farming methods, one must know the ordinary sciences, the chemical and physical reactions which have been discovered, the inventions made and their effect on mankind. One must understand the various trends in politics, the policies of the various parties. Even mathematics comes into it. One must interpret the figures that one is given. One must be able to asses their accuracy and so on.

One must know meteorology: the effect of the weather on events at various stages in the course of history. In fact, there is very little a history teacher does not have to know.

From these few remarks it can be seen that a history teacher is a special teacher. Quite frankly, the history teacher is the best teacher.

Having praised the history teacher in very glowing terms — yet very true ones — there is another aspect one must consider very carefully. That is our presentation of the facts.

We are creatures of our environment. We are acted upon by the community around us. We are acted upon by home circumstances, by our inherent beliefs, by our religion, by political and other views. That is

where the danger comes. We are apt to interpret history instead of presenting it as a reality.

It is only by completely submerging ourselves that we are able to do this. Too many teachers use the history lesson as a soap box. They stand up and present a fact very dogmatically. This is white — that is black, good or bad and so do more harm than good.

At no stage should a historian pronounce judgement. He is unable to do so. He can only speak in light of his present day experiences. The child too, interprets what he hears in the light of what he understands, in the light of what goes on around him, of what he hears at home, what he has been taught in his Sunday School, what his Granny has told him. All these factors influence the child when he hears something from you as a teacher. Therefore he must hear things correctly from you. You have to put over to him exactly what happened, how it happened and why it happened.

This is the most difficult part. We have to take ourselves out of history altogether. It is the self-effacement which is so difficult. We cannot realise in the light of our present circumstances the attitude of the early Europeans, for example, to slavery. To us it is automatically wrong. To them it was an accepted fact. Think too, of the ghastly forms of capital punishment they had. They were an accepted fact in their day. I wonder how our forms of punishments and our institutions will be regarded a thousand years hence?

We must therefore never present the facts of the past in the light of the present day. That is an absolute crime and quite frankly, has led to more trouble in the world than anything else.

One only has to think of the last war, the position of Germany under the Nazi party where they glorified the nation and certain acts of the nation, forgetting everything else that went on in the world at the same time. They kept the young in ignorance of events outside Germany which did not co-incide with their ideology. They brought up a generation which went into a war which devastated Europe. This is a fairly recent example of the misuse of history teaching.

Everything that happens is history. Some of it may not seem important yet every event which happens is of interest to a historian. Take for example this meeting here today — this symposium of ours. The fact that it is taking place now will be history tomorrow and it will become more and more historical as time progresses. How will it be interpreted? There are several different ways as I see it at the moment. They may say it was a gathering of earnest teachers who desired to improve the teaching of their subject — desired to improve education in general. Or it could merely be passed off as some busibodies meeting to listen to one who loved the sound of his own voice. Alternatively, it could be said it was a meeting of a bunch of fanatics who were determined to overthrow the existing method or regime of education. No doubt

all of you can think of many more combinations and permutations of ways in which this symposium will be interpreted.

We are living through times which are the makings of history. The recent event in the House of Assembly, the assassination of our Prime Minister, is a salient point in the history of this country and yet the interpretation of that in the future is open very wide.

Going to the past, the interpretation of certain historical events is again on national or individual basis. Take 1815, the Battle of Waterloo. If you tell the average Englishman that the Battle of Waterloo was only won because Blücher arrived on the French flank with his forces, you are looked at askance. Most Englishmen think that this battle was fought by the British army alone without any allies. This is not propaganda, but merely bad history teaching.

The responsibility for the accumulation and collation of historical evidence rests primarily with the historian. This work is published in various books or in various other manners and then from these are taken the textbooks which are used in the schools to pass the facts on to the pupil. Too often the writer of the textbook is not a historian. If he were a historian, he would take the facts and present them as was done by the original investigator. Yet human nature being what it is and we being prey to various psychological factors, too often the facts are put into a textbook are an interpretation by the writer of the situation. Therefore we find the first fault creeping in.

The textbook is then used by the teacher to pass the facts on to the children. Too many teachers do just this. They work blindly from the textbook. What is there is what they teach. They do not investigate outside of that, they do no research, they do no further reading. You can now see how history can be distorted.

Remember, we are dealing with young minds. In the Primary School we can present a fact to a child and because it is given to them by the teacher, it is believed. That fact usually sticks in their minds for the rest of their lives. We can give them an incorrect answer and in 10 years time it will be almost impossible to eradicate that fact from their brain. This can be done without any ulterior motive on the part of the teacher at all.

Yet think how much more damaging it is when a teacher deliberately misinterprets the facts of history. He places before the child something which he feels is correct, or he feels would be to advantage to his particular creed or belief, or the future of his particular section. It is a grave responsibility on the teacher and too few realise it. To all of you it must be obvious that an unscrupulous interpretation of history can mould the future of a nation, can make or mar it.

These preliminary remarks are addressed to all teachers from the High as well as the Primary sections. History is not something which

can be taught from a textbook. It calls for research, investigation, hard work on the teacher's part.

Now let us see how history is tackled in the Primary School.

Primary School

In the lower school, that is from Sub. Std. A through to Std. II, children learn what is called Environment study. This is a non-examination subject and in it they start to learn about their surroundings beginning with their own home and what is found there; then the people they are likely to meet, those in authority over them at school and in their town, on to the homes of various lands as well as the homes of long ago; their responsibility for the conservation of nature; the observation of nature through their own experiences, through collecting various specimens for a Nature Table, and so on.

The child begins to have a concept of time. First, things are new or old but gradually the child becomes aware of time without learning dates but they are able to divide time into various eras. With this acquisition of knowledge of the past they also learn — or rather they begin to learn, their responsibilities as a citizen, starting with their duties at home and at school and their duties in the town.

In Std. III history begins as a formal subject. It is carried right through to Std. V. In the short space of an hour and a half a week for three years, the children go through the history of South Africa from the reasons leading up to the founding of the Refreshment Station at the Cape under Jan van Riebeeck right the way through to the formation of Union, covering the spread of Western Civilization, the Great Trek, the various immigrations such as the 1820's and German Settlers, the formation of the Republics of the Transvaal, the Free State and Natal, the various wars with the Bantu, the troubles between the British and the Republics culminating in the War of 1899 to 1902 and the subsequent recovery and formation of Union.

Section A, then, on South African History seems pretty full, but that is not all. In each year children have to cover a certain amount of Civics. In Std. III they learn about how they are governed in their immediate environment at home, at school and in the town. In Std. V they learn about the Municipal Council, Divisional Council, School Board, the Provincial Council and the way money is raised to finance the work of these authorities. In Std. V the children are taught about Parliament, how members are elected to the House of Assembly and to the Senate, how an Ordinance or a law is made. They learn about the Courts of Justice, right the way through from Justice of the Peace to the Supreme Court.

The three years work in Civics is to lead the child to realize that he or she is a citizen of South Africa.

Section B covers General History. They learn about the early civilizations of Egypt, Phoenicia, the Hebrews, the Greeks and the Romans, early transport, the rise of the Christian Church, the Crusades, inventions

which affected mankind such as writing, printing, gunpowder, spinning and weaving, further work in transport and communications, the development of the steam engine and the motorcar. They learn about the Reformation and the Counter Reformation, the emigration from Europe to the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. They learn about medical progress and the development of transport as we know it today, the modern motor car, electric light, radio, television, the aeroplane from early days through to the modern jets. In Std. V they are introduced to the nation builders of recent times, Lincoln, Bolivar, Cavour, Bismarck, Lenin and also the exploration in Africa of Mungo Park, Livingstone and Stanley and the exploration of the Polar regions by Perry, Scott, Amundson and Byrd. All this, Section A and B, has to be done in $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours a week for three years.

Time is very limited indeed. No wonder children dislike history when they have so much crammed into them in such a short space of time. When I say crammed, that is exactly how history is taught by far too many teachers. There is no time to attempt to make the subject interesting, lively, appealing to the children's imagination.

History made interesting

Remember, we are dealing with a young and enquiring mind, one which is ready to be interested in something new and everything that he learns about the past is new to him. It is something which he has not yet experienced. But that other people have experienced, and he finds that of great interest. What can we do to make the history lesson more interesting?

Obviously, the first thing is the teacher must know his or her history. The child, having no pre-conceived ideas, is likely to come out with some searching questions. He will want to know why something happened. He will want to know about what you are talking. He will want a description of things. He must have something on which his imagination can work to realise about what you are talking. This is a chance for an enterprising teacher to use the many teaching aids which are available or to use those which he can make himself.

It is here in the primary school that we can teach a child to work for himself. Unfortunately, too many teachers spoonfeed their classes and as a result pass on to the High School a pupil who is unable to work on his own. If one can instill the desire to carry out research, not in its true sense, but by way of going deeper into a subject, then the primary school will be assisting the high school. Not every child has the ability or desire to carry out investigation or research on his own but he should know how to do it — how to use the reference books in the library, how to find facts in magazines, newspapers, etc. and how to present them. In this way you will see how closely related to the language is the subject of history.

At once the question comes into your mind: "Have we the time to do this?" The answer: "No, not with every child." The syllabus is a very crowded one indeed. It is far too wide, far too detailed for children of primary age.

The facts that they learn from Std. III to Std. V are gone over again in the high school. I feel that it is the fact that history is made difficult for them in the primary school that stops a child taking history as a subject in the High School. By making it difficult, I mean we expect too much of them. We expect them to have an adult knowledge of history. We expect them to know when an event took place, why it took place, where it took place and so on. Yet we are dealing with young children. Is it fair to expect them to understand facts which most adults still do not appreciate?

I am not saying that they can never appreciate this but we have so much to do in so short a time that most of it is glossed over and literally becomes a blur or a jumble of facts in the child's mind. This sets up the adverse reaction to this subject when it comes to the High School. How can we overcome this?

Need we teach History?

What is the use of history in the Primary School? Should the subject not be left to the High School? Not all teachers realise the need for history nor do they realise that it is not divorced from any other subject. With it one can correlate every other subject in the Primary School syllabus — the languages, arithmetic, geography, nature study, hygiene and Scripture. History is part and parcel of the syllabus. It should become part and parcel of the child's school life. Through this subject he should learn of the past of his own people, of other people and the world. He should be proud of the part his people have played in the events of the world. Yet he should also begin to understand that other people have their own views and their own rights as much as he has his.

Do we succeed doing this under the present syllabus? We don't. We are merely presenting a subject containing far too much for the young child in such a way that we are setting up a resistance to the subject and are passing on a very real problem to our colleagues in the High School.

How can we improve history in the Primary School?

It is obvious that we have to make it interesting to the primary child. I don't mean that it should be play-play or anything like that. We must redraft the syllabus to ensure that when a pupil leaves the Primary School, he or she has an appreciation of chronology, that they understand time and what it was like in the past. It is not so important for them to know a string of dates linked with events of the past. That can come later and will come easily provided that the child has an idea of how people lived,

how they travelled, what they believed, etc. at various stages throughout man's existence on earth.

It is no good trying to hammer in a date which is a fixed point in history. The child is not yet ready for such fine definition.

When they start off at school, a thing is either new or old. Then gradually they get the conception of time. As they come through the primary level they begin to differentiate. Things have varying degrees of age. So the concept of time is formed in their minds.

As these concepts form so they should link them up with the life which went on at those various stages of which they have learnt. "Very old" which they now learn as "Ancient", they associate with the cavemen running around in skins, carrying clubs, learning about fire and so on. Then the next step is toward their own time. They come to the various civilizations, Rome, Greece etc. The next step forward is the one which interests all children, the Middle Ages. There seems to be a natural attraction for all children in knights in armour. Then they recognize our own type of civilization. It is amazing how the child most appreciates the ancient rather than the modern. We should bring them through history that way, starting from the very earliest of times up to the modern times.

We must take the starch out of the syllabus in the Primary School. The child should receive a broad outline of the history of the world, a firm foundation on which the High School can build. We must take the raw material and prepare it so that our colleagues can add the finishing touches and that fine polish which is the hallmark of a firstclass product. We must not handle the material in so hasty a way trying to do too much in too short a time, expecting a child to specialise before basic principles have been grasped and so pass on a flawed article.

With a broader syllabus, one that is more elastic and which commences in the sub-standards, we shall achieve this aim. Both the Primary and the Secondary areas will then bring a child to an understanding of history and give the pupil a feeling for the subject. This will stay with him for the rest of his life and will be of great advantage to all. We shall then be developing a child who is fully educated, one who is able to play his part in the future of this country, which is the true aim of education.

The syllabus should be such that the subject develops with the pupil. Each child goes through various stages in growing up and these correspond closely to the development of Man from a near animal to a cultured civilized being. At each stage we must present the appropriate period of history for his own stage of development. Thus we shall not be expecting the child to understand anything which is beyond his ken.

The syllabus should therefore begin in the sub-standards where they will deal with primitive men as a preparation for formal history later on. Then step by step, the children will advance into the subject on a general basis until they are ready for more specific topics. This should be about

Std. II, for here the child has settled down as a member of a community and will understand how the early civilizations worked.

From here on, the emphasis should be on Western civilization and its spread over various parts of the world. This gives the lead in to our own South African history. The pupil will see what has happened here against the background of the rest of the world and will have the correct perspective. Side by side with this will be the old Section B, the great inventions, discoveries etc. all falling into place and their influence on history becoming clear.

For the Primary School we should not make a fetish of dates. A few key dates sufficient to pinpoint the major events, with everything else falling into its correct period. This wide general knowledge of history will enable the high school to proceed with its more detailed studies of specific periods. The basic will be there and then their job will be that much easier.

Naturally, the present examination system will have to be altered, but any change in this as far as the Primary School is concerned will be welcomed. The whole field will be widened once we drop "short answers". The pupil will have a chance to show his understanding of the subject and not be penalised because he is one year out in a date. A more general question will benefit all children, yet still allow the bright pupils to shine.

Textbooks will have to be adapted, but as aids rather than volumes of facts. The text book should be an auxiliary in the classroom and not a bible. The teacher must teach and not just rely on an author to instruct his class.

This is the crux of the whole matter. Given good teachers who know their subjects and who realise that it is their job to educate the whole child, our system will work well. The more we put into our teaching, the better the results will be and the better citizens we shall turn out.

J. B.