

SOME ASPECTS OF THE TEACHING OF HISTORY IN HIGH SCHOOLS

Should History be a compulsory subject in High School in all standards up to Std. X? The ideal position would be for History to be an optional subject freely and willingly chosen by all pupils because, having enjoyed what has been described as a "spacious and leisurely" presentation in the lower standards, they have come to realise that a knowledge of history is valuable for the future citizen and indispensable for the cultured person. For has not History been described as man's memory, and a bulwark for civilization? "Not to know what happened before we were born," wrote Cicero more than two thousand years ago, "is to remain perpetually a child. For what is the worth of human life unless it is woven into the life of our ancestors by the records of history?"

All pupils in High Schools should study History up to Std. X as part of a sound general education on which to base their further specialised studies. Education as a cultural process is losing ground to vocational instruction with its single-minded pursuit of practical efficiency in teaching adolescents how to make a living rather than how to live, how to achieve the good life, how to be educated for citizenship responsibilities and the service of the nation.

The English Academy of Southern Africa has been studying the steps being taken by Universities to provide science and engineering students with a course in English as a means of communication. A course in History would be a protection against the increasing threat of "scientific barbarians". Former pupils I have met who have been studying science and engineering at South African and American Universities have told me how glad they were to have studied History at School because they had found that fellow students who had not studied History were ignorant of matters outside of their subject.

If all pupils in High Schools were compelled to study History, those whose main field of interest lay elsewhere should be provided with a special course included for its cultural value. These pupils may be described as a "captive audience" and their course should be of a fruitful and interesting nature and preferably a non-examination course.

Pupils no longer dislike History as cordially as they once did but it remains an unpopular subject for several reasons, chiefly owing to difficulties in the subject itself and partly owing to examinations which involve the reproduction of memorised facts. The aim of true education is not to fill up an empty vessel or apply a surface coating but to bring out qualities already inherent in pupils. Habits of thought and attitudes of mind are more important than the reproduction of certain pieces of knowledge. History may well be man's memory but the memorisation of facts is not the aim of History teaching! There are other methods of testing a pupil's knowledge and grasp of the subject matter. The two

year course tested by the Std. X examination also covers too large a field. A short period would provide a greater opportunity for the detailed study which pupils like and can undertake.

History should be a non-examination subject, as was Race Studies, for the "less-gifted" pupils in Stds. VI, VII and VIII. These pupils should be given a course based on their capacities and interests and designed to broaden their horizon. Pupils may learn with enjoyment many things about the past but the content of the course should be intelligible as well as interesting. It is not enough to aim merely at "interesting" pupils however much the teacher of the "less-gifted" pupils may be tempted to do just this. Much thought will have to be given to devise methods and plan a suitable course for these pupils.

The value of History teaching is the cultivation of an "historical sense" rather than the acquisition of factual knowledge. History teachers all hope that most of what they teach will be remembered but all factual knowledge consumed by the pupil is cheerfully eliminated from his system in a short space of time.

It is not necessary to discuss all the aims and methods of teaching History to those pupils who are true "scholars" because there are many stimulating books available such as that written recently by Professor Van Jaarsveld and Dr. Rademeyer. There must be as many methods of teaching History as there are teachers of History. Each teacher should try to devise effective and novel methods and an endless variety will probably produce better results than one fixed method.

Pupils suffer from a remoteness of time and place. My younger son, when we were discussing Napoleon at the dinner table, asked me: "But did you actually know Napoleon?" A "time line" or chart should be used to show the sweep of time and give depth to the Middle Ages and Ancient Times. It is also necessary to introduce pupils to the broad panorama of world history. Pupils must be given some understanding of the background of our History in Europe and of our increasing relationships with the rest of the world.

There are some who plead for the study of the lives of great men. Carlyle wrote: "Great men, taken up in any way, are profitable company. We cannot look, however, imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining something by him." History as the study of the great ones of the earth — their aspirations, thoughts and deeds — rouses the feelings and stirs the imagination of young pupils. Whether personages or incidents should be presented as models for the pupils' imitation is a contentious question. Should History have a value as a direct or only as an indirect teacher of morals?

Great use should be made of the pupils' own immediate historical background. History can interpret much of what comes within their

experience. Most families have some tangible link with the past. In the Koopmans de Wet Museum there is a painting of my wife's grandmother's grandmother. She was the wife of Admiral Blom of the Dutch East India Company. As a boy I was given a cutting from the Grahams-town Journal describing how my grandfather was mentioned in a Despatch by Sir George Cathcart for the part he played in the Frontier Wars against the Khosa. An ancient ruin, the site of a battle, a tradition or a custom will help to remind pupils that this world is the visible result of the activities of thousands of people in the past.

Pupils should be taught how to use contemporary sources. These add vividness and detail to their studies and help to explain "how we know". The use of sources has its difficulties but suitable source books, especially those which contain extracts of autobiographies, memoirs, reminiscences, letters and contemporary newspapers could be used to great advantage in teaching South African History. One of my lessons on the Voortrekkers was greatly enriched when one of the pupils produced a copy of "Uit die Voortrekkertyd", his grandfather's reminiscences about his father who had accompanied the Uys Trek. On another occasion a pupil told about his grandfather, Dr. Fuller, whose book "Louis Trigardt's Trek", was published by the Van Riebeeck Society. Historical novels can also serve a useful purpose and School Libraries are playing a valuable part in the teaching of History and are being used ever-increasingly by pupils doing projects and research work.

It is not surprising that some teachers of History are disillusioned by the magnitude of the task but those who are inspired justify History as a compulsory subject by continuing to strive to achieve such results as rousing the interest and effort of their pupils, stimulating self-activity and initiative, developing independent thought and judgment and fostering co-operation and good citizenship.

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