

**ADDRESS TO THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF SOUTH AFRICA
ON THE OCCASION OF ITS TENTH ANNIVERSARY, SATURDAY,
16TH OCTOBER, 1965, AT POTCHEFSTROOM**

I should like to thank you for your kind invitation to be here with you this morning on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Historical Society. And, it is my first duty to congratulate you on your "birthday" and to wish the Society all good wishes for its growth from strength to strength in the future. I am aware it was founded ten years ago in an effort to encourage the study of history, particularly in the schools, as it was feared that there was a waning interest in the subject at school level; over the years the Society has aimed at stimulating a live and vital interest in the subject and has hoped that this interest would encourage a greater number of pupils to follow it and to know more about the past and the traditions of this country of ours. It has issued its regular publications; these have been brought into the schools; and as a result it has succeeded in bringing many little-known facts and information about our past to the knowledge of the teachers of history in the schools. So, on this occasion of its tenth anniversary, the Association has every reason to be proud of what it has already achieved, and it is with pleasure that I felicitate you at this juncture. I feel it is an honour to say a few words to you on this occasion, despite the fact that I am fully conscious that there are many more and better qualified to do so.

The subject that has been proposed to me that I should talk about is "The Teaching of History". As you are fully aware, it is a vast subject and there have been many books written on it. It will not be possible in a short address either to cover every aspect of the teaching of history or to go deeply into the theory of history as a science. This being the case, I hope that you will forgive me if I confine my few remarks this morning to my own experience in the subject and to what I feel are the essentials in the teaching of the subject at school.

One might begin by asking: What is history? To answer this, we might possibly take our illustration from the growth of a child. A child is born into this world. From the moment of its birth, its conscious existence begins, and it is subjected to the influences of its environment and the people with whom it comes into contact. Whatever the influences of its environment are and the people with whom it comes into contact, whether good or bad, they will all play a vital part in the shaping of the character and outlook of the young child. As the child grows through the years, and its consciousness strengthens, the greater the variety of ideas that will impinge upon its mind and outlook, and this process will continue throughout its life. As it grows, the wider will its contacts be and the greater the influences — the influences of the community in which it lives, the country in which it lives, and the world in which it lives. The child is to a great extent a product of his environment, the situation into which he is born, and he is a product of these circumstances, even if during the

process of growing and developing, he rejects, of his own volition, many of the influences. One often hears that so-and-so is a "self-made man". This is a contradiction. No man is self-made, for he is always the product of his environment, his circumstances, and his contacts with others, all of which play an important part in his development and in the shaping of his personality.

So it is with history to my mind. Men and women are born into a certain period of time in history; they are born into a certain environment with its climate, temperature, physical features, food and a host of other characteristics, all of which are different in time and place and circumstances from those of other men and women. These influence them, but unless there is contact between the men and women of one race and the men and women of another race there will be no progress. It is contact between peoples that makes for progress, and this contact may be through trade, it may be through war, it may be through interchange of ideas, it may be in a host of other ways. In other words, just as the child grows up influenced by the circumstances of its environment and its contacts, in the same way a people grows up in its contacts with other peoples and as its environment changes. Like the growth of the child, the growth of mankind is also a *continuous* process. If we look back over the whole gamut of history, we find that it had roots in prehistoric society; influenced by its environment, this society developed along the banks of rivers, the Nile and the two rivers, Euphrates and Tigris; these communities had contact; civilisation grew and spread, chiefly westwards, through Greece to Rome, to Western Europe and to the Americas, and finally into the other continents. In recent times the West has again influenced the East, so much so that the East has been revitalised.

From what I have mentioned, it will be evident that mankind has been influenced by three things: (i) environment, (ii) contact, and (iii) continuity. To my mind, history then is the story, the explanation of and the interpretation of these factors in the growth of mankind; in other words, it is a constructive review of the past.

In trying to arrive at this constructive review we should be as objective as we can, in other words, seek only the truth. This will involve looking at the facts, selecting what is relevant, piecing the relevant facts into a pattern, until the full story is available. To the three things mentioned just now, we then add another — looking for causes. To illustrate this, I should like to quote an apt passage from Carr:

"Jones, returning from a party at which he has consumed more than his usual ration of alcohol, in a car whose brakes turn out to have been defective, at a blind corner where visibility is notoriously poor, knocks down and kills Robinson, who was crossing the road to buy cigarettes at the shop on the corner. After the mess has been cleared up, we meet — occurrence. Was it due to the driver's semi-intoxicated condition — in which case there might be criminal prosecution? Or was it due to the say, at the local police headquarters — to enquire into the causes of the

defective brakes — in which case something might be said to the garage which overhauled the car only the week before? Or was it due to the blind corner — in which case the road authorities might be invited to give the matter their attention? While we are discussing these practical questions, two distinguished gentlemen — I shall not attempt to identify them — burst into the room and began to tell us, with great fluency and cogency, that, if Robinson had not happened to run out of cigarettes that evening, he would not have been crossing the road and would not have been killed; that Robinson's desire for cigarettes was therefore the cause of his death; and that any enquiry which neglects this cause will be a waste of time, and any conclusions drawn from it meaningless and futile. As soon as we can break into the flow of eloquence, we edge our two visitors gently but firmly towards the door, we instruct the janitor on no account to admit them again, and we get on with our enquiry. But what answer have we to the interrupters? Of course, Robinson was killed because he was a cigarette-smoker. Everything that the devotees of chance and contingency in history say is perfectly true and logical."

Although we may not agree with this approach to the selection of facts, I have merely quoted the passage in order to illustrate the need for enquiry and the search for all points of view, which to my mind is essential if we are to get at the truth in history.

And this brings me to the procedure in the classroom. A first essential is that the teacher should have a spirit of enquiry. He should be well read so that he can weigh and consider. The wider his background of reading on the work he is treating with his class, the richer his teaching will be and the sounder his judgment. He will be in a position to present all sides of a question, and he will fulfil his function in history — that of presenting as full a picture as possible and leaving the ultimate interpretation to the pupils under his charge. He will stimulate his charges to read further for themselves, so as to bring greater understanding. If he succeeds in getting his pupils to read further, both at school and after, he will have succeeded in his job. Something that much disturbs me is that both teacher and pupil are very often bound to one text-book in the study of history, and I cannot stress too much that I consider that history is in the nature of a "philosophy", in that matters should be weighed and considered from all points of view, before a final conclusion is come to — if this is possible in dealing with human nature. How often have I found that Socrates is a mere name to most pupils; what he stood for and what his methods were is a *tabula rasa* to most. How often does one come across in text-books the mention of, say, Machiavelli, but who has troubled to read his book, *The Prince*, which can be bought in a cheap edition and can be read in an hour? How often do we mention Marco Polo, but how many of us have bothered to read his travels as set down by himself? Examples of this kind one can multiply. On the other hand, have we paused to consider the words and the vocabulary we use in our lessons? We glibly refer to such things as the "Renaissance", the "Reformation",

“the vacillating policy on the Eastern Frontier” — to mention only a few — but do the pupils understand these terms? Words like “Protestant”, “federation”, “union” and a host of others have a specific connotation. Do we really ensure that the pupils know what we are talking about? Do we, in other words, ensure that they are acquiring the necessary *insight*? From my experience, I feel that often we are only using words; we may give the pupil a definition, e.g. the “Renaissance” is a “rebirth of learning”. What “learning”? Why was it necessary for it to be “reborn”? This, to my mind, requires a good deal of explanation, but it should follow as a natural process in the continuity of the history we are teaching. If we have laid the foundations well, step by step, as we progress through the syllabus, and ensure that the pupils are aware of the continuity of the history that we are teaching, then each step in the continuity should proceed as night follows day. History is the linking together of the chain of events into a continuous thread; if one link is weak, then the chain cannot be strong, and the history will be imperfect. Do we not try to cover too much ground in our syllabuses, with the injunction that some parts are to be treated in a cursory fashion? Surely we are missing the necessary *depth* when we realise that the history of mankind is a continuity, and that all events in the past have brought it to its present state?

“Understanding” or “insight” are the most important aspects in the teaching of history, I feel. How can we, for instance, understand the French Revolution unless we have a full understanding of the mediaeval system, the autocratic monarchy of Louis XIV and particularly of his successors, the influence of the Enlightened Despots, the American War of Independence, and the influence of British ideas of democracy upon men such as Voltaire and Montesquieu? Yet we omit much of this from our syllabuses, in other words, we are destroying the continuity of history. Carry these events further — for they influenced thoughts in this country of ours both at the time and later.

As a step further in bringing the “understanding” that I plead for, we should make far greater use of maps and sketch-maps in our teaching. How can we illustrate “the vacillating policy on the Eastern Frontier” which is always reiterated as a cause of the Great Trek in our text-books? To my mind, this can easily be demonstrated to pupils by a series of rough sketch-maps. By using the Socratic approach in one’s questioning, one can lead the pupils to deduce for themselves why this phrase is used. Further, what was the real root of the problem on the Eastern Frontier? This too can be deduced from sketch-maps. One could make the history of this period more alive by posing other questions, such as: “What solution would you have to the problem if you had been the Governor, bearing in mind that you had few troops and little money, the spending of which was not really in your hands for it had to be accounted for to the Government overseas?” Another question could be: “Why was it that the British Settlers, who were placed right next to the dangers on the

Eastern Frontier, did not trek from the Colony?" Turn to another period in our history, the Diamond Fields Dispute that is best illustrated from a sketch-map — but begin with present day knowledge, i.e. from the known to the unknown. Ask your pupils to draw you an outline map of South Africa, sketch in the Orange, Vaal and Harts rivers, sketch in the boundaries at present of the provinces of the Cape, Free State and Transvaal. I can assure you that you will receive a shock when you see their efforts! Ask them if the Cape and the Transvaal have a mutual boundary; ask them where Hopetown is. You will receive a ruder shock! Ask them what usually form boundaries between states or provinces. You may get a reply — mountains, rivers, or lines, or the sea — in other words, natural features — but is this so in the Free State? Why not? This will then lead you on to the discussion on the finding of diamonds and the subsequent disputes.

I mention these details in an effort to stress the necessity for (i) the constant use of maps and sketch-maps in the history lesson, (ii) the constant need for posing questions along the lines that Socrates suggested to us thousands of years ago, and (iii) drawing the pupils into co-operating in the lesson so that they will think and "understand". It also implies that the blackboard will be constantly in use, which to my mind is essential despite the cry of "talk and chalk". "Chalk" is as much an "aid" as the film, the film-strip, the picture, but somewhat less spectacular!

A well-stocked history library is essential to all history teaching, and the pupils should not only know what books are available, but should be encouraged to read them and use them for reference purposes.

And history is alive. Each new generation, looking back upon past events, comes to see a new viewpoint on what has happened; in the light of new research, new archaeological discoveries, and new interpretations of past events, our understanding of our past growth in civilisation grows richer. We need only cast our eyes around the bookshops to see the new books on historical events which we thought we knew all about. In the history of our own country there is a renewed interest; there has been a spate of interesting books issued of recent years. Is this not an indication of the renewed interest? Little-known facts, which were cursorily treated in the older text-books, have been investigated more fully with the use of letters and correspondence that have been hidden for many years, and memoirs that have come to light from out-of-the-way corners; these have been pieced together and a fuller story or picture has been gained. As the years go by, we are getting a fuller view of past affairs, and our perspective is being brought nearer the truth. To illustrate: our ideas of Lord Charles Somerset have been fixed by previous text-books; read the recent book on Somerset based upon correspondence recently released, and one's picture changes — for this correspondence throws us back into the times in which he lived and makes us understand more fully the age in which he lived and how people reacted to him at the time. We are now more fully able to project ourselves into the "history" of the times

when he was at the Cape. I could give more examples, but I indicate this one to stress that not only "history" itself is a continuous process, but that the "interpretation of history" is also a continuous process. One may pose the question: Do we ever get a true picture? We may not in our lifetime, but that does not preclude our trying to do so in the light of new findings.

And we should also remember that Terence once wrote: "*Homo sum — humani nihil a me alienum puto*". ("I am human being — I consider nothing relating to human affairs to be foreign to me"). I quote this to stress the point that history is in sources other than history books or encyclopaedias or authoritative reference books; it can be found in documents, books on heraldry, books on education, in poetry and literature, in illustrations of costumes, weapons and other evidences of the social and economic life of a people. The more one reads, either in reference works or historical novels, and the more one sees and observes, in museums, collections and monuments, the richer will the imprint be on our minds. And this is what we should strive for in our teaching of history in our classrooms — in order to keep the spirit of enquiry alive.

No teacher can give his pupils all there is to know on any particular facet of the work he is treating, but what he can do is to stimulate his pupils to want to know more. If he can succeed in getting his pupils to read widely — and this he can encourage by setting specific tasks which will require searches in reference works or elsewhere, and if he succeeds in getting his pupils to read history after they have left school, by creating that love in his teaching — then he will have succeeded in his task.

There are many other aspects upon which I might have touched this morning in talking on the teaching of history, but I have tried to emphasize a few. I conclude in the belief that we will have succeeded in our job if we instill into our history teaching the belief that we have *come from somewhere* and that it is closely linked with the belief that we *are going somewhere* and that history has a sense of direction. Our concern with progress in the past is the safest safeguard of our progress in the future, provided always that we aim in the fullest measure at getting at the truth in our search for an explanation and interpretation of the past.

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