

THE SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY FOR THE TRAINING OF HISTORY TEACHERS. NATIONAL CONGRESS 29-30 JANUARY 1988.

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This is very much a personal report on the Congress which was held at the University of Stellenbosch. Matieland, die Eikestad—it does not matter what you call it, Stellenbosch has a charm and appeal all of its own and the University campus must rate as one of the most beautiful in the world.

The Congress began in the beautiful sunshine of early morning in late January in the Western Cape—the sort of day that makes you think of grapes ripening on the vine. The opening address by Professor van der Ross, recently retired Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Western Cape, dealt with the role of History as a school subject in a multicultural society. Taking as his theme the idea that the pen is mightier than the sword Prof. van der Ross stressed the need to find a new focus in the teaching of History that would explore the links between history and political developments. This would mean a new history which could educate for social change towards a new society which South Africa needed to develop. He stressed the need for a broad perspective and the folly of trying to exchange one set of parameters for another which would be equally unsuitable for developing the new society he hoped to witness.

The opening address was followed, after tea, by a panel discussion on the relevancy of political literacy for schools. The panel was composed of Prof. Trümpelman of RAU, Prof. Stuart of UNISA, and Prof. Kotzé of Stellenbosch. These are all Afrikaner academics and their common ground is to great for a really effective panel. They all agreed that political literacy was not only desirable but necessary for effective pupil understanding of history, but differed as to how best to teach it. My overall reaction was of an opportunity missed—the discussion was too theoretical and lacked the spice of divergent concepts of political literacy and its values. If the panel had been more disparate, for example, a Xhosa, a Coloured, an Englishman and an Afrikaner we might have come closer to the problems of what political literacy is and how to teach it. Nevertheless I enjoyed listening to the panel and found the discussing interesting.

One of the disappointments of the Congress for me was the next address, the last of the plenary sessions. This was a talk by W.A. de Klerk entitled Literature and History. Changing at will from English to Afrikaans and back with quotations in French and German scattered in for good measure, I found the talk lacking in any cohesive argument and of little interest. I had expected to hear of the use of literature in the teaching of history, of the ways in which Dickens, Shakespeare and others reflected the society they lived in and commented on it. I got a hotch-potch of ideas and interpretations of which the most memorable is quite the worst reading of T.S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" I have ever been subjected to. This address did not live up to the standards of the rest of the Congress.

After lunch we were faced with choices of concurrent sessions. The problem of language arose—for until registration I had not had any intimation of which talks would be in which language. My original choices were somewhat changed at this stage while those of my ex-Zimbabwean companion were severely limited. Obviously I will only comment on the talks I attended, the first of which was Prof. Ray Tunmer of Rhodes University on research done by his students on pupils understanding of historical concepts. I was at once fascinated and alarmed. The disturbing lack of understanding of historical concepts such as dictatorship, political power and democracy is a frightening indictment of our teaching and of the lack of cultural background of many pupils in this area. The need

to look at historical concepts and to ensure that the pupils know and understand what we mean by them became a theme of the Congress. Prof. Tunmer certainly showed up a definite problem area in history teaching. Easy cures were not on offer.

After tea I chose to hear Mr Moodley of the University of Durban Westville on the subject of Questioning in History Teaching. This was good back to basics stuff—the sort of thing all teachers need to be reminded of every few years. Mr Moodley had some good ideas of how to stimulate interest in History through clever use of questions especially if related to given stimulus material. If he had nothing of earth shattering importance to impart, Mr Moodley did remind us of the basic questioning attitude that is essential to all good history teaching, and offered us some tips on how to cultivate this attitude and use it to further stimulate the pupil to question further on his/her own.

Friday's final session was a choice between a talk on the newspaper as a resource and "Concept teaching in the school subjects History and political education: a solution for the dilemma of history teaching." Was this really a choice? I plumped for the solution to the dilemma; I am not convinced that I was given the solution but found the talk interesting and stimulating. Prof. Stuart spoke rapidly and confidently of the way history teachers could overcome the problems of bias and prejudice by teaching concepts first. The idea is that the concept, e.g. nationalism, is taught to the class and that this is then used to filter the ideas of African nationalism, Afrikaner nationalism, etc so as to allow the pupil to understand the subject and its impact through the concept already taught. Obviously for some subjects the pupil must strain his material through a variety of these concept filters. Prof. Stuart did promise that the published version would be a fuller exposition of the theory than his talk, but even so I have some reservations about his theory. My reservations were not helped by having listened to Ray Tunmer earlier on the problems of pupil non-understanding of concepts. The talk was also highly theoretical and gave no indication of HOW one can teach concepts effectively in the abstract—as would presumably be necessary if it is to be a clear filter. I look forward to reading the fuller account at my leisure when the papers are published.

By this time the average delegate was looking, and probably feeling, rather shell-shocked so it was as well that the Congress adjourned to a Cheese and Wine Reception, courtesy of Maskew Miller Longman. The social side of the Congress was thus catered for by the fruits of the valley after which I am sure I was not the only one to enjoy an early night.

Saturday morning began with a brief retrospection before we split again into four sessions of talks (again concurrent sessions) before rejoining for the A.G.M. of the society. The first set of talks was a choice between Zimbabwean history and the utilisation of local history. I chose local history presented by Mr Joubert of the Wellington Training College. A lot of what he had to say was more relevant to the preparatory school level than to high school but he did have some good ideas although they were rather diffidently presented. Underlying his talk was the principle of getting the pupils to do the work by sending them out to research such local items as street names, suburban origins etc. On a practical level there could well be problems if close liaison between classes is not maintained. This can be difficult at the prep.-college jump but could only help to bridge that in a school with both. The ideas were good and certainly some use must be made of local history especially in the lower standards in order to stimulate an in-

terest in the subject.

I then chose to hear Mrs Moutlana of the HSRC Institute for Conflict Studies on the subject of a Revisionist History Curriculum. I expected a cry for people's history but heard instead a plea for a balanced curriculum which recognised both extremes of interpretation of South African history without being bound to either. The appeal, if it could be called that, was moderate but it was vague and woolly in terms of specifics which Mrs Moutlana would like to see incorporated. This was another example of the main flaw in the Congress as a whole, it was theoretical not practical. As one delegate commented to me during one of the talks, it would be nice if they had brought in a teacher and a class to demonstrate HOW to teach these things.

After tea, I chose to hear Prof Kapp and Carl of Stellenbosch on the trends and development patterns in history education in the Cape. It was an interesting analysis of pupil statistics but it did not offer any solution the the generally acknowledged trend of dropping numbers of pupils opting to study history. This was a problem often mentioned but for which no-one had any answers. It also has implications for teacher training and for the standards of political awareness throughout the population.

The final session which I attended was by Dr Jeff Mathew

of Edgewood College of Education on the subject of Empathy in the teaching of history. He not only stressed its importance for any real understanding of the subject, but also gave some tips on how one could go about teaching it. This was an aspect which so much of the literature on empathy in history glosses over, so it was refreshing to see it faced squarely and with some very interesting ideas at a practical level. It was, to me, a fitting end to the talks of the Congress.

The delegates then all joined once more in plenary session for the A.G.M. This was a good move for seldom have I seen an A.G.M. conducted with more speed and less argument. We were all tired and eager to go so re-elected the committee as it stood and agreed to give it a mandate to investigate changes to the constitution and name in order to reflect better the decision to allow teachers to join.

The Congress ended at lunch time on Saturday, most of us having attended ten sessions over a day and a half. For anyone that is tiring and for most of us made more tiring by being in different languages so only the most thoroughly bilingual were never conscious of the extra effort of concentration needed to follow the other official language at a technical level. It was an experience to be remembered for its academic stimulation and for the chance to renew old acquaintances and make new ones. All in all, a very successful Congress.