

SOME ASPECTS OF THE TEACHING OF HISTORY

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*Taken from **The Mentor**, Vol. 33, Nr. 7, October 1951. Many of the points brought forward by Prof. Brookes are still valid today and worth taking note of - EDITOR.

It is not without hesitation that anyone who has not been teaching history in the classroom undertakes to speak to teachers of history on how to teach it. My qualifications for speaking on the subject are -

- (a) the joy with which I learned history at school from two good teachers - one in primary school and one in high school - who made history live because they were interested in it;
- (b) the fact that I have written one contribution of some importance to South African history in my "History of Native Policy in South Africa";
- (c) the fact that I have taught history, although mainly to university or very senior school classes.

All these qualifications cannot make up for the lack of recent and regular classroom experience and therefore this address must consist rather of comments and suggestions than of any dogmatic statements on the subject.

In a Multi-racial Country.

In one respect I have had unusually wide experience in that I have taught English-speaking, Afrikaans-speaking and Bantu students. The teaching of history in a multi-racial country is not an easy task. I learned at an early date that the Boer War

must be described to Afrikaans-speaking students as "Die Engelse Oorlog" or "Die Vryheidsoorlog". I also faced the difficulty of talking to Bantu students about the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh "Kaffir Wars". I faced the fact that the Zulus regarded Shaka not as a sort of Nero, but as a kind of Zulu "William the Conqueror", the founder of the nation. Even though our teaching may be confined to one racial group it is a good thing to bring into it the breadth of understanding which such an experience must give. The unseen listeners to our history lessons should always be before us.

Why am I what I am?

I think that a very fruitful way of teaching history is to tell pupils that it is the answer to the question, "Why am I what I am?" I used this method very effectively with a senior training college class at Adams College. I began my first lesson by asking them to look at the textbook which they were using, a book printed in the Latin alphabet which, in its turn, was connected with the Greek and the Egyptian methods of writing. The pages were numbered with Arabic figures, and the printing was something which we owe to the Renaissance.

It was obvious that this was a very good beginning for a

syllabus which extended from the ancient civilisation to the present day. The fact that the Latin alphabet had been brought to the Zulus by English missionaries and earlier on had been brought to the heathen English by Roman missionaries was a telling point. The Reformation was made a much more living subject by being connected with the church affiliations of the students and of the missionary institutions of the students with which they were familiar.

Within the old framework of history, the framework in which European and Western civilisations are treated as the centre of things, I have found myself at variance with a good many textbooks and teachers, and in the greater stress which I have laid habitually on the later Roman Empire, an empire which is quite unfairly depreciated by H.G. Wells in his "Outline of History", and which many teachers seem to think perished with Nero. (Reference to A.J. Kamee - Justinian - and to "Archbishop H.G. Wells"). I have also felt that a large number of our textbooks unduly depreciate the Middle Ages, which should be given greater prominence.

The Scope.

But is the old framework sound? Are not the facts of the present day challenging it? It is much more important than it used to be to teach American history properly and the East can no longer be considered ancillary to Europe. The older civilisations, such as those of China and India, must be studied. If the present day child must answer the question, "Why am I what I am?", he must know much more of what lies west of Europe and east of Europe and the history behind it.

History is a study of great movements. It is also a study of great men. The younger the child the more refreshing would be the emphasis on the human factor, which is indeed a very important factor. Is there not considerable truth in the dictum of the old French philosopher, that if Cleopatra's nose had been half an inch longer the history of the world would have been different.

Shakespeare indeed has not underestimated the personal factor in history. "Anthony and Cleopatra" is on the whole good history and gives, in many ways, a very clear picture of the transition period between the death of Julius Caesar and the foundation of the Augustan Empire. Anyone who reads Lawrence Housman's plays is likely to form a better

impression of the Victorian era than he would from a stodgy textbook. History and literature should play into each other's hands in a school. Even books of historical gossip have their value in making history live. Our school libraries and access to other libraries are an important part of history teaching to both teacher and taught. In this connection it may be said that reading is a far better preparation for a history teacher than "reading up". Bacon says "Reading maketh a full man", and this is very true.

Should it be Taught at all?

We know that history can be an explosive subject in South Africa. We are treading on a surface which has once been lava, a surface which has not quite set and the heat underneath which can be felt by the feet. Least history should be abused, many people argue that South African history should not be taught. It will undoubtedly be abused in the future as it has been in the past, but to adopt the attitude of leaving it alone because it might be dangerous is a denial of life. Surely it is possible to use our imagination and be fair without having minds and hearts of a bloodless neutrality. Both sides can be put. The imagination can be used. A great deal of South African history, like other history, resembles Greek tragedy in that often both sides were right.

Even in schools and, of course, much more in universities, something should be done about the use of source. Some preliminary work should be done in school work from sources and estimating their value can be as interesting as a good detective story. There is room for the writing of a book on this subject with illustrative quotations for use in the upper classes of schools.

Even if it is not included in the syllabus, some local history should be brought into the teaching programme. The history, in other words, of the town or village in which the school is situated.

There is the question which is sure to be asked in plaintive tones, "How can I manage if I am not a history specialist?" I have a limited faith in specialists and specialisation. History is one of the subjects which an intelligent man can, to a large extent, make his own by proper reading and thought. No teacher should rest satisfied to make history a cramming of a list of dates of dictation of notes from an uninspired or uninspiring textbook. Better things than these can be done even by one who has not specialised.