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*The Foundations of the
History Syllabus*

Many arguments have been advanced to justify the inclusion of history in the school curriculum, but ultimately all of them stem from the claim that the study of the past contributes to a better understanding of the present. This claim can be substantiated on purely practical as well as general cultural grounds.

There is, first of all, the utilitarian motive which springs from the recognition that the structure of our present-day society and the issues that confront it have their origins in the past. The better our knowledge of these origins is, the better equipped we are, it is argued, to discharge the responsibilities to which we are committed as members of that society.

At the same time, the above claim applies equally to those people who wish for no more than that delving into the past should satisfy their curiosity and give them pleasure. Even if they cannot be shown to derive any immediate and tangible benefits from doing so, the imaginative experience involved cannot but enrich their minds. It may be said that one who has passed through such an experience and in the course of it acquired a general background knowledge, is better placed to understand the times in which he lives than one who has not.

History, let it be remembered, is concerned with the present as much as with the past, and any dichotomy between them is false since there is a continuous process of the one merging into the other. Hence, there is general agreement that this process presents a worthwhile and indeed

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necessary subject for study and that it should form an integral part of everyone's education.

But as soon as it is realized what this study entails difficulties set in. For if history is the story of the development of the present-day world, it is the story of human endeavour, of political institutions, international relations, social conditions, scientific progress, etc. History is all that, and much more. What chance is there of doing justice to such a range, even if it were possible to devote a whole lifetime to it?

It is at this point that we come face to face with the problem of selection. We cannot regard all facts relating to the past as being of equal importance, but must select those which are of more significance than others. Here the word 'significance' is used in a subjective sense, as it applies to us living in the second half of the twentieth century.

We use our judgment in the light of such knowledge as we possess, and we interpret our knowledge in the light of current attitudes and concepts, which means that we must be prepared to see the next generation of students of history arriving at different conclusions. The transient nature of what is historically significant can be illustrated by the following example.

At a time when one after the other of Britain's former colonies is reaching the goal of independence, there is of necessity much preoccupation with the reorientation of the British Empire and Commonwealth and hence a renewed interest in its evolution. It is not unreasonable to suppose that when the old ties with the mother country have been severed, the present interest will lessen and that Imperialism, much maligned today, will be regarded in retrospect as a necessary and even beneficial stage on the road to national maturity. By then the focus of attention will be on other problems relating to the contemporary world, with a corresponding adjustment as to what aspects of the past receive closer consideration.

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Having experienced so many changes in our own lifetime, we can never be sure that by the time the children of today have become the adults of tomorrow, the issues will still be as topical and relevant as they are at this moment. What we may be sure of is that at every stage the quest for historical information will be affected, however imperceptibly, by the preoccupations of the time in question.

So far history has been mentioned only in terms of studying it, as distinct from teaching it. The teaching aspect introduces further complications, in that those in charge of the subject have to exercise their judgment not for themselves but on behalf of others; these are not adults like themselves, but children; and the time at their disposal is extremely limited. In quantitative terms alone, what boys and girls come into contact with while they are at school can only be a part, a very minute part, of the story of man. The task of selection is thus made harder, and it becomes evident that factors other than historical values are at stake.

Indeed, the question of what material should go into the syllabus and the grounds on which it is selected cannot be answered in terms of the subject alone. Consideration must be given to a number of criteria, and it is the purpose of the following pages to discuss what these are.

At the outset, one general observation may not be amiss: care should be taken at all times to ensure factual accuracy and to treat with caution any of the romanticized stories which are sometimes passed off as history. This is not to belittle the value of good historical fiction which has done much to stimulate an interest in the subject. Fiction fulfils a supplementary function and can do this admirably. The point is that, no matter how good a story may be, if it does not record what actually happened, it does not belong to the category of history.

The first, and by far the most important factor against which to measure the matter to be selected, is the pupils

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we teach, their capacity and interest. It is always tempting to talk of 'the child' as if he were a specimen capable of being scientifically examined and labelled. No such child exists, and what a teacher has to remember throughout is that he is dealing with individual children.

It is also easy to exaggerate differences in interest as related to age and mental ability. What little evidence there is goes to show that these interests differ in degree rather than in kind. That is to say, at all stages children find it hard to muster an enthusiasm for constitutional (as distinct from political) issues, whilst the human and romantic elements retain their fascination throughout life, as is witnessed by the popularity of biographies and stories of war, travel and adventure. Nor are the responses of girls so markedly different from those of boys as one might be inclined to think. The observations which follow are, therefore, of a very general nature only.

From their infancy children show an absorbing interest in other people, and to identify themselves with them forms an essential part in the development of their character. Because of this human concern, the lessons will be focused initially on the lives and deeds of famous figures of the past. This ensures a ready response and provides a useful lead into an understanding of the age to which they made a contribution.

Whenever possible, these figures should be actual historical characters or, alternatively, representatives of their class or profession, as found in the *Canterbury Tales*. 'The People' is a generalization which amounts to an abstraction and carries little appeal. Also, and this need present no serious obstacle whilst the subject is not yet treated methodically, examples should be chosen from countries all over the world, lest the impression be gained that human achievement is the prerogative of any particular nation.

One major difficulty which bedevils the teacher at every turn is that all the characters on the historical stage belong

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to the world of adults. It is true that the nature of ambition, fear or loyalty can be appreciated from an early age, but the springs which motivate human action usually go deeper than that, and to grasp all the subtleties involved requires a more mature mind.

Is the answer, then, to subordinate events to conditions? Not altogether, for what fascinates a child is not so much how people live as what they do, even if he does not understand why they do it. There was a time when there was an over-emphasis on the latter, which gave rise to that masterpiece of historical satire *1066 And All That*, but it may be that the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite (that is 'social') direction.

Boys and girls have an almost unlimited capacity for exercising their imagination, which is easily fired by things however strange or remote. In fact, their lack of preconception often enables them to feel more at home in the past—pre-historical times in particular—than their more sophisticated elders. By stimulating the imaginative faculty, the range of their experience can be extended. Whenever possible, the attempt should be made to link imaginative experiences with experiences of everyday life and to follow up any clue which the local and social environment may offer for exploring the past. The importance of using the familiar as the point of departure cannot be overstressed. But to concentrate on it to the exclusion of everything else would be a mistake.

In the first place, the natural curiosity which children possess is far too great to confine itself to matters which are familiar to them. On the contrary, it is the unusual which often has the greater attraction. Besides, the range of their actual experience is still very limited, and the environment in which many of them are brought up offers little scope for enlarging it. It does not by any means follow that, just because something is close at hand, whether in space or in time, it thereby carries a greater appeal or is more easily understood.

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Irrespective of whether the information comes from near or far, there is more likelihood of its being meaningful to youngsters if they are allowed to handle it in some way; and once it has acquired meaning, the foundations are laid for the process of finding out for themselves. Although, at first, the story as told by the teacher or read in a book will quite properly occupy a prominent place, it is from an early age that children learn by expressing themselves. What is included in the syllabus should, therefore, also be chosen with an eye to any opportunities that may present themselves for inviting their active participation, be it through drawing, building or play-acting. For these, some material is obviously more suited than other. The course of the Hundred Years' War, for instance, can be expressed more easily in concrete or visible terms than the causes.

In general, the demands made on young pupils must not be too exacting, for their span of concentration is short and ability to perceive relationships not yet fully developed. It is best to regard the early years as a period of initiation with the object of kindling an interest, and not to attempt to teach the subject formally and in a systematic way.

It has already been remarked that, as we follow children through their development, no sudden transformations can be observed. But as they grow older their interest in, and comprehension of, the significance of cause and effect grow too, so that it becomes possible to take them behind the scenes, as it were, and show them not only what happened but why it happened. And whereas the emphasis has hitherto been on material things and the approach largely biographical or even anecdotal, there is a whole world of ideas beyond to which their minds can gradually be opened.

Now, too, is the time for more attention to the particular, when children not only ask all sorts of penetrating questions—which they have done from the beginning—but are not satisfied until the required details are supplied. The material

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must be such, therefore, that it can be explored in depth. It must be more advanced in other respects as well, because their heightened capacity for reasoned thought and mastery of expression enables them to rely more on their own efforts. At the same time, their abilities tend to run in more individual channels, which underlines the need for variety, so that each one of them may be stimulated to express his full potential.

Yet, whereas their faculty for projecting themselves into the world of yesterday remains undiminished, boys and girls are often less willing to exercise this faculty as they grow older. This is because, with their future careers ahead of them, the world around them begins to loom more largely in their minds, and what affects them directly has the greater impact. Whilst it does not mean that what went on before should be neglected in favour of what is happening at the moment, every effort must be made to establish the bonds which inextricably link the present with the past. The bonds are often anything but apparent, which makes the task all the harder.

It takes a long time before that degree of maturity is reached when young people can weigh up evidence for themselves and use their judgment independently and critically, and when the issues underlying historical situations begin to fall into place. Such things can be expected in the sixth form, aided by a more generous allowance in the time-table and smaller numbers in the class. Then, too, through making a comparative study of different writers handling the same raw material, they may learn something of the historian's craft. As for the power he wields, they may even agree with Samuel Butler that 'although God cannot alter the past, historians can; it is perhaps because they can be useful to Him in this respect that He tolerates their existence'¹

But in this connection a note of warning must be struck. It is as easy—and as mistaken—to keep adolescents on apron strings for too long, as it is to assume that they are

¹ *Erewhon Revisited*, Ch. 14.

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as much at home with abstractions as they were, in their younger days, with concrete material.

Apart from the pupils' age—mental rather than chronological—their level of intelligence must be taken into account. With less bright children, and this applies to all age-levels, it is imperative that a number of modifications are introduced into the scheme of work. The first, and most obvious, is to be wary of intricate questions such as are posed by constitutional or religious matters. This is because their comparative lack of imagination, reasoning power and ability to grasp relationships makes it harder for them to visualize something that cannot be directly observed.

Secondly, it is necessary to proceed at a slower working pace, the effect of which is that, unless the number of teaching periods is substantially increased, the amount of subject matter tackled is much less. It would be a waste of time, because psychologically unsound, to attempt to cover the same ground by treating it less thoroughly. It is all the more important that, as with young children, there should be scope for as detailed and concrete a treatment as possible.

Many issues have to be simplified, but there are limits to which one can go and it is often better to leave alone what cannot be readily explained. In fact, the axe of selection must be wielded in an even more ruthless manner with these children than with their more gifted fellows. A 'C' stream course which is a watered-down version of the 'A' stream course will never do.

Finally, it must not be forgotten that history has an emotional as well as intellectual content, and just as we cannot afford to ignore differences in ability, we cannot ignore the attitudes that are formed towards it. An initially positive attitude is quickly changed into a negative one if the material is inappropriate or, indeed, if suitable material is presented in an unimaginative way. Fortunately, the past provides such varied fare that even the most extravagant

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taste is capable of being satisfied. If this does not happen, it is not the fault of the subject.

This is not to say that the steps we take should be dictated by the children's whims, or their likes and dislikes. These are transitory and subject to environmental changes. It is, in truth, a weakness of the so-called child-centred approach in education that it is apt to take spontaneous reactions at their face value and is not sufficiently outward- and forward-looking.

From a discussion of children, we now turn to the person of the teacher, for it is he who, whatever pressures are brought to bear on him, is finally responsible for drawing up and administering the syllabus. The better his qualifications, the better are his prospects of successfully discharging his responsibilities, the term 'qualifications' here being used in the sense of being a blend of training, knowledge, enthusiasm and ability.

Thorough familiarity with the basic facts must be the ultimate object, and for that reason the trained specialist has, as in every other profession, a considerable advantage. The non-specialist, on the other hand, may be more sensitive to what is required—he does not fall so readily into the trap of taking for granted that what his pupils ought to know, and what he himself knows, are the same thing.

Any deficiency in factual knowledge can be made up in time. More important is a willingness to add to the knowledge and ability to utilize it. Everything that has been learnt at the training college or university, a young teacher finds, has to be re-appraised, and it takes many years of experience in the classroom before he can begin to feel confident that he is operating at a level which does justice to both the subject and the pupils.

Apart from qualifying in the above-mentioned sense, a teacher is always at his best at those things which fill him with a genuine enthusiasm. Such enthusiasm is infectious,

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and whether it be for medieval castles or modern railways, there is every prospect that, provided it is not a fad, it will transmit itself to his charges. What may at first seem like a by-way, may in fact be the gateway into the past. A teacher with a special interest in archaeology will no doubt make as much as he can of the opportunities the local environment may offer. For another, digging for prehistoric remains may have no appeal whatever, and it would be foolish of him to attempt any serious work in that direction.

Important, also, are differences in ability. One who possesses the gift of narration will choose his material with an eye to the impact he knows a well-told story makes on his young listeners. For another, dramatic representation may be the most natural and effective medium. An enthusiasm, however passionately felt, is of little avail unless it is matched by the ability to put it to good purpose. These two, enthusiasm and ability, do not necessarily go together, but when they do, they make an irresistible combination.

The discussion would not be complete without reference to certain external factors which have a bearing on the amount and nature of the material to be selected. For instance, the number of periods available in the time-table will impose limits on how much it is possible to achieve. Over the years, it makes quite a difference whether the allowance is two periods a week or three, and in a school which enjoys the more generous allocation it is reasonable to expect that more ground is covered.

Not only does this depend on the number of lessons per week, but on the length of the course at the post-primary stage. This may be anything from four years in some secondary modern schools to eight years in some grammar schools. Occasionally, history is not taken as a compulsory subject throughout, but is dropped during the last year or two. Again, allowance has to be made for the fact that there are two leaving dates for the fifteen-year olds (at Easter and in