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978-1-107-64455-7 - Essays on the Teaching of History

F. W. Maitland, H. M. Gwatkin, R. L. Poole, W. E. Heitland, W. Cunningham,

F. R. Tanner, W. H. Woodward, C. H. K. Marten, W. F. Ashley

Excerpt

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THE TEACHING OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY.

HE that will be a teacher of Ecclesiastical History must lay it to heart that there is neither art nor mystery in the matter beyond the art and mystery of teaching History in general. Ecclesiastical History is not an enchanted ground where the laws of evidence and common sense are left behind, and partizanship may run riot without blame. It is simply a department of General History like Political or Social or Economic History, and differs no more from these and others than they do from each other. Each of them leans on the rest, and in its turn throws light on others. The problems of one are often the answers of another. They all deal with the same mass of material, for there is meaning for them all in every single fact which has ever influenced the development of men in political or other societies : and they all deal with it in the same way, obtaining their facts by the same methods of research, and sifting them by the same principles of criticism. So far they are unreservedly alike ; for the power of life divine which works in Ecclesiastical History works equally in the rest, and works in all by natural laws. The difference is only that each has a different thread to disentangle from the great coil. Thus facts which are principal to one are often minor matters to another. Yet be it noted that it is never safe entirely to ignore the smallest fact, for History in all its length

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and all its breadth is one organic whole, and every single fact of the entire collection has a bearing of some sort on every other.

Our chief aims in the practical teaching of History are three—to rouse interest, to give the guiding facts, and to teach the principles of research and criticism which enable men not only to become their own teachers, but to return and see for themselves how far we rightly gave them the guiding facts. And these three aims are in their natural order. In the case of children, we seek chiefly to rouse their interest, though we give them the simpler guiding facts, and tell them in simple cases where we get them and how we sift them. Our teaching must look forward from the first, and lay foundations for the future. A little further on, the stress falls chiefly on the guiding facts, though neither of the other aims can be neglected. At a third stage, even the ripest of our scholars will thank us for keeping up their interest and giving them fresh guiding facts, though our chief endeavour will be to teach them the methods of criticism and research. The most advanced teaching must always lean on and look back to the elementary things; and these must always stand out clearly from the rest, and be emphasized so far as may be needed to prevent our scholars from losing themselves in a maze of detail.

The teacher must therefore keep all these three aims always more or less in view. The characteristic difference between elementary and advanced teaching is not in the amount of detail, but in the relative prominence of these different aims. Advanced teaching need not always be detailed teaching. It may very well be a mere summary of the teacher's own results, which the students are to test by working out the details for themselves under his general guidance. Just as the teacher who has not learned enough spoils his outline by his imperfect grasp of the details underlying it, so the teacher who has more learning than he can manage thinks it enough to pile up details without bringing out clearly the important points. The one

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mistake is about as bad as the other; and it is quite possible to commit both at once.

The two chief methods of teaching are by lectures and by papers. Each has its own advantages. Lectures are (or ought to be) fresher and more interesting, and the best means of opening out new ideas; while papers are better suited to follow them up (not at once, but after an interval) and to test and strengthen the student's grasp of his work. Thus (as we shall see more fully later on) the two methods call for somewhat different faculties in the teacher, so that while both methods ought to be used, the individual teacher may fairly lean a little to that for which he feels best qualified. Within certain limits, the work he can do best is the best work he can do for his pupils.

The first thing to be done in lecturing is to get a clear plan for the lecture. This plan may vary greatly from lecture to lecture; but it should always be carefully chosen. It must be simple, and it ought to give a natural arrangement of the matter in hand. Thus the political history of Western Europe for some time after the treaty of Utrecht may be gathered round the efforts of Spain to recover her lost possessions in Italy; and the physical geography of Spain herself will map out well her eight hundred years of conflict with the Moors. But whatever the plan may be, it must be strictly carried out. Digressions are useful enough, and may even form the chief part of the lecture. But any serious digression ought to be planned out beforehand, and all digression must be kept firmly subject to the preemptory condition that there never be a moment's doubt where the thread of the plan is left, and where it is taken up again.

The arrangement of the lecture needs care. The heads should stand out boldly, and there should not be too many of them. If more than five seem wanted, let some of them be grouped together. Even the subdivisions must be clear, and clearly distinguished from the larger headings. If only the

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arrangement is quite clear, it is none the worse for being a little formal. The wording, on the other hand, should be elastic. Critical sentences will need careful study; but in general, the more freely we speak the better. Half the battle is to watch the class and keep in touch with it, and catch the inspirations of the moment without digressing at random.

The delivery should be slow, so that students may be able to take down most of what is said; and an occasional pause (not merely after a critical sentence) will be a help. If the voice is quickened, it should be an understood sign that students are for the moment to take nothing down. Bad lectures are more commonly made bad by quick speaking, want of pauses, and consequent overpress of details than by faulty arrangement. The young and zealous teacher goes too quickly, doing work for his class which they ought to do for themselves, and crowding his lectures with details better learned from books. The old lecturer who knows his ground and has forgotten his own early difficulties also goes too quickly, throwing down valuable hints for his best men, and leaving the rest to find their way as they can. I have heard of lectures where every word was gold-dust, which yet were largely thrown away, because nobody could take good notes of them. Near akin to quick speaking is another disorderly habit. A lecturer ought not commonly to need a wheelbarrow for his books: and it is a bad sign if he goes home laden like a beast of burden.

How about notes for the lecturer's own use? Some speak without notes; and this is an excellent plan, but only for those who are perfectly sure of themselves. The risk is very great of forgetting parts of the plan, of breaking down in trying to frame critical sentences, or of being tempted into imprudent digressions. Others write out everything, and simply read their notes; and this is commonly fatal. The more our eyes are on the class and the less on notes the better. Lectures must be spoken, not read: and the power to read a manuscript as if it were freshly spoken is one of hard attainment. In its

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absence, nothing but rare excellence can keep a read lecture from becoming a soporific. The best way is to take in notes full enough to remind us of our plan and help us through any sentences that have to be worded with special care, but not full enough to tempt us into the fatal error of reading them. If these notes are carefully drawn they may with advantage be laid on the table for inspection as soon as the lecture is over. The younger students in particular will learn method from them in the most effective way.

This then seems to be the ideal of a lecture:—plan clear and thoughtful, arrangement clear and rather formal, delivery clear and slow, wording clear and free, but suggestive and precise. Tell your class that every phrase and every turn of a phrase is there for a purpose; and invite them to take it to pieces, and see with their own eyes and not with yours that things are well and truly stated. I am satisfied that a lecture which fairly aims at this ideal will be almost equally useful to students who differ widely in attainment. The weakest absolutely need the clear plan of the lecture to guide their reading, and will get strong encouragement from every glimpse of its deeper meaning; while even the strongest are always glad of a clean suggestive outline, full of hints for further study.

Some will think this ideal pitched too high, at least for the Poll man. I have not found it so. Give him your best, and take extra pains to make sure that everything is quite clear; but do not lecture down to him. He will often answer splendidly, if he is properly appealed to. Your conversation class at the end of the term will be a pelt of eager questions; and long before the year is out you will see waves pass through the room like the wind over the corn—sometimes even the lecturer's crowning triumph, when every pen drops of itself in close and eager listening, as if a signal had been given. The teacher can commit no more crying sin than in thinking that inferior work is good enough for backward students. Said a former College tutor to me once, "You

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know you cannot do much with the Poll man. I find it as much as he can manage if I give him a few simple questions, and expect an answer in the words of the book." He was not famed for success in teaching the Poll man.

We pass now from lectures to papers. Both are commonly needed. Lectures are likely to evaporate if they are not followed up by papers; and papers are likely to be fragmentary work if no foundation has been laid for them by lectures. Fifteen or twenty years ago papers were very commonly looked on as menial work, but I hope that idea is nearly dead now. In truth, the task of looking over a paper thoroughly is very much harder than that of giving a good lecture. It is not enough to score the answers overnight, and in the morning deliver a general harangue on all things and certain other things. Another plan is to look over the paper with each man singly, thereby securing him the overestimated "benefit of individual attention." But if this is not done perfunctorily it consumes an enormous amount of time; and (what is worse) it throws away the important help which students can be made to give each other. There is a better way than this, but a much harder one.

In my later years of private teaching the excessive number of lectures to which theological students were driven (often two, three, or even four in a morning) compelled me to do most of my work by papers. The plan finally hammered out was this. The class was six or seven. A smaller number did not give enough variety, and a much larger one was unwieldy. As variety was an object no care was taken to sort the men. Strong and weak sat in the same class, and with the best results. The weak sometimes helped and seldom hindered the strong, while the strong helped the weak enormously. There were three, four, at utmost five questions in the paper, with perhaps three or four more below a line. These last were quite optional, and seldom answered; but a few words at the end were enough to shew the way of dealing with them. The questions, especially those

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above the line, were big subjects, more or less of an essay character, which required a fair amount of reading and considerable grasp of mind to do them really well. Easy questions were avoided. If anyone could not do the whole paper he had standing orders to bring two answers done in outline rather than one completely: yet if anyone pleased he was welcome every now and then to throw his entire strength on a single question, doing it much more thoroughly than usual. Then I took the first man's answer to the first question, and commented on it there and then, not only for his own benefit, but for the class; and so on round the table, summing up myself at the end, and perhaps giving my own answer. After this the next question, beginning with another man. This is a plan which draws heavily on the teacher. In lecturing he has only to put the subject in the best way he can find: but here he must take it up at a moment's notice by any handle that may be offered him. He must see through the whole structure of the answer at a glance, and recognize in a moment the whole process by which it was put together. Then comes the criticism; and this will task to the uttermost his command of the subject. Mere slips of grammar or fact he scores quietly: but these are small matters. Sometimes he reads out an extract from an answer, sometimes he outlines it for public benefit, sometimes he tells two men to read each other's papers (rather a stretch of authority), sometimes he invites the class to dissect some tempting half truth, sometimes he calls attention to some new view of the matter, and occasionally he puts in a quiet hit at some bit of petty naughtiness at the far end of the table. Misbehaviour of any consequence I met with less than half-a-dozen times in more than twenty years.

The first advantage of this plan is that each man not only does the question himself but gets the salient points of half-a-dozen other men's answers picked out for him and discussed before the teacher sums up himself. True, the weaker men find the questions very hard, and often wholly miss the point

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of them. But they soon begin to see that if they have honestly done what they can, they always know enough about the matter to see its bearings when they are pointed out in class: and meanwhile their occasional successes and even half successes will give them courage. A man gains new confidence when for the first time he has done a hard question better than some to whom he has always looked up. But here the teacher needs all his gentleness. Let him above all things beware of impatiently brushing aside an imperfect answer as worthless. He must give the man credit for every touch of insight, and even for honest work that has turned out a failure, and then take it just as it stands, and gently lay open the misconception which has done the mischief. A very little roughness or want of sympathy will utterly ruin this part of the work.

Another advantage is that men are drawn together, and the class becomes more or less a society for friendly study. It represents a German *Seminar* on a lower plane. Men not only have abundant samples of method, but get used to hearing subjects of their own reading discussed from all points of view. The beginner cannot do much more than get up what he finds in his book; and from this point we must lead him on to look all round things, to see their connexions, to use his own judgment, and to recognize old problems under all disguises. Whatever questions may come before him in the *Tripes* he must know exactly the method of dealing with them. The flexibility of mind required to do this is even more distinctive of the educated man than his learning; and I know no better training for it than by such papers as are here described.

Lectures and papers must be the staple of our regular teaching. Essays may have to be prepared for; but students who are well trained on papers will not need to devote any very great attention to them. On the other hand, the conversation class is an occasional help of great importance. In this the Socratic method is a powerful weapon in skilled and gentle hands, especially for clearing up elementary ideas; but

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I have never felt myself quite equal to it. I therefore did the clearing chiefly in the papers, and devoted the conversation class to humbler uses. The men were told to look up difficulties, bring their note-books, and ask what they liked. They generally managed a good bombardment of questions. There was no great harm if the talking was chiefly done by a few of the best men; for if their questions were not quite representative, they were all the more useful and suggestive. They generally got quite as much from a conversation class as from a lecture. Nor is the teacher who simply stands and answers questions quite so passive as he seems. If he wants a particular question asked, he can generally force it as a conjuror forces a card, by properly shaping his answers. He can be active enough if he pleases.

Guidance rather than teaching is needed by students of a riper sort, who are ready or nearly ready for original research. In Cambridge either the Theological or the Historical Tripos will now give an excellent training in historical method. A man who goes through either, and takes a good place in his Second Part, has laid a broad foundation for future work, and made a good start with the critical study and comparison of original writers. When a man has once reached this point, historical teaching proper falls into the background, though he may still want special help from the philosopher, the antiquarian, the palæographer, the economist, or the teacher of languages. The German *Seminar* is in itself excellent: but it has never taken root in Cambridge. Only a few students yearly are equal to the work, and most of these either go down as soon as they have taken their degree, or if they stay in residence they are most likely reading for some other Tripos or competing for some University distinction, or possibly already preparing a dissertation, so that hardly any have leisure to join a *Seminar*. When a man is ready to undertake a dissertation, the only help that can be given him is some general information about books and original authorities, and

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perhaps a few general cautions about wider aspects of the subject which he may be in danger of overlooking.

As regards the teaching of Ecclesiastical as distinct from that of General History, I really have nothing to say. I will not even put in a caution against the *odium theologicum*, for this is no special disease of Theology, but the common pest of all studies. Quarrelsome dogs can always get up a fight; and bone for bone of contention, bimetallism is as good as transubstantiation. I hear say that artists can disagree; and I have seen a very pretty quarrel over the Gulf Stream. The only difference is that ecclesiastical language has a few peculiarities.