

The Right Kind of History: Teaching the Past in Twentieth-Century England

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This book is both timely and long overdue. Timely because it is published after a period of surprisingly intense national debate over the place of history in the school curriculum and in the midst of a government review of the national curriculum partly prompted by that debate. Long overdue because education remains one of the most poorly served (and surely one of the most significant) themes in modern British historiography. Why such poor service? Some explanation may be found in the early colonization of the subject by education specialists in teacher-training colleges and university faculties of education, writing understandably in a technical mode that focused on questions of pedagogy and professional practice; a similar fate has befallen legal and financial history. But there surely is more to it than this. Academics may feel schools are too close to them, or even beneath them. A highly fragmented system may seem too dauntingly complex. And there may be some residual effect of the low status that education had for a long time in political and policy circles – one of this book's themes.

David Cannadine spotted an opportunity in this lacuna. In 2008 he procured a grant from the Sainsbury-funded Linbury Trust to survey the history of history teaching in English state schools over the last century. With this grant he hired two postdoctoral researchers, Nicola Sheldon and Jenny Keating, who had established expertise in the histories of childhood and education. For two years they plundered the National Archives, history of education archives, and oral history archives, and amassed a novel collection of oral histories themselves by contacting teachers through their professional organization, the Historical

Association, and older people through publicity in *Saga* magazine and the *Daily Mail*. Their goal was to document history teaching both from above – the regulatory structures, the examination boards, the politicians (especially for the period since 1989 when the innovation of the National Curriculum meant that central government finally did begin to set the curriculum directly) – and from below, ‘from the chalkface’, seeking memories and records from teachers and students alike. Many of the latter can be consulted on the project’s website (<http://www.history.ac.uk/history-in-education/> [2]), including some of David Cannadine’s own notebooks from his grammar-school days in Birmingham in the mid 1960s, and many more have been deposited in the Institute of Education and British Library. These invaluable materials will be mined for generations to come.

At the time the project was launched, the public debate over the history curriculum was heating up but not yet boiling; that point would come after the 2010 general election, with the advent of the Conservative-Liberal coalition government, the appointment of Michael Gove as Secretary of State for Education, and Gove’s announcement in early 2011 of the national curriculum review. Although the review covers all subjects, history was the subject that drew the most public comment; between Gove’s appointment and the launch of the review, a trio of historians with high media profiles (David Starkey, Simon Schama, Niall Ferguson) weighed in with their recommendations, and at various points Gove gave both Schama and Ferguson the nod as putative ‘history czars’ who might advise him on the history curriculum rewrite. From all these history czars the cry went up, ‘history in danger!’ An implicit and sometimes explicit narrative was being constructed – once upon a time, all English schoolchildren had learned their national history properly, thoroughly, and lovingly; ‘recently’ (exactly when this happened depended on your age or political orientation – it might have been as long ago as the 1960s or as recently as the New Labour years since 1997), it had been eclipsed by faddish new subjects like media or IT or by political correctness or by a misguided belief that history was more about ‘skills’ than about learning your national story. Most pupils ended their study of history at 14 and less than a third opted to continue it to GCSE. Michael Gove had an opportunity to put this right – to bring history, especially the national history, and especially national history taught by traditional methods (exciting stories telling us ‘who we are’), back into the heart of the curriculum.

Into this debate this book – written by Cannadine from materials assembled by Keating and Sheldon – comes like a blast of fresh air. ‘Twas ever thus, they show: ‘history has always been beleaguered in the classroom – as, indeed, have many other subjects’ (p. 12), a shrewder observation than it may appear. For most of the 20th century, history was very far from the heart of the curriculum for ‘every English schoolchild’. The state provided less schooling of any kind and less history in particular than most of its European comparators, which used national education and national history to build national consciousness; England already had that national consciousness, as well as a relatively high profile for history in its general culture. Before the Second World War most children had no secondary education at all and thus little exposure to specialist history teaching. The minority that did enjoy secondary education received something like what is now imagined as the ‘traditional’ history curriculum – English history from the Romans to the Great War, with some periods of European history for the more advanced levels – but only 10 per cent of the age cohort took history to 16 (‘School Certificate’, the precursor to O level and GCSE).

When secondary education was finally extended to all pupils after the war, history still did not figure much in the curriculum offered to the majority in secondary modern schools. They were thought to require ‘concrete things’, ‘relevant to the present’ (p. 113), so that the history they were taught focused less on the political narrative of the grammar schools and more on topics such as food, clothing, trade and technology, with an emphasis on very recent and contemporary developments. For this majority there was no system of national examinations until 1965 and therefore no history qualifications at all; still only 20 per cent of the age cohort took a history examination at 16. When comprehensivization began in the 1960s, there was a great deal of uncertainty as to what role history should play in the new schools’ curriculum and which if either of the existing models it should follow. A mixed bag resulted, with a more global and contemporary approach taken from the secondary moderns to ages 15 or 16, and with A level sticking more closely to the grammar-school approach right up to the 1980s. The total numbers of students taking a school-leaving qualification in history through the late 1960s and 1970s inched up, but remained at under a third of the

cohort, still disproportionately drawing upon the more privileged students who had always studied the subject in grammar schools.

Although the Thatcher reforms that followed revolutionized the structure of education at all levels, they did not much alter this situation. The institution of a national curriculum, which prescribed subjects and their content up to the age of 14, probably meant that more history was being taught to these younger children in a more structured way than before – a mixture of about 50 per cent British history, some European history, and a much wider range of non-European topics ranging from Ancient Egypt to the Aztecs and Native Americans. Later reforms added more emphasis on global history, ‘cultural, ethnic and religious diversity’, and, controversially, the slave trade and the Holocaust. But the decision not to make history compulsory for the new unified qualification at 16, GCSE, meant that the proportions studying history to that age remained stable at under a third. The authors note some slight decline in the uptake of history after the inauguration of GCSE, but in fact even that very small decline had more to do with regulatory changes which required students at first to choose between history and geography and then widened the choice to other humanities subjects. Compared to geography, history held its share well under these circumstances, and its share at A level actually grew.

In short, history is not now ‘in danger’ – after 14 it is more or less in the position it has always been, taught primarily to more academic and more socially advantaged children, with probably a greater presence before 14 as a result of the national curriculum. The authors praise the existing national curriculum for offering a judicious blend of British, European and world history, ‘on the whole ... a well-meant and well-balanced outline’ (p. 233). Their principal contribution to the current debate is to urge the integration of the national curriculum with GCSE, so that history can be taught as a continuous and compulsory course from 11 to 16. The structural difficulty here is that at present post-14 education is only lightly regulated, the curricula determined by independent examination boards (operating as commercial entities), and market pressures have narrowed the post-14 curriculum to a heavily presentist orientation; thus it is possible today to study primarily 20th-century history in each of the last five years of education from age 13 to 18. So the authors call for more national control over the 14–18 curriculum as well. If GCSE is to be integrated into the national curriculum, and a broad chronological course offered from 11 to 16, ending with modern history at GCSE, then A level would require more regulation to ensure greater chronological and thematic diversity at 16–18.

How do these recommendations chime with Michael Gove’s stated aims and the early returns trickling out of the national curriculum review? Cannadine and his colleagues do not endorse the call for more British history at 11–14, as they believe it is already amply catered for by the existing national curriculum. There is only a dim hope that the pundits will absorb this point; when an Ofsted report, ‘History for all’, made the same point backed up by a lot of evidence in 2011, the press were so obsessed by the history czars’ and the government’s polemics to the contrary that they more or less inverted the report’s true findings. The book’s arguments for compulsory history to 16 are finding more fertile ground. The current drift of the national curriculum review seems to be towards making not only history but other academic subjects, including geography and a modern foreign language, all compulsory through GCSE. The result would be an extension of the government’s earlier initiative, the English Baccalaureate (‘E-Bacc’), towards a larger, more academic core curriculum to 16. It is to be hoped that the government will recognize this book’s corollary argument, that a core curriculum to 16 will necessitate more regulation of the curriculum not only at GCSE but also at A level. My own view is that a continuous chronological course from 11 to 16 would exacerbate the narrowing of the later stages of the curriculum to modern history, and that rectifying this for the small minority who can be expected to take history at A level leaves the vast majority still only examined on modern history at GCSE; I would prefer a more creative approach to the 11–16 curriculum chronologically, thematically and geographically, giving GCSE as well as A level candidates a true taste of the varieties of history. But either strategy will require closer attention to the examination boards than the national curriculum review has yet been permitted.

Whatever the effects of this book on the policy debate, we can hope that it will put down a marker for historians – reminding them of the importance of education as a main theme in the social and cultural as well

as the political history of modern Britain, and of the untapped sources available to them (now considerably swelled by the efforts of Keating and Sheldon). Even in the history of history teaching, this book – as opposed to the archive it draws on – is only a starting point. It does not reveal as much of the story ‘from the chalkface’ as it might have done. Cannadine’s preferences as an historian of British elites are perhaps over-indulged; the social backgrounds and political careers of every one of the 55 education ministers between 1900 and 2010 are elaborately rehearsed, even though (as the book says) most of them paid little attention to schools and often saw their time in education as a mere political stepping stone. The state’s neglect of education has little to do with the social backgrounds of the education ministers specifically; a more comprehensive analysis is needed. Conversely relatively little attention is devoted to the experience of the classroom. The great experiment of teaching history for the first time to the majority of children in secondary schools after the Second World War is covered in a few hasty pages, and the confused period when comprehensive schools tried to juggle the secondary-modern and the grammar-school curricula remains confusing. Yet this book is in so many other ways a model to emulate. It sweeps away a lot of mythologizing, past and present. It reminds us forcefully how diverse the British school system was for most of the modern period when it was locally rather than centrally directed. Cannadine had initially hoped to cover the whole of the British Isles, but the map of England alone was so complex and difficult to clarify that the authors wisely stuck to this one, large piece of the puzzle. It gives a lucid and reliable outline of the kinds of histories that were on offer to schoolchildren in different parts of the system over the whole of the past century. Finally, it has stored up priceless archival resources for the future. The authors can be proud of the fact that their book will certainly serve not only as a starting-point for future historians of history teaching, but also as a model for future historians of all the other parts of the school curriculum. It would indeed be an excellent starting-point for any reader seeking to survey the state of British democracy in general over the course of the last century. Such a shame that historians have not seen that possibility before.

Other reviews:

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-right-kind-of-history-teaching-the-past-in-twentieth-century-england-by-david-cannadine-jenny-keating--nicola-sheldon-6277488.html> [3]

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/video/2011/nov/28/david-cannadine-history-compulsory-schools> [4]

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/8915720/Why-we-need-to-talk-about-history.html> [5]

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[3] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-right-kind-of-history-teaching-the-past-in-twentieth-century-england-by-david-cannadine-jenny-keating--nicola-sheldon-6277488.html>

[4] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/video/2011/nov/28/david-cannadine-history-compulsory-schools>

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