

The Importance of Studying the Past

by Tristram Hunt

‘It can’t be important because we don’t spend much time on it.’
(Year 8 student)¹

My history education began in dramatic fashion.

In a rather deep hole, in a curve of the Medlock and surrounded on all four sides by tall factories and high embankments, covered with buildings, stand two groups of about 200 cottages, built chiefly back to back, in which live about 4,000 human beings, most of them Irish. The cottages are old, dirty, and of the smallest sort, the streets uneven, fallen into ruts and in part without drains or pavement; masses of refuse, offal and sickening filth lie among standing pools in all directions . . .

This was Friedrich Engels’s depiction of industrializing Manchester in his 1844 classic, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. And it was the text which my inspirational history teacher, Mr Mackintosh, decided it would be fun for a class of eleven-year-olds to study. So, week by week, we travelled through the mills, workhouses and lodging rooms of urbanizing England; the accounts of broken limbs, effluent-bubbling streams, smog-laden skies and overcrowded tenements. We met typhus-ridden Irish immigrants and boorish, philistine factory owners.

And, of course, it was wonderful: a beguiling mixture of gore and grime along with a sense of the visceral, foreign, unknowable past which we all wanted to get our hands on.

There was, it has to be said, little narrative arc to Mr Mackintosh’s teaching. He was a Scottish patriot, so we studied the battle of Bannockburn in quite some detail. But he knew how to play to our English prejudices, so Agincourt received the attention it deserved. There wasn’t much search for bias, role-playing or empathy. But there was a highly idiosyncratic, dramatic, and engaging teaching style which inspired me to study the subject further. At secondary school, I was equally favoured with gifted – if perhaps more structured – teachers who taught me a

House of Commons

tristram.hunt.mp@parliament.uk

chronological framework, the fundamentals of source analysis, how to write an essay and a great sense of the *importance* of studying the past.

My fear today is that too many schoolchildren are being denied similar opportunities for engaging in the intellectual excitement and civic virtue of history – as well as the skills and personal fulfilment that come with it.

This is particularly germane with the teaching of history back in the news, thanks to repeated initiatives from the Conservative Education Secretary Michael Gove. ‘One of the under-appreciated tragedies of our time has been the sundering of our society from its past’, Gove told the Conservative Party conference last October. ‘Children are growing up ignorant of one of the most inspiring stories I know – the history of our United Kingdom. Our history has moments of pride, and shame, but unless we fully understand the struggles of the past we will not properly value the liberties of the present.’ He went on to announce a review of the National Curriculum – advised by the Atlanticist Simon Schama – placing British history at its heart. ‘Our children’, Schama suggested, ‘are being short-changed of the patrimony of their story...for there can be no true history that refuses to span the arc, no coherence without chronology.’²

But the attention of government ministers and academic commentators has been for the most part in entirely the wrong direction. Faux-patriotic concerns about a lack of British history in the syllabus and a wilful failure to distinguish between various stages of the curriculum has diverted energy away both from the fundamental issues of time allocation for history in the school day and from the differing roles the study of history can play over time during a child’s schooling.

WHY STUDY HISTORY?

A respect for the past – a sense of excitement about new ideas, peoples and places; as well as a rather normative belief in its powers to inform the present – must begin at school. As the National Curriculum rightly puts it, the study of history ‘fires pupils’ curiosity about the past in Britain and the wider world. Pupils consider how the past influences the present, what past societies were like...and what beliefs and cultures influenced people’s actions...They see the diversity of human experience, and understand more about themselves as individuals and members of society.’

The civic function of this learning process is essential – something I believe both as a historian, and as a politician. History provides us with a collective memory; it gives us a sense of connection to place, time and community. It also behoves us to study the mistakes and mindsets of our forebears. In 2003, on the eve of the Iraq War, then Prime Minister Tony Blair travelled to the United States Congress to announce that ‘a study of history provides so little instruction for the present day’. He then went on to repeat some of the classic, historical errors of British action in the Middle East.

What is perhaps worth stressing are the broader levels of contemporary historical amnesia. We are all familiar with the polls of youthful public ignorance, revealing a total absence of knowledge about the past. More worryingly, this often extends even into university. A recent study of first year undergraduates found that eighty-four per cent did not know who commanded the British forces at Waterloo, eighty-nine per cent could not name a single nineteenth-century prime minister and sixty-six per cent did not know who was monarch at the time of the Spanish Armada.³

More seriously, what these figures hint at is the steady dehistoricization of the public realm. This has, in my view, gone hand in hand with increasing secularization. The institutions of civil society through which our forebears gained their knowledge of the past and their place within it – close-knit, multi-generational extended families; the church or chapel; girl guides and boy scouts; trade unions or Lodges; political parties or civic institutes – have haemorrhaged members. Learning outside the classroom has collapsed. Today, it is really the National Trust (with its 3.3 million members) which keeps the flame alive. The consequence has been a remarkable loss of historical bearings. It is a situation, as Eric Hobsbawm put it in the introduction to his *Age of Extremes*, which is arguably in danger of transforming post-modern man back towards the timeless mentality of pre-modern man.

The destruction of the past, or rather of the social mechanisms that link one's contemporary experience to that of earlier generations, is one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late twentieth century. Most young men and women at the century's end grow up in a sort of permanent present lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times they live in.⁴

More apocalyptically, Jonathan Clark has warned in particular of the inevitable loss of connection with the past which has gone with the absence of faith.

Religious identity was once a potent source of a sense of historical bearings: it underwrote individual identity in a way that turned history into a procession, and a procession set within a wider providential scenario... The growing separation of Church and State [in the UK], formally avowed in statute and delivered in practice by the market, therefore produces a culture that is not only officially secularized, but also silently dehistoricized.⁵

This bleak situation has shifted the responsibility for basic historical knowledge more and more on to schools. Devoid of support within civil society, the teaching of history has become ever more crucial for the nurturing of an informed citizenry.

HISTORY AND NARRATIVE

Maybe because of this absence of history outside the classroom – as well as the documented impact of popular history programming – history is proving a relatively healthy subject at the moment. A recent OFSTED report on the teaching of history in some 166 primary and secondary schools notes that, in 2007-10, ‘there were more examination entries for history than for any other optional subject at GCSE level, apart from design and technology’. There has been no significant decline in the proportion of students taking GCSE history – around a third – since GCSEs were introduced in the 1980s. And ‘numbers taking the subject at A level have risen steadily over the past ten years’, making history one of the ‘top five subject choices at A Level’.⁶

So why do so many of Britain’s schoolchildren have very little sense of the shape of British history and the forces that have made us who we are? In much of the commentary surrounding this issue, the villain of the piece is taken to be Key Stage 3 – the stage taught between eleven and fourteen, after which students are allowed to drop history. Britain is almost alone in Europe (with Iceland) in permitting students to junk history at such an early stage.

In fact, as detailed analysis suggests, Key Stage 3 actually allows for a broad and nuanced approach to the teaching of the past, covering British, European and World History over a cascading series of time-lines. And this is why – in my view – current political obsessions about rewriting the curriculum entirely miss the point.

The problem is how this teaching is delivered in practice. For according to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, ‘pupils often fail to acquire a good overview of history as they progress through Key Stage 3. Too often, the focus is on developing pupils’ in-depth knowledge of specific topics in history at the expense of making explicit links and connections between the different historical periods studied’.⁷ The recent OFSTED report makes the same point, reporting that ‘some pupils found it difficult to place the historical episodes in they had studied within any coherent, long-term narrative. They knew about particular events, characters and periods but did not have an overview. Their chronological understanding was often underdeveloped and so they found it difficult to link developments together’. My Labour MP colleague and former editor of *History Today*, Gordon Marsden, has suggested schools are offering, ‘a “Yo Sushi!” experience of historical understanding – with students gobbling up titbits as they come round on the module conveyor-belt but able to make little connection to the broader picture once the dishes have done the rounds’.⁸

Whilst Key Stage 3 remains broadly and admirably catholic in its approach to the past, there is no doubt that as the study of history continues through GCSE and A Level it becomes progressively less broad and the Tudors and twentieth-century dictators dominate the syllabus. If students have looked at the Tudors in Key Stage 3, they may end up studying the period – in effective historical isolation – some three times up to A2.

Astonishingly, some fifty-one per cent of GCSE candidates and a staggering eighty per cent of A Level candidates study the Nazis – often for the second or third time.⁹ Not surprisingly, this has influenced an entire generation's view of European history, and the place of Britain in Europe. Some modifications have been made with the introduction of a post-war German history module – but Operation Barbarossa will always out-trump Willy Brandt.

In truth, the situation is already shifting. More and more AS and A2 students are now choosing courses focused on the history of the post-war American Civil Rights movement. This area of study is the coming 'Hitler', with generations of young people acquiring a very detailed understanding of bus boycotts in Alabama and the role of President Johnson but not much appreciation of Britain's own history of democratic and social struggle.

Behind much of this debate is the familiar struggle of skills versus knowledge: should the syllabus focus on delivering the skills of a historian, or provide a broader knowledge of the past useful for an informed citizen? In terms of British historiography, it calls to mind the struggle between Raphael Samuel and Education Secretary Kenneth Baker in the 1980s: the one advocating the merits of 'new history', the other crafting a Whiggish National Curriculum which set out to explain 'how a free and democratic society has developed over the centuries'.

Now the truth is that the fetishization of sources (combined with miraculous advances in IT) has produced some truly exemplary teaching – with primary schoolchildren, for example, looking at Tudor probate records. It has also served a broader civic function. As Professor Richard J. Evans of the University of Cambridge puts it, 'source-criticism teaches students not to accept passively every fact and argument they are presented with'.¹⁰ The question is whether this set of skills comes at the price of that broader appreciation of the past. It has meant school-children pouring over source materials – which are often now simply extracted second-hand from textbooks – devoid of context, content and meaning.

It has produced truly bizarre examples of historical questioning: one piece of homework my friend's son was asked to produce urged him to list five bad things and five good things the Nazis had achieved – a rather extreme example of historical balance! This obsession with balance and bias imbues a culture of extreme scepticism which is not necessarily the most productive use of students' time – when some elements of the past are now pretty well established as fact. As Professor Robert Tombs puts it,

The present system drills students to write formulaic essays on causation and mechanically 'evaluate' miscellaneous texts for 'reliability'. And it's boring: students and teachers are stuck in a round of tests, exercises and exams, which discourages them from venturing outside the limits of a fragmented and decontextualised curriculum.¹¹

And this is not, in my view, a Left-Right divide with conservatives only interested in narrative. Coming from the Left, I think it is vital that the next generation should be able to appreciate the story of struggle – of democracy, the rule of law, equality, freedom of conscience and so on. Surely, it is better for schoolchildren to know of the English Civil War, the industrial revolution and the nature of Empire than to be able clinically to unpick yet another isolated account of the League of Nations. If students are to mature into citizens, they need to know their past – not least, in a very civic republican manner, to prevent political powers manipulating the present.

But to many classroom practitioners, such a debate seems achingly old-fashioned. For this generation of teachers, the skills or knowledge debate is otiose. For what modern ‘historical understanding’ is about is using source-based material to tell a story; using the skills of a historian to develop a narrative. There does not need to be any binary divide if the teaching of ‘our’ or an island story happens *alongside* investigating issues of bias, primary and secondary texts and objectivity. Indeed, it provides the best classroom vehicle for exactly such a task. And it is this middle path which is so often lost in the debate in Parliament and the Comment pages when it comes to the teaching of history.

HISTORY, BRITISHNESS AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Behind much of this discussion of history is a neuralgic concern about national identity and Britishness. For there is a growing consensus in the political classes that in an age of increasingly fractious identities – of migration, globalization and religio-ethnic sensibilities – history at school has a prescriptive role to play in forging a sense of national, British identity. The question is whether a sense of British or national identity can be taught in the classroom through an explication of our national past. Roger Scruton, the Tory philosopher, is suitably sceptical. He has argued that British values are a matter of practice, not of theory.

I cast my mind back to the way in which Britishness was taught to me by my family, school, church and town. These British values . . . were seldom mentioned and never taught. Britishness was a state of mind, imparted like the sense of family, as a collective ‘we’. It was a matter of belonging.¹²

I think there is much truth in what Scruton says – not least, the importance of a sense of history, heritage and identity outside the classroom. But the nature and composition of British society have changed markedly since the post-war period, and in a multi-faith, multi-cultural age of mass migration and identity politics, a stronger teaching of ‘British values’ – however codified – might well be necessary.

The last Labour government in Britain embedded this process as part of a new concentration on citizenship – with citizenship ceremonies, a statutory place for citizenship in the National Curriculum (delivered either independently or through related classes such as history, politics, or geography), and a guide to British history for new citizens written by the late Sir Bernard Crick.¹³ We even had the bizarre situation of a government report urging the teaching of British history and values through citizenship classes – when they could just have learnt some history!¹⁴

But, first of all, to step back: is there not something just a little unBritish in attempts to create a state-sanctioned narrative of the past? For the joy of Britain is that we have no purpose in the world – unlike the great republics, we have no end-point, no *telos*. And have the last decades not witnessed numerous examples of unedifying pathways to nationalism sparked by textbook rewrites and the crafting of schoolroom stories about ethnic myths and Whiggist tales of national destiny?

In Japan official accounts of the Second World War sparked diplomatic protests and even rioting in China. In India, schools and universities are still recovering from the attempt by the (Hindu Nationalist) Bharatiya Janata Party to ‘saffronize’ India’s extraordinarily multi-cultural past. In France, politicians in 2005 ruled that the school curriculum should recognize, ‘the positive role of the French overseas presence, notably in north Africa’: a particularly ironic request, given subsequent history. And in America, of course, the self-congratulatory game is given away by the textbook titles on offer: *The American Way*; *Land of Promise*; *Rise of the American Nation*; and *The Challenge of Freedom* are among the more nuanced choices.

If there is to be a greater concentration on the teaching of British history we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. There is in fact something very British, as part of an anti-systemic world view, about much of our pluralist, reflexive approach to the past. And it has its admirers. The Council of Europe is currently nurturing history teaching in post-Soviet and eastern European nations. In countries where nationalism and ethnic strife is ever present, the British tradition of non-prescriptive, critical enquiry is regarded as especially valuable.

But in Britain the spectre of nationalism riding a history syllabus is not the main issue. First, I think, because that predicates far too much political engagement on behalf of today’s young. And, secondly, because an increasingly able cohort of history teachers is able to deliver a syllabus of British history which is suitably reflective of the multi-faceted nature of our past – warts and all. But at the same time they are able to inculcate various civic sentiments – a sense of identity beyond race and religion; something of a common culture; and a sense of ownership in the institutions and functions of the British state and civil society and the ideals and history they embody. Often this can best be achieved by approaching the past through the prism of local history – exploring how the immediate environs of the school can open up both local and global histories,

Richard Evans has recently made the opposite case, arguing that 'It makes far more sense to teach British children of South Asian or Afro-Caribbean background about the parts of the world where their families originated – the history of the Mughal Empire, or of Benin or Oyo, for example', than British history.¹⁵ This is the academic rather than political mindset, and singularly fails to appreciate the broader civic function of education in developing a cohesive citizenry. Is it really unreasonable for schoolchildren to gain a basic knowledge of the history of the country in which they live?

Yet should teachers be pressurized by the state into teaching an intellectually valid historical account of Britishness? Is it even possible? Not least because any shared notion of Britishness is in such rapid retreat. The latest British Social Attitudes survey had only forty-eight per cent of people living in England saying that 'British' was the best or only way of describing their identity. This was down from sixty-three per cent in 1992. It begs the question as to whether the state is trying to shore up for political reasons a declining sense of identity through the classroom. And whether the teaching of English, Welsh and Scottish identity in the devolved components of the UK might be more effective?

This is surely the place to think about the civic purpose of history. For what Key Stage 3 should be about – that part of the curriculum in which history is compulsory – is the teaching of history for fundamentally civic purposes. If pupils wish to pursue the subject to GCSE and A Level, the focus on skills is far more appropriate. Before that, between eleven and fourteen, the emphasis must be on a broad-based syllabus which presages the teaching of British history in order to nurture at least the bases of informed and active citizenry. And the syllabus offered at KS3 currently provides just that – it is much more a question of delivery.

THE TEACHING OF HISTORY

For so much of this debate is, in a sense, academic. Because while scholars and pundits enjoy nothing more than debating the nature of the curriculum and the threat from the Left and the Right, none of that matters when the actual teaching of history is so flawed by constraints on time and curriculum. Between eleven and fourteen a typical pupil is likely to be taught history for just an hour a week; that is, some thirty-eight hours a year. Even the most skilled teacher has her work cut out to begin to develop some form of narrative arc, some sense of the rhythm and ruptures of British history in these circumstances. If we are serious about delivering a proper historical grounding, then the syllabus needs to be slimmed down and the timetabling of history extended.

Dr Dean Smart, Secretary of the History Teachers Network, puts it well:

The problem is that history does not get enough time in schools. Pressure to tackle literacy and achieve GCSE targets has eroded the history

curriculum. Introducing flawed, dull ‘literacy’ lessons took time from history and ignored history’s ability to develop literacy, knowledge, skills and understanding in context. Vapid bland ‘learning to learn’ courses or humanities frameworks stole more time, with the robbery completed by pressure to accelerate GCSE, and launch courses at 13 not 14.¹⁶

And he is absolutely right to take aim at the growing trend for co-opting history into broader, generic, ‘humanities’ courses which are too vague and haphazard to deliver any real historical grounding. As OFSTED concluded in its analysis of history teaching, ‘Where these developments had taken place, curriculum time for teaching had been reduced and history was becoming marginalised.’¹⁷

In some schools, the assault on history teaching is altogether more blatant. The demand for easy League Table points means that many schools are now trying to divert students away from taking history at GCSE and A Level. Scandalously, some teachers and administrators would much rather have the easy option of high grades on low demanding courses than allow students to fulfil their intellectual ambitions. So we now have a situation where students in independent, private schools are almost twice as likely to study GCSE history as those in maintained schools. In the new generation of Academy schools, the situation is even bleaker. Data is hard to come by, as Academies are able to hide their full results, but research carried out by myself and the CIVITAS think-tank was highly disturbing.¹⁸ In one Academy in the Yorkshire and Humber region, out of 150 students only nine were entered for history in 2008-09. In an East Midlands Academy, just five per cent of entries were in history and geography. In another Yorkshire and Humber Academy only six per cent of entries were in history and none in geography. While Academies’ A*-to-C performance is extolled, it sounds infinitely less impressive when it transpires, as it has, that only 0.5% of an Academy’s seventy-per-cent A*-to-C rate is in history, and eighteen per cent is in an ICT course dubbed weak by Ofsted.

This matters not just because both the learning experience involved and the qualification are highly dubious. It matters because of what is being lost. This is, in a phrase made famous by George W. Bush, ‘the soft bigotry of low expectations’, a belief that those in communities of historically low educational attainment should not be challenged. This is the mindset that denies young people access to a history of the English civil war, the industrial revolution and the British empire. It maintains they are not interested and shouldn’t be bothered with such fanciful topics.

Combine this trend with the broader assault on history and the humanities in higher education and it is clear that history is in danger of becoming a rich man’s topic – which is going to undermine our capacity to produce an informed citizenry and potentially to exclude some of the best and brightest from becoming historians themselves.

But I don't want to conclude on a doom and gloom note. The teaching of history in British schools is still incredibly strong. There remain thousands of highly dedicated, highly skilled professionals enthusing children about the past. In today's media-rich age, there are also extraordinary opportunities for exciting pupils' interest in history: television programmes, websites, easy travel, and in museums and heritage sites a whole ethos devoted to access and inclusion.

What the current debate also reveals is the powerful importance of history in civic life. And it is no surprise that at this period of British history – in the face of devolution, globalization and mass migration – we should be ever more drawn to establishing our place in the present through the past. But in too many school timetables there is not the space to do so.

Tristram Hunt is a historian and Member of Parliament.

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