

The strange death of history teaching

(fully explained in seven easy-to-follow lessons)



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This essay came about because as a professor of economic history who lectures on university economics degree schemes I had become increasingly puzzled as to how little history my undergraduates seemed to know. In a typical tutorial not only did the students not know what the Protestant work ethic was they had never heard of the Reformation, and one student offered the view that Martin Luther was an American civil rights leader. Then it went down hill from there. What is a Protestant? Silence was the stern reply.

I was aware that ignorance of history by present day school children had for some time been the subject of concern among many, including the Prince of Wales. Surveys demonstrating the situation have multiplied, like this one reported in 2001:

The Great Fire of London took place in 1066, Hitler was Britain's Prime Minister during the Second World War and Henry VII had eight wives. These are just some of the howlers that came to light in a survey designed to test the historical knowledge of secondary school youngsters. Almost a quarter of the 200 children aged 11 to 18 questioned by publisher Osprey placed the first world war in the wrong century and 17 per cent linked Oliver Cromwell to the Battle of Hastings rather than the English Civil War. One in 200 youngsters thought the Romans ruled just 150 years ago, 6 per cent thought our current Queen Elizabeth II was on the throne at the time of the Spanish Armada and nearly three-quarters were unable to name Nelson's flagship, the Victory.¹

So I decided to quantify the situation more precisely among my own students and for the last three years I have given the freshers (those educated in Britain) a quiz of five of the easiest history questions I could think of, and what I considered any well-educated (make that any) 18 year old should know. The results can be found in Table 1, and show that on average not much more than one out of the five questions was answered correctly. Almost twice as many students thought Nelson was in charge at the Battle of Waterloo as named the Iron Duke, while nine students thought it was Napoleon (or Napolian or Napolium). Almost 90% of the students could not name a single British prime minister from the nineteenth century.

It could be argued that my quiz was only asking for isolated facts. But ignorance of these facts also means a deeper lack of knowledge and understanding. Not knowing where the Boer war was fought, for example, means you know little or nothing about the history of Britain's colonial past in southern Africa, and hence the origins of apartheid or of present day Zimbabwe. Not being able to answer question 1, and particularly the wrong answers offered, means a lack of knowledge of who Nelson was, or the significance of arguably the most famous land battle in history, or for that matter who or what was Napoleon or the French Revolution, let alone the causes or consequences of these figures and events. And, of course, a lack of knowledge of the facts axiomatically precludes any analysis of them.

It could also be suggested that mine was an unscientific questionnaire among a small sample of youngsters. This is true; but my students are probably not untypical of similar undergraduates on social sciences courses, and significantly they are students (37% of whom came from fee-paying schools and a further 15% from selective schools) studying at one of the Russell group of universities, on courses where the entry requirement is an A and two Bs at A level, which probably places them in the top 15% of their generation in terms of educational qualifications. This implies that, all things being equal, 85% of my undergraduates' age group know even less than they do. In other words, we are looking at a whole generation that knows almost nothing about the history of their (or anyone else's) country. And this collapse in historical knowledge is a relatively new phenomenon. A recent survey by the BBC found that while 71% of over 65 year olds knew the significance of the battle of the Boyne only 18% of 16-24 year olds did so.²

Table 1: Responses to an undergraduate questionnaire on history knowledge (% correct)

	Question 1 British general at Waterloo	Question 2 Monarch during Armada	Question 3 Brunel's profession	Question 4 19th century Prime Minister	Question 5 Location of Boer War	Total all questions
Whole group N=284	16.5	34.5	40.5	11.5	30.6	26.7
GCSE students (52.7% of N)	19.9	41.7	42.4	17.6	44.4	33.2
non GCSE students	12.8	26.3	38.3	4.6	15.0	19.4
Students with A or A* at GCSE (71.8% of GCSE passes)	22.2	42.6	41.7	21.4	48.1	35.2
Students with A or AS level (22.9% of N)	24.6	49.2	41.5	30.6	55.4	40.3
Students from fee paying or selective schools (52.7% of N)	21.2	34.8	33.3	7.6	24.2	24.2

Question 1 – Who was the general in charge of the British army at the battle of Waterloo?

Question 2 – Who was the reigning monarch when the Spanish Armada attacked Britain?

Question 3 – What was Isambard Kingdom Brunel's profession?

Question 4 – Name one prime minister of Britain in the 19th century?

Question 5 - In what country was the Boer War of 1899-1902 fought?

History teaches us that even so-called primitive societies passed on by oral tradition the story of their peoples. In Britain today we are even failing to do this. Why? This question sent me off on a quest, applying what skills I possess as a professional historian, to find the answer. It quickly became clear the extent to which I had lost touch with things since I studied O and A level history in the 1960s, and taught it myself in the 1970s. I learned one surprising lesson after another on my path to enlightenment.

Lesson 1: little history is now taught in schools

One obvious factor in my students' ignorance is that not much history is now taught in schools. At primary level, history takes only 4% of curriculum time, and is often taught in blocks of weeks rather than consistently through the year.³ At secondary level Britain is out of step with virtually all other European countries in not making history compulsory up to the age of 16 (in some countries it is 18).⁴ When the National Curriculum was introduced in Britain in 1989 history was compulsory up to aged 16, but since 1995 it can be dropped at 14.⁵ Even up to 14, history has apparently to fight for time on the curriculum; and schools seem to be able to get away with teaching history only one hour a week for two years so that some children give up the subject at aged 13.⁶ In 2006, 1,479 out of the 3,500 state secondary schools entered no candidates for GCSE history.⁷

But studying too little history only explains some of the results in Table 1. Of the students taking part in my quiz over half had taken GCSE history, compared with 32% of 16 year olds in the UK generally in 2007 (down from 39% in 1994).⁸ However, as you can see, Table 1 shows that although those students that had taken GCSE history consistently scored higher in the quiz than those who had not, there was no huge disparity, increasing the correct answer rate from 19% for non-GCSE students to 34% for those taking the exam. Even among the 72% of GCSE students who obtained A and A* grades, over three-quarters of them couldn't name Wellington, nor almost 80% of them a 19th century prime minister. Indeed, among the 23% of my students who had passed AS or A level history three quarters got question 1 and a half question 2 wrong. The star prizes went to two students who obtained an A* at GCSE and an A grade at A level in history. One, from a fee paying school, got no answers correct and thought Cromwell was a 19th century prime minister; the other got only one correct and he or she thought Queen Mary saw off the Armada and the Boer War was fought in the Netherlands. The schools inspectorate, Ofsted, recently reported that: 'In schools where pupils demonstrate high achievement, they have: a good knowledge of historically significant events, people, and concepts'; whereas in fact – no they don't.⁹ Incidentally, as can be seen from Table 1, the 53% of my students that went to private or selective schools did slightly worse than the rest, so the issue is not one of resources or class; the expensively educated students are just as ignorant of history as the rest.

So the question remained – how was it that students who in theory had studied the subject for 13 years at school, and who could emerge with the highest exam grades, didn't know the basic facts of history?

Lesson 2: classroom teachers must take some of the blame

It became clear to me very quickly that there is a well-defined history education establishment (HEE) which controls the way history is taught in Britain. It includes: the government - the education department (whatever it calls itself this week); a quango/watchdog - the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA); the schools inspectorate – Ofsted; the examination boards; the university teacher training departments, and finally, to their shame, the Historical Association - a 100 year old body which claims that as 'the voice for history' it 'aims to further the study, teaching

and enjoyment of history at all levels: teacher and student, amateur and professional'.¹⁰ Largely self-appointed, mutually supportive and very sure of themselves, the staff and members of these bodies all seemed (until very recently at least) to follow a party line with apparently no dissenting voices and with a clear preference for communicating in jargon.

One thing the members of this HEE tend to repeat to themselves (and anyone else who will listen) over and over is that, in the words of Sean Lang of the Historical Association: 'all the evidence points to the strengths of the teaching of history in our schools'.¹¹ A QCA report notes: 'the quality of history teaching in secondary schools is a real strength. Successive Ofsted reports for secondary history confirm the view that the overall quality and effectiveness of history provision remain high. In a recent report, Ofsted states "in 80 per cent of lessons seen ... the teaching has been judged good or better, meaning that history is one of the best taught subjects". At A level this rises to 91 per cent'.¹²

Table 2: History O level/GCSE

	Annual entry	% of all subject entries	Passes grades A-C as % of history entries	Passes grades A and A* as % of history entry
1960	128,638	8.0	57.2	N/A
1970	162,514	7.3	57.5	N/A
1980	179,155	6.0	58.6	12.3
1990	195,680	5.7	52.0	11.5
2000	190,279	4.0	61.3	22.8
2007	205,200	4.4	67.2	29.3

Source: DES, *Statistics of Education*; DfES/DCSF website.

The HEE can point to the glittering improvement in exam results. As Table 2 shows, the pass rate in GCSE history (at grades C and above) has gone up from 52% in 1990 to 67% in 2007, and the top A-A* grades from 12% to 29%. At A level, Table 3 shows that, whereas up to 1980 consistently about 70% of students passed, by 2008 virtually no one failed, and those achieving A grades has gone up from 8% in 1980 to 25% today.

Now one has to ask - since we know that our children are being taught hardly any history - how can these results

come about?

Table 3: History A level

	Annual entry	% of all subject entries	Passes grades A-E as % of entry	Passes grade A as % of entry
1960	19,140	8.8	71.8	8.8
1970	40,983	9.3	70.6	8.4
1980	41,731	7.4	69.4	8.4
1992	42,302	6.3	79.2	12.8
2000	33,140	4.9	89.2	17.5
2008	42,110	5.7	98.9	24.6

Source: DES, *Statistics of Education*; DfES/DCSF website.

The reasons for the grade inflation, which seems to run throughout the exam system in all subjects, is beyond the scope of this essay (and needs addressing), but the probable explanation for the glowing Ofsted reports is that the inspectors are seeing what they want to see, which appears to be: children playing games, role playing, drawing pictures, engaging in group discussion, trying to imagine what it feels like, for example, to be a medieval peasant, or studying a range of historical source materials - and accordingly rate the classes highly.¹³ The epitome of a good lesson to Ofsted is a class on the topic: ‘Why didn’t the Romans overcome crime?’ where pupils work in groups and then reported back to the class dressed as Romans as if addressing the Senate.¹⁴ The National Curriculum website, promotes history via a video of history teaching at Coplestone High School where pupils role play local professional people designing a monument for Thomas Clarkson, the anti-slavery campaigner, which involves them getting out of the classroom and, for example, interviewing a local councillor. A pupil says he thinks: ‘It’s a lot better because if you are learning it [history] outside in the community you can see actually what’s going on not just looking in a textbook’. The teacher says it makes the teaching more exciting and more exciting for the pupils.¹⁵ What the QCA considers the height of good history teaching is also apparent on the ‘innovating with history’ section of their website.¹⁶ There, one teacher describes using a ‘brainometer’ to improve the verbal skills of the pupils when investigating the Battle of Marston Moor as part of studying, ‘Why did Charles lose the Civil Wars?’ Another teacher dresses herself as a CIA man in dark glasses to announce to the class that JFK had been assassinated in Dallas, before showing them videos and source material and inviting them to discover for themselves who killed the president.

So can history teachers be absolved from culpability in their pupils’ ignorance of history because they are only doing what is expected of them? No, the classroom history teachers must take some of the blame. It seems clear that when

it comes to the choice of subjects for study, which is, within limits, a matter under the control of the classroom teacher, war, Hitler, or the American Wild West, for example, are being chosen to entertain the children rather than for what would be important and useful to them to study. Teachers state candidly that ‘Kids find the Nazi period interesting. A lot of things happen. There is plenty of violence’ or ‘the problem with the Nazis is that they are sexy. Evil is fascinating’.¹⁷ There is also evidence that even within the topics studied pupils are not learning much. For example, one respondent to my quiz who said they had studied the Tudors still did not know who was queen when the Armada sailed. And, of all the subjects pupils should know something about it is Hitler and the second world war, whereas in one recent survey 73% of under 25 year olds did not know what D-day was, and in another survey half of 16-34 year olds were unaware that the Battle of Britain happened during the war.¹⁸

History teachers must know therefore, and presumably view with equanimity, that when the majority of their charges pass out of their hands they know almost as little history as when they came to them. And the majority of classroom teachers supported the policies that brought about this result. Some classroom history teachers did put up a fight against the corruption of their subject in the 1980s and lost their jobs over it, but they received little or no support from their colleagues.¹⁹ A survey of history teachers commissioned by the QCA in 1999 found an overwhelming majority was against the inclusion of a traditional and mainly political British history course for GCSE.²⁰ Given the choice between entertaining their pupils and educating them the decision of the classroom teachers is clear. History teachers are foursquare behind the curriculum which may yet carry their subject down the road to oblivion.

But with these caveats, if history teachers are only doing what they are trained to do, and if we accept the Ofsted reports that they are making a good job of it, then the problem must lie mainly with what they are being told to teach and how they have been instructed to teach it.

My search continued.

Lesson 3: history is now taught in topics

What quickly became clear is that history as I was taught it in the 1950s and 1960s and still teach it at university today – relatively comprehensive coverage lasting several centuries taken in chronological order - has completely disappeared in our schools. It has been replaced by the study of topics, narrow in subject matter and/or limited in time period - the innovation of the advocates of the so called ‘New History’ which started to gain the upper hand in the 1970s.

History teaching by topic now starts in primary school where, typically, 5-11 year olds are taught for example the Romans, the Tudors and either the Victorians or the post-1930 period; but not necessarily in that order. So ‘Britain since 1930’ can be followed by ‘Ancient Egypt’.²¹ At 11-14, pupils can be taught a bewildering array of topics. The National Curriculum website suggests an apparently random series of 22 topics, including titles (reported here with their original deplorable grammar and punctuation) such as: ‘Images of an age what can we learn from portraits 1500-1750?’; or ‘Snapshot 1900 what was British middle class life like?’²² And inside topics you find other topics. So that: ‘How and why did the Holocaust happen?’ includes the topic: ‘Why was Anne Frank forced to go into hiding?’ And the topics continue through GCSE. Candidates taking the AQA History A (Schools History Project) option, for example, would study medicine and public health from 10,000BC to the present day, the American West 1840-1895 and do two assignments on multicultural Britain and on local history, and that would be the sum total of their coverage of history in two years’ study.²³

At A level, under the new syllabuses introduced in 2008, AQA exam board students at AS level, for example, could study: 'Britain 1603-1642', and 'Britain 1629-42: the failure of absolutism'; and in the second year A2 level: 'British monarchy: the Crisis of State 1642-1689', and an assignment on a theme stretching over 100 years where choosing the 17th century would make sense. In other words, two years work entirely on the Stuart monarchy. Alternatively, students could really mix it up with topics such as: 'The Crusading Movement and the Latin East, 1095-1204'; 'A Sixties Revolution? British Society, 1959-1975'; and 'The Emergence of a Great Power? Spain, 1492-1556'.²⁴

You don't have to think about it too long to realise that teaching history by narrow topics has glaring weaknesses. Firstly, if narrative history is 'one damn thing after another', history by topic is 'one damn totally unrelated thing after another'. If 11-14 year old pupils are studying 'How and why did the Holocaust happen?' one week, and 'From Aristotle to the atom scientific discoveries that changed the world?' the next, the scope for bewilderment and confusion on their part is clearly considerable.²⁵ This is a weakness that may yet prove fatal. A year or so back, Scottish academic historians, alarmed that schools in Scotland were abandoning history teaching altogether, argued that the reason was 'that over the past 20 years history has lost most of its rigour and intellectual structure and ... fails to engage children because of its fundamental incoherence'.²⁶

With the abandonment of traditional history also went all hope of teaching an understanding of long-term change and of the chronological sweep of history, where one thing follows another with their causes and consequences. Traditional history taught where events and people (and indeed where the pupils studying the subject themselves) fitted into what David Starkey has called the 'map of time'.²⁷ Traditional history had a satisfying logic – it made sense. In contrast to the confusion that topics bring, the chronology of say: the ancien regime, followed by the French Revolution, followed by the rise and fall of Napoleon, followed by the forces of reaction gives a satisfying grasp of the ebb and flow of history. Nor do teachers seem to be obliged to put their topics in any chronological context. If it's not bang on the topic it's of no apparent interest. One of my students who got an A at A level studying Hitler did not know that Britain also fought in the second world war and had never heard of the Battle of Britain. From the point of view of understanding how history works studying a topic in splendid isolation is almost worthless. It certainly makes little or no contribution to helping students understand the world they live in which should be one of the great paybacks from studying history.

Interestingly the Americans had a good look at our history by topic and said - no thank you. They asked and answered the following question:

What is sacrificed when the historical overview is abandoned? Students are left without the historical sense that comes only from a familiarity with the broad sweep of history. Large gaps exist in a student's knowledge of the cultural markers that glue society together and provide a common basis of experience, understanding and communication. Without an "historical frame of reference," we will have lost, in the words of David Lowenthal, the optimism that history is assimilable, "that the story of humanity had a length and a form within which one could find one's bearings. With no such prop, students today are wholly at sea. History has no shape, no pattern, no consensually fixed guideposts ... Past scrutinized mainly in terms of fragmentary set topics cannot be viewed in their historical fullness, as many-sided, multifarious, often self-contradictory realms." ... The National History Standards declare, "Chronological thinking is at the heart of historical reasoning. Without a clear sense of historical time - time past, present, and future - students are bound to see events as one great tangled mess."²⁸

Most importantly, that history is now taught by topic brings us closer to explaining the ignorance of my students since it inevitably means yawning gaps in historical knowledge. Even the most brilliant pupils who master all the topics put

before them and get straight As in all their exams are going to be ignorant of most of history. Gaining an unrivalled mastery of, for example, 'How did the medieval church affect peoples [sic] lives' or 'Mughal India and the coming of the British, 1526-1857 how did the Mughal Empire rise and fall?' still almost inevitably means you don't know who Nelson was.

The problem is compounded by the scope for abuse of the system. Since each school is allowed to pick and choose this allows specialisation on certain topics over a prolonged period. The choice of topics might be because they are easier to teach, easier to pass exams in, are uncontroversial or, more likely and most worryingly, that they are simply the most entertaining. As the head of an exam board said recently: 'This is the entertainment age and they [pupils] are looking to be drawn in'.²⁹ For these reasons some topics have become the choice of a high proportion of schools across the country, and are studied year after year. Usually, the topics named in this regard are Hitler and the Tudors, but asked to name two topics they had studied the respondents to my freshers' quiz revealed that (out of the total of 371 topics mentioned) 32% were to do with war (or as one student put it 'Topic 1 – War, Topic 2 – Another war'); while the Nazis (or Natzis) were 14% of topics mentioned and the Tudors 8%. If my students are typical, at any one time you could walk into any history lesson in the country and you would have a better than one in three chance that the topic being studied would be either the first or second world war or the Nazis.

Indeed, with the skilful choice of topics a history teacher could teach nothing but the world wars and Hitler's Germany from aged 11 to 18, which makes the fact that the vast majority of my undergraduates did not know who the Duke of Wellington was, and a significant number thought Napoleon headed the British army at the battle of Waterloo, entirely explicable.³⁰ This is confirmed by a report in the *Sunday Telegraph* that out of a party of 12 secondary school children interviewed in Trafalgar Square only one knew whose statue stood on the top of the column. As one pupil put it: 'At primary school, I learnt a lot about the Second World War but since starting senior school I really haven't learnt anything new. We're doing the Second World War again so it's unfair to ask me who that is'.³¹ This problem is now acknowledged even by some in the HEE. Lang, for example, pointed out that at one examinations board it was possible at A level to do five out of six units on the Nazi period, and he feared that we will reach the situation where all that the history teachers themselves have done is the Nazis, so in turn that's what they will teach.³²

My next extraordinary discovery was that the advocates of teaching history by topic were well aware that it would lead to an ignorance of history. But they had a simple answer – a knowledge of history was unimportant. In other words, one element in the reason for our children's ignorance of history is that the HEE actively condones it.

If we apply the Great Man Theory of history to the degeneration of history teaching, responsibility rests largely with one man - the late John Fines - a teacher of history teachers and a leading architect of the New History. Fines, in fact, peddled a high-sounding line in sophistry, including a strange bundle of contradictions. For example, he had an enthusiasm for story-telling to children, while at the same time the whole thrust of his message was that 'we waste children's time by telling them things'. Fines was also someone who from his writings clearly had a very wide knowledge of history, yet he spent his career dedicated to seeing that the country's pupils would not emulate him. Writing in 1971, Fines argued that 'knowledge is in effect froth on the surface of the mind', only useful on a desert island where there were no libraries, or for quiz games.³³

Fines gained many disciples who enthusiastically took up the campaign against historical knowledge using equally specious arguments. One such is Alf Wilkinson of the Historical Association. It was probably true, Wilkinson said in 2005, that children knew less about history than their counterparts did in the 1960s and 1970s, but: 'What does it matter if they don't know the dates of the battle of Trafalgar if they know where to find the information?'³⁴ This is a

strange argument indeed, particularly coming from an educationalist. Logically, it is an attack on the acquisition of all knowledge. Why do you need to know where France is when you can look it up in an atlas? Why do you need to know how to change the fuse in a plug when you can look it up in a DIY manual? Historical knowledge is no different to any other type of knowledge, and a rough rule of thumb is that the more you have of it the better. People don't have time to look everything up, and indeed (without sounding too much like Donald Rumsfeld) you have to know you don't know something before you can look it up. For example, in 1917 Britain gave secret support to the Zionists for setting up a Jewish state.³⁵ In 1953 the British and Americans conspired on behalf of the oil companies to depose the democratically elected prime minister of Iran, ushering in a brutal autocracy.³⁶ These are pieces of historical knowledge which help to make sense of Arab attitudes to Britain today, but if you did not know them, as you read your morning paper, how or why would you look them up?

Obviously, we humans need to carry as much knowledge and understanding around in our heads as possible in order to make sense of the world around us and operate effectively within it. History knowledge, to say the least, is no exception. Indeed, wouldn't you expect history educationalists to be arguing that it has a vital role to play? Instead, they are denying its importance. Young people need to know for example that the right to vote had to be fought for. They might be more inclined to use it if they did. They need to know why, when, and how the welfare state was set up, how and why the political parties were formed. We need a working knowledge of history to read a quality newspaper, to better understand literature and the other arts, or, for example, why immigrants used to come from the West Indies or India or Pakistan but now come from eastern Europe. Indeed, those in charge of history teaching should be shouting the loudest that there is no area of life - politics, society, the economy, art, literature, science, sport - which is not enlightened, enriched and made more enjoyable and understandable by knowledge of its history. Instead they are arguing that a knowledge of history is unimportant. On the contrary a lack of historical knowledge means that you are an ill-informed, poorly-educated citizen, which at the moment is what our education system is producing - enthusiastically encouraged by the HEE.

Teaching history in narrow topics therefore explains my students' lack of historical knowledge. But why was history teaching broken up into topics? What drove intelligent educators into the perverse position of condemning our schoolchildren, and therefore in the long-run our society, to an ignorance of history?

I read on.

Lesson 4: there was an apparent need to teach history 'in depth' and skills in the use of primary sources

The reason that history had to be taught in topics was explained by Fines: 'the superficial scamper through the whole of history ... is a waste of time, a way of making history boring and an avoidance of doing real history, where true knowledge may be found: history in depth'; 'instead of learning the matter of history, children should learn to use historical skills and attitudes'.³⁷ He argued that 'history in school was to be as similar as possible to history ... as the best professionals practiced it'; 'the more pupils go into depth, the more professional they become ... the pupil acquires the expertise to "do history"'.³⁸ To Fines therefore: 'Using source-material and tackling the problems of evidence give a feeling of reality which second-hand history can rarely give.'³⁹ Clearly then the perceived need for study using primary sources to teach the skills of the professional historian to school children demanded the abandonment of traditional history and the innovation of the study 'in depth' of narrow discrete topics since it would not be possible to teach periods of hundreds of years of history via original sources - it would take too long.

The use of primary sources in school history teaching had been advocated by M. W. Keatinge, an Oxford

educationalist, as early as 1910, and again by F. C. Happold, in a book published in 1928, which contained most of the elements of what was to become the New History.⁴⁰ But these ideas gained little ground in their time, and the start of New History's rise to dominance dates from a short six page article by Mary Price entitled: 'History in danger', published in *History* (the journal of the Historical Association) in 1968.⁴¹ Price argued that history teaching was in crisis and to avoid it going the way of classics it had to move from teaching British to teaching world history, and to embrace the use of primary sources to stir curiosity 'as nothing else can'. Following hard on this article came the first publication of *Teaching History* (another Historical Association journal) in 1969, to disseminate the ideas of the New History.⁴² Then, in 1971 the Schools Council for Curriculum and Development (a quango formed in 1964 to devise and encourage innovative methods of teaching) set up a project to study and revise the history curriculum for 8-13 year olds. The following year came the Schools Council History Project for 13-16 year-olds, set up under the leadership of David Sylvester, a lecturer in education at the University of Leeds, but in which Fines had a key role and which provided him with a vehicle to put his ideas into practice.⁴³ A new curriculum was drawn up, apparently in response to what classroom teachers surveyed wanted, and within a decade or so the New History had virtually seen the complete overthrow of traditional history teaching. By 1985, HMI was talking of the importance of the 'progression in historical skills and stressed the importance of children working as historians'.⁴⁴ Finally, the ideas of the New History were installed in history syllabuses when the GCSE was introduced in 1986, and into the National Curriculum in 1991.

The process of the overthrow of traditional history teaching and the imposition of the New History was in fact an object lesson generally in the way we are governed. A self-selected group pushed through a revolution in the education of our children with virtually no outside input into the process but with huge, possibly irreversible, implications for our society and culture. Moreover, although there was controversy at the time the basic tenets of the New History were exposed to very little serious scrutiny, let alone a sustained theoretical critique, so it's worth making some obvious points here.

The whole concept of teaching school children to do 'real' history just like 'real' historians, as Fines was fond of phrasing it, was clearly based on a perverse view of what professional historians actually do, possibly based on the fact that so few of the new HEE had ever written any history (Fines had a PhD but never published any of it). Christine Counsell, senior lecturer in education at Cambridge University and an editor of *Teaching History*, argues today (in the typical prose of the HEE) that the 'curriculum developers produced and researchers analysed new cognitive domains that were deemed to be more closely derivative of the practice of the academic discipline itself'.⁴⁵ In fact, they were doing nothing of the sort. What Fines and others did was to invent a strange travesty of what historians do, which often amounted to activities such as painting, making posters, role playing, devising board games, acting out made up scenes from history and so on, usually done as group activities.

The most controversial of these new activities involved the manufacture of a hitherto unknown skill of historians which went under the name of 'empathy'.⁴⁶ The concept of empathy, which attempted to teach pupils 'What might it have been like to be someone I am not?', for example a Roman centurion or Martin Luther King, also emerged from the Schools History Project, and was successfully promoted with evangelical zeal.⁴⁷ To Jenkins and Brickley: 'Empathy is not an optional extra to historical understanding – it is historical understanding'.⁴⁸ Empathy, they argued, was similar to where pupils are asked to imagine they are a snowflake; in history lessons this was to translate into: 'put *yourself* into the mind set of the medieval prince'. Ambitious claims were also made by John Slater, an enthusiastic HMI, who wrote in 1988 that empathy would help us stop patronising the past, so that the 'historian is ...reluctant to see the past as aberrant or irrational'. In fact, Slater seemed to believe empathy could cure most of society's ills since it would also 'make us less likely to patronize our fellow human beings', 'choke back mockery, give condemnation second thoughts, halt prejudice in its tracks, put the break on violence'.⁴⁹ Another enthusiast,

John Cairns, maintained that for pupils to reach a significant level of empathy they had to overcome ‘a lack of self-other discrimination’.⁵⁰

No other aspect of the New History held itself up to contempt more than empathy, and the view of history as ‘pretend you’re a Roman centurion’ was regularly pilloried in the popular press. More importantly, serious writers like Ann Low-Ber were just as damning. Writing in 1989, she argued: ‘The teaching and examining of empathy is based on little research or practical experience. The development of this idea within the Schools History Project has never been made fully public, nor has it been subjected to outside review and criticism. Recent attempts at research into how pupils develop the concept of empathy are peppered with warnings about the tentative and inconclusive nature of the findings’.⁵¹

Empathy was eventually laughed out of court, and disappeared from the official history curriculum in 1997, although it is still alive and well in many current textbooks.⁵² In Chris Corin and Terry Fiehn’s A level textbook, *Communist Russia under Lenin and Stalin*, for example, the supposedly advanced level history students are asked to pretend they are a Russian peasant or a Communist party activist.⁵³ In Hite and Hinton’s, *Weimar & Nazi Germany* (see Figure 1), pupils are required to assume the character of Hitler or Himmler or a fictitious ‘ordinary German’, and explain their feelings towards the SA and their reaction to the Night of the Long Knives. In Barbara Mervyn’s, *The reign of Elizabeth: England 1558-1603*, students have to make believe they are a foreign banker interviewing the queen, or they are a tabloid journalist.⁵⁴ It hardly needs saying that professional historians seldom feel the need to empathise with their subjects. We are interested in motives; but while: ‘Why did Napoleon invade Russia?’ is a subject for history: ‘How must it have felt to have been Napoleon during his retreat from Moscow?’ is a question for historical fiction writers. And it should not go unremarked that the use of empathy in history teaching implies to pupils that history can be made up.

Unfortunately for the advocates of the New History, committed to doing school history like ‘real’ historians, when academics are actually doing history virtually the only activities they undertake are reading and writing. Historians, at least in their professional capacity, not only do they not empathise with their *dramatis personae*, they also do not role play, paint posters or play board games. Neither is researching and writing history a group activity; it’s almost always a solitary vigil in archives, libraries or a study. Even the idea that the only ‘real’ history is the use and interpretation of primary sources is wrong. Some professional historians make a good career and a useful contribution never having come near a primary source. Theoretical or synthetic work can be as valuable as research into the original documents, and some of the most respected and influential history books written in recent decades use only secondary (what Fines disparages as second-hand) sources – Eric Hobsbawm’s *Age of Revolution* or Paul Kennedy’s *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* come immediately to mind.

As a matter of fact the process of writing ‘real’ history usually starts with a literature review and reading all the secondary sources before any primary material is touched. In its bastardised form, school history seems to start and end with the primary sources. Today approximately 40% of GCSE examination marks and about a quarter of the marks for A level are given for answering questions on sources, and apparently it is possible to gain maximum marks in an A level sources exam question on the second world war ‘without necessarily knowing how the events of the war unfolded, who was on whose side, or indeed who won’.⁵⁵

School children can only play at being historians and to suggest that they are being taught to use primary historical sources in a meaningful way is a ridiculous conceit. How many among the most brilliant A level students know their way around the National Archives and could turn State Papers Domestic into a piece of history? A sizeable proportion of my first year university undergraduates are unable to marshal evidence from basic textbooks and write

a passable essay, never mind use primary sources. Yet faith in the wisdom of teaching skills and working with primary sources in schools remains for the HEE undimmed. Sean Lang argued recently: 'Pupils, even very young pupils, can achieve tremendous results by working directly with archival holdings and historical materials. Of course, you cannot learn everything about Tudor life from looking at a probate, but you can learn an awful lot, and you can certainly make a very good start'.⁵⁶ But the fallacy of Lang's approach must have been pointed out to him because he goes on: 'Some will object that we are not in the business of raising little historians. I think this makes the mistake of equating historians with academic historians, and after all most university history graduates are not going to pursue post-graduate historical research, so you could say exactly the same of university courses'. In fact, you can say exactly the same about university history courses. As a general rule they do not use primary sources and they are not designed to produce professional historians, so the question as to why we are attempting to train primary school children in the professional historian's skills remains. Researching and writing history and particularly wading through what can often seem like an infinity of primary material is not easy, is often an unrewarding slog and, unless you are a gifted amateur, done well requires years of training and practice. As someone who has found it difficult enough to teach PhD students the use of primary sources, the difficulty of doing the job in any meaningful way with, say, 14 year olds, just seems risible.

This is not to say that primary sources should not be used in teaching history as stimulus material. I can remember in the 1970s going to the local County Record Office and photocopying 18th century parish registers and enclosure maps and using them with my A level students to very good effect to bring home to them the fundamental origin of demographic or agricultural history. This occasional exposure to primary sources fitted well into a traditional economic history course but it would have seemed an absurdity, and still does, that it should become the purpose of history teaching, as it is with the New History.

Indeed, my parish registers and enclosure maps were photocopies of actual primary sources, but in the New History way usually pupils are fed pre-digested and pre-packaged snippets in textbooks, which even then are often bowdlerized, or in the words of one textbook: 'adapted or abbreviated to make them accessible to all students, while preserving the sense of the original'.⁵⁷ Outrageously, many of the textbooks go one step further and simply make the sources up. As can be seen from Figure 2, Byrom *et al*, in their textbook for 11 to 14 year olds, obviously didn't have handy quotes from leading imperialists like Cecil Rhodes for their topic on empire so they simply invented them, or as they say - 'tried to imagine what they would tell us if they were to come back from the dead'.⁵⁸ In A level textbooks too a lot of the sources are fabricated. Cartoons of characters with bubbles coming out of their mouths (more suitable you might think for instructing kindergarten children than 18 year old adults) containing speeches they never made are common practice, as in Figures 1 and 3. Again, Figure 4, from Hite and Hinton's, *Weimar & Nazi Germany*, shows posters that purport to be original but are somewhat suspiciously written in English.⁵⁹ At no time are the students informed of which 'sources' are real and which are made up, and again the easy implication for them to make is that history can simply be invented. That is to say, we have embraced the nightmare world of the philosophy of post-modernism, where, as Beverley Southgate happily puts it: 'historians roam freely over the past, mingling "fact" with "fiction"'.⁶⁰

The arguments against the New History don't stop there. Source based history is also easy to teach badly, because among other things, as already touched on, the scope for confusing the pupils is high. But guess what? - confusion among pupils was welcomed, even sought after, by Fines, who believed that learning history was an 'essentially messy and disorganised process'; 'messy, inchoate, slow, backwards and forwards, a constant struggle and never, never clear'.⁶¹ Contemporary history textbooks illustrate Fines' viewpoint to the full. As well researched, painstaking and cleverly put together as most are, the pages of the textbooks for the 11-14 year olds, for GCSE and, most lamentably, A level students, are nonetheless a chaotic combination of: maps, diagrams, 'timelines', graphs, posters,

cartoons, photographs, potted biographies of leading figures using bullet points, goblets from original documents and newspapers, or from

Figure 1

How significant was the Night of the Long Knives?

The Night of the Long Knives marked a major shift in the development of Hitler's dictatorship. In different ways, he had triumphed over both the Left and the Right. He had tamed his radicals in the SA and won the support of the elite, most crucially the army. The generals were conciliated by the weakening of the army's rival, the SA, and a promise that they would retain a monopoly of armed force. They hoped that with the SA weakened the army's influence would increase. Some generals proposed the army take an oath to tie Hitler and the army together. So, when Hindenburg died, all soldiers took a new oath of personal loyalty to their Führer, replacing the traditional oath of loyalty to the constitution (see page 171). But the generals' plan backfired. As Kershaw has recently argued (in *Hitler*, p. 525), 'Far from creating a dependence of Hitler on the army, the oath marked the symbolic moment where the army chained itself to the Führer.' It was the SS, not the army, which made the real gains. In July 1934 it became independent of the SA, under Hitler's personal and direct command.

The greatest winner of all was undoubtedly Hitler. He had gained the acceptance of the legalised murder of opponents. This served to intimidate future opponents and to embolden him. The traditional organs of the state had acquiesced in (accepted) his actions. Most of the German people accepted the view that as their Führer he would act only for the good of the nation. The Night of the Long Knives showed that the new state was not to be a traditional authoritarian one, but a new dictatorship, where the rule of law was to be replaced by the dictates of one man – a man who, contrary to appearances in 1933, had a horrific vision of the future.

■ 10D The significance of the Night of the Long Knives

ACTIVITY

Choose one of the following:

- a) an associate of Röhm who escaped the death list
- b) an associate of Papen
- c) a Reichswehr general
- d) a German Socialist in exile
- e) Himmler
- f) Hitler
- g) an ordinary German (you may decide what type).

Using the sources and your own knowledge, explain this individual's feelings before June 1934 about the SA and his or her reaction to the Night of the Long Knives.



Source: John Hite with Chris Hinton *Weimar & Nazi Germany*, London, John Murray, (2000).

'real' history books, and a modest amount of the authors' own text, all scattered around the pages as insets or windows. As can be seen in Figures 4, 5 and 6 the pages seem to take inspiration from the Beano or the Daily Star; and note how similar they look whether aimed at 11 year olds, GCSE or A level candidates.

There are also more practical objections to the New History. One of these is that in-depth sources-based history is time consuming, which as I have said is why it has to be taught in topics.⁶² As the Tory party, History Practitioners Advisory Team report argued recently: 'the sheer amount of time source work takes up causes resentment because it takes away from what young people want above all from history – to find out what actually happened'.⁶³ Yet Fines was happy to allow for 'a seemingly endless process of slow groping' after truth among pupils; while he argued that teachers must 'allow the process of discovery to work itself out'.⁶⁴ But are the weeks spent on the battle of Marston Moor, or the assassination of JFK, or designing a monument to Thomas Clarkson, noted above, justified, both in terms of what the students get out of it and the preparation time of the teacher? Moreover, and incredibly in view of his support for their use, it is Sean Lang's opinion that: 'By and large they [pupils] loathe sources.'⁶⁵

A yet more fundamental problem is that, even in the doubtful event that school children were to be successfully taught to become proficient in the use of primary historical sources, what has been achieved? They are merely acquiring a skill that 95% of them (at its most generous even allowing for the popularity of genealogy) will probably never use again. What is the point of teaching our children the skills of the professional historian? What benefit is this to society? Or if it is argued that history in depth teaches generic skills, like literacy, communication, team work, the detection of bias; or, just as often, how to paint a picture or act out a role - the obvious danger for history is that many school subjects can do these things. It's

bad politics because history can no longer argue it is doing something unique. For example, in another current textbook, which contains a range of suggested activities suitable for history classes, in a typical case the students are to be given brief extracts from the speeches of Hitler and Stalin urging various sections of German and Soviet society (such as the middle class) to support them. Based on the speeches, the students are required to draw posters with coloured pens to appeal to these social groups - in 25 minutes.⁶⁶ A difficult task. But assuming the students to be successful the 'learning outcomes' of the textbook state that they would be able to: 1.) critically analyse the main values of a movement or organisation; 2.) translate ideas into visual form; and 3.) evaluate a group's appeal to different social constituencies. The point is that all three skills could be equally well taught in virtually any other arts or social science lesson, including citizenship. What the pupils are not learning is any history. The New History has lost sight of the subject's (as my marketing colleagues would put it) 'unique selling proposition', which is the study of the past. No other discipline can claim to study past politics, past society, the past economy and so on, and thereby offer a distinctive understanding of the way the world works now.

Another problem is that along with the teaching of sources has come a range of often invented historical concepts and skills, which would also appear to be out of line with the competencies that should be expected of school children. The National Curriculum (a poorly written, jargon ridden and often incoherent document) makes pretentious demands on pupils that they would seem to have little hope of fulfilling. At Key Stage 3, for example, 11-14 year old pupils should, the National Curriculum says, 'begin to devise and refine their own questions to structure an investigation, developing their own hypotheses and selecting and deploying evidence to reach and justify their own conclusions. Pupils can either use their acquired knowledge and understanding to suggest hypotheses, or can suggest hypotheses at the start of the topic based on their own assumptions and values, which they then test against the evidence'. How many 11 year olds, a high proportion of them we are often told can barely read or write are capable of formulating an historical hypothesis and testing it?⁶⁷ But then much of the National Curriculum, as regards history at least, makes little sense. For example, pupils, it says, need to understand the concept of

'Significance', which it then tries to explain. 'Statements about significance are interpretations that may be based on contestable judgements

Figure 2

The rulers

This map shows the British Empire in 1900. Around the edges you can read about some of the people who helped to make the Empire. These people really existed but they never spoke these exact

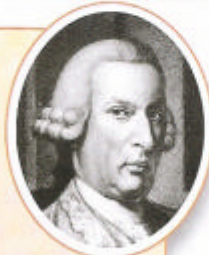
words. We have researched their lives and we have tried to **imagine** what they would tell us if they were to come back from the dead. Some of their ideas and actions seem shocking to us today.

James McLeod (1836–1894)



“I was a policeman. My father was a British army officer but I was raised in Canada. I joined the Mounted Police – the Mounties – in 1873. We Mounties were proud of the way we treated the natives, or Indians as we called them. In the United States of America thousands of white soldiers were killed in wars with the Indians. In Canada it was different: hardly a single Mountie was killed by an Indian. We gave them good land to live on, as well as tools and animals and teachers if they wanted them. I am proud of the way the British Empire treated the natives well in Canada.”

William Beckford (1709–1770)



“I was a merchant. I was born in Jamaica in the West Indies. My family owned huge sugar plantations there. We bought black slaves from Africa and we sold the sugar cane they grew. That is what the Empire was all about: trade and riches! It helped us all: slaves became Christians, worked hard and were sure of a home and food. Planters became rich. I was a millionaire. I moved back to England and increased my fortune by trading from London.”

Cecil Rhodes (1853–1902)



“I was a businessman and politician. I left England to live in southern Africa in 1870. I made a fortune by mining for gold and diamonds. But that was not enough for me: I wanted to change history. We British were the best people in the world so I wanted us to control as much of the world as possible! I made a mining deal with an African chief. When his tribe rose up against my men we crushed them and took their lands. From that time on a new nation was born. It was called Rhodesia. I was proud to have part of the mighty British Empire named after me.”



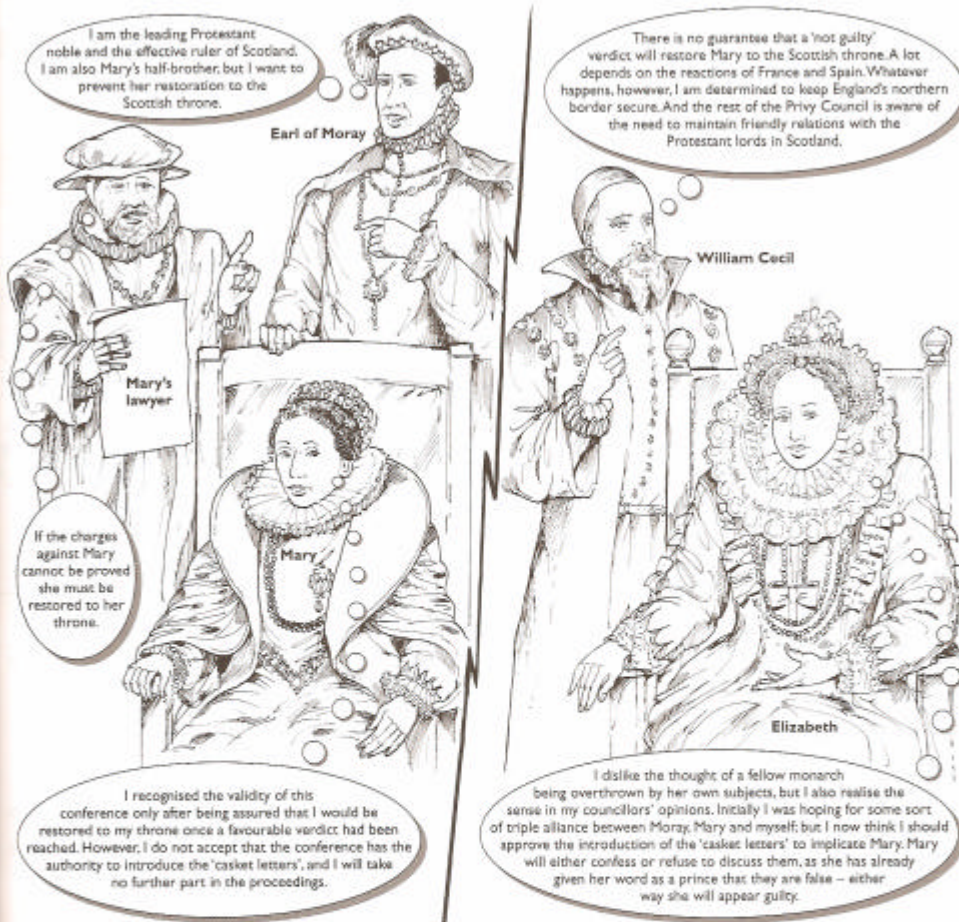
Source: Jamie Byrom, Christine Counsell, Michael Riley and Paul Stephens Wood, *Changing Minds: Britain 1500-1750*, Harlow: Longman (1997).

Figure 3

■ 18A The views of the leading influences on what happened at the York Conference

177

WAS MARY, QUEEN OF SCOTS, A MAJOR THREAT?



ACTIVITY

- 1 Was Elizabeth's decision about what to do with Mary the same as the solution you advocated in Question 2 on p. 176? Do you think she made the right choice?
- 2 In a group discuss the following statements:
 - a) The York Conference demonstrates the skill of Elizabeth's council in securing a legal solution to a complex and dangerous problem.
 - b) The York Conference was a cynical propaganda exercise in which the law was used for political ends.
- 3 Write a brief newspaper report on the York Conference under the title: 'Verdict no surprise'.

TALKING POINT

Is Source 18.3 fair? Is it based on hindsight alone, or is it also speculative?

Source: Barbara Mervyn, *The reign of Elizabeth: England 1558-1603*, London: Hodder Murray, (2001).

Figure 4

FOCUS ROUTE

- 1 List the range of reasons why people voted for the Nazis.
- 2 Which of these reasons do you consider the most important?
- 3 How have historians' interpretations changed in recent years?

SOURCE 7.23 Nazi publication, *Der Betriebs-Stürmer*, 1931

The years 1914-18 involved the destruction of the German Reich's economic pre-eminence and thus the freedom of German labour. November 1918 did not result in the deposition [overthrow] of the FEUDAL lords to the benefit of the workers. Instead the 9th November brought the defeat of Germany as a state. But the German worker paid the price.

His masters today are the irresponsible, faceless, international big capitalists and the Jews of the banking world ... National Socialism demands a transformation from the utterly unscrupulous profit-motivated economy to an economy geared to need.

SOURCE 7.25
A Nazi election poster, 1932:
"We want work and bread!"

E Why did people support the Nazis?

ACTIVITY

We will begin to investigate the reasons why some people voted for the Nazis by examining Nazi propaganda in the form of leaflets and posters.

- 1 Draw and complete a table like the one below, using Sources 7.23-32.

Source	Group directed at	Their grievances	What the Nazis offered	Other comments

- 2 What overall conclusions can you reach from these sources?
- 3 How valuable are these sources as evidence of why people voted for the Nazis?

SOURCE 7.24
A leaflet from July 1932

**GERMAN WOMEN! GERMAN MOTHERS!
Our Young People Defiled.**

The present Prussian Welfare Minister ... has confirmed ... that in a German Grammar School for Girls 65 per cent of the girls had experienced sexual intercourse and 47 per cent had some form of sexual disease ... The number of sexual offences and cases of incest pile up in the most gruesome manner! ...

This is the result of the many years during which our people, and in particular our youth, have been exposed to a flood of muck and filth, in word and print, in the theatre and in the cinema. These are the result of the systematic Marxist destruction of the family ...

The National Socialists must win the election so that they can put a halt to this Marxist handiwork, so that once again women are honoured and valued, and so that the cinema and the theatre contribute to the inner rebuilding of the nation.

German women and mothers, do you want your honour to sink still further?

Do you want your daughters to be playthings and the objects of sexual lust?

If NOT, then vote for a National Socialist majority on July 51st.

Then vote for

LIST TWO

- HITLER-MOVEMENT
- NAT.SOCIAL GERMAN WORKERS PARTY



SOURCE 7.26
A 1924 Nazi poster:
'First bread! Then reparations'



SOURCE 7.27
A 1932 Nazi election poster showing Marxism as the guardian angel of big business. The angel has SPD on his helmet - the Nazis called the moderate Socialists Marxists to discredit them



Source: John Hite with Chris Hinton, *Weimar & Nazi Germany*, London: John Murray, (2000).

Figure 5

What should be done with the King?

In 1788 Louis was prepared to try reform and was hailed as a hero when he called the Estates General. When many of its members formed the National Assembly in June 1789, Louis had little choice but to go along with it. The revolutionary leaders wanted to share power with him. The question was whether Louis really accepted the changes the Revolution had made, or whether he was biding his time, hoping for help from abroad.

In June 1791 events took an unexpected turn.



SOURCE 1 The royal family creep out to the waiting coach

ROYAL FAMILY ESCAPES!

Paris, 21 June 1791

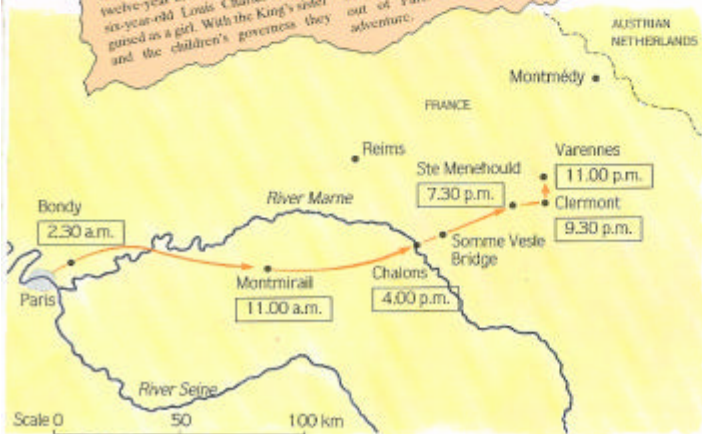
It was 7 a.m. precisely this morning when the King's manservant at the Tuileries, Lemoine, drew back the curtains of the King's bed. He was astonished to find the bed empty! Although closely guarded in their palace, the royal family has managed to embark on a daring escape.

A source close to the palace has said that the Queen's Swedish admirer, Count Fersen, planned the escape.

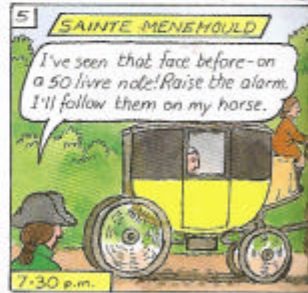
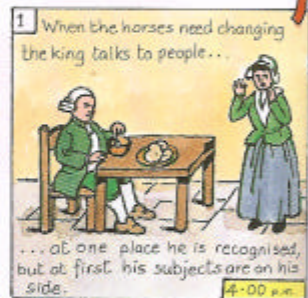
Last night, towards 10 o'clock, it is believed that the Queen quietly woke children's bedroom and quietly woke twelve-year-old Marie Thérèse. Then six-year-old Louis Charles was disguised as a girl. With the King's sister and the children's governess they then slipped down a hidden stairway to the courtyard where Fersen had a coach waiting.

Queen Marie Antoinette, it is said, then returned to her bedroom so that people would not be suspicious. The King crept out of the palace to the coach soon after 11 p.m., disguised as a servant!

The Queen disguised herself as a governess. She had a narrow escape when the Commander of the National Guard, Lafayette, passed by her but failed to recognise her. It is believed the Queen was unnerved by the experience, lost her way and arrived late at the coach. But within minutes the escapades were heading out of Paris on their dangerous adventure.



SOURCE 2 A map of the royal family's route



Source: Colin Shephard, Chris Hinton, John Hite and Tim Lomas, *Societies in Change*, London: Hodder Murray (1992).

Figure 6

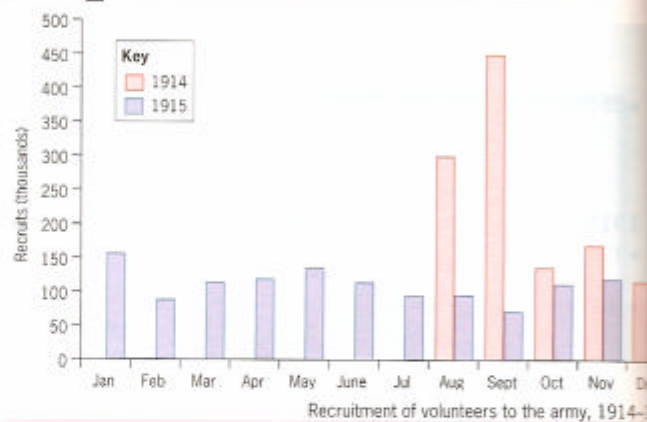
Recruitment and conscription

When war broke out Britain had only a small professional army. It needed a large one very quickly. The government began a massive recruitment drive, with posters, leaflets, recruitment offices in every town and stirring speeches by government ministers.

There was already a strong anti-German feeling in the country. The press strengthened it further with regular stories of German atrocities – babies butchered in Belgium, nurses murdered and, most famously of all, the German factory where they supposedly made soap from boiled-up corpses.

The recruitment campaign was highly successful. Half a million signed up in the first month. By 1916 over two million had been enlisted (see Source 2).

SOURCE 2



- 1 Look at Sources 3–5. Describe the method each poster uses to encourage men to join up.
- 2 Draw up a list of arguments for and against this statement: 'Conscription was fairer than voluntary recruitment.'
- 3

PROMPT 2

Make notes about how recruitment to the army affected civilians. Include notes about:

- voluntary recruitment
- conscription
- conscripts
- family life.

SOURCE 3



A 1914 recruitment poster. It features Lord Kitchener, a former successful general who became Secretary of State for War and the figurehead of the recruitment campaign.

SOURCE 4



A 1915 recruitment poster.

SOURCE 5



A 1915 recruitment poster.

about events, issues and people, and are often related to the value systems of the period in which the interpretation was produced.’⁶⁸ On the use of evidence the National Curriculum notes that: ‘Knowledge of the past is based on evidence derived from sources and depends on the questions asked and the sources available rather than making prior assumptions about the validity and reliability of the historical sources used’. I have no idea what this gobbledegook means but teachers are expected to make use of it when teaching 11 year olds.

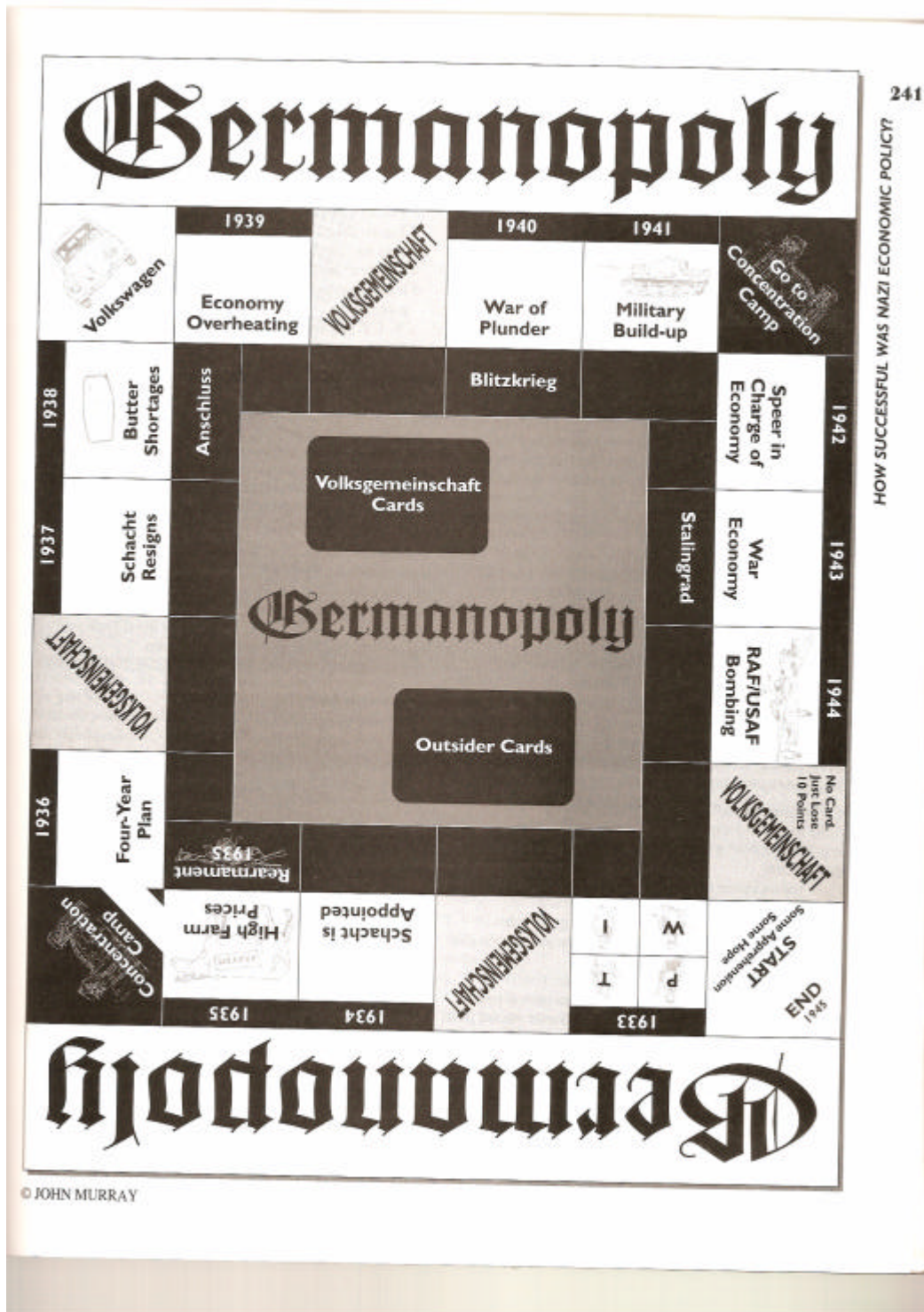
What else has been sacrificed at the altar of the New History? Well, it is yet another paradox of skills based history teaching that the most useful (albeit generic) skill of them all, essay writing, is neglected. The HMI, Slater, scoffed at essay writing as ‘a very eccentric literary form’, which explains in part why of all the pretentious history skills listed to be taught in the National Curriculum you will not find one which amounts to: ‘write a good essay’.⁶⁹ In Ben Walsh’s GCSE textbook, *Modern World History*, for example, nowhere are the pupils required to write much, and never to write an essay.⁷⁰ In A level textbooks too, in Corin and Fiehn’s, *Communist Russia under Lenin and Stalin*, for example, where writing is required it is usually only one sentence or one paragraph; such as: ‘Write a list of the aspects of Lenin’s character and personality that you think contributed to his success’. In the handful of essays required, these might start with essay plans drawn up by a group of students, or written after rearranging cards with the suggested contents of each paragraph written on them.⁷¹ In Hite and Hinton’s book, students are invited to undertake a wide variety of about 100 ‘activities’, only two of which require the students to write a full essay and on both occasions they are more or less told what to include. Another time they are given an essay writing exercise but not asked to write the essay, and elsewhere they are asked to ‘plan or write’ an essay.⁷² In Mervyn’s, *Reign of Elizabeth*, too, students are required to undertake around 80 activities only three of which could be described as writing an essay.⁷³

Perhaps it’s worth noting what has replaced essay writing in history teaching. A typical activity in Walsh’s GCSE textbook, for example, would be asking the pupils to draw a copy of a bonfire and label the sticks with factors that made the first world war possible.⁷⁴ In A level textbooks such as Mervyn’s, students are asked to draw up lists, fill in tables, or, as a group, ‘brainstorm’ ideas to justify a proposition.⁷⁵ In Hite and Hinton’s, *Weimar & Nazi Germany*, students have variously to draw spider diagrams, or draw a ‘left wing’ caricature of an SA man; while group activities include one based on the radio programme, *Just a Minute*, where pupils are asked to talk for 30 seconds without deviation, hesitation or repetition on, for example, why the Nazis came to power; or they play a board game invented by the authors called ‘Germanopoly’ (see Figure 7); or they have to stage a mock trial on - ‘Who killed Weimar democracy?’ - and play the roles of judge, defendants, prosecutors and jury.⁷⁶

The nonsense of down-grading essay writing is that, if history teachers were concerned for their pupils to be doing ‘real’ history, the essay, in the extended form of journal articles or book chapters, happens to be how most ‘real’ history is produced. So it is another irony of the New History, a movement whose avowed aim was to get pupils doing history closer to how the professional historians did it, actually took them further away. Whereas a pupil under the traditional regime, who would be reading a variety of books and writing essays based on this activity, could pass almost seamlessly into doing historical research and writing journal articles, today there is a yawning gap between their supposed expertise in group activity, role playing and poster drawing to doing ‘real’ history. When I was doing my A levels we would have to write an essay a fortnight in history (aside from those for economics and geography), which meant, I would guess, I wrote about 25 in total over two years. This skill stood me in good stead at university, as a post-graduate, a teacher and an historian, but it would have been equally valuable had I gone into business, the civil service, the professions or journalism as the basis for writing: memos, briefs, papers, reports or articles. More than ever, today A levels are a preparation for a university career, where history students will be asked above all to

read

Figure 7



Source: John Hite with Chris Hinton *Weimar & Nazi Germany*, London, John Murray, (2000).

'real' history books and articles and write essays. Current A level history teaching does not prepare students for this, which is why most universities now have to offer formal or informal remedial tuition in essay writing and other study skills to their first year undergraduates.

Another devalued and neglected skill in New History teaching is that other main activity of 'real' historians – reading. In all the 11-14 year old, GCSE or (even more deplorably) A level textbooks, mentioned above, the bite-sized bits of reading on offer are clearly designed for students with a short concentration span. Moreover, nowhere do these textbooks encourage students to read further. As the History Practitioners Advisory Team put it recently: 'One of the saddest aspects of the all-pervasive influence of the examination has been the proliferation of textbooks and examination guides geared in fine detail to the specific requirements of particular examination papers. This has meant that books no longer carry any information except that which is absolutely necessary to pass a particular examination paper'.⁷⁷ Although A level (though not the GCSE) textbooks usually come with a bibliography, not only are the students not encouraged to read the books cited, they are actively discouraged from reading anything not contained in the textbook itself. The authors usually maintain that their book 'contains everything you need for examination success and more'.⁷⁸ The implications of this are that, if the prescription of their textbooks is followed, pupils studying the new 'real' history will never encounter books that 'real' historians have written.

One justification for the New History put forward by Fines and his followers was, as we noted above, that it would enthuse students for the subject. This hope can be dismissed very easily since, according to a recent QCA report, 40% of pupils leave primary school with a negative attitude to history and many 'have forgotten much of what they learned in history and can bring to mind little more than the names of some of the topics or periods they have encountered'; and, also as noted above, over two-thirds give up history at the earliest opportunity in secondary school.⁷⁹ Of the minority that soldier on it has to be reported that the universities are, to a sad extent, not being passed on enthusiastic students with a thirst for knowledge, able to make sense of undigested primary sources, able to think for themselves with critical and enquiring minds - to say nothing of being able to formulate an hypothesis and test it against the evidence. The most noticeable skill many of my students have acquired is how to gain the highest marks in assessments by doing the minimum amount of work. As my quiz revealed, the majority of undergraduates are not only ignorant of history, they lack the motivation to do anything about it. Only 77% of my first year undergraduates stated they had read a book in the previous year and, in amongst Harry Potter or the autobiographies of celebrities, only two of the books they named were history books. If our children don't get history at school, they don't get it.

So history is taught in isolated topics because of the perceived need for schoolchildren to acquire the supposed skills of the professional historian by studying history in depth using so called primary sources. But two questions remained for me – why was the transformation in history teaching thought necessary by its proponents, and how were they so successful in their mission? First we need to look at what cannot have been the reason in either case.

Lesson 5: traditional history was not failing

The emerging HEE's answer to the question as to why traditional history had to be replaced was that it was failing and in decline.⁸⁰ This proposition however was a myth initially perpetrated in Mary Price's 1968 article. Price argued that 'the tendency for half the population of secondary schools to drop the subject after three years seems to

be increasing'.⁸¹ But she offered no evidence for this assertion; the only evidence of a problem was a survey in 1966 which revealed that a high proportion of those leaving school at 15 put history high on the list of 'useless and boring' subjects. But these early leavers were not those choosing what O levels to take anyway, and moreover Price admitted that there was no over-all diminution in numbers taking O and A level GCE history, and there was steady maintenance of the size of history departments at universities. Yet the myth of the failure of traditional history teaching took a strong hold which continues down to the present day. Alison Kitson, a lecturer in History Education at the Institute of Education, for example, recently offered the by now seemingly self-evident truth that in the 1960s:

Pupils were bored in history lessons, they were not convinced of any good reason why they should study it any longer than they had to and there was a real danger that history would go the way of Latin, taught to a small minority of pupils in private and grammar schools.

What rescued history from this fate was a movement which focused on what it was like to be a historian as well as on the content itself. This turned history from an exercise in acquiring and memorising facts into a dynamic and engaging activity ... we don't want to go back to the bad old days when kids were bored to death and dropped history at the first opportunity.⁸²

No mention or explanation then as to why in the 'bad old days' that we should not go back to 50% of pupils gave up history at the first opportunity while today the 'dynamic and engaging' subject encourages 68% to do so.

Looking at the facts rather than the myth, Tables 2 and 3 show that Price's admission that there was no over-all diminution in numbers taking O and A level GCE actually disguised the fact of a healthy growth. Although there was a slight reduction in those taking O level history compared to the total of all subjects taken, the absolute numbers taking the exam increased overall by 26% in the 1960s (the first decade for which figures are available), two or three times faster than in the 1970s and 1980s, while numbers were in decline in the 1990s (although this decline has been arrested recently). Equally, Price had no right to argue that history was in danger of going the way of classics. From 1960 to the time she was writing, candidates taking history O level had increased by 20%, while those taking Latin had fallen by 6%. The A level picture was even brighter. As Table 3 shows, numbers sitting A level history more than doubled in the 1960s and represented an increased share of all A levels sat: this growth was far more rapid than in the 1970s and 1980s, and a complete contrast to the abject decline, similar to that in GCSE numbers, in the 1990s.

How then, against the evidence, did the advocates of the New History manage to dish the traditionalists and win such a complete victory? The first answer is - by an unrelenting chorus of misrepresentation and propaganda (easily detectable by any pupil who has learnt a key skill of the New History). Again, there is another irony in that Fines and his followers, whom no-one could doubt had a passion for history, and who must have been taught history the traditional way, now set about traducing it at every turn. Traditional history, they shouted, was: just 'a corpus of information' which involved 'cumulative memorising of a body of facts'; rote learning particularly of dates; learning the kings and queens of England; it was knowledge for its own sake; it was teaching Whig history and the onward march of progress; it was a boring 'trundle through the ages'; it was 'chalk and talk'; it was 'just about great men or politics'; or it was, as Daniel Burton (the BBC's history teacher of the year award winner in 2007) put it recently - 'the long narrative of great men, great battles and Great Britain'.⁸³

All of this is a gross distortion of the truth. Here are a selection of O and A level exam questions (among hundreds that could have been produced) from the supposed bad old days of history teaching:

In what ways was Norman England unlike Anglo-Saxon England? (*Oxford and Cambridge Schools*

Examination Board, GCE O level, Paper III English Outlines, 1066-1603, July 1951, Question 3).

What did the Friars contribute to English life? (*Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board, GCE A level, II English History Outlines, 878-1919, June 1953, Q 7).*

In what ways was England more civilized at the end than at the beginning of the twelfth century? (*Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board, GCE A level, II English History Outlines, 878-1919, June 1952, Q 5).*

What in your view is the significance of the Peasants' Revolt for the historian of rural England? (*Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board, GCE A level, II English History Outlines, 878-1939, June 1966, Q 15).*

'The golden age of enterprise'. Do you consider this an accurate description of the Elizabethan age? (*Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board, GCE O level, Paper III English Outlines, 1066-1603, July 1951, Q 17).*

Why was Parliament not reformed in the eighteenth century? (*Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board, GCE A level, II English History Outlines, 878-1919, June 1952, Q 19).*

How would you account for the fact that although slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1834 harsh conditions of employment persisted in Britain until after that date? (*AEB British Economic and Social History, Advanced Level, Paper II 1851-1960, June 1969, Q 10).*

In what ways did the fear of Russia influence British policy during the period 1815 to 1878? (*Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board, GCE O level, Paper III English Outlines, 1688-1878, July 1951, Q 14).*

Analyse the factors contributing to the growth of trade unions in the period 1850-1914. (*University of London, Advanced Level, British Economic History I, Summer 1965, Q13).*

Did the rise of the Labour Party make the decline of the Liberal Party inevitable? (*Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board, GCE A level, II English History Outlines, 878-1939, June 1966, Q 40).*

Outline the events leading to the general strike. Why did it collapse? What were its results? (*Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board, GCE O level, Paper III English Outlines, 1914-1951, June 1968, Q 4).*

'The creation of the Welfare State is the great continuous theme of twentieth-century English politics', Discuss. (*Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board, GCE A level, II English History Outlines, 878-1939, June 1965, Q 39).*

Can you justify British foreign policy in the 1930s? (*Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board, GCE A level, II English History Outlines, 878-1939, June 1965, Q 41).*

Note that there is not a king or queen, a great man or a great battle in sight in any of these questions (although of

course questions on all of these could be found); no question required any particular need to learn dates, and rote learning of a body of facts was unlikely to get you a good mark since the students are asked for opinions as much as facts. Although the New History advocates were successful in posing the issue as 'skills versus knowledge', the questions here were not just asking for knowledge but required analysis, were open ended and demanded the pupils' own points of view. Even at O level – why? what? how? justify, discuss, was what was required of the candidates and the good students had plenty of scope to demonstrate not just their knowledge but their understanding and analytical ability. Moreover, the questions forced students to study a wide range of subjects that had relevance to their own lives: the growth of trade unions, parliamentary democracy, the welfare state, and so on.

But none of this evidence, which they clearly had available to them, deterred the detractors of traditional history. The HMI, Slater, for example, also recycled the myth that history had been increasingly unpopular amongst pupils, and self-confidently pooh-poohed traditional history in a much admired and quoted passage.

Content was largely British, or rather Southern English; Celts looked in to starve, emigrate or rebel; the North to invent looms or work in mills; abroad was of interest once it was part of the Empire; foreigners were either sensible allies, or rightly defeated. Skills – did we even use the word? – were mainly those recalling accepted facts about famous dead Englishmen, and communicated in a very eccentric literary form, the examination length essay. It was inherited consensus, based on largely hidden assumptions.⁸⁴

Fines, in 1993, echoed Slater:

in England history had been largely seen as the history of Anglo Saxon white men in positions of power in the south of England. What about the 'Celtic fringe' (significant title), what about the 10,000 blacks who lived in London in the eighteenth century, what about the history of technology, what about the poor, what, above all, about the history of women?⁸⁵

The simple answer to Fines' rhetorical question, which he can't fail to have been able to answer correctly himself, was that – Celts, blacks, women, technology and the poor were all well represented on the traditional history syllabuses. This can easily be illustrated (at the risk of being repetitive) by again taking a sample of questions from traditional exam papers, with their challenging questions on all these issues; and with no mention of an Anglo Saxon white man in a position of power, in the south of England or anywhere else:

Give an account of the Revolution settlement either in Scotland or in Ireland. (*Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board, GCE O level, Paper II English Outlines, 1399-1714, July 1951, Q 15*).

'Sugar, spices and slaves were the basis of the first British Empire.' Discuss. (*Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board, GCE A level, II English History Outlines, 878-1939, July 1965, Q 28*).

Account for the growth of the movement **either** for the abolition of slavery **or** the improvement of working conditions, and explain their success. (*Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board, GCE A level, II English History Outlines, 878-1939, July 1966, Q 34*).

Discuss the economic consequences of the extension since 1914 in the employment opportunities for women. (*AEB, British Economic and Social History, 1969, Advanced Level, June Paper II 1851-1960, Q 10*).

Illustrate and account for the progress made before 1919 towards the emancipation of women. (*Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board, GCE A level, II English History Outlines, 878-1919, June 1953, Q 36*).

‘In the eighteenth century new industrial techniques were less important than improvements in methods of transport.’ Discuss. (*Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board, GCE A level, II English History Outlines, 878-1919, June 1952, Q 27*).

In what respects did the treatment of the poor change between 1750 and 1850? Do you consider the general position had improved or deteriorated? (*AEB, British Economic and Social History, Advanced Level, June 1969, Paper I, 1750-1850, Q 2*).

Moreover, there is the crowning and outrageous irony that the victory of the New History has meant that the history of Celts, blacks, women, technology and the poor is now never taught to the vast majority of pupils. Of all the topics my students listed they had studied, Celts, blacks, women, technology and the poor hardly featured. Out of the 371 topics mentioned, only three were the slave trade (one more than Jack the Ripper or the assassination of President Kennedy), and five the suffragettes (less than half those that studied the Cold War). Traditional history covered the Celts, blacks, women, technology and the poor with ease; the New History with its small number of narrow topics does not, cannot and never will.

Another strange twist to the arguments of the New Historians was that traditional history had to go because ‘the world was changing’; and Britain was becoming a multicultural society.⁸⁶ In amongst the rhetoric it seemed to go unnoticed that why a changing world, or Britain becoming a multicultural society was an argument against traditional history, or teaching British history, was never spelled out by Fines, Slater, or anyone else. Why they should have thought it more appropriate that immigrant children be taught the history of Germany or Russia rather than that of the country in which they were growing up seems perverse even by Fines’ standards. Recently, the QCA had the effrontery to complain that present day history in regard to its black and multi-ethnic aspects tends to ‘undervalue the overall contribution of black and minority ethnic people to Britain’s past and ignore their cultural, scientific and many other achievements’.⁸⁷ Yet this valid complaint disguises the fact that it is the QCA’s enthusiasm for the New History taught in topics that has largely ruled out any treatment of the history of ethnic minorities which traditional history could incorporate quite effortlessly.

Another suggested reason as to why traditional history had to give way was the post-modernist argument, put forward by Furedi among others, that there was no longer ‘a history with a capital H; there were many competing histories’; the implication being that traditional history represented ‘a singular monolithic “History”’ which was no longer tenable.⁸⁸ This alleged problem with traditional history was raised in a related way by Lord William Wallace in a recent RSA lecture series on teaching history. The noble lord argued that there was a conflict between a narrative over hundreds of years ‘with a relatively clear understanding which students can grasp versus how far do you teach history as teaching people how to question what they are told ... how do you construct a consensus among the contending and competing narratives ... historical narratives always reflect political agendas’.⁸⁹ This also follows Slater’s view that traditional history had an inherited consensus, based on largely hidden assumptions. But this is yet another unwarranted distortion of how history works and how traditional history was taught.

There are two elements to writing history. First, there is finding out what happened in the past; which 99% of the time is uncontested territory. No historian would argue that William the Conqueror lost the Battle of Hastings, or the First Reform Act was passed in 1932. Likewise, most historians would agree that a general history of Britain, say in

the 18th century, that omitted discussion of the American War of Independence or the industrial revolution would be defective and unacceptable. So we have a relatively uncontroversial scaffolding for a narrative. But then, secondly, historians have the far more difficult but probably more important role of explaining what happened in the past; analysing the events of history and their causes and consequences. Here there is almost always disagreement, and especially if the historian goes further (than some of us would argue they should) and makes moral judgments. But the point is, traditional narrative history can, and indeed it is essential that it does, accommodate these historical debates from writers of whatever political or theoretical viewpoint. It's the stuff of history, and the textbook writer's duty is to give a fair wind to all legitimate interpretations. As the History Practitioners Advisory Team has recently argued: 'History's value within a democratic society lies in its capacity to engender argument and debate. Pupils should learn that history is open to many different, and often conflicting, interpretations'.⁹⁰ In other words, school history does not need to, and perhaps should not, construct the consensus among the contending and competing narratives that Lord Wallace seems to think is necessary. Where is the problem? Wallace's and Slater's view that historical narratives always have hidden agendas is standard post-modernist fare, but would either of them be prepared to enlighten us on the hidden political agendas of the exam questions quoted above? I can't see any.

Above all, the success of the New Historians was due to their being able to get away with equating traditional history with badly taught history. Fines' attack on the breadth of traditional history was particularly curious. It was, he maintained, too fast.

[I]t turned history into a race which nobody could ever win, with the teacher getting faster and faster the nearer the exams got, leaving out greater and greater chunks of reality in the hopes of making it to the winning post. Fast history leaves out the best bits, the stories, the detail, the rambling by-ways which intuition tells you to follow. Fast history tells lies, for it paints history not as it is, confused and confusing, bedraggled and messy, gloriously cluttered, inexplicable and maddening, and sorts it all out into one almighty washing line with only the pegs left in place.⁹¹

Traditional history, just like the New History or any subject, could be taught badly. It could be boring, uninspiring, or even fast, but this was just bad teaching, it was not inherent in the methodology or curriculum of traditional history. I was taught history at a secondary modern school up to O level, and in a grammar school 6th form to A level in the early to mid 1960s, and my experience was probably not untypical. On reflection I had two good (not charismatic, just good) history teachers and one poor one. There was a lot of note taking (and with the bad teacher at A level this was virtually all we did) and the use of chalk and the blackboard, but this was before photocopying and all the many audio-visual aids at the command of today's teachers. But it was not rote learning (although there was cramming at revision time) and the two good teachers used question and answer techniques to get us involved thinking about the issues. At A level especially, there was a lot of discussion over causation and controversies over the different interpretations of the sort of issues represented by the exam questions given above. For some reason I particularly remember heated debate on whether it was inevitable that Britain lost the American colonies and who was to blame for Gordon's debacle in Khartoum. There was never any question that we were being taught the uncontested truth, and we were expected to read widely, including 'real' history books such as David Thomson's *Europe since Napoleon* or A. J. P Taylor's *English history, 1914-1945* (both still worth reading today), to write well-argued essays in good English, and we were encouraged to be critical and offer our own opinions, all 'skills' which have stood me in good stead as a professional historian. Incidentally, if it is suggested I was an atypically studious goody-two-shoes, I only managed a B in A level history. In any case, traditional history teaching made me want to be an historian.

Finally, there was perhaps another reason why the New History won through, and that was the entry of politics into

the issue. In the 1980s, the opposition to the New History zealots was led by the Thatcher government and the New Right who wanted to use history teaching as a tool to foster patriotism and a British national identity, and this tended to obscure their otherwise valid attack on the silliness of teaching empathy and skills at the expense of knowledge.⁹² Perhaps when you are opposed by Mrs Thatcher, the *Sun* and the *Daily Telegraph* it is easier to convince yourself and others, including the political left, that you are on the side of the angels. Indeed, support for the New History to some extent came from the movement among left wing academic historians and their 'history from below' movement. The establishment of the History Workshop Group by Raph Samuel in 1967, encouraged the active participation of students and working people in the process of making history, particularly the use of oral history and other primary sources.⁹³ But it is yet another irony in the situation that in supporting the New History these Marxists ensured that pupils would never again be taught working class history in Britain, as traditional history had always done. Again, another book I was encouraged to read in the 6th form was Henry Pelling's *History of trade unionism*. That is not going to happen today. If there are any 18 year olds that have ever heard of the General Strike I have yet to meet one, and certainly of the 371 topics mentioned by my undergraduates only one (Chartism) indicated any teaching of the history of trade unionism or class struggle in Britain in our schools today.

Incidentally, because history teaching makes itself the subject of justified contempt it continues to be vulnerable to attempts at political high-jacking. That history in schools should be used to promote citizenship, Britishness and patriotism is apparently a subject close the Gordon Brown's heart and to that of the QCA.⁹⁴ Pupils, it is urged, should be taught Britain's great and glorious past, or as Starkey writes: 'we need not the critical, but the celebratory.'⁹⁵ This came to a head a few years ago in the move prompted by the *Daily Telegraph* and the right-wing think tank, Civitas, to get H. E. Marshall's *Our Island Story* reinstated in our primary schools.⁹⁶ Marshall's hundred year old book will instruct our children how 'from the very beginning of our story you have seen how Britons have fought for freedom, and step by step they have won it, until at last Britons live under just laws and have themselves the power to make those laws.'⁹⁷ Reading on we find that among the many lucky people that the British brought this freedom to were the New Zealand Maoris.

This imperialist propaganda masquerading as history needn't be dignified by counter argument. But this is not to say that British history should not be the basis of history taught in schools; not to inculcate citizenship or patriotism, but simply because British history is likely to be the most useful in helping pupils make sense of the world they live in. School children are surrounded by the evidence of British history in the burial mounds, Roman roads, ruined castles, the churches and canals and factories; they also live with institutions like the welfare state, the police force, and trade unions. History should play an essential role in helping them make sense of all these things. Pupils are not surrounded by German or Russian history and it is not particularly useful to them, for example, to know why Stalin collectivised Soviet agriculture.

The point is that history teachers who complain about political interference, and might have books like *Our Island Story* and the job of teaching citizenship or patriotism foisted on them, only have themselves to blame. Because the way history is taught in schools seems rightly nonsensical to outsiders including myself, who should be a natural ally, it is obviously vulnerable. Because of its degenerative and schismatic condition, history practitioners as an academy (far too grand a word) are in no shape to resist pressure from the politicians. History as a discipline should have its own integrity. Some of us believe it is a social science whose purpose is to find out what happened in the past and explain why it happened as objectively as possible. But we are in a minority even among academic historians, and are, of course, completely cut adrift from school teachers. And until the New History is abandoned and history recovers its credibility – dignity, even - the political pressure will continue and could prove fatal. History already has to teach 'cultural, ethnic and religious diversity', and it could next be buried in a non-subject like citizenship or lumped together with geography and religious education as 'humanities', or lost completely in whatever is the next

big initiative coming the schools' way; its days as a separate subject in primary school already seem numbered.⁹⁸

It is worth mentioning at this point that the sort of model I have put together above is not quite how history is always taught in practice. I have picked up from talking to school teachers, children, and of course my undergraduates, that traditional teacher-centred learning lives on. Ofsted deplores in some schools 'the predominance of direct input by teachers, with pupils having little to do beyond sitting and listening'.⁹⁹ What seems to have happened is that league tables and targets have put pressure on results to the extent that today history teachers are not so much teaching history as how to pass exams in history, requiring resort to direct teaching methods. So we have the worst of both worlds: a curriculum, syllabuses and exams designed for using sources, acquiring skills and so on, but teachers often applying direct instruction teaching methods solely designed to produce good exam results. And clearly, as the History Practitioners Advisory Team put it recently: 'This impoverishes the pupil's experience in history, which thus becomes entirely dominated by "teaching to the test"'.¹⁰⁰

The question nonetheless remains – it is clear how and why they won through, but why against all the evidence were the New History establishment themselves convinced of the need to create the myth of the failure of traditional history and overthrow in a decade or two the teaching methods of centuries – indeed, a pedagogic tradition which probably went back to Herodotus two and half millennia ago? Oh, the arrogance of it!

Lesson 6: the New History was required by the advent of child-centred learning

The answer to the question above probably has nothing to do with history as a discipline at all. It was just that the history teaching establishment felt that the subject had to catch the tide that was running throughout the education system generally in the form of 'child centred learning' (CCL).

The concept of CCL - teachers should not impart knowledge and understanding to pupils but pupils must discover this for themselves by undertaking activities - has been dated back to the French 18th century philosopher Rousseau and more precisely to Hayward in 1905; and the theoretical work of Froebel, Dewey, Rogers, and others pointed in the same direction.¹⁰¹ Traditional teaching, it was argued, meant that 'students become passive, apathetic and bored', and therefore it should be replaced so that knowledge was constructed by the student, who moreover learned better when performing activities. The teacher should be a mere facilitator of learning rather than a presenter of information, and also not interfere with the pupil's 'process of maturation, but act as a guide'; the child will learn when he/she is ready – personalised learning.¹⁰² In essence, the shift away from teaching to an emphasis on learning meant that authority was transferred from the teacher to the student, whose interests and desires were now to be paramount.¹⁰³

By 1931, the Hadow Report on primary education in Britain was committed to CCL, arguing that 'the curriculum is to be thought of in terms of activity and experience rather than of knowledge to be acquired and facts to be stored'.¹⁰⁴ The Plowden Report of 1967, also on primary school education, gave a nudge in the direction of, although not wholehearted support for, CCL, saying: 'We endorse the trend towards individual and active learning and "learning by acquaintance" ... Yet we certainly do not deny the value of "learning by description" or the need for the practice of skills and consolidation of knowledge'. Plowden also emphasised 'the teacher's responsibility for ensuring that what children learn is worth learning', but clearly in the case of history this last injunction was sadly ignored.¹⁰⁵

Why, with such a long pedigree, CCL should only have become fashionable in the late 1960s and 1970s is unclear

(and would make a good research project). Possibly CCL's rise had something to do with the economic and social changes associated with a broad based increase in living standards and a reduction in income inequality in that period. For whatever reason it is possible to detect the growth in a type of egalitarianism in the 1960s which resulted in a suspicion of, and a decline in deference to, authority. In many areas of life - politics, gender, class or industrial relations - this trend was probably a good thing, but in the case of education, and perhaps child rearing in general, although CCL might sound good in theory, its practical impact on our society has probably been little short of disastrous.

The New History was, then, merely fitting in with the advent of CCL in education generally. In fact, the development of 'enquiry or discovery approaches to learning history' dates in America from the 1950s, but, from the late 1960s the new emerging HEE in Britain, led to some extent by Fines, took up CCL with tremendous enthusiasm.¹⁰⁶ To Fines: 'Only the children can do the learning for themselves and the knowledge they arrive at will be different to ours'; 'proper study must be active, and it depends on the pupil making judgements, not just parroting back those of the teacher or the text'. And according to Fines, children 'must have the chance first to catch on to their own interests, to stay with them and become masters in the field'.¹⁰⁷ CCL was clearly the pedagogic philosophy driving the Schools Council History Project, summed up in their 1972 declaration that: 'Pupils were "to do" history not just receive it'.¹⁰⁸ To many writers the New History was to play its full part in the wider egalitarian revolution which was destined to amount to a virtual educational utopia. To Jenkins and Brickley, writing in 1989, empathy and the New History was an aspect of a social transformation whereby the introduction of the comprehensive system of secondary education in Britain would create such a levelling democracy that there would, among other things, be an end to 'hierarchical examinations'. The ideal situation for Jenkins and Brickley would be 'where children bring their own opinions to school, then every opportunity for their expression must be offered and valorised: what do *you* think of the past, what is history for *you*'.¹⁰⁹

Coincidentally or not, CCL and the New History were boosted by the simultaneous rise of that intellectual blind ally - post-modernism. The French philosophers' view that there are no objective historical facts lent obvious support for CCL, since it follows that anyone's history is as valid or worthwhile as anybody else's. As Southgate has put it: 'The removal of "objective truth" as a meaningful goal is counterbalanced by a perceived need for many different accounts of the past - none claiming any special privilege, but each providing some illumination from its own perspective'.¹¹⁰ The logic of this is that the painstaking work of professional historians, with years of training and publications behind them, cannot be 'privileged' over, and are of equal value to the efforts of a 10 year old. English post-modernists espousing these ideas, like Keith Jenkins, were highly influential and had a ready outlet in *Teaching History*. Fines, although not explicit on the subject, also talked the post-modernists' language. To Fines: 'That there is somewhere to be found a body of knowledge, understanding and skill that should be given to all children to help them in their future lives' was 'not only wrong and perverse but also dangerous'. 'Involving children in the process of enquiry means that they engage in genuine historical learning activities from which they construct their own views of the past, that is, their own histories'. 'Many children equals many histories'.¹¹¹

CCL is now explicitly part of the HEE orthodoxy - the pupil's desires lead the way. For history pupils in primary school Ofsted applauds 'very good teaching that is thoughtful, fun, and well-matched to their needs, interests and abilities'. At the 11 to 14 year level the QCA's advice to teachers is: 'If you want to design a curriculum to motivate and engage pupils, where better to start than by listening to their views?' They then go on to applaud the secondary school we noted before where in the QCA promotional video the history teacher tells us:

The impetus for change to the history scheme of work at Copleston High came from the pupils themselves, who asked for a more diverse curriculum and wanted activities involving debate, group work, role play,

research and making [sic]. Pleased to see the increased flexibility in the revised programme of study, the history department seized the opportunity to address pupils' preferred learning styles and meet their needs and interests more closely ... [So] teachers hope to engage pupils and improve their behaviour and attainment. The department has high hopes for this more personalised approach to learning.¹¹²

The full implications of CCL are clearly stated here. The children should be asked by the teachers what they want to do and how they want to do it and then it should be given to them. Many studies have indicated that what pupils want to do, their 'preferred learning styles', are the range of enjoyable activities listed in the quote above, and what they least like doing is reading and writing.¹¹³ Clearly, they have had their own way.

Again, it is worth emphasising that despite the huge consequences which CCL entailed for education generally, and history teaching in particular, its introduction was based on no democratic, parental or any outside input, nor was it apparently subjected to any serious intellectual debate. Indeed, the notion of CCL on a practical level was not founded on any conclusive theoretical or empirical evidence of its effectiveness as against traditional methods. Although some surveys have found to the contrary, an extensive US government project carried out between 1968 and 1977, concluded in favour of direct instruction methods.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, CCL is now the prevailing educational orthodoxy in Britain and history teaching is just one of its victims. Unfortunately, history possibly suffered more than other subjects since the sciences or geography, for example, lend themselves to experiments and genuine activities, whereas, as we have seen, history had to invent spurious ones. Certainly, the theoretical flaws and practical consequences of CCL applied to history teaching should be pointed out.

As we have noted above, the idea that school children can 'do' or create their own history using primary sources in any meaningful sense is an absurdity. Pupils are, and can only be, provided with carefully selected, pre-digested (often sadly invented) primary sources by the teacher or the textbook with the direction the children are expected to pursue, and with the end result they are expected to reach, more or less firmly in mind in advance. If anyone has a hidden agenda it is the New History teachers and textbook writers. If children conclude that Elizabeth I was a bad queen because she was a woman, or that the Holocaust did not happen, the logic of CCL and the New History (and the philosophy of post-modernism) is that these conclusions have to be accepted as valid. But in practice does the teacher sit back happy in the knowledge that little Johnny has created his own history, or do they point out ever so tactfully all the reasons why he is – WRONG? Clearly the teacher will always have to push the student back onto the path of the generally agreed facts and interpretations of history - previously established by professional historians. Anything else is a delusion.

This last point raises another aspect in the situation: if history teachers in the new egalitarian way were prepared to cede authority to their pupils it equally followed that they as classroom history teachers should see no reason to defer to the academic university historian. To Aldrich, writing in 1989, the idea that it was 'the job of the university historian to determine the historical record, and the job of the school teacher to receive such wisdom and present it in simplified form to school pupils' was no longer tenable.¹¹⁵ Slater also announced with satisfaction the new order of things. Since children could now create their own history, he wrote, some university lecturers, were worried 'that new ideas are not just disseminated downwards, but upwards and outwards'.¹¹⁶ So a schism opened up between the new HEE and the classroom teachers on the one hand and professional historians, like the late Geoffrey Elton, on the other. The latter were exasperated by the way things were going, but their concerns were ignored, and moreover they continued to teach history at their universities for the most part in the traditional way.¹¹⁷

The idea that school children can create their own history and therefore don't need the professional historian is of course yet another fallacy indicated by the fact that school textbook writers are usually honest enough to acknowledge that they (and therefore classroom teachers and their pupils) are ultimately reliant on the interpretations

of history, hard won, and thrashed out by the professionals, even when they in turn disagree with each other. The academics are also usually the ones who provide, or point out the directions to, the source of primary materials for schools.

And CCL is fundamentally flawed in another major respect. At yet another conference among teachers and the HHE at the Institute of Historical Studies in 2007 on the theme 'Why History Matters', one group agreed predictably that: 'Effective learning in history is promoted through activity based learning which addresses pupils' different learning styles ... Approaches to teaching should be pupil-centred ... [and] focuses on the needs of learners and differentiates learning in terms of personal background, ability and learning style'.¹¹⁸ But of course no teacher confronted with a class of 30 individuals can actually achieve this in practice. It's another dangerous fiction. Let's go back to our teacher at Copleston High as he asks the class what their preferred learning styles are. Twenty-nine of the class agree: 'Let's get out of the classroom and have some fun', but one puts his hand up, knowing he risks a good kicking at break time, but says: 'Please sir I would like to read history books and write essays'. Would he have been accommodated? I think not. But in CCL terms he has as much right to be the centre of attention as anyone else.

There are many more problems, *a priori*, with CCL applied to history teaching. Firstly – since the whole idea of CCL is that it is pupil driven, where was the evidence that children come to school hungry to create their own histories? Jenkins and Brickley wanted children to bring their own opinions on history to school, but why would we expect that primary or secondary school pupils would come to school with any opinions on history at all? How many children bring to school their ideas on why Henry VIII broke with the church of Rome or how Hitler came to power? It would be more plausible to assume that they knew nothing about these things and couldn't care less about them. Secondly, the whole notion of CCL seems to be predicated on an axiom, that children are all thirsting for knowledge and, moreover, are keen to work hard to obtain it, whereas a reasonable alternative hypothesis would be that, given the option, they have an inbuilt preference for substituting leisure and fun for the hard work of acquiring knowledge or a skill. In practice CCL means therefore that children have to be 'sold' history by being told it is fun and exciting, fits in with their 'preferred learning styles', and is never hard work. Thirdly, in effect CCL allows the teacher to abdicate responsibility for deciding what pupils need to be doing in history classes. In giving children what they want to do there is the obvious question as to whether this accords with what they need to be doing in their long-term interests. Further, it makes the assumption that children are the best judges of this. Again, where is the evidence? Fourthly, in theory at least, CCL is an ego-centric and individualistic philosophy and it is at least questionable whether it is desirable for pupils to be told that their individual wants and desires are the focal point of education. Because, finally, surely society should have a say in what is in its collective interest that its future adult citizens be taught. In which case society should have an input into whether its children be given a comprehensive history of the country they are growing up in, or a set of ersatz skills pretending to be things professional historians do, while spending year after year studying two world wars and a German dictator.

So there we have it - my quest was over. CCL means that teachers instructing their pupils is anathema, they must find out things for themselves by doing activities. Doing activities in history means the use of primary sources and the acquisition of skills. Using primary sources and gaining skills takes a long time and is only viable in the study of narrow historical topics. Topics means no knowledge of history outside the topic. So the ignorance of most of history demonstrated by our children generally, and my undergraduates in particular, is fully explained.

Last lesson: History today

One question remains: given the history of history teaching outlined above, is the system capable of change? There

are one or two encouraging signs, but probably too many people would have to admit that they were wrong, and there is still a great deal of self-satisfaction in most quarters of the all-powerful HEE. Here, for example, is Christine Counsell, still giving out the good news that all is well in the world of history teaching:

The finest of new history teachers are advancing our understanding of historical learning. They debate the meaning of historical significance; they share and read about each others practice; they go on Historical Association CPD weekends and agonise over the best wording of questions on empire and imperialism in order to get the challenge for Martin [a struggling 12 year old former pupil of hers] just right. How to construct a causal explanation in a non-anachronistic and sympathetic form? What kinds of visual or written sources might help Geoffrey [another 12 year old] see the difference between ‘evidence’ and ‘information’? What traditions of scholarship must we understand if we introduce Year 7 to Islamic history? ¹¹⁹

Counsell argues that more history should be taught, and urges people to write to their MP: ‘Emphasise that what the press bleats on about – too much Hitler at A-level or whatever – is irrelevant: it is easy to solve and affects a tiny proportion of students ... Emphasise the popularity of history with pupils and the achievement of history teachers.’ She explains away the fact that only a third of pupils now take GCSE history as due to school managers preventing their pupils from doing so if they might not get a good grade.

According to Counsell, therefore, there is nothing wrong that giving children even more New History couldn’t put right, which, since she is clearly aware of the ridicule and opprobrium that the New History engenders, is self-confidence on an heroic scale. And, none of Counsell’s arguments hold water. Focusing on the problem of teaching too narrow topics like Hitler is not irrelevant, nor is it only a problem confined to A level, nor will it be an easy one to solve. Moreover, most students who give up history at 14 are not forced to do so by school management but do so with enthusiasm because history is not a popular subject as it is now taught. Half my undergraduates gave up history at 14 for their own reasons not because they were forced, or even encouraged, to do so by schools worried they could not get good grades. Finally, how can it be more important for educationally backward 12 year olds to know the difference between ‘evidence’ and ‘information’ or the meaning of ‘historical significance’ (none of which as far as I know academic historians give any thought to) but not know the most basic facts of their country’s history?

As depressing is the attitude of the classroom teachers. If we eavesdrop on a history teachers’ chat room we read from one contributor:

Just got today the latest edition of Teaching History (125, December 2006). Some really important stuff on historical significance that every History teacher needs to get his/her head round asap – ‘significance’ is about to be the IN issue ...

And another weighed in with:

It took me a week to get through my December copy of ‘Teaching History’. Then there was Christmas. Then the battle call for ‘real history’ again.... But I do actually think that ‘Significance’ is the key issue, and perhaps the most important issue that History teachers can focus on to maintain the integrity of the subject in the face of the politicians.

Clearly, teachers feel threatened, and almost unbelievably they see salvation and protection from the politicians in teaching ‘historical significance’. No! The next IN issue, and the most important thing that history teachers can focus

on to REGAIN the integrity of the subject – is to get back to teaching our children some useful history.

A glimmer of encouragement did seem to come from the fact that Counsell's complacency is no longer shared by all in the HEE. These elements have finally come round to admitting that there are some problems with teaching history by narrow topic. A recent QCA report has argued against the narrowness of history teaching: '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'; 'many pupils are failing to gain a good overview of history or an understanding of the significance of some key events and individuals ... and more attention should be given to the teaching of chronological understanding'.¹²⁰ Paul Armitage, an HMI, argued recently that: 'Pupils often study discrete periods of history without any apparent rationale for the order of specific content ... so that young people get muddled and find it hard to form an overall story or narrative or to know why they're studying.'¹²¹ Exactly so.

Sean Lang, also seems to have broken with the Historical Association's party line stating in 2004 that 'things have gone badly wrong in school history'. '[H]ow can we put history back together again' he asks, coming out as a defender of historical knowledge, and arguing: 'The trouble with the curriculum in England is that we have huge gaps in our historical coverage'.¹²² He was chairman of the History Practitioners Advisory Team which reported recently in favour of narrative British history to 'give pupils a mental timeline in which to place their historical environment'; and that: 'In the end, people will always draw their own lessons from history, so it is important that they should do so on the basis of knowledge'. Examination units, says the report, 'focus on short snippets of history' so 'Young people have very little sense of a wider chronological sweep into which they can fit the events they study at GCSE and AS/A level'; 'we have lost the idea of analytical narrative'. Again: 'What marks a good historian is ... how much history he or she knows and the ability to draw on that knowledge in presenting an argument. It is impossible to conceive of someone being good at history without knowing a lot of history'.¹²³ Absolutely spot on.

So some have seen the light. But wait. None of these revisionists point out that the reason for these huge gaps in historical knowledge is the New History that they themselves have religiously promoted, and show no sign of wanting to abandon. Therefore, although the problem is clear to some in the HEE, the solution is nowhere in sight. Ofsted also recently argued that: 'Too great a focus on a relatively small number of issues means that pupils are not good at establishing a chronology, do not make connections between areas they have studied and so do not gain an overview, and are not able to answer the "big question"'. So what do Ofsted hold up as exemplars of good teaching? One lesson devoted to 'Why didn't the Romans overcome crime' and another to the question: 'Do you agree with the view that Perkin Warbeck posed the most serious threat to Henry VII's throne?'; both classes conducted as group activities.¹²⁴

To repeat, CCL demands pupils must do activities to create their own history, which because this is time-consuming demands studying short or narrow topics and is incompatible with teaching in long, comprehensive, chronologically coherent, periods. Lang, also seems unaware of this inescapable logic. While his Tory group wants to avoid the 'very narrow and bitty' nature of the topics studied, and argues for the 'construction of a historical narrative' it still wants pupils to do this by using 'real source material' in the way people use the archives in researching family history.¹²⁵ Lang's attempted solution to these incompatible aims is - topics and yet more topics. Therefore the Historical Association's recommendations are now for 'greater diversity: diversity of topic; diversity of country and geographical area; and diversity of period'.¹²⁶ In other words, more diverse bittiness.

Another tactic for trying to avoid the 'bittiness' of topics now seems to be - 'themes'. An Ofsted conference report on history in 2005 argued that what was required was a wider range of topics, or a curriculum based on themes that

would reflect topicality, ‘for instance World War II, Nelson, and the Olympics’, and ‘overarching exemplar questions: “why and how has Britain fought wars?” “How have we been governed?” “How have human rights evolved over time?” “How have people lived?”; “How have they been ruled?”; “What have they believed?”’¹²⁷ Armitage’s solution too is - let’s do selected wars from the Roman invasion to Iraq, or let’s put together something on civil rights from the Magna Charta to the abolition of slavery.¹²⁸ And despite starting with the right diagnosis to the problem the History Practitioners Advisory Team’s solution is also for ‘a structure based on topics requiring, typically, two or three lessons’ teaching’, based around the themes – government, society and belief. For example, for the theme - government - they would have the topic ‘Kingship and Succession in Eleventh Century Britain’, inside which would be eight sub-topics each taking up one or two lessons and would include ‘Brian Boru and the battle of Clontarf’, and ‘Scotland: the battle of Carham’; in other words, another list of random topics purporting to be British narrative history.¹²⁹ Or put yet another way – stupidity.

Themes are now being introduced into the 11-14 history curriculum and A level, but of course they are no better than topics and don’t solve anything since inherently they have no context. Wars, for example, have political, economic, and social causes which may stretch back hundreds of years and they have effects that last long after they have finished. All this is lost jumping from one war to the next. Only traditional history can fit wars logically into their chronological, political, social and economic context and give as a result an understanding of their causes and consequences.

In all these meetings, seminars, policy groups, and conferences does no one (put their hand up at the back and even tentatively) suggest - ‘What about “Britain, 1750-2000: a political, economic and social history”?’ Isn’t one voice raised in favour of common sense?

For the vast majority of the present generation of youngsters to grow up knowing virtually nothing of their country’s history is an outrage and should be intolerable. In the nine years from aged five to 14, or the 11 years to aged 16, there is ample time to take pupils from the Stone Age to Gordon Brown and back again. If Simon Schama can manage the Iron Age to the present day in fifteen television programmes considerably more depth could be achieved with two hours a week for 11 years. But the history of history teaching teaches us that this is not going to happen as long as CCL is the prevailing pedagogic fashion. And CCL is not going away. In the words of the 2005 Ofsted report, what is still essential is ‘a curriculum that meets the history needs of all pupils and students by focusing on what they will learn, not what the teachers will teach’.¹³⁰ If this principle is unshakable all else follows. Pupils must be doing activities, activities in history means topics, topics means ignorance.

End, as they say, of story.

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