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BY

NATHANIEL W. STEPHENSON

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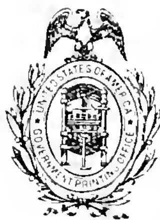
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V. THE PLACE OF HISTORY IN THE CURRICULUM.

By NATHANIEL W. STEPHENSON,

Professor of History in the College of Charleston.

THE PLACE OF HISTORY IN THE CURRICULUM.

By Nathaniel W. Stephenson.

The subject assigned to me is "The place of history in the curriculum," and I am given to understand that what is chiefly wanted is a discussion of its bearing upon secondary schools. I take it there are involved two questions: Why is history in the curriculum at all? and, assuming its place there, What work is it expected to do? In a word, if I interpret my assignment correctly, I am to open the case on behalf of history as a secondary study by applying to it that touchstone which is the characteristic contemporaneous one in all things intellectual, the merciless question, "What's the use?" So asks the modern world of all things; especially, so ask Americans. What's the use, in education, of Latin, of mechanics, of history; in a larger sphere, of morals, or art, of Christianity, of life itself?

Let us imagine the American layman—the intelligent member of a school board, say—asking himself this question, What's the use of history in schools? Where shall he look for an authoritative answer? Judging from my own experience, if he question rather widely he will soon be struck by the fact that the people most likely to have answers to the question are not agreed among themselves. If you will pardon the personality, I have had some opportunity to compare views on this point, because in connection with an important publishing house it has been my duty to classify and report upon the various criticisms of presumptive authorities upon certain manuscripts. What has struck me above all else is the great range and variety in the nature of the tests applied by these many-minded critics. I will not invariably accuse them of that vigilant mentality, so irksome to the average mind, which definitely formulates its standards. But none the less the standards are there, all the more insistent—as is the case with so many deep-laid things—because not tested by the pitiless exposure of a logical examination.

An excellent instance of what I have in mind occurred the other day in a criticism of a grammar-school text of State history. The author had mentioned certain actions of the Civil War, but had contented himself—wisely, it seems to me—with a note that did not exceed mere mention. The critic in question objected with evident feeling. Singling out one of these actions he protested: "It was

much too gallant an achievement to be passed over in a footnote." Here is a point of view that could be matched in citations from other critics almost without number. And note how definite even though unformulated is the assumption lying behind it. Ask the critic, "What's the use in teaching history to the young?" and, if he is true to himself, he will say: "It's use is to inculcate principles of conduct, to cultivate a respect for brave and unselfish action."

I am the last person to sneer at such a point of view. If our schools are not to inculcate courage and patriotism, I, for one, have no use for our schools. But is the history classroom the place in which to achieve this laudable end? Is not this chiefly an incidental accomplishment, a matter of the personal influence of the teacher's character—the one thing we appear to consider valueless in our present system when teachers are paid so often on the same scale as butlers, when none probably draw equal wages with a first-class chauffeur. In the history classroom are there not other lessons crying out for consideration that history alone can teach and are not these the things that history study ought to stress? Surely all of us here present will agree that such should be the case. History, even for the young, is a subtler and more complex affair than any, even the most impressive, object lessons in civic virtue. Merely to point a moral is too narrow a function for this rich and stimulating pursuit.

Well, what else can we discover among the various viewpoints of our critics? One other stands conspicuous. Over and over again I have encountered the objection that a given manuscript does not sufficiently glorify our ancestors. History, as ancestor-worship, is the implied standard of innumerable critics. To inculcate a reverence for our own past, regardless of the question how much of that reverence is deserved; to soothe our vanity, to afford a basis for the praise of ourselves—such, frankly, is the ignoble standard of a great army of the worshipers of their ancestors. Surely, one need but to mention this to do one's full duty by way of protest. Who, with the genuine impulse of historical scholarship—the mere impulse, I say, let alone the achievement—can fail to be indignant over such an attitude? Virgil gave us our true motto when he put into the mouth of Aeneas, "Neither Trojan nor Tyrian shall sway me"; and Tennyson richly enlarged the theme when he expressed the spirit of pure inquiry—that spirit, remember, which failed in the "Palace of Art" merely because it attempted to substitute thought for life, not because it had a wrong conception of the life of thought—saying:

> I take possession of man's mind and deed;
> I care not what the sects may brawl;
> I sit as God, holding no form of creed,
> But contemplating all.

Of many other standards for the criticism of historical studies in secondary schools, I will forbear to speak. But there is one more that it is not safe to pass over in silence. However, before examining it permit me to arrange the perspective—if I may so express myself—in which this third great fallacy should be placed. In parenthesis, as it were, let me remind you of several things, common, I have no doubt, to the experience of us all. First, is there anyone accustomed to examine college freshmen in history who does not feel that secondary teaching of history, take it by and large, is at present chaotic? I should be most happy to be persuaded that my own experience is exceptional. I fear it is not. The historical impression left in the minds of high-school pupils is too often of the same sort as one that lay behind a paper in an English literature examination which I once assisted in conducting at a noted State university. The paper informed us that in Shakespeare's "Julius Cæsar," Cæsar was warned to beware the ides of March, but that Cæsar ignored the warning, and Brutus and Cassius and "the rest of the ides" waylaid him and killed him.

No, we confront a double confusion, a confusion of standards in the minds of the teachers, a confusion of impressions in the minds of the pupils. We have not yet come to the third great fallacy, but are fast approaching it. It has been brought about in part—in part only—by the disgusted reaction of many well-meaning teachers against the crass absurdities of old-style memory drills in history. What has paved the way to the third fallacy is a vain confusion of the teaching methods of high school and college. Without entering into subtleties upon a matter so obvious to common sense, it is enough to remind ourselves that we were, our pupils still are, quite different beings at 15 and 20, and that methods which worked with us at the golden age of 15 were not the same as those which worked at the brazen age of 20. Unfortunately, some good people have parted with their youth forever—alas, that it should be so—and can no longer so much as guess at Wordsworth's meaning, praising the long happiness of "days bound each to each by natural piety." These unfortunate people, justly indignant over the confusion in a boy's mind of the slayers of Cæsar with the ides of March, have no formula for a reformation, but to impose their mental processes—the processes not even of the brazen age, but so to speak of a still more sophisticated one, the age of iron—upon the stubborn romanticism, the potent idleness, of unconquered youth.

And now for the third great fallacy. It is the assumption that history, even in secondary schools, should be treated as a descriptive science, as the free play of a masterful curiosity ranging, with a sportsman's instinct for the difficult, through the jungle of the past. Such is the ideal of university history, an ideal of mature minds who

have reached a point where it is safe to eat the fruit of knowledge for its own sake, who may justly say, "We are old enough to think of all mental activities but as tonics to our own minds;" who may look with equal joy upon the handling of a policy by a statesman, or the management of a theme in a Wagner opera, or the smiling victory of Utamaro over the demon of a color chord that none but he could master. I am unable to measure my disdain for the man or woman of mature life to whom such a conception of history, of music, of painting, is a vain thing, who will omit it from a catalogue of the utilities of the spirit. Such a conception is involved in that true ideal of a liberal education so nobly phrased by Newman in his seventh discourse on the "Idea of a University." But what, pray, has this to do with high schools? What connection between history as a descriptive science and the mental aptitudes, the general capacities, of boys and girls of 14, 15, 16? For my own part the connection appears so slight as to be practically negligible. Unless I am quite on the wrong track the idea of history as a descriptive science is as false a standard for the judgment of secondary teaching as are those other fallacies, history as sermonizing and history as ancestor worship. The consciousness of the years between 14 and 18 is still too plastic, too barbaric, if you will, for real results in descriptive science. Essentially impressionistic, these years must be cultivated through imagination upon the one hand and a discreet routine of habit upon the other. Analysis, genuine science, in history at least, is not yet. But it is in just these years that interest in history is most likely either to be established for life or be put to rout for life. Premature imposition of scientific methods may easily cut its throat. A warning never to be forgotten is that satiric fable which is a classic of the British medical tradition.

Said an English surgeon of a certain supremely difficult operation:

"Yes; it is a final test of the operator. I have ventured to perform it only twice; both times, fortunately, with good results."

"Pooh, that is nothing," said the Frenchman, "I have performed it five times."

"Indeed," replied the Englishman. "A wonderful record. And what of the patients?"

"Oh," with a jaunty shrug of the shoulders, "they all died."

Is there any doubt that the satire might be adapted to explain the active dislike of history acquired by many a youth in school?

Let us always remember that in secondary schools we are dealing with vivid, impressionable young people, quick to respond to anything that seems true, but having as yet slight power of analysis, still less fondness for analysis, and that all work done in this period is a sort of bridge linking the grammar-school age, in which analysis

does not exist at all, with the college age, in which some degree of analytic faculty may always be assumed. In the secondary period the analytic faculty is to be awakened, but awakened with great cautiousness, got upon its feet with a patient tact, watchful lest the shy young thing escape out of one's hand into the desert of youth's illogical stubbornness. So, since our problem all through this difficult age is to lure youth into the paths of analytic method, it behooves us to take very careful thought what use we can make of a given study in accomplishing this end, what place it should have in an ideal curriculum.

Hitherto my paper has been made up chiefly of objections—of negation. Permit me now, briefly, to be positive. I speak but tentatively—especially in view of the names that follow mine on the program of this conference, names that justly carry such great weight of authority—and I never, I trust, forget that history and dogma are mutually exclusive, that even on this question of methods of instruction the dogmatic historian is a contradiction in terms. That tribal poet who was the first historian—as well, apparently, as the first pragmatist—knew what he was about when he whispered out of the remotest past into Kipling's ear, "There are nine and forty ways of composing tribal lays. And every single one of them is right"—right, that is, if it arrives, if it delivers the goods.

In this purely tentative spirit, then, I will venture upon two suggestions, hoping thus to contribute a little toward fixing the place, defining the function. of history in the secondary curriculum. One of my suggestions will deal with subject matter, the other with method.

First, however, let us all take a momentary review of the various historical interests present in our own minds. Do we not find that they fall into three classes? To me, at least, this is unquestionable. I find in my mind to-day a vivid interest in the magnificent, the multiform drama of the warfare of man with circumstance considered merely as a true story that thrills my heart like a trumpet; I find also an interest equally vivid in tracing back into the past the causes of the present, in locating there evidence that will explain the present; lastly, I find that subtlest interest of all—delight not primarily in the results of research but in its process, what we may call the interest of the historical sportsman, big-game shooting in the jungle of the past's misrepresentations. It is my fixed belief that all three interests are normal properties, genuine treasures, of the fully rounded, mature mind. To ignore the first—as is done by an entire school of historians, one of whose conspicuous members in a recent work on the Civil War devotes to the actual drama, the agony and the bloody sweat just one page and a half—seems to

me an abnormal point of view. To my mind these three interests differ, not by the times at which they cease out of our lives—for I believe that none should ever cease—but by the times at which they enter our lives. And if such is the case, then of course the general character of study at the times when these interests successively appear may easily be determined.

Am I not right in thinking that the purely dramatic interest traces back to earliest childhood and forms the true touchstone by which to try history teaching in the grammar-school period? Am I not also right in holding that at the other extreme the third interest—the zeal for research as an intellectual tonic, a force acting upon the mature mind in the same way as music and painting—is a thing practically unthinkable in all periods previous to that of the university or, at least, the college? Surely, then, it is in the intermediate period, the period when analysis is in the bud, when we need to encourage it by giving it an obvious function readily grasped by common sense, that we should take up the study of history as a conscious search for the explanation of our present world, the oracle from which, through due attention to its utterances, we may receive an answer to the question, How to live.

Such, then, would be my touchstone of the subject matter of history teaching in secondary schools. I would have it continue the interest in the human drama begun in the grammar-school period, but carefully blend with that interest the more advanced analytic one, the interest in the past as the clue to the labyrinth of the present. All the data employed, both in textbooks and in classrooms, should serve as predication of one or other of these subjects.

But it is a truism that in every study the process is as vital a matter as the content. Here, again, I can not escape the conclusion that a whole school of teachers and textbook writers are gravely in error. Even when they are seeking to explain the present by the past these teachers, these writers, vitiate their attempt through an inadequate sense of their undertaking. I refer to all those who carry to excess the topical method of study, who reduce their picture of the past to a series of propositions, a catalogue of illustrations, of applications. Did time permit, it would be interesting to analyze the textbooks of our day to show how insidiously the topical method is replacing old conventions by new ones, substituting for the old canon of rigid propositions upon ancestor worship a new canon, rapidly solidifying into rigidity, of propositions upon economic effects in history; how, in both cases, understanding tends inevitably to give way to memory; how, in a word, new presbyter again is but old priest writ large.

But time does not permit. I will content myself with a final and this time an unconditional statement. The one thing needful in

history teaching, the thing so often missed, but without which there is no result worth while, is imagination. The process of ideal historical study all up and down the scale from kindergarten to university must be through and through imaginative. Not to catalogue the features of the past, but to re-create the life that once informed those features, is the true aim of history in all its phases. To acquire the difficult art of calling up that life, of bodying it forth out of the strange and ambiguous things known as human documents, is a feat of the disciplined imagination as difficult as it is precious.

You will observe that I have dropped the word "science" and introduced the word "art." Both the charm and the pain of history grow out of its dual character, its unique blending of art and science. When one assigns as its highest function the extraction imaginatively of the fluid human facts—not the rigid physical facts—concealed in the written word or implied in tradition, one seems to make the historical imagination almost the same thing as the literary imagination, to make history preponderently artistic. Into such a delicate subtlety I may be forgiven for declining to enter in the last moment of my allotted time.

Surely all of us, on second thought, whether we have an answer pat or only wish we had, appreciate that the historic imagination is not the same as the literary imagination. Let us go further and say that in history our imaginative effort, lacking much of the freedom, the unscrupulousness of the literary imagination, yet resembles this literary imagination in having a wonderful responsiveness to suggestion, but that in the case of history this responsiveness works under exact control, projecting upon an imaginary screen, as it were, not a picture of our own contriving, not impressionism of any sort, but a true and accurate bodying forth of suggestions contained in specific records. I am not sure that this is not a greater feat of imagination—in some ways, at least—than even the strictly literary feat. Certain I am that it is the last achievement of historical scholarship, that unfortunately few people experience it, and that, to the average reader of history, it is as foreign as Sophocles.