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What history should we be teaching in Britain in the 21st century?

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History as I was taught it at school was the most deadly of subjects. Our history teacher sat at the front of the class, in a gown and peculiar wig, his head down on the desk, snoring, with a burning pipe falling out of his mouth. The entire class was asleep in front of him; and that is my memory of history up to A level.

So what I am going to say now is not *laudator temporis acti*. I am not blind; I do not think that all was perfect in the past. We have been properly enjoined to a critical attitude of the past including our own. So do not think, then, that I am just saying that things were always better. Because remember, outside the academy, history is an unbelievably successful subject. Now surely that has got to be our starting point? If you look at the sales of history books, they are usually right at the top of the non-fiction bestsellers, apart from handbooks. If you look, and here you will forgive me if I boast, at my *Six Wives of Henry VIII*, (1) it got 4.5 million viewers, the largest ever audience for that sort of serious documentary; *Elizabeth* was a number one bestseller in hardback and paperback. (2) The largest sales of any book in recent years have been Antony Beevor's *Stalingrad* – even more than *Berlin*. (3) Simon Schama's books sell reliably well, and now there is Niall Ferguson snapping at our ankles. So, in the world outside academic halls, history is doing very, very well.

It may well be useful to ask why. The answers that I would give are the answers that, in fact, all of the people mentioned above – Simon Schama, Niall Ferguson, David Starkey and Antony Beevor – gave at a series of [summer schools organised by the Prince of Wales](#), who plays a very important public role in this area. That extraordinarily diverse group of people, doing history in entirely different ways, from entirely different centuries and from entirely different perspectives, all agreed on one thing – content. What matters is content; what matters is narrative; what matters is characterisation. This is how history sells. This is why it has its place on the bookshelves. This, I would argue, is also why it matters. History, fundamentally, is a branch of storytelling. It is, of course, a very sophisticated branch of storytelling: issues of evidence, issues of critical analysis, issues of debate are very important, but they seem to me to be the scaffolding and the foundations. What we must have in place is the substance, is the structure itself, is the magnificent many-mansioned building of history. It has been said that there is a need for us to pull together; I would argue that, in some ways, we pull together too far and too fast. And what goes on in schools has deliberately modelled itself on university teaching of history, which in many ways I regard also as being defective. We have become research led, in a way which I think is entirely unsuitable for a subject which, we are arguing here, is worthy of a place at the centre of the curriculum. So let us then turn things the other way around. History in the media is not some awful degenerate deviation. We are not – Schama, Starkey, whoever – deviationists to be whispered about.

We need, I think, to begin by learning lessons. Now, the first job, it seems to me, is to be confident in content. I remember vividly Stanley Bindoff, sitting in a meeting of the London Board of Examiners meeting, considering a question that I put forward that reflected some of the scholarship of the last 100 years: 'a bit specific, what we want are questions with room in them'. That meant, of course, that he did not change his questions from one year to the next, which made life much easier for him and for his students. But he was right. What we need is history that is roomy, that is big. We need, as our first goal to give students a map of time – that is why we are teaching it to everybody.

I took my first class at Cambridge, at the age of twenty-two in 1967, and I took my last class formally at the London School of Economics in 1997, thirty-five years in all. I inherited from Ragnhild Hatton a course which rejoiced in the title of the 'History of European ideas' and concentrated largely on the German cameralists of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. When I had taken my first class, a very bright American – because, of course, the LSE pioneered the taking of foreign students, which is why it still thrives – came up to me and said 'Professor Starkey, I am really not sure, which came first the Renaissance or the ancient world?'. I would guarantee that if you put a similar question to children now, the majority of them would not be able to spell Renaissance – at least this girl was able to do that – and they would have absolutely no idea of where they came, or why, indeed, the order mattered. So we need that sense of a map of time, a placing in time, where we stand in the universe of time.

If that is the case, it implies that we should have very extensive courses. Now here again, I have got to argue against myself in my own practice. When I was a young university teacher, I had far more important things to do than learn about periods of history that I did not know about already, so I argued passionately for shorter and shorter courses; it made it so much easier. Nevertheless, I think that was a fatal mistake, one which has culminated in the kind of absurd A level courses we have nowadays, in which you study half of the reign of Henry VIII, from 1508 to 1529, and stop just when it gets interesting. It is absolutely ludicrous. There is a paper on the second half of the reign of Henry VIII which concentrates largely on religion. I was approached with a sample AS level question, for students aged between sixteen and seventeen: 'Discuss the role of Archbishop Cranmer in the formation of religious policy from 1535 to 1539'. There are two people in England who can answer that question; there is Diarmaid MacCulloch and me, and we disagree about the answer. It is also the least important period of Cranmer's life, when he had least impact on religious policy. It is absurd and scandalous and should be reserved purely for a university third-year specialist subject.

So, we have got these shrunken courses. We need big courses, we need ancient history, we need medieval history, we need the history of the dark ages, we need that sense of change and development across time. Now why can't we do it? I have illustrated part of the problem: we do not actually want to do it, many of us, because it is too much like hard work, learning about new topics. The second thing, of course, is that the way we teach history is fundamentally wrong, or rather the dominant message of the teaching of history is fundamentally wrong. John Fines was a very good man, with a wholly disastrous influence. The skills-based approach to the teaching of history is a catastrophe. It is, of course, also derived from a truly dreadful book, E. H. Carr's *What is History?*, (4) which prioritises the historian over history and method over content, leading to an utterly vulgar notion of relativism. In other words, I get a little bit worried about the emphasis on the critical. I wonder occasionally whether we need a bit more confidence that a great deal in history is actually known.

I am profoundly sceptical, too, about the use of documents at early stages in teaching. It usually turns into an exercise of English comprehension, almost completely devoid of historical content. And in any case, properly to analyse a document requires very serious levels of historical understanding, which is quite unfair to expect of a fifteen year old. It is silly. This approach leads to ritualised box-ticking. It has also seen the rise of that dreadful word, bias – everything is biased. Every historical source is biased, so what? To use this simply as a general term which children are intended to throw around leads to something that is worse than an absence of criticism; it is a universal scepticism, which I think is profoundly dangerous.

I am also deeply sceptical about the prioritisation which is part of the E. H. Carr/Fines process of historiography, that is to say, historians' views as opposed to historical content. It is a fact not to be disputed that most historians are tedious and morally reprehensible. Kevin Sharpe is brilliant on this subject: he says that the collective noun for a group of historians should be a 'malice'. One of my more vivid memories from the many years during which I sat on the Board of Examiners of the University of London, and chaired it in its final sad death throes, was a question on the role of Laudianism in the lead up to the English Civil War of the seventeenth century. One student, and he was a reasonable candidate, listed every conceivable historian's view on it before he had the vague notion

that perhaps he ought to show something about what had actually happened. So he tried to describe a church, and he culminated in informing me that Laud insisted that the altars were moved to the east wing. Churches, of course, do not have east wings; country houses do. Churches have east ends. This person knew nothing about the church, nothing about an altar, nothing about a religion, nothing actually about the seventeenth century, and yet he got a 2:2 because he was able to recite the views of historians.

Now this seems to me to be an outrage. It produces a subject which is intellectually indefensible and desiccated. It is also profoundly wasteful of time. A skills-based approach consumes endless time. One is constantly re-inventing the wheel, sending children off to do research that comes up with the amazing discovery that the Battle of Hastings took place in 1066, something which David Bates will, I think, tell us is a relatively well established fact. Why waste time doing this? And in the course of their research these same children will dredge up loads of nonsense on the Internet. We need to have confidence in content, we need to have confidence in our own knowledge, in what is actually knowable in history. We need big subjects, big themes.

In conclusion, how can we justify the idea of history at the centre of a national curriculum? There are two ways of doing it. The first is psychological. Memory is central to being human. The most terrible sign of Alzheimer's is the loss of memory, something uniquely destructive to the personality. We are memory, we are our awareness of ourselves. I would suggest that societies are really very similar. They are collective memory, and a society that loses its collective memory has nothing. Without an awareness of the need for collective memory any notion of community, value or stability vanishes and we become merely individualised flotsam and jetsam. So there is a really powerful argument of this sort to be made for the centrality of history.

But there is also another argument - and here I think I may be on ground that I suspect relatively few people in this room will agree with - that I am prepared to defend as an approach, not as a final solution to everything. It is that, again, I think we have overdone the critical element of history. I think there is a very powerful place for the celebratory. If you look, for example, at the teaching of history in Germany, it is concerned with the warning from history, and the warning from German history in particular. If you look at Britain it does seem to me, and this may be terribly naïve, that the message is pretty optimistic. I do think that English history, in particular, has a fundamentally optimistic message. With our perpetual questioning of history, partly from a Tory point of view, partly from a Marxist point of view, partly from a postmodern point of view, we have really lost a sense of the larger generalisations about our past.

Distinguished Anglo-Saxonists, like the late lamented Patrick Wormald or James Campbell, have argued for the remarkable nature of the Anglo-Saxon state, the participatory nature of its government, the use of the vernacular, the involvement of a broad sector of the population in decision making and so on. All of these things seem to me to be very important, and they may very well be, as, for example, Alan Macfarlane argues in *The Origins of English Individualism*, a constant, fundamental strand in English history. (5) This is worth looking at. It also seems to me, again as Macfarlane argues, that there is a connection between the politics of participatory government, of limited government, of relatively responsible government and a particular attitude to the family, which is that the family is not extended but is on the whole rather smaller, more individual, more nuclear if you like. There is also a particular attitude to law, manifested in the prioritisation of property in English common law. All of these things do establish certain mindsets within English society which, of course, culminated in the two great revolutions of the seventeenth century. The Civil War and the Glorious Revolution of 1688-9 led to the astonishing assertion that, instead of the people having the religion of the king, the king should have the religion of the people, which solved that problem rather neatly.

And, of course, in the latter part of the seventeenth century, England, as Voltaire realised, single-handedly invented modernity. Voltaire, of course, had the enormous advantage of being one of the few Frenchmen to have spoken fluent English; but he wrote about Newton and Locke, with astonishing prescience, as the founders of the new age; and I think he is right.

I know that there is slavery, I know that there are horrors, I know that there is Albion's tree and all the rest of it, but do we clearly remember that slavery was extinguished by the British Navy? Do we clearly remember that the passion of the anti-slavery campaigners, led by people like [William Wilberforce](#) and [Lord Shaftesbury](#), was rooted within this tradition, as, of course, were the rulings by [Mansfield](#) and others against slavery. They are also part of this English tradition, and this self-laceration that we have gone in for is, I think, profoundly unhealthy.

I want to put before you this view that we can and should defend history as a central subject in schools. But we will have to reform. We will have to teach history differently, with a different sort of confidence, by different methods and with different goals and purposes. This is not any kind of nationalist paean of our past, far from it. Although England was the first to embrace nationalism of the traditional nineteenth-century pattern, it was also the first to abandon it. Nationalism was replaced with a different notion of belonging, that is, attachment to institutions and values, which seems to me to be the way forward. We need, then, a certain confidence; we need not the critical, but the celebratory. You cannot teach without a belief in what you are doing. Ultimately, you have to be confident; you have to be confident that history matters, and not simply professionally, not simply as a construction of terribly clever footnotes, but that its content actually matters to those who are learning, and will continue to matter to them for the rest of their lives. Otherwise why bother?

Notes

1. First screened on Channel 4 in September 2001. [Back to \(1\)](#).
2. D. Starkey, *Elizabeth: Apprenticeship* (2000). [Back to \(2\)](#).
3. A. Beevor, *Stalingrad* (1998); A. Beevor, *Berlin: the Downfall, 1945* (2002). [Back to \(3\)](#).
4. E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (1961). [Back to \(4\)](#).
5. A. Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism: the Family, Property and Social Transition* (Oxford, 1978). [Back to \(5\)](#).