

# THE TEACHING OF HISTORY IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

by

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## *The Task of the History Teacher:*

THE fundamental objective of all teaching is to produce an intelligent citizen that will take a "rational and enlightened" interest in the progress of his country. This is what Gladstone visualized when he introduced his Education Act of 1870 for the express purpose of producing an educated voter while the subsequent acts introducing first compulsory and ultimately free education were but extensions designed to take care of the advancing democracy in England. But to ensure that the educated voter became a valuable citizen, the introduction of History as a compulsory subject in the school curriculum became essential for without a knowledge of the history of one's country and without at least an elementary knowledge of civics, no care can be taken of one's "citizenship" nor could one be proud of such "citizenship". To become a naturalized citizen of the U.S.A. a person is required to pass an examination on the history of that country. The task of the History teacher is therefore a matter of national importance and the approach to the teaching of the subject deserves careful consideration.

Despite many emphatic assertions to the effect that History is on its way out as a popular subject at school and that the teaching of History has become a drudgery, the subject is not dying nor has its teaching fallen to the low ebb many would have us believe. The suggestions set out below have actually been proved in practice in cases where the History teachers are not mere teachers of bare facts, where the approach is enterprising, where the motivated subject has not become more important than the future citizen studying the subject. Some of these "modern" teachers with whom I have discussed the topic of "method" not only enjoy their teaching but in addition derive the double satisfaction of obtaining excellent examination results and of seeing the pupils continue with the study of History at University.

## *The Necessary Prerequisite:*

TO present the subject successfully, a prerequisite is, of course, a qualified History teacher, that is, a teacher who is wellread, well-informed and adequately equipped to meet the demands that will be made on his resources. To make the subject alive, virile, popular and relatively easy to learn, the History teacher will make use of all possible aids to establish clarity. By obviating ambiguity and muddled thinking

one would obviate also such howlers as "a papal bull is a male cow" and "When Napoleon arrived in Morocco he found that all the public houses were closed".

### *The Creation of "Atmosphere":*

**W**ALKING into a History classroom, an outsider should immediately become conscious of a certain atmosphere. There, on the walls, should be the pictures of the great personalities of the period with which the teacher is dealing — or even the pictures of the other famous characters who have made "History . . . the essence of innumerable biographies" (Carlyle). The resourceful teacher will raise the funds for purchasing comparatively cheap frames for pictures contributed by pupils or procured from illustrated periodicals, for instance by means of a "cake-and-candy sale" during one of the breaks. There must follow the inevitable "don't": Don't allow pupils to destroy valuable books in their hunt for relevant historical illustrations!

The atmosphere should be "thick" with maps — Hang them on the walls, draw them on the blackboards, refer to them constantly. Have you ever tried a flannelgraph with a black background and light strands of wool to illustrate fluctuating frontiers, e.g. those of the Italian and German states during the nineteenth century? A young teacher attempted to explain to the standard 8 class the possibility of France becoming encircled by Habsburg territories by simply drawing three straight lines representing the French coastline on the West, the Pyrenees on the South and the Rhine on the North — Needless to say, the pupils had not the foggiest idea of what "encirclement" by the Habsburg implied. Matriculants' sketchy attempts to illustrate the vacillating policy on the Eastern Frontier had the rivers flowing into the Atlantic Ocean or, if you prefer it, running out of the Indian Ocean. To help these students the teacher should continually refer them to a comprehensive outline of the map: most students are visual types and the oral injection is insufficient.

Still on the topic of atmosphere: Have you ever tried building up a museum? Primitive stone implements, the arts and crafts representing different native tribes, firearms, dress styles, coins — they all help to create atmosphere and interest is sustained.

### *Textbooks and Reference Libraries:*

**T**HE greatest teaching aid is, of course, the textbook. But the pupil should be trained to use the book properly and to be aware of both its merits and its deficiencies.

Over and above the best textbooks (with a proper index, marginal notes and attractive illustrations) the scholar should have access to a judiciously furnished library. The accent is on "have access to": reference

books should not be mere showpieces. Pupils should be permitted the use of up to date publications containing articles by experts such as "History Today", edited by Peter Quennel and Alan Hodge — this would improve not only factual knowledge but also the power of expression. A practical method of using the reference library is for the teacher to divide the class into small study-groups of about six or seven who must prepare a lecture on a certain topic after being guided by the teacher. The teacher will select any member of the study-group to "teach" the lesson to the class. This ensures that at least six or seven will have the specific subject thoroughly prepared. When the member of the study-group presents the lesson the rest of the class become the critics and will suggest improvements. The History teacher will finally summarise the topic. The study-group will return to their task of rewriting the lesson in "model" essay form which will be typed, roneoed and distributed to all the members of the class.

A certain young teacher told me that at his particular school, as an added incentive, the lectures were tape-recorded for future reference. Imagine the thrill it must give the "lecturer" to hear his own voice — and to discover his own talent! Thus the scholars have been obliged to do some independent reading; they increase their vocabulary and improved their style. (Remember that "If you can't say it you don't know it"); time and labour have been saved — the children worked harder than the teacher; and the pupils have progressed along those suggested "rational and enlightened" lines.

Mention has been made of roneoed notes. These have undoubted uses but are subject also to equally great abuses. It is fatally easy for roneoed notes to become stereotyped. Concise language and abridged ideas could make roneoed notes dull, soulless, something no-one reads for pleasure. The sheets should, however, always play only a subservient role to the textbook. Accurate, neatly typed roneoed notes can be a great boon to the inexperienced teacher and may even be an indispensable aid to "swotting" for the pupil who has no flair for History. At the same time life could be infused into these notes by inserting blank sheets into the file on which pupils may sketch or paste illustrations, enter apt quotations and jot down notes for their own guidance thus virtually compiling their own textbooks. The History teacher would contribute his share by constantly checking and if necessary revising the roneoed notes.

#### *Other Aids:*

**T**HE projector offers another effective way of keeping the subject alive. Time can be wasted here more easily than in any other way but normally everybody enjoys the half-hour diversion — which is also important.

Talking about diversions. Somewhere, in a prominent place, should be a map which may be pulverised with little pins holding differently coloured labels "reporting" topical news from various activity centres: "Algiers: French troops, supported by helicopters killed 43 Algerian rebels", "Vatican City: The Pope celebrates eightieth birthday", "Washington: Eisenhower fit for another campaign", "Cape Town: South Africa Act Amendment Act promulgated". A great deal of discussion will probably follow on "World News Flashes" reporting from London that "Tom van Vollenhoven is Rugby Film Star", from Johannesburg that "Holt is points winner", from Pakistan that a cricket umpire was "ragged" by the players. Properly controlled, even these "Historical" events can be both entertaining and enlightening.

Excursions of an historical interest should form an integral part of a school's students high school syllabus. A visit to the Makapan or Sterkfontein caves will stimulate the pulse of the History class. The teacher on the Reef has an advantage: Visit the Africana Museum in the morning with your standard six class; have lunch at a restaurant and attend matinee in the afternoon if you don't want to see more sights.

These jottings are of necessity brief as they are submitted mere as a lead for keeping the teaching of History alive, bearing in mind that "Truth lies within a little and certain compass, but error is immense" (Viscount Bolingbroke). Any criticism, whether adverse or favourable, would be most welcome provided the nett result is towards a more positive and constructive approach to teaching methods and consequently bringing the scholar a step nearer to the ultimate goal of "useful citizenship."

## DIE BEHOEFTE AAN 'N NASIONALE PRENTE-KABINET

deur

W. J. DE KOCK

**D**IE gedagte aan 'n sentrale prente-kabinet vir ons vaderlandse geskiedenis is sekerlik niks nuuts nie. Vaagweg is daar al dikwels oor gepraat en geskryf maar tot hede is die enigste pogings tot verwesenliking daarvan nog taamlik ver van die ideaal verwyderd.

In die onderwys word sonder teenspraak die waarde van aankouingsmateriaal in die vorm van foto's, prente, tekeninge, landkaarte, films, filmstrokies en lanternplaatjies as kragtige en haas onontbeerlike hulpmiddel by die mededeling van kennis aanvaar. Dit geld by uitstek