

The Informal Teaching of History

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The subject of the informal teaching of history—that portion of historical teachings which is given neither in the schoolroom at home nor in the classroom at school—seems to be best dealt with by attempting to answer three questions:

- I. Is such teaching desirable, and if so, why?
- II. Is it possible, and if so, how?
- III. Has it any special dangers, and if so, what?

I. History, being co-extensive with the known life of man, and therefore widening with every hour, it is evident that the 1200 hours or so which a child may give to the subject in an ordinary course of schooling must be quite insufficient to bring him acquainted with even the main facts of history. But far more important is the inculcation of the historical point of view, and this is often far easier when dealing with one or two children than with a class. Complaints are often heard that a child has had so many years of history teaching, and yet knows nothing, for instance, of the Crimean War. It is forgotten that this war is recent and of little general importance, and that the child ought not to have come across it in his formal course. But it is of course most advantageous that he should have heard stories of this war and know of some relative or friend who took part in it. It may be objected that only a skilled teacher can impart the historical point of view; but this point of view is merely a particular instance of the law of uniformity: its essence is the conception that people were much the same in past ages as now, that differences of language, dress and custom are unimportant, that the past was neither a puppet-show nor a masquerade, but a portion of real life, in which people acted from motives very like those which still govern human conduct. The late professor Blackie has put the historical point of view into a couplet, when he says of the men of old:

“They ate, drank, loved and hated, laughed and cried,
And begat children like themselves, and died.”

The child that conceives a Crusader as a kind of Imperial Yeoman and not as a pantomime-figure has attained the point of view so far as his capacity admits.

II. Not only is it possible to teach history informally, but it is impossible to avoid doing so; the only question is whether such teaching is sound or unsound. A man will say “I know no history,” and go on to develop his theory of the evolution of Greek philosophy or Italian art, of the origin of the Reformed Churches, or of the true meaning of such names as “Whig” and “Tory”. But these are all historical matters, and in fact, apart from baby-talk and pure science or pure art, a man must talk of historical subjects or hold his tongue; even science and art have most interesting historical aspects. But as Hugh Miller spoke of “the geology of the anti-geologists,” so one might speak of “the history of the anti-historians.” Since then we must talk history to our children, it is worthwhile to talk sound history. Occasional inaccuracy of detail is of no importance, so long as one avoids “pontifying,” the merely parochial point of view, and such bitter partisanship as leads children to picture great men as objects of contempt. One may disagree with Mr. Chamberlain, but there is something wrong with a household where the children learn to speak of him by disrespectful nicknames.

To come to detail, one may-

(a) Tell or read stories to children-the method of Herodotus: Scott was doubtless right in deprecating the attempt always to “write down” or “talk down” to the capacity of children, who understand more than we think and remember more than they understand; such memories become valuable later on:

(b) Show them churches, bridges, houses, monuments, and give their dates, not in figures, but by association with known persons-the method of Pausanias: “that church was built in Walter Scott’s time”; “this house when your grandfather was a school boy”; “this bridge twenty years ago; a hundred years ago it could not have been built”:

(c) Show them portraits, battle-pieces, historical pictures, armor, and other historical objects, avoiding representations of horrors or the display of instruments of torture, as likely to produce morbid imaginings; for the same reason pictures displaying a great

amount of dark shadows should not hang in nurseries: the notorious inaccuracy of “historical” pictures matters little:

(d) Call their attention to books and get them to read for themselves, and show them how to use books of reference; the inaccuracy of Shakespeare’s historical plays and of historical novels is unimportant, if the child grows familiar with the great names and interested in those who bore them. Wendell Holmes admirably illustrates the value of forming the book-habit by the Eastern story of the drugs in the racquet-handle:

(e) Take them to visit historical scenes, near home or at a distance:

(f) Combine methods (c), (d) and (e) by taking them, for instance, to Killiecrankie during a summer holiday, showing them Dundee’s postern when they return to Edinburgh, giving them his portrait to look at and reading or singing them “Bonnie Dundee”: a natural comment on the song would be that in fact he did not ride down the Bow, nor leave Edinburgh by the West Port, but took the way of the Water Gate and the “Lang Dykes,” now Princes Street, but then a country lane:

(g) Give them every chance of seeing notable persons and historical pageants, and of being present at royal proclamations and commemorative services, and generally of taking part in the public life of their own or any other country; and

(h) Interest them in traditions, ballads and current sayings attributed to great men; the tales of Regulus or Wallace may not be true in detail, but they are true to the national characters of Rome and of Scotland: the weighing of historical evidence comes later, and a belief which reflects and has influenced national character is itself a part of history; yet traditions should from the first be told as traditions.

III. That there are dangers in the informal teaching of history cannot be denied, but the art of living includes the facing of unavoidable dangers, and such these appear to be. The chief are perhaps:-

(a) Generally false views, bitter partisanship and hole-and-cornerishness or the want of wide conceptions; these have been dealt with above:

(b) Inaccuracy of details, which we have dismissed as unimportant, provided the attitude of infallibility be avoided:

(c)Incorrectness of method, which again is of little importance if it does not amount to falseness of general view: and

(d)Wearying the child and so producing a dislike of the whole subject: it is notable that in our islands only is this commonly regarded as a danger; the rest of the world says “You wish a child to know a thing? Better teach it him,” while we say, “No, no; you will only make him hate the thought of it,” from which the inference seems to be that we have not given enough attention to the elementary rule that all teaching must be made interesting, especially for the young: children are “bird-witted” and cannot as a rule bear to apply themselves long to one subject. All informal teaching should be opportune, not thrust down a child’s throat when he is longing to play or make first-hand investigations for himself, and one should not attempt to ascertain how much a child has carried away from a given piece of instruction; what you have told him he will tell over to his nurse or his younger brother, but not so willingly to you; the promise is that the bread cast upon the waters shall be found “after many days.”

It appears then-if the above views be accepted-that the informal teaching of history is desirable, is possible, and is not unduly dangerous when undertaken by the intelligent and courageous.

The most important suggestions made in the discussion that followed the address were perhaps that children should be taken to see historical plays-as well as induced to read them or hear them read-and that portrait-statues and the names of streets, squares and the like might afford valuable hints for historical teaching of the kind in view.

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