

Why We Teach History

The study of history is vital to students' development, but it must be presented with integrity.

By Walter A. McDougall

"If we act only for ourselves, to neglect the study of history is not prudent.

"If we are entrusted with the care of others, it is not just."

Samuel Johnson

The sterility of the current debate over history may be explained by the failure of combatants of all political stripes to acknowledge and grapple with the fact that the teaching of history serves three functions at once.

Intellectual

One, obviously, is intellectual. History is the grandest vehicle for vicarious experience. It truly educates provincial young minds and obliges them to reason, wonder, and brood about the vastness, richness, and tragedy of the human condition.

If taught well, it trains young minds in the rules of evidence and logic, teaches them how to approximate truth through the patient exposure of falsehood, and gives them the mental trellis they need to place themselves in time and space and organize every other sort of knowledge they acquire in the humanities and sciences.

To deny students history, therefore, is to alienate them from their community, nation, culture, and species.

Civic

The second pedagogical function of history is quite different and often seems to conflict with the first. That is its civic function.

From the ancient Israelites and Greeks to the medieval church to the modern nation-state, those charged with educating the next generation of leaders or citizens have used history to impart a reverence for the values and institutions of the creed or state.

The post-modern critic may immediately charge that this amounts to a misuse of history and the brain

washing of young people: just think of the sectarian history taught in religious schools, the indoctrination imposed by totalitarian régimes, or the flag-waving history that hoodwinked young Americans into volunteering for the Vietnam War.

But to cite such examples is to dodge the question. The civic purpose of history cannot be abolished, since all history — traditional or subversive of tradition — has a civic effect. So the real questions are whether schools ought to tilt toward extolling or denouncing their nation's values and institutions and how the civic function may be fulfilled without violence to the intellectual function of history.

Moral

Those questions are painfully hard to resolve and are a matter of conscience as much as of reason — which brings us to the third — moral — function of history.

If honestly taught, history is the only academic subject that inspires humility. Theology used to do that but, in our present era — and in public schools especially — history must do the work of theology. It is, for all practical purposes, the religion in the modern curriculum.

Students whose history teachers discharge their intellectual and civic responsibilities will acquire a sense of the contingency of all human endeavour, the gaping disparity between motives and consequences in all human action, and how little control human beings have over their own lives and those of others.

A course in history ought to teach wisdom — and if it doesn't, then it is not history but something else.

I believe it is possible to pursue all three purposes of history in books and the classroom. None of us will do so without friction and shortfalls, because we are no less creaturely than the historical people we teach about.

Moreover, the quality of our instruction is limited and skewed by the finite set of facts we know or set before our pupils.

But errors of fact and judgment as to what to include or omit are excusable and correctable. What is inexcusable and, as Samuel Johnson wrote, unjust, is the willful denial of truth or promotion of falsehood in order to 'slam-dunk' into students an intellectual, civic, or moral purpose at the expense of the other two.

Johnson may have been thinking about statesmen when he referred to those "entrusted with the care of others." But no one is more entrusted with others' care than teachers, and no teachers more than historians.

Prudence and justice are two words conspicuous by their absence in our otherwise verbose debates on how, why, and when to teach which sort of history.

An honest history must hear and pass on the laments of those displaced in the course of our nation's growth. But the main story line must remain that of the Euro-American dominant culture, its ideals and aspirations, creativity and service to itself and others in peacetime and war: the good as well as the bad and ugly.

For only by learning that story will tomorrow's leaders — of whatever race or sex — know the standards they are supposed to live up to, gain the knowledge needed to excel, and begin to acquire good judgment, without which the power that knowledge imparts is a curse.

(Adapted with permission from "Footnotes," a bulletin of the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI). Dr. McDougall is chairman of the History Academy of the FPRI and coauthor of the forthcoming book, The Flickering Lamp: History, Education, and American Culture in the New Century (Encounter Books).