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To cite this article: Joseph Smith (2022) 'Talk about the questions of the day, shun them not': three late Victorian voices on the place of history in English schools, *History of Education*, 51:2, 167-183, DOI: [10.1080/0046760X.2021.1977855](https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760X.2021.1977855)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760X.2021.1977855>



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Published online: 08 Nov 2021.



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‘Talk about the questions of the day, shun them not’: three late Victorian voices on the place of history in English schools

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ABSTRACT

This paper brings together the ideas of three writers from the 1880s who argued for an enhanced status for history in the school curriculum. Although there is superficial agreement between the writers in calling for history to develop children’s citizenship and patriotism, each conceives these values differently. Focusing on the teaching of history to children in elementary and third-grade schools, this paper suggests that the considerable plurality of views among advocates of history reflects the underdeveloped disciplinary identity of history in the Victorian academy. However, the paper also contends that, in considering the pedagogic complexity of teaching history to children, these writers were engaging with epistemic debates – about the place of myth-histories and the processes of narrativisation – that would not exercise historical philosophers until the late twentieth century. Then, as now, the school curriculum proved fertile ground for discussion about what history is, and what it is for.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 September 2020
Accepted 1 September 2021

KEYWORDS

History; patriotism;
citizenship; Victorian;
historiography

Focusing on historical learning in elementary and ‘third-grade’ schools,¹ this paper draws on three contributions to debates around history teaching in England that span the period 1880–1889, and assesses each in terms of their views of the purpose of history and associated pedagogical prescriptions for how it should be taught. These sources reveal considerable disagreement in the late nineteenth century about history’s nature and purpose. In one sense, such disagreement is inevitable: history remains a contentious discipline even today.² However, the paper will suggest that the unusual development of history as a discipline in the English academy led to a particularly heterogeneous view of the subject in English schools. British universities were slower than their European counterparts to recognise the disciplinary distinctiveness and epistemic affordances of the subject, meaning that the subject drifted more slowly (and haphazardly) towards the

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¹After 1880, elementary education was compulsory for all pupils up to the age of 13. The term ‘third grade’ schools refers to the most basic level of secondary education, up to the age of 15.

²Joseph Smith, ‘Discursive Dancing: Traditionalism and Social Realism in the 2013 English History Curriculum Wars’, *British Journal of Educational Studies* 65, no. 3 (2017): 307–29; Tony Taylor and Robert Guyver, *History Wars and the Classroom: Global Perspectives* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2011); Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree and Ross Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Random House, 1997).

professionalisation seen in Europe and the United States. Consequently, this paper looks at school history at a time when history in the academy was undergoing epochal changes.³

The paper first examines the status of history as an academic discipline in the second half of the nineteenth century, before asking what it is possible to know about the teaching of the subject in schools. In the main section of the paper, three detailed contemporary explorations of the place of history in schools are analysed. The paper concludes with some brief reflections on what these findings mean for our understanding of Victorian historiography and the contemporary field of history education.

History as an emergent discipline in nineteenth-century Britain

As many writers have pointed out, the professionalisation and specialisation of history in England took rather longer than in other countries. For example, the first academic journal in history – the *English Historical Review* – did not appear until 1886, 27 years after the establishment of the German language *Historische Zeitschrift* in 1859. For Goldstein, Britain's relative stability as a nation-state (when contrasted with the German lands or multilingual France) meant that there was less urgent psychological demand for the subject. Levine has looked at the way in which respect for the subject paralleled changes in the British establishment, most notably the explosion in record-keeping by the civil service in the 1850s. A third factor relates to the overwhelming popularity of the histories produced by gentlemen of letters such as Macaulay, who famously wrote that he would not be satisfied until his *History of England* replaced 'the last fashionable novel on the table of English ladies'.⁴ However, it is in universities that the genealogy of history's evolution can be most clearly traced. Although George I established Regius chairs in history at Oxford and Cambridge in 1724, neither university formally taught the subject until 1848. Even after the subject was introduced, its position was initially insecure with history taught as an adjunct to Law at Oxford and as part of a broader Moral Sciences Tripos at Cambridge. Moreover, at Cambridge the Moral Sciences Tripos was taught to 'poll men' (those students who had not demonstrated the required proficiency in mathematics or Classics) and did not lead to the award of a BA.⁵

The reluctance to take history seriously was related to two difficulties inherent in the subject, which feature in our later discussions: first, the infinite scale of the past, and second, the question of how one demonstrates expertise in the face of this. At Oxford, the former of these two quandaries dominated discussion. At first, the university taught a broad sweep of English and European history but (following custom in Classical studies) made this manageable by specifying a narrow list of approved texts with which students were expected to be minutely familiar. This was motivated in part by convenience: it was easier (and cheaper) for a general tutor to

³Doris Goldstein, 'The Organisational Development of the British Historical Profession, 1884–1921', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 55 (1982): 180–93; Philippa Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional: Antiquarians, Historians and Archaeologists in Victorian England 1838–1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁴Quoted in Mark Phillips, 'Macaulay, Scott, and the Literary Challenge to Historiography', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50, no. 1 (1989): 117.

⁵Goldstein, 'Development of the British Historical Profession'; Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional*.

familiarise himself with a single text than with an entire period of study. However, from the 1870s colleges were encouraged to appoint lecturers in specialist periods whose expertise could be shared, sparing colleges the unthinkable expense of appointing a tutor for each period. This process of periodisation percolated down to school history too: in 1888 the Oxford Local Examination syndicate removed its 'Outlines of English History' and replaced it with four shorter periods that varied by examination cycle.⁶

While these reforms challenged the assumption that 'knowing history' meant a familiarity with a broad sweep of the past, it maintained a belief that the 'best' historians were those who could recall most, albeit about a narrower period. Indeed, the view that history could not be considered intellectually rigorous because it could be 'crammed' had led to a crisis at Cambridge in 1867 when the subject was removed from the Moral Sciences Tripos. Although the subject was revived when Seeley became Regius Professor, it was not until 1885 that the examination system established the principle that history was, in part, a methodological endeavour in which students needed familiarity with 'the original authorities'. In his discussion of this period Peter Slee concludes, 'History was now recognised clearly to be a developing, research-based discipline, and it was agreed that students should be aware of the distinctive processes as well as the distinctive products of historical research'.⁷ The contributors analysed in this paper suggest that a similar process was at work in schools: they are united in their criticism of rote learning, and all agree that school pupils must show an ability to explain events rather than simply memorising them.

However, it is possible to overstate the scale of change that the English historical community saw in this period – narratives of English exceptionalism were still the norm. Although he had overseen reform at Cambridge, Seeley cautioned that 'history, while it should be scientific in method, should pursue a practical object'. Commenting on Seeley's *The Expansion of England* (1883) which sold 80,000 copies, Richard Aldrich writes that his 'basic theme was that the expansion of England was an example of manifest destiny and beneficial cultural transmission'.⁸ Seeley opened his book by stating that the purpose of history was to 'modify' the reader's 'view of the present and his forecast of the future' so that 'the history of England ought to end with something that might be called a moral'.⁹

Thus, in the period explored in this paper, history in England occupied a curious and unique position: it had incorporated much of the methodological professionalism associated with the Rankean school of scholarship but had tempered this with a sense of imperial exceptionalism and a lingering attachment to the practical and didactic insights that the past supposedly afforded. History was still a 'new' subject finding its way in the academic landscape and a range of views on its nature and purpose remained. These diverse attitudes (and the question of whether historical understanding could ever be more than knowledge retention) inevitably suffused debates over what should be taught in schools.

⁶John Roach, 'History Teaching and Examining in Secondary Schools, 1850–1900', *History of Education* 5, no. 2 (1976): 137.

⁷Peter Slee, *Learning and a Liberal Education: The Study of Modern History in the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Manchester 1800–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 83.

⁸Richard Aldrich, 'History in Education', *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education* 32, no. 1 (1996), 55.

⁹John Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (London: Macmillan, 1883), 1.

History as an emergent school subject in the late Victorian period

Given the difficulty that history had in achieving disciplinary respectability in Victorian English universities, it is not surprising that the subject occupied an unsettled position in the school curriculum. At elementary level, history was not widely taught as a discrete subject throughout much of the nineteenth century. Advice to school inspectors in 1839 suggested that pupil-teachers were not expected to have any historical knowledge until the third year of their training when they would be tested on ‘the outlines of English history’.¹⁰ In 1866, the Committee of Council on Education complained that the system of payment by results under which schools were judged primarily based on pupils’ attainment in the ‘3Rs’ (reading, writing and arithmetic) has ‘tended, at least temporarily, to discourage attention to the higher branches of elementary instruction: geography, grammar, history’.¹¹

While 17,710 children were studying history by 1875, this was still only a minority of elementary school pupils and successive reforms continued to discourage its study. The Code of 1882 ruled that it need only be taught at Standard V and above, thus reducing the incentive to teach it to younger children. It also stated that schools could offer only two ‘class subjects’ to inspectors, of which one must be English. Inevitably, the space for history in schools was squeezed by the 1882 code and, in 1890, history was taught in just 414 of 22,516 departments for older children.¹²

However, an emphasis on the teaching of history as a discrete subject in elementary schools can be somewhat misleading. Stephen Heathorn makes the point that the emphasis on the 3Rs in the 1880s was accompanied by an understanding that children should learn to read through familiarity with subjects (such as geography and history) to which they were not otherwise exposed. Indeed, Heathorn notes that in 1882 fully one-third of literacy texts had a historical focus.¹³

Sources on the content of history lessons in Victorian schools in England

While government records provide a reliable account of education policy in the era, sources relating to what actually happened within schools are scarcer. Until the publication of *Suggestions to Teachers and Others Concerned in the Work of Public Elementary Schools* by the Board of Education in 1905, no guidance about teaching was offered to schools beyond the bald expectations of the inspection standards. Scholarly attention to the pedagogy of history teaching came even later, with M. W. Keatinge’s landmark *Studies in the Teaching of History* in 1910 and the associated textbook *A History of England for Schools with Documents, Problems and Exercises* in 1911.¹⁴ Observational data from school inspectors offer some insights, but these rarely paid systematic attention to the teaching of individual subjects. Observation of history teaching by outsiders is

¹⁰Committee of Council on Education, ‘Minutes Dated 25th August and 21 December 1846’, in *Reports on Elementary Schools 1852–1882*, ed. F. S. Marvin (London: HMSO; 1908), 285.

¹¹Cited in Gordon Batho, ‘Sources for the History of History Teaching in Elementary Schools 1833–1914’, in *Local Studies and the History of Education*, ed. T. G. Cook (London: Methuen, 1972), 138.

¹²Ibid., 139. Class subjects were inspected on a whole-class basis, rather than by examining individual children.

¹³Stephen Heathorn, *For Home, Country and Race: Constructing Gender, Class and Englishness in the Elementary School, 1880–1914* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2000), 11.

¹⁴Maurice Keatinge, *Studies in the Teaching of History* (London: A & C Black, 1910); Maurice Keatinge and N. L. Frazer, *A History of England for Schools with Documents, Problems and Exercises* (London: A. & C. Black, 1911).

rarer still. George Fox, who researched English schools for the 1898 American Historical Association's *Study of History in Schools*, complained that 'There seems to be an unwritten law that an English master's form room is his castle, and it is not an easy thing to see the actual work of teaching'.¹⁵

One of the few scholarly attempts to study the history curriculum in the period was offered in 1936 by Olive Shropshire, who noted ongoing tensions in elite private schools between the traditional teaching of Classics and the growing recognition that more recent history was both academically rigorous and socially useful.¹⁶ While Shropshire made use of the small number of written curricula in a small number of elite schools, elsewhere studies of textbooks have been used as a proxy for researching what was taught and learned in English classrooms. These textbook studies have sometimes concluded that Victorian children were inculcated with an Anglocentric narrative of Protestant British exceptionalism and conquest.¹⁷ Marsden goes further, arguing that even this narrative evolved over the nineteenth century so that a paternalistic attitude towards colonial subjects which began the century evolved into a social-Darwinist view that occupied people were 'literally subhuman'.¹⁸ While this characterisation of the curriculum might not be entirely inaccurate, it is somewhat sweeping.

Valerie Chancellor's *History for their Masters: Opinion in the English History Textbook 1800–1914* remains a defining work in this field, even 50 years after its publication. Chancellor concludes that the view offered by Marsden that history teachers in the past were involved in indoctrination and propagandising is, to a large extent, a presentist fallacy. Rather, Chancellor argues, the stridency and simplicity of the ideas in school textbooks reflected a commonplace certitude which has only recently been called into question. In her own words,

Judged by the general standards of debate in Victorian England, the opinions expressed in books designed for children do not bear the marks of extremism which may be one of the hallmarks of propaganda.¹⁹

Chancellor also makes the point that an overriding concern with Christian morality acted as an important (though imperfect) check on political dogmatism: 'Thus, the monarchy may be sacrosanct, but individual monarchs were judged in moral terms. ... Warfare might be necessary, but for many writers it was still evil.'²⁰ In addition, Yeandle has explained that texts from this period were occasionally subject to contemporary critique for their militarism, bias and inaccuracy.²¹

¹⁵George Fox, 'Appendix V: History in English Secondary Schools', in *The Study of History in Schools* (American Historical Association, 1898), <https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/the-study-of-history-in-schools/appendix-v-history-in-english-secondary-schools> (accessed June 20, 2020).

¹⁶Olive Shropshire, *The Teaching of History in English Schools* (New York City: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1936).

¹⁷Pamela Horn, 'English Elementary Education and the Growth of the Imperial Ideal', in *Benefits Bestowed? Education and British Imperialism*, ed. J. A. Mangan (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 39–55.

¹⁸W. E. Marsden, 'All in a Good Cause: Geography, History and the Politicization of the Curriculum in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century England', *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 21, no. 6 (1989): 518.

¹⁹Valerie Chancellor, *History for their Masters: Opinion in the English History Textbook 1800–1914* (Bath: Adams & Dart, 1970), 139.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 140.

²¹Peter Yeandle, 'Empire, Englishness and Elementary School History Education c.1880–1914', *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research* 3, no. 1 (2003): 55–68.

As we have seen, researchers such as Heathorn and Yeandle have proposed that the attempt to understand Victorian history education solely through the prism of textbooks yields a partial and distorted picture. Heathorn argues that textbooks focused on history specifically were scarcely used in most elementary schools and that instead nationalist narratives were transmitted in topics featured in class ‘readers’; that is, texts used to teach children to read.²² Sales figures would seem to bear this out: while the most popular history textbook sold just 6000 copies between 1891 and 1902, 115,000 copies of Longman’s *Ship Historical Readers* were sold in the same period.²³ Consequently, Yeandle draws a distinction between the history education most children received (through literacy readers) and that received by the minority in elite fee-paying secondaries (through history-specific textbooks). This difference in audience led to an important difference in intent: while history textbooks were aimed at educating the next generation of empire-builders, most Victorian children received an education aimed at ‘enlightened patriotism’.

For Yeandle, ‘enlightened patriotism’ as a curricular aim ‘prioritised the needs of citizenship and morality above the inculcation of what contemporaries dubbed “crude” or “blind nationalism”’.²⁴ Although this aim had long coloured how Victorians thought about education, it was given theoretical support in the 1890s after the works of Johann Herbart, a German educationalist, were translated into English. Yeandle writes of a ‘Herbartian Invasion’ and contends that many teachers retrofitted their own ideas concerning the importance of civic education with Herbartian language, often in ways that ‘Herbart himself would not have recognised’.²⁵ Yeandle argues that in the years before the First World War these Herbartian pedagogists clashed with empire-traditionalists regarding the purpose of history education in schools.

Overview of authors and source texts

The findings of this paper complement those of Yeandle while differing in two aspects of its scope. First, this paper explores arguments about what a *specifically historical education* ought to be, rather than the place of history within education more generally. Consequently, although the Heathorn–Yeandle thesis that most children did not learn history as a discrete subject is empirically verifiable, it is important to those people who thought historical learning was important *in its own right*, rather than simply as an aid to literacy. Our contributors are keen to distinguish historical understanding from both the practice of memorising narratives and the practice of recalling disconnected facts. Instead, they agree that pupils must be led to an understanding of the interconnectedness of events. This emphasis on causation as the central conceptual demand of the discipline draws on Herbert Spencer’s contemporary advocacy of ‘descriptive sociology’.

²²Stephen Heathorn, ‘“Let Us Remember That We, Too, Are English”: Constructions of Citizenship and National Identity in English Elementary School Reading Books, 1880–1914’, *Victorian Studies* 38 (Spring 1995): 395–427.

²³Yeandle, ‘Empire, Englishness’, 58.

²⁴Peter Yeandle, *Citizenship, Nation, Empire: The Politics of History Teaching in England, 1870–1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

²⁵*Ibid.*, 53, 66.

A second divergence from the Yeandle–Heathorn thesis concerns period. While Yeandle treats the period from 1870 to 1914 as one when Herbartian pedagogy dominated in English schools, this paper studies the period immediately before the translation of Herbart into English in 1892. While our three writers show an emphasis on themes that would become associated with Herbart – citizenship, morality and enlightened patriotism – there was not yet a unified view of what these terms mean or how they should be taught. Herbart would later provide this consensus, but our pre-Herbartian authors use these words in very different ways.

The authors come from a range of backgrounds and are speaking to a range of audiences and so, unsurprisingly, advance different arguments about the purpose and practice of history teaching. There follows a short summary of each author’s background and experiences and a concise summary of the author’s position. Inevitably, these summaries will be painted in broad strokes and are no substitute for the more detailed analysis that follows.

The three texts analysed in this paper are:

- (1) ‘On Learning and on Teaching History in Schools, and on the Results Obtained by Such Teaching’ was a contribution to the *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* by art historian George Williamson in 1888.²⁶ Williamson is responding to an earlier contribution by Oscar Browning, which he felt focused too narrowly on the teaching of history to students in elite schools who were preparing for university.²⁷ In contrast, Williamson discusses ‘the teaching and learning of history in more elementary places of education than the college with especial reference to lads of the middle classes intended for business, journalism or the other professional walks of life’.²⁸

Williamson advocates an approach to pedagogy that draws out pupils’ understanding of the past from their own life experiences. In doing so, he argues that children can come to make a connection between their own lives and concepts such as citizenship and patriotism. Despite this child-centred pedagogy, he is the most insistent of our contributors on the need to teach a factually accurate rendering of the past. He argues that myths should be assiduously avoided in the history classroom because children are unable to distinguish these from true events.

- (2) *The Teaching of History in Schools* – an 1889 lecture delivered by Joseph Wells, an Oxford classicist.²⁹ Although writing from the perspective of the academy, Wells pays considerable attention to the historical education of children of all ages, from

²⁶George Williamson, ‘On Learning and on Teaching History in Schools, and on the Results Obtained by Such Teaching’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5 (1891): 247–257.

²⁷Oscar Browning, ‘The Teaching of History in Schools’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 4 (1889). An earlier version of this paper contained more sustained discussion of Browning’s own views on history education in schools. However, his emphasis on students considering historical study at university meant that it was not easily compared with the other three contributors: 69–84.

²⁸Williamson, ‘On Learning and on Teaching History in Schools’, 241.

²⁹Joseph Wells, *The Teaching of History in Schools* (London: Methuen, 1892).

delighting in the disappearance of Richmal Magnall's *Questions* from primary schools,³⁰ to considering the use of graduates of the new university history programmes as specialist tutors.³¹

Wells advocates a historical education grounded in patriotism and service to one's country delivered through an instructionist pedagogy. Drawing on his background as a classicist, Wells is relaxed about teaching fables, myths and untruths to children, provided that these myths are sufficiently morally instructive. His views come closest to the empire-traditionalist type identified by Marsden.

- (3) 'Chapter XIII – History' from *Lectures on Teaching* by J. G. Fitch.³² Fitch was an experienced school inspector who, following the development of the Teachers' Training Syndicate at the University of Cambridge, was charged with giving lectures on 'the practical aspects of a schoolmaster's work'.³³ Fitch complains in his preface that there is considerable difficulty classifying schools in England, but his comments on history as a subject relate to 'Primary' schools, 'the majority of whose scholars leave at the age of 14'.³⁴

Fitch shares with Williamson a view that history teachers should aim to connect the past to contemporary concerns and advocates the teaching of political concepts (such as monarchy and state) as a precursor to historical learning. Unlike Williamson, though, Fitch sees great power in historical myths and fables. But while Wells would teach these for their character-building potential, Fitch argues that children can begin to interrogate these myths, question their facticity and weigh their discursive power.

Detailed analysis of source texts

Analysis of the texts was inductive: as the texts were read, codes were used to identify emerging themes. Thereafter, a table was produced of direct quotations from each text, allowing close comparison between authors' views on each emergent theme. The emergent purposes – which will be analysed in more detail below – were:

- Patriotism
- Citizenship
- Disciplinary understanding
- Cultural literacy and myth histories.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 16.

³¹*Ibid.*, 22.

³²Joshua Fitch, *Lectures on Teaching*, new ed. (Toronto: Topp Clark Co, 1892). 'Chapter XIII – History' runs from pages 335–55. Although the first edition was published in 1880, all citations in this paper are from the 1892 new edition.

³³*Ibid.*, iii.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 51.

Patriotism

The 1880s were an interesting point in Britain's evolution as an imperial power. On the one hand, the situation was promising: the Berlin Conference had formalised British claims in Africa and the country was ruled by an Empress-Queen who, in 1887, celebrated 50 years on the throne. However, the unexpected defeat by the Boers in 1881, the loss of Khartoum in 1885 and ongoing debates over Home Rule in Britain's nearest colony serve as a reminder that Empires are rarely peaceably held. Our sources support the view that patriotism and imperial identity were important dimensions of the history curriculum in this period. However, there is considerable disagreement over what patriotism is, what it demands and how it is fostered. To highlight one important difference, consider these contrasting directives on how children might be led to patriotism. First, Wells:

It is for English teachers, if I may adapt Pericles, to make their children contemplate the deeds of England until they become enamoured with her, as a lover of his mistress.³⁵

And now Williamson:

the very walls of the [local] town, its name and its people, are vivid lessons in history to make Englishmen proud of their country – to give them justifiable pride in their homes and their hearths, teach them the history of the place where they live, and in teaching learn with them the history of the spot in which it pleases Providence you should live and work.³⁶

These are clearly quite different understandings of patriotism. For Wells, 'England' is something magnificent and remote to which children learn to attach themselves. For Williamson, meanwhile, 'England' is the familiar backdrop to children's lives, every bit as inspiring as Wells's great deeds but quiet, circumspect and too easily taken-for-granted. These contrasting conceptions of 'England' derive, perhaps, from the differences in the two men's field of expertise. As a classicist, it is not surprising that Wells conceives the nation as a militarist entity steeped in the warrior spirit of Machiavelli's *'virtu'*. For Williamson, the art historian, the nation is understood in more aesthetic, even pastoral, terms.

This contrast is brought into even sharper relief by the way in which the two men write about England's relationship with its European neighbours. Wells writes:

England has been made great by her prejudices; happily these are passing away; but if she is to remain great, something positive must be put in their place. The average Englishman in the last century thanked God daily . . . that he was not a frog-eating Frenchman, or any sort of contemptible foreigner. Such a feeling was most unfortunate; but while it made us the best-hated nation in Europe, it won us the rule-of-the-seas and Waterloo.³⁷

Writing a year earlier, Williamson saw Waterloo very differently:

Let us take wider views and broader methods, and let us teach history, not as though England formed Europe, and that all it was important for Englishmen to learn was how we fought the Frenchman, and beat him, hurrah! How we ignore Blücher at Waterloo, and France and Sardinia at Inkermann, and Russia and Greece at Navarino, and with characteristic John Bullism take all the credit to ourselves.³⁸

³⁵Wells, *The Teaching of History in Schools*, 13.

³⁶Williamson, 'On Learning and on Teaching History in Schools', 253.

³⁷Wells, *The Teaching of History in Schools*, 13–14.

³⁸Williamson, 'On Learning and on Teaching History in Schools', 250.

For Williamson, England has a long history as a European partner, whereas for Wells, a certain amount of bigotry was unfortunate, but justifiable so long as it contributed to an ill-defined national self-confidence. While explicitly critical of ignorant jingoism, Wells comments that he wants boys ‘to feel that to him and the English-speaking race belongs the first place in the world’. Such a view is echoed, albeit in more limited form, by Fitch, who writes:

It used to be the fashion more than now for Englishmen, especially after dinner, to talk much of our glorious and unrivalled constitution in Church and state. No doubt there was in all this an element of insular boastfulness, and perhaps a little selfish vulgarity. But after all patriotism is one of the things which our teaching ought to cultivate – a rational and affectionate regard for the country in which we have been born, and for the privileges we enjoy in it.³⁹

Borrowing terms from Yeandle, we can see that Fitch opens with a critique of ‘crude nationalism’ before sliding into a defence of ‘enlightened patriotism’. For Fitch, these ideas are continuous, rather than mutually exclusive. Primitive nationalism is seen as a *precursor* to a more informed sense of patriotic citizenship, rather than something that might preclude it. Wells might argue from a vulgar nationalist perspective that ‘we have national songs, and we ought to be made to learn them at school’, but he considers this an age-appropriate patriotic education; children’s patriotism will become more sophisticated with time.⁴⁰ In contrast to Yeandle’s view that they represented settled positions, from Fitch and Wells we can see that contemporaries did not view enlightened patriotism and crude nationalism as necessarily antagonistic but as more and less informed varieties of the same phenomenon.

As we have seen, Williamson’s patriotism is somewhat *sui generis*: his patriotism is local and European, but rarely national. It is, we might contend, patriotism without the Patria. As an artist, he celebrates the affective relationship with one’s local environment, while also stressing the deep cultural and intellectual ties with the continent. Indeed, Williamson’s pan-Europeanism stresses consanguinity, even as he bolsters stereotypes:

To Germany we owe a great deal. To our Danish and Viking blood much of strength and courage . . . and from France we glean habits of luxury, much comfort and convenience, and the daintier elements of life. All these countries intimately concern us.⁴¹

Citizenship

It should not come as a surprise that questions of citizenship emerge in all of the contributions; even today the preparation of children for life in a democracy is among the first defences made of the teaching of history in schools.⁴² That said, the extension of

³⁹Fitch, *Lectures on Teaching*, 355.

⁴⁰Wells, *The Teaching of History in Schools*, 36.

⁴¹Williamson, ‘On Learning and on Teaching History in Schools’, 251.

⁴²See Ken Osborne, *In Defence of History: Teaching the Past and Democratic Citizenship* (Toronto: Our Schools/Our Selves; 1995), and Keith Barton and Linda Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Hillsdale, NJ: Laurence Erlbaum, 2004).

the franchise brought about by the Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884 made questions of citizenship especially pressing, as the proportion of voting males rose from around one-in-seven in 1860 to two-in-three in 1890. In common with emerging democracies around the world, the expansion of the franchise was accompanied by the expansion of elementary education, giving rise to the 1870 Forster Act (which made local authorities responsible for elementary education) and the 1880 Education Act (which made elementary education compulsory).

This link between the expansion of the franchise and the expansion of education was well understood at the time, not least by Forster himself who famously stated that ‘now we have given the working class political power we must not wait any longer to give them education’. Of course, as Chancellor points out, the meaning of this famous epithet is somewhat ambiguous – was this a call of an educated democratic citizenry, or an expectation that school might teach these new voters to ‘learn their place’?⁴³ Wells best captures this tension between placing trust in the newly enfranchised, and a lingering Burkean fear of the mob:

of the special results of history, as distinguished from other subjects, no doubt the first place would be given to the training it furnishes for citizens . . . the importance of this point is impossible to exaggerate, especially now, when the basis of our state has been widely rising; wisely, I say, even though political power is entrusted to classes which have not the traditions of long experience of government to guide them.

In his analysis, Yeandle places considerable weight on the anxieties created by the extension of the franchise, arguing that the popularity of ‘enlightened patriotism’ as a curricular aim emerged because

the establishment, concerned about the rise of working-class organisations (reflected in growing support for leftist political parties), sought to use history to promote identification with nation rather than social class.⁴⁴

Here, as elsewhere, Yeandle’s analysis, though generally sound, is weakened by treating the entire period between 1870 and 1914 as essentially continuous. Until the emergence of the Independent Labour Party in 1893, there was no ‘leftist political party’ in England for which the working classes could vote, and it was not until 1906 that candidates were fielded in sufficient numbers to have any meaningful impact. Our texts from the 1880s are not, therefore, bound by a unifying concept of ‘enlightened patriotism’ but instead capture a faith in a more expansive concept of citizenship education.

For Wells and Fitch citizenship is an informational question, but Williamson positions it differently. While Fitch urges ‘the importance of lessons on the government and constitution under which we live’,⁴⁵ Williamson sees citizenship as something which is drawn out of the child through an emphasis on what he terms ‘daily history’:

talk about the questions of the day, shun them not. . . Did not the recent enlargement of the franchise mark an historical epoch, and did not the Local Government Act make a still more startling change in county history? Why not discuss them? Why not inquire of the lads how and by whom they are governed, who has charge of the roads, and who the poor, who

⁴³Chancellor, *History for their Masters*, 1.

⁴⁴Yeandle, *Citizenship, Nation, Empire*, 40.

⁴⁵Fitch, *Lectures on Teaching*, 353.

sustains and who governs the workhouses and asylums. . . . Let the subject be real, illustrate it by the real names if you will, . . . set the lads to find out about the various bodies and to question the teacher, and, depend upon it, a good body of citizens will be trained up.⁴⁶

The etymological origins of the word ‘education’ are a useful touchstone for comparing our contributors’ views. Craft tells us that ‘education’ derives from two Latin terms: *educare* (meaning ‘to mould’) and *educere* (meaning ‘to draw out’).⁴⁷ In the cases of both patriotism and citizenship, Williamson favours *educere*: both qualities are framed as nascent human capacities that are developed from within through reference to the familiar. Our other contributors, meanwhile, emphasise *educare*. For them, history affords a stock of knowledge and archetypes which might inspire and mould their students.

As Reba Soffer has shown, the view of history as fundamentally an education in public service dominated in Victorian universities.⁴⁸ Inevitably, therefore, notions of citizenship among our writers emphasise the duties owed by the citizen to the state. For Fitch, ‘every boy should be made to feel that unbought services will be required of him . . . and that it will be honourable to render them’.⁴⁹ Wells, meanwhile, has a more specific ‘honourable’ service in mind:

When I first read this paper three years ago, I was somewhat scornfully told that I seemed to look upon boys as only intended to be ‘food for powder’. This is a more modern version of the hackneyed old phrase ‘*Dulce et decorum Est pro patria Mori*’; I prefer the old version myself, but I am willing to accept the new one, and to answer that I do most firmly believe that it is at times at man’s first duty to be ‘food for powder’, and that his education should fit him for this among other duties.

Once again, Wells’s scholarship in the Classics is evident, as he conceives the state in fundamentally militaristic terms: citizenship, as much as patriotism, must be suffused with *virtu*. However, in hindsight we can suggest that Wells’s sentiments capture a moment of high-imperial hubris, albeit just eight years after Britain’s humiliation in the first Boer War. It hardly bears mention that a celebration of ‘*Dulce et Decorum est pro Patria Mori*’ would have been unthinkable after 1918, even if Horace’s patriotic phrase had not been ironically repurposed in Wilfred Owen’s bitter excoriation of the Great War.⁵⁰

On the subject of the dutiful citizen, mention must be made of one purpose of history which is conspicuous by its absence – that of moral education. The idea that history might serve to help children learn right from wrong is one which emerges just once in the source texts (Wells), and even this instance emphasises the importance of moral ambiguity in the study of the past, cautioning against the ‘danger of injustice to men of old time’ and insisting that ‘it is unhistorical to ignore the share which the spirit of the times had in producing injustices and abuses’. In emphasising historicism and in highlighting the dangers of moralistic presentism, Wells identifies himself as a thoroughly Rankean historian. That Wells, our most patriotic and militaristic contributor, can combine these

⁴⁶Williamson, ‘On Learning and on Teaching History in Schools’, 254, 5–26.

⁴⁷Maurice Craft, ‘Education for Diversity’, in *Education and Cultural Pluralism*, ed. M. Craft (London: Falmer, 1984), 9.

⁴⁸See Reba Soffer, *Discipline and Power: The University, History and the Making of an English Elite, 1870–1930* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994) for an expansion of this point.

⁴⁹Fitch, *Lectures on Teaching*, 254.

⁵⁰<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46560/dulce-et-decorum-est>.

views with a commitment to disciplinary rigour somewhat undermines the interpretation of the Victorian educator as moral guardian advanced by Chancellor, Yeandle and others. That said, Wells cannot resist describing King John and Judge Jeffries as ‘thoroughly bad’ and condemning the entire House of Stuart for being ‘false to England’.⁵¹

Disciplinary understanding

Wells’s insistence on the avoidance of presentism is an important dimension in another unifying theme: the emergence of disciplinary understanding as a purpose of history education. As we have seen, Creighton’s argument that ‘the aim of all study is the education in method’⁵² became increasingly influential in the Cambridge of the 1880s, leading ultimately to the adoption of a source-based paper in 1885. However, the same arguments were clearly emergent in schools, too.

All three writers agree that children’s historical knowledge is fragmentary and unsystematic, and all three are convinced that existing school practice – especially a reliance on memorisation of disjointed facts – is to blame for this situation. This notion that history is a discipline for which one can be ‘trained’ suggests that a view which treated history as a ‘way of knowing’ was beginning to emerge. For all our commentators, an understanding of causation is central to this ‘training’ as a historian. Although the writers emphasise the value of narrative to pupils’ learning, they are keenly aware that learning a narrative and learning history are two separate things. For Fitch, ‘history is not a mere narration of facts in their chronological order; but to know it is to know events in their true causes and connection’. Williamson is more sardonic, but his diagnosis is the same:

our average schoolboy will tell you of the Peninsular War and describe the death of Sir John Moore, but ask him for what reason English troops were fighting in Spain, and your answers would be both curious and absurd.⁵³

In these observations, our commentators clearly conceive of history as a discipline that requires children to construct some meaning from the past. There is a strand running through these contributions which is quite at odds with the stereotype that children were to be moulded into obedient (or racist) citizens through the repetition of imperialistic and patriotic tropes. No doubt Wells is clear that children should learn to love their country, but he is equally scathing about examiners who ‘give high marks for the neat reproduction of lecture notes, rather than for real interest in the subject’.⁵⁴ For our writers, history is not a singular story but an emergent lens for comprehending the world. Narratives are seen as important to children in developing this lens, but narratives are not enough in themselves. Instead, our writers foreshadow Carr’s famous dictum that ‘all history is the history of causes’.⁵⁵

⁵¹Wells, *The Teaching of History in Schools*, 17–18.

⁵²Quoted in Slee, *Learning and a Liberal Education*, 77.

⁵³Fitch, *Lectures on Teaching*, 336; Williamson, ‘On Learning and on Teaching History in Schools’, 249.

⁵⁴Wells, *The Teaching of History in Schools*, 25.

⁵⁵E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Vintage, 1961).

This idea of history as an emergent way of knowing is clearly influenced by Herbert Spencer's *Essays on Education*, which wrote of the value of historical learning as 'descriptive sociology'. In fact, since all three of our writers cite Spencer, we might playfully suggest that, in the 1880s, *Herbert* had more influence than *Herbart*. Williamson quotes Spencer approvingly:

It must be admitted that the liking felt for certain classes of historical facts is no proof of their worth, and that we must test their worth as we are to test the worth of other facts, by asking to what uses they are applicable. These are facts from which no conclusions can be drawn [and are] of no service in establishing principles of conduct which is the chief use of facts.⁵⁶

Fitch goes further in this respect and argues that the teaching of historical and sociological concepts should precede the learning of the facts about the past:

I should give a short series of lessons . . . with a view to make some simple and fundamental historical ideas intelligible – a state, a nation, a dynasty. . . . Scholars would thus see what sort of matter history had to do with, and would be prepared to enter on the study with more interest.⁵⁷

Wells is scornful of these approaches, describing Fitch's approach as a 'delightful new instance of making bricks without straw' and, casting doubt on a Spencerian approach more generally, writes:

a child has a healthy appetite for facts; he likes action and story, and if we offer him instead theories of the relations of classes, he will likely learn them like a parrot, or more likely, learn nothing at all.⁵⁸

While all our writers support the fostering of causative thinking in students, they are less certain of the value of sharing other aspects of the historian's craft with children. The value of primary sources in the classroom is asserted by all three writers, but these are used to enliven learning rather than to give an insight into how historians work. Fitch agrees that primary sources 'will, if wisely chosen, and read at the right time, be found to play an important part in fastening the record of some great event in the mind'.⁵⁹ Before embarking on a long digression on the importance of numismatics in stimulating pupil interest, Williamson offers the only example of primary sources being studied *in se*:

A facsimile of a sheet of the Domesday Book and an explanation of its text, specially if it relates to the country and town or district in which scholars are, will impress upon the minds of the pupils the great value of that invaluable work far better, far quicker, than hours of discourse.⁶⁰

It is clear, therefore, that educators were conceiving of school history as something that children needed to understand, rather than just a convenient narrative to be memorised. Our modern belief that overpowering narratives crowd out the space for critical and historical thinking is a presentist fallacy. Our teachers see no contradiction: dominant

⁵⁶Williamson, 'On Learning and on Teaching History in Schools', 255.

⁵⁷Fitch, *Lectures on Teaching*, 341.

⁵⁸Wells, *The Teaching of History in Schools*, 23, 12.

⁵⁹Fitch, *Lectures on Teaching*, 349.

⁶⁰Williamson, 'On Learning and on Teaching History in Schools', 246.

narratives might not constitute historical thinking, but nor did they preclude it. Children were to learn narratives, but they were *also* to investigate the causal chains implicit in these narratives and to use primary sources to fix these in their minds.

Cultural literacy and myth-histories

The importance of narrative can also be seen in the advocacy of what has recently been termed cultural literacy, the idea that full civic involvement demands a familiarity with important shared cultural reference points.⁶¹ For our writers, cultural literacy relates to historical learning in two ways. First, the importance of historical knowledge in comprehending other aspects of cultural life. Second, the role of apocryphal history, national legends or myth-histories (such as King Arthur, Beowulf or William Tell) as a dimension of identity formation.

All our writers agree with the first of these: that history has an important role in helping children develop a more culturally enriched set of interests. Fitch says that teachers should ‘treat’ students studying the Wars of the Roses to ‘two or three well-selected scenes from Shakespeare’s Henry IV or VI.’⁶² The art historian Williamson expects a broadening of the curriculum suggesting ‘greater attention to the authors, dramatists, reformers than to the monarchs, soldiers and favourites.’⁶³ Wells captures this aspect of learning in vivid, if somewhat paternalistic terms:

Few things are more pathetic than a bank holiday in one of our great national collections: the people go there because they have a dumb consciousness that they ought to go; but they find nothing to interest them because they have never been told about the things that have been gathered for their instruction.⁶⁴

Though there is considerable agreement among our writers regarding the importance of cultural literacy, there is a comparable level of disagreement concerning the teaching of myth-histories. Wells frames the dilemma and reaches a surprising conclusion:

unfortunately, a large number of the ‘pearls of history’ are ‘mock pearls’: are we therefore to keep them from children? Or shall we first use them and then introduce wholesome doubt? The latter course at any rate is certainly a mistake. Children don’t understand half lights . . . I for one have no doubt that children have the right to the good old stories of English history, however often they have been refuted. What if Prince Henry did not strike Judge Gascoyne and then nobly apologise when king? He might have done it, and the story helps us to realise what one of our greatest kings thought of duty.⁶⁵

To modern minds, Wells’s approach is shocking not only because it excuses the ethically dubious practice of telling untruths to children, but also because it makes a contestable claim about the character of a historical figure – Henry V – and then uses fabricated evidence to support it. Here it is possible that Wells’s training as a classicist has once again influenced his views on teaching more recent history. After all, the Ancient Greeks

⁶¹The specific term ‘cultural literacy’ is derived from E. D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Random House; New York, 1988), but the idea (albeit in more critical form) was apparent in Pierre Bourdieu’s work on cultural capital from at least the late 1970s.

⁶²Fitch, *Lectures on Teaching*, 349.

⁶³Williamson, ‘On Learning and on Teaching History in Schools’, 247.

⁶⁴Wells, *The Teaching of History in Schools*, 35.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 21.

and Romans did not share our modern division between myths and history. Furthermore, there are, even today, events in the ancient past about which scholars are uncertain whether they were historical or apocryphal.

Here, as elsewhere, Williamson opposes Wells when he writes:

History is not romance, it is its very opposite, with its inquiries respecting facts and causes, it is something known, as its very word etymology tells us. It is no tale or story . . . and yet too often the history learned in schools is not history at all, but an interwoven tissue of romance, colour, name and date.⁶⁶

This thoroughgoing commitment to the facticity of history may appear to contrast with Williamson's earlier suggestion that children should learn about the past from the world around them. However, Williamson sees a distinction between the epistemic and the pedagogic, which is the mirror image of Wells's. Where Wells seeks a teacher-led pedagogy that is flexible about the facticity of what is taught, Williamson favours student-led learning that is underpinned by commitment to a historical past.

It is unsurprising that such disagreement over the teaching of myth-histories exists; after all, the question of how to handle these popular, but faulty, versions of an imagined past is a quandary for history educators even today – to ignore them is to deny their power, but to engage with them is to risk giving them legitimacy. In modern history classrooms in England, this is reconciled through an approach known as 'interpretations of history' wherein myth-histories are taught as inaccurate renderings of the past that nevertheless carry (or carried) considerable cultural weight.⁶⁷ For example, children may learn about the importance of Arthurian legend to late medieval notions of chivalry, or they may interrogate more recent myth-histories such as Clark's 'lions led by donkeys' interpretation of the First World War.⁶⁸ In studying these interpretations children not only explore whether they are 'accurate' but also why they are imbued with such enduring meaning and power, *despite* their inaccuracy. Given that this approach is a late twentieth-century creation born out of postmodern critiques of history, Fitch comes startlingly close to pre-empting it:

That Romulus and Remus were suckled by a wolf . . . that Arthur gathered a goodly fellowship of famous knights at the round table at Caerleon, that William Tell shot an apple on his son's head, may, or may not, be authentic facts which will stand the test of historical criticism. But they were for ages believed to be facts. The belief in their truth helped to shape the character and convictions of after-ages. They had, therefore, all the force of truths, and they deserve study just as much as facts which can be historically verified.⁶⁹

Where Wells disregards the facticity of what is taught and Williamson insists on this, Fitch advocates a complex middle ground in which narratives exercise discursive power, and argues that this power is, in itself, a legitimate object of study. The fact that there is no settled position on the teaching of myth-histories in academic practice leads to a diffuse set of beliefs about how to teach these in the classroom.

⁶⁶Williamson, 'On Learning and on Teaching History in Schools', 244.

⁶⁷Robert Phillips, *History Teaching, Nationhood and the State* (London: Cassell, 1988) provides a fascinating discussion of the controversies that surrounded the inclusion of 'Interpretations of History' in the first English National History Curriculum. Homologous concepts are discernible in the curriculum of other countries.

⁶⁸Alan Clark, *The Donkeys* (London: Hutchinson, 1961).

⁶⁹Fitch, *Lectures on Teaching*, 350–1.

Conclusion

From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, we are accustomed to thinking of history as a staple of the school curriculum and a pillar of academic traditionalism. This paper, however, analyses a time when history was viewed with suspicion as a disciplinary interloper: the speeches it analyses are not ‘defences’ of an established academic domain, but advocacy for a new and controversial subject on the margins. This battle for intellectual respectability had only recently been won in universities and needed to be re-fought on the terrain of the school curriculum.

This lack of surety regarding the place of history in the English academic landscape is mirrored in the diversity of views offered by our writers. Our contributors do not fit into the narrow cast of imperial-minded doctrinaires that Marsden – or, to a lesser extent, Aldrich – has made for them. Chancellor is correct to say that their ideas are sometimes shocking to the modern mind, but that they are not extraordinary for their time. Yeandle’s argument that Herbartian ‘enlightened patriotism’ dominated educational thinking in this period finds some support, but our writers are more varied. This heterogeneity is explained, in part, by a difference in focus. While Yeandle, following Heathorn, investigates the place of history in the elementary curriculum, our writers focus on history as a discrete subject in both elementary and lower secondary schools. This extended attention on a single topic inevitably gives rise to more rigorous attention to children’s intellectual (rather than social) development. However, in the absence of a settled discipline with which to undergird their opinions, the ideas suggested by our writers are inevitably diffuse.

To a large extent, this disciplinary and pedagogic vacuum is filled in our writers’ pedagogies by a need to stimulate individual pupil interest. The lingering idea that history was primarily a gentlemanly pursuit, rather than a recognisable discipline, haunts their views. However, for our writers, pupil interest has an important pedagogic role: interest stimulated curiosity, which helped children think inquisitively about the past. Thus, when Williamson urges the teaching of local history, or Fitch advocates using literature in the classroom, or even when Wells defends the teaching of erroneous ‘mock pearls’, each has the same aim: the development of curiosity as a precursor to further investigation. In all cases, we are reading the words of men who love the past, and who feel that nurturing this love is the first step that we all must take in knowing the past better.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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