

# *The Role of History in Today's Schools*

A discussion by

ERLING M. HUNT  
CHARLES G. SELLERS ✓  
HAROLD E. TAUSSIG  
ARTHUR BESTOR

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## The Role of the College Historian

by

Charles G. Sellers

I must begin by explaining that I am not qualified to speak with any authority to the assigned topic, that is, the place of history in the schools. Instead the best I can do is to report to you my experience of the last six months as a fairly typical historian—that is, a historian who has had a vague sense of the importance of history in the schools, but who has really known nothing about it. Rather accidentally I have been called upon to venture out upon this unknown frontier, an experience that more and more historians are going to be having as time goes on. And it is on the basis of this slight experience that I presume to speak about the role of the historical profession with regard to history in the schools.

Six months ago the Organization of American Historians asked Arthur Bestor, Richard Brown, John Wiltz (now replaced by Robert Cross), Angus Johnston, and me to come up with some recommendations as to what the organized historical profession could most usefully be doing to assist in improving the teaching of history in the schools. My associates had all been out on this frontier already, but for me a new terrain was being explored for the first time. In six months of reading and discussing with school people, I have found this terrain very different than I had thought it to be.

One misconception, widely shared by historians, had to do with a group of people who presumably inhabited this terrain and whom I was in the habit of referring to as educationists. They were, I had been assuming, not very bright; they knew nothing about any subject matter areas; they had an abnormal hunger for power and influence; and they thought they knew all about how teachers ought to teach without knowing anything about what was to be taught. I had also been assuming that these educationists were organized in some mysterious but potent way for the purpose of preventing any intellectual content from getting into the school curriculum, and for the purpose

of denigrating, out of envy and fear probably, intellectuals like me and other historians in the colleges and universities.

The natives I actually encountered conformed to my preconceptions in only this respect: they were located in school classrooms and administrative offices or in college departments of education. Some of them, indeed, were from my own campus, though I had never encountered them before. It is a symptom of our condition that professors of history and professors of education, instead of walking across the campus to talk with each other, must repair to Washington or some other neutral ground. So it should not be surprising that the educators, too, brought to our encounter some stereotypes and suspicions. The professor of history, they assumed, thought he knew all about what should happen in the schools even though he had not been inside a school classroom in twenty years. If prospective teachers, they expected him to say, would simply come and sit at his feet and absorb his historical wisdom, all possible problems would be solved.

Professors of history have doubtless continued to afford a somewhat greater basis for these stereotypes than educators, but the kinds of figures described by both stereotypes have now lost whatever relevance they may ever have had to the situation of history in the schools. Instead, in a widening range of encounters, educators and professors of history are discovering that they have much to learn of one another. Among both groups there is a growing recognition that the improvement of school history cannot be accomplished by educators alone or by historians alone. The task requires the convergence of people with these varying kinds of experience and competence and interest. Indeed, as time goes on, we may hope to develop at least a cadre combining in the same individuals the competencies and interests and experiences of both groups.

Closing this personnel gap is crucial to closing the gap between what is usually called content and method in historical pedagogy. The improvement of history in the schools requires that considerations of method proceed from considerations of content, and vice versa. In the training of teachers we must somehow find a better way than sending prospective teachers to one end of the campus to learn what they will be teaching ("content") from professors who know little about pre-college classrooms and students, and then to the other end of the campus to learn how to teach ("method") from professors who know little about what they will be teaching. Similarly in every activity that affects the teaching of history—whether grand curricular design,

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conformed to my preconceptions in school classrooms and departments of education. Some of campus, though I had never contemplated of our condition that professional education, instead of walking over, must repair to Washington should not be surprising that the under some stereotypes and susceptibility assumed, thought he knew all tools even though he had not been years. If prospective teachers, simply come and sit at his feet and solvable problems would be solved.

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the writing of textbooks, the devising of teaching strategies, the preparation of units and materials, or whatever—scholarly expertise and experience must converge with classroom expertise and experience. This seems to me the fundamental truth underlying the modest but growing interaction between educators and historians. Unfortunately this truth is as yet more widely recognized among educators than among historians in the colleges and universities; and how to bring about a greater convergence of content and method, of historians and educators, seems to me the most fruitful subject that could be talked about and thought about and worked on in groups of this kind.

Starting from this conviction, the principal fruit of my brief experience on the school history frontier, I address myself primarily to my brethren back in the settlements. All I have learned has confirmed my impression that on the average, and with many spectacular exceptions, history is the least effective subject in the school curriculum. I teach hundreds of students who come to college after a considerable exposure to history in the schools. I am concerned that they don't *know* history; but I am even more concerned that by and large they don't *like* it. In fact a very large portion of students leave their study of history in the schools with a strong distaste for the subject. Surely something is badly amiss.

What is wrong, and what should be done about it? Why is the historian needed, and how can he be most useful? In discussing these questions I shall necessarily be drawing upon the discussions in our OAH committee, but expressing, of course, only my own views.

A fundamental problem is the great confusion about what we are trying to accomplish by teaching history. Professors and teachers at all levels would doubtless advance various elaborate answers to this question. But if we extrapolate the rationale for teaching history from what the average teacher in the average school actually does, it is a mixture of two things. The most important of the two is the assumption that it is important, for reasons neither explained nor understood, for students to commit to memory a certain body of information about a certain segment of the past, as codified and canonized in that product of our times known as the textbook. The average teacher of history assumes it to be his primary purpose to take a textbook and to transfer its contents, by the most efficient methods he can devise, into the minds of his students. Realistic teachers soon recognize that students can be induced to absorb only a part of the impressive array



of information contained in the average textbook, and most of that for purposes of short-term recall only, because this kind of knowledge cannot be made very meaningful to the average student.

The second assumption, again not well defined or understood, is that in teaching history we are somehow making students good citizens of a democratic society. Partly it is assumed that the aforementioned accumulation of information somehow serves this purpose. But in addition it is generally thought important to make sure that students understand that some things in history are good (the Declaration of Independence, George Washington Carver, free enterprise) and that some things are bad (Radical Reconstruction, Communism). In summary, most children are actually taught history as though the real objectives were to make sure that everybody knows certain historical facts and that everybody incorporates the dominant social values of our society.

The teaching of history will not be much improved until we all have a much clearer notion of what we are trying to do and why. Educators have long since recognized the importance of defining objectives clearly. But inasmuch as professional historians have rarely offered assistance in defining the nature of their discipline or its pedagogical objectives, the educators have too often succeeded only in prefacing their curricular blueprints with lists of objectives so long, diffuse, overlapping, and ill defined as to be of little use.

Historians should wake up to the fact that the school world is now beginning to get this kind of assistance, and very exciting assistance, from the scholarly world, but not from historians. In fact the school world is today bubbling with excitement over what is beginning to be called "the new social studies" or even "a revolution in the social studies." This incipient revolution—if that is not too strong a term—arises from the fact that social scientists and learning theorists like Jerome Bruner have joined educators in some fresh and hard thinking about the desirable intellectual and affective outcomes of social-studies learning. Essentially they are redefining the objective of social-studies education as training in ways of thinking rather than mastery of specified bodies of knowledge. And they are simultaneously engaged in developing the very different teaching strategies and materials that are necessary to achieve this very different objective.

While history still occupies the largest part of the social-studies curriculum, and while it is taught with notorious ineffectiveness, the

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current existing activity in the area involves only a few historians—notably those associated with the Committee on the Study of History (Amherst College and the Newberry Library), the Carnegie Institute of Technology, and Educational Services, Incorporated. Whether the movement for a new social studies revitalizes the study of history in the schools or undermines it will depend to a considerable extent, in my judgment, on the degree to which historians lend their assistance.

On the one hand, the various social sciences are demanding a larger place in the social-studies curriculum. Many social scientists, influenced no doubt by history's poor showing to date, advocate organizing the entire social-studies curriculum around social-science concepts, relegating history to the role of a grab-bag of historical instances to be used for illustrative purposes. Though history will continue to be strongly defended for the wrong reasons—the widespread public belief that history somehow reinforces conventional and patriotic values—it seems to me to be on its way to a radically diminished role in the schools—and ought to be—unless as much effort and imagination are expended on improving its teaching as are being expended on the social sciences proper.

On the other hand, enough has already been done by the few historians now involved to demonstrate how dramatically the teaching of history could be improved if the historical profession were to join fully in the development of the new social studies. I would expect, in fact, that a substantial participation by historians in thinking through the objectives of history teaching at the school level would have a considerable beneficial effect on the teaching of history in the colleges and universities.

Inseparable from the clarification of objectives is the development of teaching strategies and materials, and here again the participation of historians is indispensable. This does not mean the development of grand national curricular designs. That day is past, and in the pluralistic school world of today curricular patterns are constructed by thousands of committees in local school districts and even individual schools across the country. This system has the advantages of involving the teachers themselves in decisions about what they will be teaching where, and of adapting curricula to local circumstances and needs. But it has the disadvantage of depriving curriculum makers in most cases of expert scholarly assistance. Under these circumstances there is a pressing need for a rapid multiplication of the handful of curriculum development projects in history I have men-

tioned—projects in which historians work closely with teachers and educational specialists in developing materials for units, courses, and series of courses. What we need is a wide and varied array of such resources, as building blocks from which local curriculum committees can choose in developing their own social-studies programs.

Finally—and this is where the shoe fits the college historian's foot most firmly—the quality of history teaching depends most in the long run on the quality and preparation of history teachers. Here the problem arises in considerable measure from the college historian's almost complete abdication of responsibility for teacher training. It is true, of course, that some prospective history teachers do not take enough work in history in college, but this aspect of the problem is diminishing. Today most prospective history teachers do get a large part of their training in history departments, and prospective teachers constitute a substantial proportion of the students taught by most history departments. But how often do history departments or individual professors of history ask themselves how well their major programs, course offerings, and course content meet the needs of prospective teachers, in terms of what these teachers will be teaching and how they will be teaching it? In my own department, with over six hundred history majors, I can't even guess at the proportion who are candidates for teaching credentials; and I suspect it has never occurred to most of my colleagues even to wonder.

Certainly, and all too typically, we have made little effort to meet the special needs of prospective teachers of history in the schools. In shaping our course offerings and major requirements, we have not considered the kinds of history that many of our students are presumably preparing themselves to teach in the schools. And we have continued to assume, if we have thought about it at all, that the question of how to teach history can be left to the School of Education across the campus. If content and method are ever going to be brought together, I and my colleagues and history departments across the land are going to have to take the initiative in establishing, in collaboration with our colleagues in the schools of education, learning situations for prospective teachers that bring together historians and educators, content and method. I would even suggest—at the risk of scaring my colleagues away from the school frontier forever—that college historians might begin to think about the possibility of collaborating with schools of education in the business of supervising practice teaching and maintaining con-



work closely with teachers and materials for units, courses, and a wide and varied array of such local curriculum committees and social-studies programs.

fits the college historian's footing depends most in the long run on the history teachers. Here the role of the college historian's ability for teacher training. It is not the history teachers do not take this aspect of the problem is that history teachers do get a large part of their training from college students, and prospective teachers from the students taught by most history departments or individuals. It is not how well their major content meet the needs of these teachers will be teaching in their own department, with over a guess at the proportion who are and I suspect it has never to wonder.

have made little effort to help teachers of history in the schools and major requirements, we know that many of our students are not in the schools. And we have thought about it at the school history can be left to the campus. If content and method together, I and my colleagues are going to have to take the lead with our colleagues in the schools for prospective teachers that content and method. I would like to get our colleagues away from the college historians might begin to think about the schools of education in terms of helping and maintaining con-

tinuing relationships with the schools in which their students serve their apprenticeships and go on to teach.

Such a sweeping reorientation of the college historian's relationship to the schools is probably too much to expect. But it would not be disproportionate to the gravity of the crisis facing history in the schools. The crisis has arisen in part from, not the malfeasance, but at least the misfeasance and nonfeasance of the historical profession. And a substantial involvement by historians seems to me essential to solving the fundamental problems: clarifying the objectives of historical study, developing new teaching strategies and materials, and bringing content and method together in training teachers and every other aspect of the school history process.

I can assure historians contemplating a foray on the school frontier that I found no anti-intellectual educationists lurking behind bushes to tomahawk unwary professors with "life adjustment" or other hideous weapons. Instead I found scores of able men and women deeply concerned with improving the intellectual quality of historical learning in the schools. Indeed I found much more earnest and fruitful thinking about the means for doing this going on in the school world than I have encountered in the college and university world. School teachers and educational specialists recognize their need for scholarly specialists and welcome them warmly to their deliberations about the improvement of learning, asking only that the college professors be open-minded and receptive about the special problems and realities of the school classroom. College historians who are willing to enter into such collaborations in this spirit will not only contribute greatly to improving historical learning in the schools, but also learn much that will rebound to improving historical learning in the colleges.