

Five Feet of History

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"WORLD HISTORY? Throw it out!" scoffed those teachers with a penchant for the practical, and they guided their charges through a maze of "Junior biz," home economics, manual arts, applied art, dramatics, band, glee club, "gentle math"—the handbook term was "general"—and "personal problems" courses.

"World history?" Teachers of the classical tradition looked down their noses and advised their students: "If you can't take ancient, medieval, or modern European history"—and in our school, you couldn't—"fill up on something substantial like languages, science, mathematics, or American history. Don't waste your time on any of the diluted survey subjects."

Not often does a course bring the appropriation of all factions upon itself.

But, in spite of this, it remained on the curriculum—more as a concession to the one-time extensive history department and a sop to the college entrance requirement of social science credits than for any intrinsic merit.

No one wanted to adopt the step-

child course. The American history teacher shed the responsibility on the band-master and he, in turn, upon the Latin teacher. When I joined the social science department as a junior member, the unwanted course became mine.

Thirty-five juniors and seniors came to the first class. "We want to be engineers," they said. Or doctors. . . . Or chemists. . . . "Why must we study history? What good does it do?" I looked into their querulous faces, well aware of the futility of argument. Only a well-planned course would answer their complaints.

"So you don't like to memorize dates for history tests?" I began. "And you think your book is a bore. Well, I agree with you. No one ever gained from memorizing meaningless dates and names. And I've never seen a good book for a class of this sort. There are necessarily some limitations to what a book selling for \$1.96 can furnish in the way of tasty information covering all time and all space.

"But . . . here you are; and here I am. What do you think we ought to do about it?"

That was a poser.

To give them an idea of how vast a period we were to cover during the year, I drew a sixty-inch line on the board, explaining that if each inch represented a century the whole line would indicate the time to be covered by the history course.

A first cousin of the traditional three-R skills is history. Like other members of the "fundamentals" family, history has received much buffeting about in recent months. Here is the story of how one teacher changed a dull and meaningless course in world history into a lively study of human beings. The author, formerly a social science teacher, is now Instructor in English at Ashland County Normal School, Ashland, Wis.

"Where," one boy asked, "would you put the Declaration of Independence?"

I placed a dot near the fifty-eight-inch mark. Another boy in the front row snorted.

"It's no fair. We have to learn five feet of history, and the American history kids next door have only two inches!"

We laughed, to be sure, but anyone who has struggled with that same five feet of history knows he made a point.

I set about making some plans and eventually a prospectus of the course emerged.—The students naturally had no ideas for the course as a whole beyond hoping to slide through a nasty requirement with the least possible inconvenience.—Prehistoric cultures were consigned to the dust-bin: ancient Babylonia and Egypt were lopped off. Consideration of Asia and, for the most part, North and South America was eliminated. When the pruning was complete there were but fourteen topics covering ancient, medieval, and modern European history. Only fourteen dates to be memorized during the year! Fourteen unforgettable dates to which other events of the world might be pegged in their relative positions.

The dull-book problem remained. To obtain the student's respect for, let us say, Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* must represent more than a paragraph in a textbook. Homer means adventure, tall stories, suspense—will Odysseus reach home before Penelope finishes the web? Intrigue—the Trojan horse. And romance—Helen's beauty touched the spark to a war that flamed for ten years. Obviously such an impression can come from contact with the epic itself. Any library will have

enough translations to equip every student with Homer in a form that he can read: Rouse's and Murray's translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* for the advanced student; Church's *Iliad and Odyssey for Boys and Girls* for the immature. We spent several days recounting the Homeric tales in class.

Bits of Sappho's poetry fit in well at this point, and a favorite selection, *Full Moon*, from Van Doren and Lapolla's *Junior Anthology of World Poetry* was memorized by the entire class.

The *Agememnon* of Aeschylus I presented as a reading after the students had done some library research on the Greek drama. Then came the Parthenon—better one building in detail than a hasty smattering of the whole Acropolis, I decided. We read and studied pictures and talked until it was part of us. Plato, as a representative philosopher, was for the most part beyond the intellectual capacities of the majority of high school students. However, I gave them a taste of the real thing in the beautiful passage on the death of Socrates translated in the easily accessible *Story of Philosophy* by Durant. One of the girls who read well got the class so interested that they demanded a second presentation. Memorization of a short poem, *Spirit of Plato* by an anonymous Greek poet, translated in the *Junior Anthology of World Poetry*, completed the special study of the first unit. And so, having had entertainment from Homer, a gem from Sappho, a bit of insight into Aeschylus, and a hand-clasp from Plato we were ready to proceed to a study of the Romans, then the medieval and Renaissance Europeans, and finally the modern era in the Western world.

The textbook was not abandoned; we used it constantly as a reference. For the bulk of the reading, library books on the unit being studied were chosen by the student in accordance with his reading interests and ability. Two days each week were spent in discussing the reading assignments on the art bibliography.

Like the textbook, examinations in this class also took on a different emphasis. Students wrote correlation tests at the close of each unit. This test was an essay on the religious, social, political, economic, and artistic aspects of one of the periods listed under the main topic of the unit. Students had liberty to use any books they needed in writing

the test. In grading, I tried to give equal consideration to the student's contribution to class discussion, reading level of books chosen for supplementary reading, organization of his reading notes, and his written test.

For pictures to illustrate the sculpture, architecture, and painting that we studied, I found the University Prints valuable. Ten dollars supplied us with a set of 100 colored prints illustrating the history of painting and with 500 halftones illustrating various types of sculpture and architecture.

"What good does it do?" Five feet of history grew to centuries of fascination, and living today took new color from its yesterdays.



"Our Youth Will Come Through"

"I HAVE no fear for our youth. They will come through. They have been taught in the million classrooms of our public schools how to think and not what to think. They have been helped in adjusting themselves to their associates. They have developed for themselves a fine sense of values. . .

"What of their record? The best test of the character of our youth is what they will do when faced with a crisis. Their behavior when faced with disaster stands as a measure of their strength or weakness. In spite of their weaknesses, they are the tallest, the strongest, and the healthiest youth who have ever inhabited this continent. What of their courage? They did not want this war. They did not choose to meet their brothers in bloody combat. They have no illusions about the glory of military heroism. They know that

blood, sweat, and tears await them at every point of the compass where they may be assigned. Because of this realism and understanding their behavior in battle has been magnificent. . .

"What of their ideals? Ask the chaplains of the Army, Navy, and Air Corps. They will testify as to their spiritual strength in the midst of disaster. Watch them as they are busy with training, talk with them as they contemplate the tasks ahead, and you will have ample reasons for a renewed faith in the youth who are defending us on the land, the seas, and in the air. I, for one, am proud to have had some share in helping to prepare the youth of this nation for this emergency."—A. C. Flora, 1942-43 President of the National Education Association. Reprinted from *The N. E. A. Journal*, September, 1943.

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