



WHY HISTORY MATTERS

Institute of Historical Research,
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A report by Colin Brooks

The Institute of Historical Research, supported by a number of professional associations and the Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology of the Higher Education Academy, hosted a symposium on the theme 'Why History Matters' on the 12th and 13th February 2007. Around seventy people attended, from practicing teachers of History at all levels to representatives of OSFTED and of the QCA. A particularly encouraging feature was the attendance of a number of young schoolteachers, and, indeed, of people training to teach History; and the Subject Centre was able to ensure the attendance of two post graduate History students, Louise Wannell and Matthew Anderson. Their individual thoughts on the symposium follow this overview.

The symposium heard plenary speakers on the two mornings of the meeting; the afternoons were given over to group discussion of four themes.

The speakers were:

1. Linda Colley, Opening Remarks
2. Paul Armitage, OFSTED, The History Curriculum: past, present and future
3. Chris Husbands, UEA, The Policy Context
4. Justin Champion, Royal Holloway; Roy Foster, Oxford, Why History Matters
5. Ros Ashby and Stuart Foster, Inst of Ed., What is a History Education for?
6. Peter Lee and Stuart Foster, Inst of Ed, Students' historical knowledge: what research tells us
7. Creating a History Curriculum: four contributions (Jon Nichol, Exeter; Penelope Harnett, UWE; Michael Riley, Bath Spa; Rachel Ward, Bury St Edmunds).
8. Madge Dresser, UWE; Don Henson, Co Br Arch., Why History Matters
9. Sean Lang, Anglia Ruskin, Hist. Ass., How did we let History get so dull?

The four afternoon themes were:

1. History and *Every Child Matters*: the Pupil-Centred Approach and the Historical Discipline
2. How can History be made Significant to all Ages and Abilities?
3. School History and Academic History: how should they relate? How can progression from School History to HE be achieved?
4. The Teaching of 'Britishness' and 'Citizenship': can – should – and *how* should – they be taught?

Each group was asked to produce a report and these will be posted on the website of the IHR: links will be available here.

The afternoon discussions were informed by the arguments of the morning speakers and by lunchtime reflection on them. It was unfortunate, though, that there was no

opportunity for extended discussion of the presentations or for direct questioning of the speakers. A consequence was that a lot of unanswered questions remain. But there was general, if not universal, agreement on a number of matters, notably

- i. that an open, democratic society could not exist without a common and an individual commitment to the study of history, a study which would emphasize the importance of individual judgment and the provisionality of knowledge, which would both provide and draw upon society's 'collective memory'.
- ii. that the study of History had to avoid insularity and should have a global perspective
- iii. that the study of History had to embrace long periods of time and use a wide angle of approach. Linda Colley suggested 'the struggle for citizenship' as one possibility (taken up in the discussions on *Citizenship* teaching).
- iv. the centrality of imaginative methods of assessment
- v. that History was an 'artistic project', one which provoked debate and engagement; that it was not one in which what could be measured was, alone, what mattered.
- vi. that the delicate balance between 'content' and 'skills' had probably shifted too far towards skills; with the rider that what was sought was not simply more knowledge but more knowledge within a particular context (as in iii above)

Many of these comments were directed particularly towards primary and secondary education; but might as easily be addressed to HE. Indeed, one of the grounds for the series of meetings which David Bates has held at the IHR has been his conviction (a conviction widely shared by the participants) that secondary and higher education must talk to each other more. It is, though, extraordinarily difficult to find the space and time for such discussions. Alan Booth presented a similar case at an earlier IHR meeting (<http://www.history.ac.uk/education/sept/booth.html>). The consequences of non-communication are unhelpful to all concerned, as Louise Wannell emphasizes in her Report. As Justin Champion pointed out, admissions procedures and personnel in Higher Education rarely have an up-to-date understanding of teaching and learning in Secondary Education. Secondary and Higher education and educators are each, in their own way, under terrible pressure. The symposium heard several instances of Secondary Education taking the easy way out (unchallenging teaching, lazy assessment procedures, collusion between textbook authors and examination boards – strikingly denounced by Sean Lang); many examples could, too, be provided from Higher Education.

As to the particular challenges, I would highlight:

- i. Paul Armitage's comment that "the modern world demands short answers".
- ii. His deduction from the statistics showing that History has a progressively more marginal role in the school curriculum that the subject is simply "not relevant enough for *all* learners".
- iii. The underlying sense, occasionally voiced, that History was about to become, perhaps, even, was becoming 'the new Latin'. Sean Lang noted that the most recent figures had shown that there were 1479 schools with no GCSE entry in History: this ominous fact was also noted by Matthew Andersen in his Report.

- iv. The need to confront the HE commitment to 'academic freedom' with the public need for engagement in and outside of HE (a tension explored by Justin Champion; Michael Riley noted that Key Stage 3 now emphasized 'Identity' as a part of History; Don Henson acknowledged the poverty of archaeologists' contributions to public debates on, e.g., climate change or migration).
- v. Avoiding the potential for engagement to slip into the politics of breast beating (Roy Foster was particularly scathing of that form of History which consisted of the 'expiation of guilt – History as 'always having to say that you're sorry').
- vi. Public – and media – concern with particular topics might not be conducive to proper historical understanding (Madge Dresser addressed some interesting thoughts to the issue of Holocaust denial and how it should be faced; she emphasized the importance of the particular example, the individual life history).
- vii. Our difficulty in distinguishing – or bringing together – the study of 'History' and of 'the past' (a study not exclusively performed by historians).

And as to unanswered questions:

- i. Is there any distinction between school and HE History (on some occasions a distinction was drawn between school and academic history)?
- ii. While the symposium concentrated on school History and its bearing on History in HE, the remarkable effervescence of History in adult education was noted: relating that interest to HE History and/or to academic History remains a significant challenge.
- iii. There was general agreement that good learning depended upon good teaching; and that both depended upon time; that there no short-cuts. In Secondary Education, installing History as a compulsory subject for 14-16 would mean that much of the damage could be repaired. How can time, time for teachers and learners to discuss, for learners to read and to think, be found in the over-crowded curriculum and in the massed ranks of Higher Education?

Alan Booth and David Nicholls, in addressing a previous IHR symposium, pointed to a survey by Barbara Hibbert in *Teaching History* which "suggested that there is still too much passive, results-fixated teaching at A level that leaves students ill-prepared for university" (see B. Hibbert, "'It's a lot harder than politics" ... students' experience of history at advanced level', *Teaching History*, 109 (2002), 39–43). It seems not unfair to suggest 'that there is still too much passive, results-fixated teaching' – and learning – in Higher Education. It seems at least arguable that much of the most disinterested and scholarly learning of History goes on outside of the formal educational context.

The Institute has hosted a series of stimulating conferences under the general heading of History in British Education: reports on those meetings can be accessed as <http://www.history.ac.uk/education/>.

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