

SOME USES OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL HISTORY AS AN INTRODUCTION
TO THE STUDY OF HISTORY

Samuel Butler once said that "Even God would not presume to recreate the past, so He created historians." We are accused of being a presumptuous lot: history is what the historian says it is, and the average person has little defence against that. However, perhaps what Butler should really have said was, ". . . so (God) created man". The fact is that we all act as historians, each in our own peculiar way. Every man is his own historian. So is every government. "The Good Life" and "Twenty Great Years" are presented to us as the historical record of this province since the great Social Credit revolution. In one's response of praise or condemnation, and in casting one's ballot in the election, we are making historical judgements on that record. That is our God-given right! Ever since Adam, man has had the power to use, abuse, or misuse that right: sometimes he is the unconscious purveyor of myths and fantasies; sometimes he fabricates and distorts to suit his particular purpose or fancy.

If we accept that it is man's fate to exercise his free will, to be a good man-historian he makes the conscious choice to be saved from error; his soul cannot be saved unless he continually strives to live the good life of the enlightened. If recreation of the true past is a matter of revelation from God, man-the-historian desperately needs to keep the faith and pray. But, if God will not presume to recreate the past, perhaps science will: enough research and we can scientifically determine the historical laws and truths. Now, however, we no longer believe in God; nor do we believe that science is God. In this agnostic age, some of us believe that we are God, while others do not know what we are. Thus, some men-historians have become conscious proponents of the "Topsy" school of history (it is always written by the winners). However, the doubters say, if man-the-historian is going to insist upon his God-given right to recreate the past, then surely he has a duty to subject his recreations to something more than the test of revealed truth and proof by his own definitions. Today, we men-historians must accept responsibility for what we purvey, whether in our daily lives, or in our rare moments of intellectual reflection.

The responsibility upon those of us who accept responsibility for what we do and why we do it is very great. For us there are the perennial questions - What is the purpose of teaching any history? Where should we start? How can we teach it best? Those of us who see no need to ask these questions of ourselves are either cleverer than God or just plain lazy. Whatever the case, most of us probably face immense difficulty in communicating any sense of value in what we are doing to and with those who happen to turn up in our classrooms as students. Part of our difficulty is, of course, the absence of easily identifiable and readily agreed upon operational definitions of what history is; but most of the difficulty probably is that so few of us constantly strive for an intellectually and personally satisfying understanding of the meaning and value of history. Part of the problem is also the absence of a commonly accepted ideology of what a historian does or should do. Most of the difficulty probably is that so few of us constantly examine our objectives as teachers and writers of history. Without some personal commitment to the role of historian, and without some practical extension of this commitment in our teaching of history, we do not stand much chance of interesting those other people in the classroom. The responsibility starts with the teacher to know what he is doing and why he is occupying their time. The basic question seems therefore to be the quality of the teacher as a historian and his approach to the discipline.

Much of the interest in local history can be accounted for by the search for better ways to be good teachers who can effectively inculcate an appreciation of history in our students. This has led many of us to reject the typical Canadian survey course - what I call the "confidence trick" approach, because it is not what it purports to be. In our rush to escape the stranglehold of time-space courses in the typical Canadian curriculum, some of us have resorted to the thematic approach and have fallen into the "relevance" trap, which can be seen in the Hodgetts' Report and in the B&B Report on Education. I call this the "Catch-22" approach, because you can never win. Too much emphasis has been placed on curriculum changes alone. Too much has been assumed: namely, that the teacher is a good historian and that the student is able to distinguish history from propaganda. Consequently, some have become enamoured with the "method" approach - the "find the scientific method" approach. Perhaps, however, progress is more likely to be made by considering one's attitude as a historian. Instead of fruitlessly searching for the ideal curriculum, all history is approached with a view to exposing its nature as an intellectual discipline. Instead of being

bogged down in arguments over what is relevant in history to our present day needs, all history is accepted as worthy of study. Instead of arguing over "process" versus "content", the two are seen to go hand in hand. With this attitude, perhaps we shall be better teachers and perhaps we shall encourage a more appreciative study of the past. Perhaps it is not so much a question of teachers teaching and students studying the history, as each doing some history.

Some of us have seen in local history a convenient tool for developing this notion of doing history in our classes. However, local history has no greater magical educative qualities than any other history. It can be very useful, but it can have just as many shortcomings as any other variety of history, if the approach in the classroom is found wanting. To ask, "What is local history?" is to ask, "What is history?" Perhaps history can be likened to one of those carved Russian dolls, contained within which are other dolls of ever decreasing size. Each doll is an entity in itself, but all the dolls form part of the whole. If the range of history is from the individual to the universal, then the local is a part of the spectrum. The local aspect of history can be investigated in its own right, but being part of a greater whole, it cannot be divorced from the history around the locality. To those extreme opponents who engage in a sort of professional condescension in their view that local history is not "real" history, we reply that national history is not debased by the investigation of the local. Rather, understanding and explaining the national experience is enhanced by the recognition that every man has his roots in the local experience, and that the universal is rooted in the individual. Thus, the study of local history provides for a more fully integrated understanding of national history. To those extreme proponents, who would have local history become little more than antiquarian "funseys" or filial piety, we reply that, being a part of the whole, it must be approached in terms of its value as history, and not as some means of ingratiating ourselves to our local citizenry and taxpayers, whether in Burnaby or Kamloops. Perhaps the most that can be said for local history is that, being a part of history, it can be a useful tool in engaging people in the doing of history.

So, now, why do history at all? One's vision of the value and meaning of history leads directly to the way in which one treats it in the classroom, and the way in which local history can be pursued in its own right and as an introduction to the study of history. One's quality as a historian is therefore at the crux of the teaching of history. In a broadly philosophical sense, the historical way of thinking, or "mode of knowledge", is a fundamental part of any

general education. However, it can no more claim to offer the key to the comprehension of man than the moral, the aesthetic or the scientific modes. It can no more exist in isolation than history can be divorced from other disciplines. All aim at the comprehension of man; but history, as I understand it, is society's collective memory of the past. Humanity can no more comprehend itself than a man can comprehend himself without some recourse of memory. The historian's special duty is to explain man's memory, especially how it got where it was and where it is. The present has its memory; the present of any particular era or locality in the past had its memory. It is this process of remembering that the historian tries to explain - and there may be no causal link whatever between the memories of any particular "present". Being a cumulative sort of thing, whose focus tends to change in the course of time, we can neither retrieve the objective past nor secure a definitive statement of it. Memory, after all, is primarily what we choose to remember, so it is very amorphous and decidedly personal. We all do this - every man is his own historian. The question is the way in which we do our remembering. Thus, to my mind, the essence of history is the comprehension and explanation of the process of remembering the recording of man's memory. In the quest for the comprehension of man, there is a "fallout" from the past, sometimes direct and sometimes decidedly marginal. The study of the history of a particular event may or may not increase one's understanding of the present. The study of a particular local phenomenon may or may not increase understanding of, or identity with, one's locality. But the historical way of thinking may enable one to combat the information bombardment and to defend oneself against what purports to be history. This notion of history can be treated just as valuably and probably much more readily on the local level as on any other level.

Among the students, a further factor is the growing recognition that the power to experience is an essential part of a more wide - ranging concept of the rational process. In history, this power to experience is critical at university and college level, and it may well be true that the survival of history in the schools, which now subscribe to the notions of free choice, will depend on the degree to which students can receive this experience. The "experientiability" (if one may use such a word) of the historical discipline can best be achieved by total immersion of the student in the very essence of the historical process itself. One learns to swim by going into the water, not merely by watching champion swimmers. One experiences the nature of history by actually doing it, not merely by reading Creighton, Careless, Brunet and the rest of that lot. History in its infinite variety can be experienced as meaningfully and perhaps

more readily on the local level as on any other.

The student's power to experience through immersion in the history means also the engagement of the student's own individual insights in its comprehension and explanation. Such insights must at some time lead the student to appreciate the need for a personally satisfying notion of the meaning and value of history, in the same way as the teacher has had to do. This is not an invitation to intellectual anarchy. Immersion also demands the disciplining of the mind through the encouragement of coherence of thought and expression. It is not good enough for the historian's recreations to make sense only to himself. Individual insight must be stable before the bar of reason and evidence. Critical judgment, as opposed to opinion, "truth", or "pure" art, must be exercised if one is to presume to do what God would not presume to do. This requires great effort and a sense of personal responsibility. History is not fun and games; it is a critical intellectual exercise, which may delight the minds of some, but which is important to the development of most. How can the student be expected to make this effort if the teacher will not or cannot do so himself? The actual immersion of both teacher and students in situations where they actually have to do the history seems to me to be the best way of encouraging this sense of responsibility. Once again, local history provides perhaps the most readily available kind of history for doing this.

Are there ways in which students can be introduced to the study of history, where there is freedom without anarchy and direction without subordination? Is it wrong even to think of an "introduction to the study of history"? Well, in the university, nearly every other discipline in the arts and social sciences has an introduction, so why not history? Perhaps history is so complex and so individualistic that there is no way to introduce it, so that the student should be left to discover for himself in the course of time what has been going on. However, this "shotgun blast" approach is probably too late for most people, whose native curiosity has been killed by the deadening hand of the chronological treatment of the past. The failure to inculcate a historical way of thinking is serious in a society which asks its citizens to use some degree of judgment every once in a while and not rely on prejudice, revelation or "truth". Is the typical survey of Western Civilization or of Canada really the best we can do? It does enable the historian to make sweeping generalizations in developing his insights about the broad course of the past, and it permits the transmission of vast amounts of information and the coverage of great periods of "background". On the other hand, the defenceless student is

offered no way of distinguishing between valuable insight and propaganda. He is almost invited still to believe, as he probably did through school, that what he is receiving is the history. He is invited to believe in the "progress" of our nation (at least in English Canada; in French Canada the appropriate word would be "destruction") from the French Regime, through the Conquest to Confederation, by means of a guided tour through a series of "periods", "ages", and "eras". The approach does carry in the mind of the student the air of authority. Expediency is no excuse for the intimidation of the student by the lecturer and the textbook. Receiving everything second -, third - and fourth - hand, he cannot conceive that he is expected to think a little for himself. With everything weighed against him, he does not even know how to think for himself in a history course. All this criticism is not to say that the broad survey has no place, but that, as an introduction, it is in the wrong place. The surveys should probably come later in the student's career. "Potted" history is probably not much better. The notion of "post-holes" with bits of "Indians" and bits of "minority groups", "social classes", "ecology", - post-holes usually determined by what the teacher thinks will "turn on" the student either because it is "relevant" or immediate - offers the student the opportunity to discover neither a coherent understanding of any of these matters nor an understanding of history. Usually they degenerate into a series of aimless student projects. The motivation to let the student "do his own thing" has much to be said for it, but is it really fair to ask for his opinion when he has no ability to distinguish between fact and fancy? To ask a student to do his own thing presupposes that he already knows what that is and how he should go about doing it.

How can the student be given some defences against the assaults of those who claim the God-given right to recreate the past? How can he be given weapons of his own which he can appreciate must be used intelligently and responsibly? My feeling is that the student can best be enabled to engage his insight, and to acquire both confidence and humility in his judgments before the bar of reason and evidence, by introducing him to the study of history as a discipline and as a mode of knowing about man and society, without any ulterior motives and without any claims to truth on the part of the historian. This, it seems to me, can very well be done by immersing the student in the stuff of history itself. And this can most readily be accomplished by using the resources of the locality and region in which one happens to be located. Obviously, there is no one way to introduce the discipline. It can be introduced "from above" within a philosophical framework,

where the student is exposed directly to the abstract questions that lie behind the historian's curiosity about the past. It can be introduced in a very practical way, from "below", where the student, being exposed directly to the problem of "making sense" of the record of some particular aspect of the past will discover that there are indeed great philosophical questions which prompt our questions about our memory. It is for the teacher, remembering that he is first of all a historian, to determine his objectives and to discover the best ways for himself of conveying to the students in his classroom some understanding of why it is worth spending some time doing some history. His conduct in the classroom will reflect his understanding of the nature of the discipline.

I think that most is gained by introducing the student to the study of history from below. In using local resources in this introduction-by-immersion approach, my object has been far less with the recording of history of the locality, although its value is acknowledged, than with using this exercise as an entree, or a "launching pad" into the limitless variety of history. Local history then becomes an avenue for broadening horizons and deepening perspectives, and for extending the intellectual appetite for the comprehension and explanation of man's memory on any level of experience, whether individual, local, regional or otherwise. A primary concern, at the introductory level, with the local experience may induce a lowering of horizons and too great an appetite for what is really antiquarian and not historical. Moreover, my concern has been less to occupy one's time with specific methodological problems of any collections of documents than with engaging one's insights in some of the great philosophical questions encountered in the historical explanations which arise from those documents. The emphasis on method at the expense of ideas may induce a techniques-oriented attitude and the notion that the "scientific method" can be applied to human activity. Yet, memory strikes me as being so intensely personal.

In our region there are many possibilities which can be drawn upon, for which materials are readily available in the Provincial Archives and which can be complemented with materials from local archives and institutions as well as from the Public Archives of Canada. In my experience I have always found great cooperation in Victoria and Ottawa and locally. Indeed, Burnaby Corporation has now made Simon Fraser University Library its official repository. Perhaps the colleges can provide a similar service to the localities. So far I have developed courses around two topics, one dealing with British Columbia's entry into Confederation (my Centennial project!), and the other dealing with the Great Depression, and I can readily foresee possibilities for courses revolving around communications, population,

economic development, political leadership and many others. It is for the teacher to use his own imagination and responsibility. The Confederation course was specifically designed to be an introduction to the study of history and consequently sought to confront the student with fundamental questions in historical explanation, such as the problem of perspective, determinism, the individual in society, "right" and "wrong", whiggery, etc., as well as with the problem of relationships between the individual, the regional, national, international and universal levels of the history. The Depression course was introduced under the rubric of "Canada since Confederation" and consequently used local and regional records to examine various broad themes in Canadian history by an integration of various levels of experience - individual, institutional, municipal, provincial, etc. - within the terms of the problem of unemployment and unemployment relief in the Lower Mainland.

Because of my strong belief in the need for both the teacher and the student to think in terms of themselves doing the history, both these courses were by design subjects about which I initially knew nothing. In this way, one is constantly confronted with the purpose and method of teaching history in the first place. It serves as a constant reminder to try and put oneself on the level of the student with every course and within every class. The great difficulty is to find the right balance between freedom and direction, between the need for the freedom of the student to discover for himself his questions and interests and the need for the teacher to give coherence to the whole exercise without so pre-selecting the material and so dominating the class as to induce concurrence with his own views. This is where attitudes to the student, the material and to history are critical. Profound restraint must always be exercised, remembering always that the crucial thing is the questions raised, and that the teacher is really only one of a group of historians, albeit one with much more experience, grappling with new historical problems. Perhaps, if the teacher were to view himself as the chief questioner, then the chances may be greater that the student will discover for himself the great issues involved without having them pointed out to him.

Another great problem is how precisely the material is to be used by the student and in the classroom. The student learns to swim by going into the water, but he must not be allowed to thrash about violently and possibly drown in a sea of material without some help from the more experienced swimmers, like the teacher and other writers of history. Every swimmer has his own style, but there are ways in which he can always improve it. Having brought together and duplicated as complete

a record as possible on the historical problem, progress through it can perhaps be organized in a "functional" manner by subject, say the role of Governors Seymour and Musgrave and the question whether one or the other was "right" or "wrong", or were "good" or "bad" as governors. By looking both at the writings of professional historians, such as Howay and Ormsby, and the materials they actually used (and possibly did not use), the student is asked to consider both the questions which have been asked and those which he thinks himself ought to be asked of the material. Also certain documents within the collection could be selected for detailed consideration for the purpose of illustrating the questions rather than for the "answers" suggested. In this way both teacher and student are constantly challenged to decide for themselves what is and is not important and significant. This seems to me to be the best way to get the student to view himself as a historian doing the history.

The great difficulty with this form of challenge to the student is that the investigation of fundamental questions tends to destroy the student's own assumptions and therefore his ability to offer any insights and explanations. Confidence is restored only gradually when it is indeed realized by the student that his tendency was simply to project his own assumptions and biases onto the material, and that he must now accept responsibility for exercising critical judgment arising from the material. Likewise, when asked to do an essay of his choice within the terms of the subject of the course, the student has first to realize that the art of history is the art of explanation. He has to know why it is that he is interested in this particular subject and what it is about this particular subject that he is trying to explain to his potential reader. Curiosity alone does not seem to be enough; it is a good start, but the writer must see in it some significance which he can convey to his reader. How much use is there in something making sense only to oneself? Thus, the teacher is challenged to cast himself, not as the determinant of right and wrong explanations, but as a reader attempting to see what the historian is trying to tell him in his explanation. Student and teacher alike must strive to do history by consciously trying to be good historians. God may have created historians, but He gave them free will to be good ones or bad ones.

These observations on uses of local and regional history as an introduction to the study of history as a whole are based upon only two years of experience

and two courses, each given twice. They can be subjected to severe criticism. However, after my experience, I conclude that the approach and attitude to the teaching of history here suggested are both useful and valid. In the final analysis, comment on the courses is comment on my quality as a historian and teacher. But, so it should be, for there must be constant examination of one's understanding of history and one's approach to the discipline. The buck stops with the teacher. I insist on my God-given right to recreate the past, but I am egoist enough to want to have others agree with me.