Irish Review (Dublin)

A Note on the Teaching of History

Author(s): E. Creagh Kittson

Source: *The Irish Review (Dublin)*, Vol. 3, No. 35 (Jan., 1914), pp. 556-560

Published by: [Irish Review \(Dublin\)](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30063085>

Accessed: 15/06/2014 22:13

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Irish Review (Dublin) is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Irish Review (Dublin)*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

A NOTE ON THE TEACHING OF HISTORY

By E. CREAGH KITTSON

WE human beings in our erring ways are sadly like sheep. Like sheep we go astray—in droves, not thinking, and not knowing where we go. Let men once become accustomed to doing something, and it is a miracle if they ever stop to consider whether the thing be worth doing at all, or whether it might not be done better. And there are not many departments of human activity in which this is more strikingly the case than in education. History, for example, is included in the curriculum of all schools—one had almost written, is taught in all schools; yet if the average man, or even indeed the average schoolmaster, were asked (in this country, at any rate) what the function of history is in a system of education, it is to be feared that his answer would leave much to be desired.

Now the first and chief reason why history must be taught, why it is the bounden duty of the State to see that it is taught in an enlightened manner, is this, that the citizen who is not familiar with his country's past is not in a position to understand the problems that confront her in the present and quite clearly unfitted to have any say in her future political development. For history is a series of problems of causation: the past has produced the present, as the present will produce the future. Everything is linked to everything else. The man who is ignorant of the causes that have produced the problems of the present cannot in any real sense be said to understand those problems; and he has no kind of right to say how they should be solved. It has even been suggested for this reason that to begin with the past and work down to the present, as is usually done, is a far less desirable procedure than to begin with our own age and work back to the past. For the aim of history teaching must be to explain how a country, as we know her at the present day, has come to exist, what forces have shaped her destiny, how her aspirations have been fulfilled or thwarted, her tendencies developed or warped, what she has wrought and what she has suffered. In pursuance of these aims, it is clear that our attention

A NOTE ON THE TEACHING OF HISTORY

must be concentrated not on the individual event or policy, which by itself is meaningless, but on its relation to other events; we must seek to trace it backwards to the causes that produced it, and forwards into the remote ramifications of its consequences in the future. And to deal with history in this manner is to lead one's pupils to think scientifically about political problems.

Seeley asserted boldly that history should be regarded as a science, an inductive science. As the botanist deals with plants and the chemist with different forms of matter, so the historian should deal with *states*. The state should be regarded from two points of view—from the point of view of its relations, externally, with other states, and internally with regard to its growth, organisation and development. If the mass of historical fact were treated inductively certain laws might be educed. Seeley would presumably have contended that by examining, for instance, all legislation we have access to, with regard to land, and what that legislation led to, we should be in a position to tell what the result of any land laws would be in the future; and that we might proceed in the same way with regard to poor laws, taxation, labour, etc. The writer is not in complete agreement with Seeley's writings; but reference is made to them because they are a valuable corrective to the vague kind of historical thought that too often passed for history before his time, and because they support the main contention of this article, that no state can allow the teaching of its history to be neglected without grave danger to its own welfare and safety.

Not all citizens of this country, apparently, are as conscious as they might be of their responsibilities in this matter. At a recent meeting of the Dublin Diocesan Synod of the Church of Ireland the following resolution was brought forward and passed: "That this Synod, in view of the fact that many of the children belonging to our Church are obliged to attend National Board Schools, where history from our standpoint bears a bias which is offensive to the parents and guardians of the children, hereby request the Commissioners of National Education to permit the conscience clause to apply to teaching of history in their schools as is the case in religious instruction."

THE IRISH REVIEW

The mover of the resolution read the following extracts from one of the books to which exception was taken: "There was once a Queen of England called Elizabeth. She was clever and wise in many ways, and the English people liked her. She is often called Good Queen Bess. For some time before Elizabeth became queen a great change had been taking place in England and Scotland. In earlier times the people were all Catholics, but a new form of religion was gradually growing up, and many people were joining it. These people were called Protestants. This new religion spread rapidly over England and Scotland, and soon there were more Protestants than Catholics in these countries. Ireland, however, remained true to the old faith. . . . Now a young boy of the O'Neill family had been taken away by the English to Queen Elizabeth's court in London, and the queen treated him very craftily, and had him trained in English ways and taught all that English boys learned. She wanted to make him forget Ireland and the ways of the Irish people, and become just like an Englishman." A later speaker stated that he had a list of seventeen history text-books in use in National Schools, "not one of which was unobjectionable from the Protestant point of view."

One has to give some thought to this matter to realise fully what it means. It amounts to this, that a number of clergymen, without any particular qualifications to deal with the matter, claim to exercise a kind of censorship over the teaching of history, to decide what facts may be taught and what facts must be suppressed; and if they are not to have their own way, they demand that the children are not to be taught history at all! In other words, they seek to use history to support their own religious beliefs and political prejudices. This is a kind of claim which would probably be made in no other country in the world except in Ireland. It is a claim which in no free country could possibly be allowed.

This article is not written in defence of the seventeen text-books; they may be heartily bad for all the writer knows to the contrary; like most text-books, probably they are. But it is not clear what the objection is to the extract above quoted. The account of the religious changes that took place at the Reformation is both

A NOTE ON THE TEACHING OF HISTORY

perfectly fair and quite truthful; and as for the reference to Queen Elizabeth it might almost be said to be flattering (Green calls her a liar). It is still further from the writer's intention to attack the Church of Ireland (of which he is a member and of which his grandfather was a rector). But he has very much at heart to vindicate the dignity of history. However little one may be a historian, one cannot see the first of the Muses thus publicly set at nought without a violent feeling of indignation—she who with proud impartiality should preside over the narration of our country's story, holding indeed for ever and above all things to truth, yet not without a tear in her eye or a tremor in her voice for the more lamentable happenings of the past. Such aberrations from any sane conception of the duties and responsibilities of citizenship can only be accounted for by the strange political system under which we live. In any case, the notion cannot be allowed to spread that history is to be written and taught to suit the views of religious sects or political parties—that there is Protestant history and Catholic history, Nationalist history and Unionist history. The main facts of history (certainly any facts that schoolboys may be called to deal with) have long been settled by competent scholars, and we have no more right to refuse to accept them than we have to refuse to accept the law of gravitation. To ask for a conscience clause against history teaching has about as much reason in it as to ask for a conscience clause against geometry; and though the neglect of geometry teaching does not necessarily affect the state adversely, the neglect of history teaching, as has been shown, does affect it adversely. For history has its function to perform in the state, a highly important and even sacred function, and if clergymen or other persons attempt to meddle with it and utilise it to perpetuate their own contemptible quarrels, they must be told quite plainly: Hands off!

Moreover, it seems necessary to point out that as far as religion is concerned, political history is not directly concerned with it at all; it has only to take note of religious changes in so far as these changes affect the welfare or development of the State. Thus, in studying the history of England, it is necessary to understand exactly who

THE IRISH REVIEW

the Puritans were, what led to the rise of Puritanism, and what Puritanism was, because without this knowledge it is quite impossible to understand the history of the succeeding centuries; but in such case it is by no means necessary to express any opinion as to the rightness or wrongness of the religious views in question. Indeed, it may be laid down as a general axiom that the teacher who makes a practice of expressing opinions about the facts he is dealing with, even when these are purely political facts, is a bad teacher. If he has political views of his own they should be kept in the background. To give one's pupils the results of one's own thought about historical problems is very much the same as working out all their mathematical exercises for them. Professor Pollard, of London University, was heard saying some time ago that his students suggested they should have a debate in class on socialism; he agreed, on the condition that those in favour of socialism should bring forward the arguments against it, and those who were against it should argue in favour of it. This is the right spirit in which to approach historical questions. History rightly taught should spread light, and dispel ignorance, error and prejudice. It is hardly necessary to say that the teaching of young children will of necessity be conducted in a very different manner from that of university students; yet the difference is rather one of degree than of kind, and it can never be too soon to make a beginning.

In the history of our own country we have a sad instance of a people long distracted by religious differences. At the present day, however, there is a hopeful tendency on the part of all Irishmen to concentrate their attention rather on the things in which they agree than on those in which they differ, and to become united in a common Irish citizenship. The impartial teaching of Irish history cannot do otherwise than encourage this tendency. In any case, all kinds of Irishmen will have to learn to face the indisputable facts and acknowledge them; and we will then learn to stand ashamed of our petty quarrels in the presence of something greater than we—the Irish Nation.