BOOK REVIEW

LEARNING HISTORY
A. Dickinson, P.J. Lee and P.J. Rogers (Editors)
Heinemann Educational Books, X-230 pages
London, 1984
ISBN 0-435-80289-5 (paperback edition)

Three members of our Society are the editors of this important volume, Dickinson, Lee and Rogers. They themselves have contributed largely to it, with six essays between them; the remaining ones have been written by D. Shemilt and two other fellow members, D. Thompson and R.E. Aldrich. Dickinson and Lee have already taken the lead of modern history didactics in Britain by editing another well known volume of essays in 1978, "History Teaching and Historical Understanding". The present book is in some respects a sequel to it. Now the English have the reputation of being eminently practical people, with a no-nonsense attitude to theory. Whether this may be true or not - there have always been famous philosophers in Britain, from Duns Scotus to Ayer -, it does not apply to this volume. It thrives on a very solid underground of historical and didactical theory, in a very clear presentation, interesting in itself, but after some time the reader is led on to the classroom and finds him or herself among discussing pupils.

The book opens with two expositions about the why of our work: why learn history (by Lee) and why teach history (by Rogers)? Peter Lee's first sentence sounds rather menacing: "There is no escape from the past" (for a brief moment I looked for cover), but what he means is that 'concepts carry temporary luggage'. The word "concepts" forms the link with the volume on historical understanding: "Children ought in one way or another... have to <u>think</u> in history lessons". We still suffer somewhat from the legacy of Piaget, who with his stages of thinking in the intellectual development in children, has given rise to the notion or the fallacy that, until late adolescence, history is too difficult a subjekt for children. So we have to content ourselves with the telling of nice stories. But if younger children too are perfectly able to reflect on history, then they must do this according to the rules of histori-

cal science, the recognized "court of appeal". Without historical science there is no rational past. Therefore concern for truth, objectivity, exact chronology, procedures of verification and falsification and other forms of scientific rationality are also needed in the classroom.

But how rational is history? Lee spends a few pages on the question whether the historical discipline knows laws. Certainly not in the sence of abstract concepts of the right kind. "We can give valid causal explanations without knowing the relevant predictive laws... On this account history can be explanatory withourt being predictive." However this does not lower history to the level of a simple practical activity (like somebody who drives a car without the slightest notion how it works). For history is not a practical activity of course, but it is <u>like</u> a practical activity (by acquiring and digesting methodically heaps of evidence). But although the discipline has its methods, it is not formalized.

The next question is what kind of experiences history provides us with. They are vicarious experiences, that is to say, they are experiences of other people, and people of the past at that, and therefore they are second-hand for us. Although we cannot tell with certainty the effects of history teaching, Lee is of the opinion that learning history (in a rational way) is liberating. With this I readily agree, but this concept still needs a lot of very exact elaboration. As it is, the essay ends rather lamely with the conclusion that history stimulates the imagination and extends the learners conception of what it is to be human. But do literature and religious education not do the same?

Rogers then takes over by stating the importance of history in education. Every one of us, children not excluded, has an image of the past, but this is not the outcome of history and therefore more or less seriously inadequate. In my opinion this is a rather elitist point of view, not so much of Rogers, but of the whole historical craft. Historians always forget that theirs is a very young and recent discipline. Nearly all ages and nearly all cultures, the Greeks included, had very different conceptions of the historical trade than they have, and even nowadays other and older concepts are common to

most of our contemporaries. Not even the most rational history teaching can extirpate them completely. Instead of sweeping them away contemptuously could we not better extend our objectivity and our rational understanding to these concepts too?

Rogers then goes on with a notion that I myself have also explained in these pages, that historical knowledge exists by virtue of analogy, that is to say that events are interrelated conceptually. The unique event is a freak and a frustation, so Rogers quotes Elton. Events are not unique, they are particular. What binds things together, what makes historical notions possible is their isomorphic character. And "identifying isomorphs in the course of historical study provides the best tools for handling important areas of experience". I am glad to hear this, for it comes very near to the basic concepts of the now extinct "exemplarist movement" ("exemplarische Bewegung"). So what historical training performs is enabling the pubils to build up frames of reference with the help of which they can handle the past. They are not only conceptual frames (the frames of the actual observer), but also contextual frames (frames or contexts given by the ideas or structures of an historical period). Rogers thinks that the formation of such frames of reference is important for the understanding of contemporary political events. Quite true, but for the understanding of <u>political</u> events only?

With its 46 pages Shemilt's essay is by far the longest of the book. It is called: "Beauty and the philosophers", and is about empathy. Ever since the affective aims of history teaching have taken their rightful place alongside the intellectual aims, empathy has become a very important issue. But a dangerous one too! For where does it lead to? To identification? Identification with a subject takes place in literary reading or the viewing of drama, as happened to the man who, after seeing Edward Albee's "Who is afraid of Virginia Woolf?", told me that he had seen his own marriage on the stage. But what does complete identification in history mean? Somebody who really identifies with Napoleon belongs in a lunatic asylum, where you always may find Napoleon or Socrates or Jesus Christ among the inmates. That is perhaps the reason why

some teachers scorn 'the approaches to empathy as unhistorical at best and fraudulent at worst', while others see in it 'the divine wind that breathes life into the dry bones of the past'. And therefore Shemilt exerts himself to explain what empathy really is.

He describes it as a "model of mind", it is an attidude, akin to imagination and creativity, comparable with tolerance and sympathy for others, in short 'the ability to put oneself into sombody else's shoes'. This is what we need in everyday life, and it therefore connects history with everyday life, for the link between them can be called "common sense". This means that empathetic construction does not offer us a scientific or epistemological model. "What it does for many of our pupils the concept of "shared humanity" (with people in the past) is not so common as it is for historians. They have to learn it, they must be trained in it. Shemilt signalizes here the very common error of adolescents of supposing that there are no motives in history, that things just happen. Of course it is very difficult for them 'to (re)-construct the attidudes and ideas, values and mores of people in the past'. It is not only intellectually difficult, but also psychologically, because it 'involves an imaginative projection of the self into the situation of the other'. The author describes at length the successive stages along which full empathy may be reached, always admitting that not every pupil may reach the last stage.

Shemilt then gives us the verbal transcriptions of parts of a number of interviews with adolescents. They start from complete incomprehension ("History is about what actually happened, not about what a certain person wanted to happen"). In a further stage a pupil may 'allow a significant role to intentional action', but the failure of human plans is then still due to factors 'independent of human intentionality' (which the author calls very aptly 'positing a species of Manichean universe'). The pupils must (and can) learn that all outcomes, successful and unsuccessful, 'may be explained causally, whether intended or not'. Shemilt ends his essay with suggestions for a practical pedagogy, in which figure biographical exercises, drama,

projective exercises ('imagine you are...'), on site-reconstructions ('take a walk through the streets of your city in 1885 and describe what you see'), games and simulations and a few more. His main conclusions is the empathizing can be taught (but your results may be slow in coming). It must be taught as a cognitve, not an affective activity (because 'affective empathy cannot be taught without degenerating into indoctrination').

Lee's essay on "historical imagination" is a logical sequence then. For him empathy, (historical) understanding and imagination are closely interrelated: as empathy is part of understanding, so imagination as supposal is criterial of understanding. Of course he makes it quite clear that imagination is not the same as using your phantasy freely in history. It starts from evidence and learns us to "read" that evidence in one way rather than another. It does not lead to identification; he calls (historical) identification 'historically destructive, and usually a sign of failure of imagination'. So the popular picture that somebody in a lunatic asylum "imagines" to be Napoleon is not right. By identifying completely with Napoleon the patient has lost the very possibility to understand that historical person.

This leads us naturally to "making sense of history" by Dickinson and Lee. Early work on children's historical understanding leant heavily on Piaget, but later research has become 'more doubtful about the wisdom of applying Piaget's categories directly to history'. I readily agree. His basic ideas about the handling of time concepts for instance were suggested to Piaget by Einstein, and readers of this periodical may know that I have my misgivings about the physicists' concept of time. In order to discover how children actually react to the "strangeness" of the past, the outhors lead us straight into the classroom, among pupils who are discussing some historical texts; a large part of the discussions is given verbatim. We can hear the children slowly plodding along the road to real historical understanding. It would be very wrong to suppose that historical understanding - 'making sense of it' - will pop up suddenly or that it must be complete immediately: it is something 'to dry to develop'. What the authors however deplore is 'the way children's

ability to understand is underestimated'. As a pupil of mine once wrote on the cover of his history notebook: "I thought history is madness, but now I see there is method in it", and his somewhat adapted quotation did not only prove that he had read "Hamlet", but also that he gone the road from bewildered incomprehension to understanding.

Next Rogers enlarges on the power of visual representation, and then Donald Thompson on procedures and contents of historical understanding. Thompson signalizes two major recent developments in the approach to history in school: 1. the emphasis on the methodology of the subject, resulting in the use by pupils of sources as historical evidence; 2. an analysis of the development of central aspects of the pupils' thinking and understanding in history, reflecting the two basic questions of the professional historian: what happened actually, and what is the historian's reconstruction of it'. Thompson calls this the "new" history, characterized by the idea that 'the central concern of school history should be developing an understanding of the methods or process of historical enquiry'. He then gives two examples. But in a subsequent essay Aldrich explains to us that this new history is not as new as it seems, for emphasis on sources, skills enquiry methods and so on has 'a firm place in the tradition of history teaching' in Britain (and I may add, in Germany, the Netherlands and the USA too). What is really unhistorical is the opinion that 'all previous history teaching in schools has been content-dominated, superficial and boring'. Quite true, but how is it that all innovation movements in history teaching are smothered after some time, having had only a partial success, if at all? The fact that certain innovations are presented half a century later as revolutionary proves that they did not have the desired effect. In fact, the author admits that 'much history teaching in the twentieth century has fallen far short of these high ideals'.

Finally I mention Dickinson's essay on the relationships between historical understanding and assessments and examinations. There is evidence, he says, that many pupils of all ages and abilities underachieve. To ameliorate this

situation it is necessary that more teachers 'incorporate carefully devised assessment schemes into their work'. I fear indeed that an inappropriate number of test paper questions are made very casually, on the spur of the moment often. But the construction of careful tests asks a lot of time which teachers sorely lack, and then there is the influence of the puplic examinations. The author concludes with suggestions for good practice, which make necessary a close collaboration between (public) examiners and teachers. At the end of the book the reader finds a useful index.

The editors are to be congratulated on their work. They have produced an enormously important and thought-provoking volume. In my opinion no history didactician or teacher trainer may leave it aside. It would be a very good thing if the authors would publish from time to time in this periodical too. Editor and readers would certainly welcome their contributions.

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BOOK ANNOUNCEMENT

BEZIG MET GESCHIEDENIS (At work with history)
by J. BEETSMA, G. HUISMAN, G. PEEK and B. PIJLMAN
Gottmer Educatief, Haarlem NL. 1984.
ISNB 90 257 17381

This is vol. I of a history workbook, composed by Beetsma, Huisman, Peek (all members of the Society) and Pijlman. It covers the long period from the prehistory till the end of the Middle Ages and can be used alongside any existing history textbook. It is a workbook, packed with tasks, questions and assignments, but also with illustrations, drawings and maps. There is no continuous historical text of course, but there are some short introductory notes. The number of written sources is extremely small. The questions and assignments refer to the contents of this volume, not of course to any textbook. Part of the assignments are of a solid conventional kind, very useful, but some are quite original and amusing. For instance the presentation of "tableaux vivants" by the pupils or the receipt for the cooking of a prehistoric soup, to say nothing of 'we build a city'.

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