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Errors and Evils of the New History

HELEN KEDOURIE

foreword

STEWART DEUCHAR

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ERRORS AND EVILS OF THE NEW HISTORY

Helen Kedourie

with a foreword by Stewart Deuchar

CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES
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Foreword

The New History is at the heart of Britain's cultural crisis. I believe that nothing is more important than to lay it open to public debate before it forms an established part of the National Curriculum. Helen Kedourie's essay on Denis Shemilt's influential History 13-16 Evaluation Study provides an excellent starting-point for such a debate, which I trust will be vigorously carried forward. I am glad that the Centre for Policy Studies, which has already published Alan Beattie's excellent History in Peril (as well as my own more modest History -- and GCSE history) is in the forefront of this debate.

Stewart Deuchar

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1.

Origins of the new history

The purpose of this paper is to disclose to the general reader some of the ways in which, under the guise of history, which is one of the foundation subjects of the proposed national curriculum, secondary schoolchildren are being introduced to a subject very different to anything which their parents are likely to have been taught; which indeed resembles traditional history not at all. The situation is serious; many children are now leaving school with no historical knowledge at all. For example, the Battle of Hastings, Henry V11 or Nelson mean little or nothing to many of them. To understand how this has come about, and the next generation is being faced with deprivation and ignorance, it is necessary to study the tenets of the 'new history'. This new history, so-called by the Schools Council History 13-16 Project (SCHP), was tested in Leeds and London from 1972-1977 as a three-year course. The findings of the trial and a summary of the new history are to be found in Denis Shemilt's History 13-16 Evaluation Study. Dr Shemilt was himself the principal evaluator of the project, and his book is recommended reading for every secondary head teacher of history.

2.
Aims of the new history

The principal aims of the new history are to find novel ways of communicating history to schoolchildren, and original methods for assessing their understanding, rather their than knowledge, of the subject. The author of the evaluation study sets out what he calls the project rationale thus: 'First, that for school history to be relevant it must satisfy the personal and social needs of adolescents; and second, that for historical knowledge to be grounded in reason adolescents must understand something of the subject's perspectives, logic and method'. History itself is to be understood in terms of concepts such as cause and effect, change and development, progress and continuity. Students are to feel that they can take part in history and that they have an active part to play. Their comprehension of the subject is to be fostered through empathy. The justification for the new history is that it meets adolescent needs by catering to their personal and social needs. To seek to justify studies by the perceived needs of adolescents is not only reductive but absurd. It demands that the child dictate the subjects he learns and, taken to its logical extreme, that a specific course be made to suit each child. Dr Shemilt cannot mean this; he must, surely, mean that the children are to be taught according to some scheme which their elders believe best for them, an idea that lies at the root of education.

3.

The emphasis on 'concepts

The scheme of the new history, as set out by Shemilt in is study, demands that the 13-year old, preparing for public examinations at the age of 16,should begin to grapple with concepts which may well perplex an older person. He is to be taught cognitive skills of analysis, synthesis and judgement, the nature of historical enquiry and the meaning of certain 'key' concepts. All this is ultimately to allow the young teenager to appreciate 'our shared human condition'. Dr Shemilt says, 'History uniquely widens pupils' ideas of what it means to be human because it forges connections and explores differences at one and the same time'. If this is to be the aim of teaching history, would not a study of biology be more apt, highlighting as it does the differences between the human race, the animal kingdom and the world of botany? The author adds, 'Perhaps most important, however, is the realisation that the social world, with all its problems and imperfections, is the outcome of the unintended as well as the intended consequences of action, of the idealism and good intentions as well as the cynicism and self-interest of their teachers, parents and grandparents and forebears. These are the crucial lessons of history and they are the lessons adolescents need to learn'. The role of history surely cannot be primarily to inculcate into children 'proper' attitudes towards the world in which they live now. Three years of history lessons on a school timetable is a lot of time in which to communicate, at the sacrifice of much else, the gems of this sociological and behavioural approach.

The idea of teaching history at school should surely be to induct a child into the past. The past, by its very nature, cannot be altered except by new evidence and new interpretations which simply change our view of the past. A historian's new interpretation becomes possible through a painstaking search for, and sifting through, detail which he seeks to make illuminating. The child embarking on the study of history needs to be told the story as it is for the time being. If he likes the subject he may become fascinated and desirous of seeking out more information about his chosen interest. By this means he will encounter different interpretations and gradually learn to evaluate the worth of what he is reading. This is not a skill which comes instinctively to a child, nor a skill that can develop unless there is something of substance for the child's imagination to feed on. Where history is concerned this is provided by a narrative, which a schoolchild can most readily find in history textbooks.

4.

The unimportance of knowledge

The new history asserts the unimportance of specific knowledge. The child is to be taught 'cognitive skills' and 'rational knowledge'. This latter is, unsurprisingly, not to be found in textbooks, for which the SCHP team has only contempt. Dr Shemilt states, 'Clearly, History develops few cognitive skills if its study involves no more than rote learning. It cannot promote leisure interests if children believe all historical data to originate in some text-book or other'. In these lines the traditional approach to history is caricatured as rote-learning. This may well be true of more than a few classrooms, but it is probably - dare one say - the fault of the teacher and not of the subject he is teaching. The cognitive skills Dr Shemilt considers necessary for the pupil are those of analysis, synthesis and judgement. By denying the worth of history textbooks, he is denying the schoolchild a source of much valuable material on which to sharpen his critical faculties. Scorn towards traditional textbooks ignores the fact that the books are based on knowledge culled by historians and that, textbooks when good, show the scholarly conclusions of historians as they are presently established. No one seeks to say that there is only one possible view of history, only that in order to be able to form a view, a knowledge of what has been ascertained for the time being is indispensable. But the new history wants to have no truck with the perhaps laborious task of communicating the framework of history. To the question 'What should history teach?' the project team has come up not with the answer, the subject itself, but with the reply 'the nature of the subject'.

The 13-year old is to be introduced to the nature of historical enquiry, which is a philosophical, and not an historical, issue. School is not the place to try to resolve a philosophical question which requires the student of it to have a considerable background knowledge and to conduct a more sophisticated style of argument than is within the capabilities of the average 13- or even 16-year old. Why then, given that the proponents of the new history accept that many children will leave school at the age of 16, are they to be confronted with a complicated question which is at one remove to the study of history itself and finds its roots in a study of the work of historians and their approach to history? The ambition to teach the nature of the subject rather than the subject itself explains why the project rationale mentions 'the subject's perspectives, logic and method'. The perspectives of history could mean either a comparison between the outlook of the great and the not so great on the world in which they live, or to much more difficult issues such as the theory of history of the great 18th century German scholar Lessing who believed in an historical progression culminating in a state of perfection and truth. As the only logic and method of history is that imposed by historians on much disparate evidence it would seem more likely that the project team was referring to this latter type of perspective. It is a misplaced ambition to expect children to answer questions which only knowledge allows them to answer.

5.
The irrelevance of chronology

Another burden the new history imposes on the schoolchild is to discover and emphasise connections between past and present. This he is to do without a firm grasp of chronology, for the new historian favours a 'radical, discontinuous course structure'. The idea of connecting past and present assumes that there is a relationship between the two. This is not always true. Feudalism in England, for example, is worthy of study for its own sake. But the feudal structure of the reign of King John has little bearing on the England of the 20th century. The reign of Queen Elizabeth I is not very ''relevant' to the rule of her present successor. To insist on such a link imposes a restriction on the teaching of history and limits the way in which any period of history can be approached.

The teaching of 'key ideas'

As the foundation of all this cross-referencing of history, designed to teach children the nature of the world in which they live, the pupil is to learn the meaning of key ideas. This is made especially clear in the Assessment Objectives of recent syllabuses. He is to be taught about cause and effect, change and development, continuity and progress. Arbitrary though the choice of these ideas is, there is nothing at all wrong with them. It is the prominence which they are given in the GCSE syllabuses that is misconceived. They are large and complicated questions which historians may spend years -- or a lifetime -- trying to unravel. And they depend on chronology for them to make any kind of historical sense. But the GCSE student is to be denied a systematic and chronological approach to history. How then will a teenager make sense of such abstract ideas within the structure of what he is taught? How can he identify 'development' if he does not know the original position? How is he to know whether one episode is the cause or the effect of another if he has no time sequence into which to fit them? It is as if the key ideas are to be taught and then applied to history rather than the other way around. An able child, if taught the matter of history, will work these ideas out for himself as his knowledge grows. As his thinking becomes more sophisticated so may his interest in such grand themes develop.

But is the purpose of history in school to teach the meaning of key ideas? The Department of Education and Science, Her Majesty's inspectors and many teachers claim that it is. Here is the crux of a most important argument. The doctrine must be challenged. History can provide an account of what has happened only as historians have established it. Yet this is not the principle concern of the SCHP team. They appear to want to treat the subject commonly called history as little more than a pastime, perhaps one that stretches the mind, but a pastime nonetheless. Dr Shemilt shows an admirable desire to interest children in the subject by approaching it as if it were a game, but at the same time he is dismissive of it because of the nature of the pieces on the board. 'Children,' he says, 'only learn chess by playing games with the pieces; and students only learn history, as opposed to merely cataloguing the detritus of the past, by playing intellectual games with the factual impedimenta, the symbolic rooks and pawns, of the subject.'

But the teaching of so-called traditional history in schools is caricatured as allowing a teacher to indulge in 'a "chalk and talk" method' of teaching and as a form of uncritical note-taking and rote-learning for the child. When the new history was tried out in the 70s, there were two groups of pupils, one being the experimental group, taught the new history, and the other called the control group, who were taught history by the traditional means. A remarkable fact -- one which some would say negated the experiment -- is that both groups were assessed only according to the new history's own standard. Dr Shemilt tells us, 'Control pupils tended to see History as a corpus of pre-existent, pre-digested and inalienable "facts"'. This is to be contrasted with the virtues of the new history: 'History aims to increase pupils' understanding of History as a distinct "form of knowledge"'. The new history proposes a new method for communicating this 'form of knowledge', described in the editorial of Teaching History (no. 46, October 1986) as 'a "process-based" form of learning', placing emphasis 'on skills pupils can develop from studying the past rather than about the "facts" of history as handed down on "tablets of stone"'. History is to be approached as a problem-solving activity, as though schoolchildren, or anyone else for that matter, could be expected to 'solve problems' in history. Some of the elements of the new method are to teach through empathy, to show children that they have power to participate in history and to encourage teacher and pupil interaction with the past, to study evidence and to instruct the children in 'verbal algorithms'.

One question to ask is what does 'process-based' learning mean? Presumably it means looking at the process by which a historian comes to assert what he does. Thus, a child is not simply to absorb the information that William the Conqueror arrived on the shores of England in 1066 but he is to ask himself what allows a historian to say this. If this is indeed what is meant by process-based learning it must be a very laborious method of study for both teacher and pupil, for it means that not one statement can go unquestioned. One paradoxical aspect of the new method is that while the matter of history, so derisively called 'factual impedimenta' or mere 'facts', is to be subject to the most critical scrutiny - as indeed it should be, but not by the schoolchild - empathetic responses are actively encouraged, even though resting on no basis of knowledge at all.

6.
The uses of 'empathy'

Empathy is the power of projecting one's own personality into, and so fully understanding, the object of contemplation. It calls for an emotional, personal and subjective response to history. New history sets itself the task of making children 'understand History from the inside' and of encouraging them to 'reciprocate positions'. Presumably by understanding history from the inside a teenager is to step into the shoes of a naval rating who fought in the Armada, for instance. He will then be able to picture the reality of such a life, the hardships and hopes, the suffering of defeat, the sweet anticipation of victory... This is not a simple task. A child will either need a vivid imagination or else a countless number of sources from which to build up a picture of the true existence of such a person: what he wore, how much he earned, how long he would be at sea, whether he was married, if he had received any education... The list goes on. This may well be an illuminating exercise, but is it history? Dr Shemilt says, 'Project pupils have more 'right' ideas about History than do comparable control subjects, but if the teacher new to History 13-16 can see no virtue in wrong ideas he may be disappointed in the results of his endeavours'. A few lines further on , he adds, 'Although frequently erroneous, the ideas of History 13-16 students tend to be lively and colourful. If not always valid and consistent, their reasoning is usually elaborate and ingenious, and this goes far towards redressing a certain naive profligacy of thought'. Would it perhaps be of more help to the pupil in the long run, though probably more painful at the time, to instil in him a method of approach to argument and discussion that will stand him in good stead long after he has left school and whether or not he goes on to further education than to leave him with this hit-or-miss way of thinking and imagination run wild? And who is to judge which ideas are 'right' and which are not if the test is heavily dependent on a subjective viewpoint?

It is a hard enough task to imagine the varied existence of other people of one's own time and culture. How then can a teenager really 'reciprocate positions' with any figure from the past? (Although examiners maintain that empathy is much more than this, in practise it comes to no more.) One minor practical problem is to find a figure with whom to reciprocate positions. Is the 17th century courtier to take his place in the classroom while the schoolboy attends the levee of the King? If this problem is overcome, and positions are reciprocated, the question remains, to what end? The author of the evaluation study himself says 'few fifteen-year-olds seem to possess the refinement of historical judgement, the breadth of experience and emotional maturity to engage in a serious and productive dialogue with "the past"'. Understanding history from the inside will not bring a child closer to understanding those key concepts such as cause and effect, change and development, which lie at the centre of the philosophy of the new history. Nor will it help him grasp that other idea, also central to the thesis of new history, that the modern world is the result of historical contingency. Aiming to understand history from the inside is a rather circuitous way of teaching children that, as Dr Shemilt says, 'People make History'.

The phrase 'People make History', which the proverbial man on the Clapham omnibus probably regards as a truism, is raised to the status of a verbal algorithm in the new history course. An algorithm, a word used in computer programming circles, is a process or set of rules which provides a sequence of operations as a routine for solving problems. As new history is described as a problem-solving subject it is perhaps as well that it has its model algorithms for solving the problems brought up by the empathetic approach. Verbal algorithms are described as providing springboards to thought. The experimental pupils have uncovered a few verbal algorithms, such as 'History is about people and what they do and what they've said and its ordinary people as well as all the famous' or 'History is people's sayings, sufferings and their deeds', or 'Evidence, you have to look at evidence'. This last algorithm, given in reply to a question about how we know what happened in the past, is contrasted with a control pupil's non-algorithmic reply, 'You look it up in books' How one reply is more conducive to thought than the other is unclear. One of the attractions of the verbal algorithm for the SCHP team is that it helps children make history relevant to their own lives because they come to realise that history is composed of ordinary people like themselves. This quest for relevance denies the richness of history for it dismisses the achievements of people in positions of power. The tendency is to see everything as the result of the work of 'the masses', sweeping away the personalities who have come to prominence, probably for good reason, and therefore figure in the textbooks. The role of the collectivity is just one view of history and only provides part of the historical narrative. To belittle the role of those labelled as great is to take a partisan and impoverished approach to history.

Once a child has jumped off the springboard to a thought marked 'evidence' what is he going to look for? If he is to 'reciprocate positions' properly with any historical character he should look at all the evidence available -- he cannot be selective. The child will need to know about the chosen character's physical surroundings, such as his clothes, his possessions, his house and its geographical location, as well as about his way of life - what he did for a living, how he ate, if he was a bachelor, whether he ever left his birthplace and his hopes and aspirations, to say nothing of needing to know about the social climate in which he lived. This may well require excursions to countless museums, libraries and archaeological sites and talks with experts in many fields. The task will be endless; it will far outlast a child's school career and calls for more resources than even the best school can properly cater for. This type of sustained research is beyond the capabilities of many an adult let alone of a developing child whose interests may, as likely as not, never draw him to this kind of research. But what sort of evidence is he likely to find at hand to help him understand history from the inside? The revolutionary aspect of the evidence is that illustrations and fieldwork are included in the new history course. It is all to the good that children realise that they can learn about history from all sorts of sources and not just from the printed word. However a wealth of scholarship is required before anyone can be in a position intelligently to evaluate or interpret artefacts and illustrations of people and events.

Shemilt himself does not discuss in any detail the type of evidence that should be set before the 13- to 16-year old new historians. One example given of the evidence set before a child consists of three scenes depicting interiors. The accompanying question asks children to comment on the improvement in working conditions they show. It will be a dull child indeed who does not realise that the question itself is directing him in a particular direction. Although the pictures may indeed illustrate that working conditions had improved they are not being used as evidence for if they were, they would be accompanied by a neutral question. To attempt to use the pictures as evidence, as a historian may well do, they should be set in a context with other pictures and information about the same period available to the child so that he can try to assess their value as comment on the past.

An example of an examination question, taken from a specimen GCSE paper was given in The Daily Telegraph of 26 April 1988: 'Syllabus A (Modern World History) offers a 1966 cartoon showing Harold Wilson (unnamed) struggling to defuse a bomb labelled Rhodesia with tools from a case labelled Sanctions, while a large black man leaning on a sledgehammer says: "You're getting nowhere, man - let us try." Candidates are then required to answer 11 questions stimulated by the cartoon. To get them all right, they would need to know more about Rhodesia/Zimbabwe from 1961 to independence than they would have to display in a high-scoring answer to the old-style O-level. Either the cartoon is simply a stratagem designed to make the asking of questions and the eliciting of information more fun, or else it is indicative of a more central role in the classroom, taking the place previously given over to textbooks. As the new history professes meagre interest in information, preferring a child to show an understanding of key concepts, it seems more likely that the second interpretation is the correct one. To centre even a small part of the teaching of history in school around interpreting such subtle expressions of opinion as cartoons, which are not always easy to understand, seems misguided. If a child understands such items, all is well and good, but it should surely not be the aim of a school history teacher to elucidate the wry, sceptical, sharp, funny, poignant or unkind comments of professional cartoonists on the world about them.

7.
The content of the syllabus

One more aspect of the new history course needs to be looked at: the syllabus. The past of one's own country would seem to be a good place to embark on a study of history and to begin to acquire the skills of a historian. A country like Britain has a past which is rich and varied. It has seen Roman rule and has itself ruled other parts of the world. It has had both ignominious and great moments and been subject to wise and less wise government. The 3-year SCHP course which Shemilt describes has five parts has five parts: What is History presents 'History as a humane study concerned with people, their actions and perceptions of events (their "sufferings" in the most catholic sense of the term)'. Is compassion really an emotion which needs to be given prominence in the study of history? This part also 'addresses the question of historical explanation in the form of causal analysis and the delineation of motives.' Then comes History around Us, designed 'to stimulate history-related leisure activities by fostering interest in and knowledge about the visible remains of the past'. The third part, Enquiry in Depth, offered, in 1980, the choice between Britain 1815-51, The American West and Elizabethan England. This part is meant to 'increase pupils' self-knowledge and awareness of what it means to be human by concentrating attention upon the ideas and beliefs, values and attitudes of people of a different time and place'. It also 'raises questions about the use and interpretation of evidence, the significance of human action and motivation, and the meaning of "causation" and "necessity" in History'. Does 'necessity' have a meaning in history? Is it not just one view of history that there is such a thing as historical necessity? This is one of those complicated questions, more philosophical than historical, that cannot possibly be answered through a magpie approach to the study of history.

Then comes Modern World Studies which offers a choice between The Rise of Communist China, The Move to European Unity, The Arab-Israeli Conflict and The Irish Question. Here 'Children are brought face to face with the complexity of causation, are required to use and analyse available evidence, and are asked to base judgements upon an empathetic evaluation of different points of view'. 'Complexity of causation' is indeed likely to prove a problem; both The Arab-Israeli Conflict and The Irish Question are contentious topics and the problems they raise have not yet been resolved. They are more suited to a current affairs course than a history course. Both topics, as do the others, require extensive background knowledge. How can a child understand the rise of Communist China if he does not know what came before? To do justice to the history of China requires a course all of its own. Why, given that there is a multitude of topics concerned with European history, does the syllabus look so far afield for its material? The fourth topic, The Move to European Unity, is not simple to explore either. Is there such a move? What is Europe? How do countries such as Poland fit the picture? Why should Spain and Germany, France and England, countries with varied histories and often in conflict with one another, want to unite at all? To be able to answer these questions in more than a superficial way requires a detailed knowledge of the history of each country and not just a wishy-washy notion that unity must be a good thing and a haphazard selection of details that will support this idea.

The final part is called Study in Development. In 1980, the only subject on offer was 'The History of Medicine'. It has now been joined by an alternative 'Energy through Time'. Dr Shemilt explains the idea behind this last element of the course: 'Knowledge of the past, the Project argues, will not on its own facilitate the understanding of the present. Of at least equal importance is the apprehension of specialist concepts used to explain connections subsisting amongst events and to relate past and present meaningfully without falling into naive historicism or mechanical determinism'. Whatever Dr Shemilt may have meant by that it remained unclear to some of the project pupils. He reveals that 'some pupils did want to know, for example, what the Arab-Israeli conflict had to do with medicine', thus showing that they missed the whole point behind their new history lessons. It may seem that one way to remedy some of the confusion would be to give a child some clear idea of the sequence of all the events with which he is presented. We are told, however, that 'with all but the brightest pupils, it is most inadvisable to teach the studies chronologically. A thematic approach should allow the child to organise data more effectively in his own mind'. Dr Shemilt, it seems, has chosen to ignore the fact that a thematic approach and a chronological one are not mutually exclusive.

8.
Conclusion

Since 1980, the date of Shemilt's study, the Schools History Project has undergone some modification, but its central thesis has spread far and wide. Now a two-year course rather than three, most of the GCSE history syllabuses have adopted such elements as the premium on empathy, the quest for concepts and the emphasis placed on source evaluation. Indeed in one syllabus this last has been raised to such a level that a whole paper is devoted to assessing the skill with which children can use it, to the neglect of history itself. Paper 2 of the MEG syllabus (a one-and-a-half hour paper carrying 30% of the marks) is described thus: 'the source material may be chosen from any period or type of history, and no prior knowledge of the subject matter of the source material will be required'. The first GCSE examinations have just been taken. Paper 1 of the Southern Examining Board's 1988 history exam is devoted to British History 1815-1983. There are three sections: section A is devoted to evaluating 'sources' -- an early trade union membership card, a plan and photographs of Victorian workhouses, two cartoons and a graph are illustrated, and there are also a few short prose extracts. For the clever child, answering the accompanying questions will not prove a great hurdle, for the answers are in the sources themselves. For the child who is not so bright, confronted with a dozen or so sources to pore over and then with questions directing him to evaluate them, the experience could benumb. Section C again has a number of illustrations and questions, and the child has to choose to answer the block of questions accompanying just one illustration. Section B is an essay section, giving the choice of one essay out of six. Here are two examples:

> 1. Ireland An Irish peasant farmer and his wife in the early 1850s decided to emigrate to America. What were their reasons for leaving Ireland? What were their hopes and fears as they boarded the emigrant ship? What thoughts and emotions did they have as they left Ireland? What opinions about the problems of Ireland did they take with them to the New World?
>
> 2. The British Empire and the Commonwealth Base your answer to this question on any one of the countries you have studied during the course. Outline the thoughts and feelings of the people of a country which was just about to achieve its independence from Britain. What would be their hopes and fears for the future, as their country prepares to celebrate Independence Day?

Leaving aside the question whether there is any worth at all in the exercise of source evaluation and the demand for empathy, the exam appears to put a premium on superficial cleverness, favouring the quick, alert child who can get away with little or no work and leaving the less bright child and those who do not have a flourishing imagination with little chance to show what they have actually learned. No wonder that you can now leave school in almost total ignorance of the how and when of history.

The syllabus has as one aim to help children pass a GCSE history exam; another is to enhance the 'new history' pupil's leisure time. Given the diverse courses and the reluctance to admit the value of making use of any historian's published research, few children attempting to do justice to the ambitions of the new history method will have any leisure time. The SCHP team seem to have been bent on treating the schoolchild as if he were a Ph.D student -- but one whose goal is not the publication of a thesis in which he can aspire to add to the body of historical knowledge, but the achievement of a pass grade at GCSE. It is indeed a compliment to their pupils that they should have thought them all capable of and eager to devote themselves to, and sustain interest in, three years of all-absorbing work probably to the point of neglecting other subjects, their school friends and family. But one need look no further than Dr Shemilt's own Evaluation Study to realise that this faith is misplaced and that the grandiose scheme leaves the very children it is designed to help bewildered.

The 13-16 history course which Shemilt envisages has no solid foundation. The eclectic approach, dipping into this or that period of history, looking at objects and drawings in preference to history books, suggests a fundamental contempt of the subject, the teaching of which he wants so radically to reform. The virtue of what Dr Shemilt calls the 'chalk and talk' method is that information, if nothing else, is imparted to the student. The prospect of the new history is that it will come to be labelled the 'dream and draw' approach to the past. Teaching through empathy may provide a pupil with an immediate sense of achievement and satisfaction, but can it possibly be allowed to pass for history? Any philosophy of education will, when put into practice, be only as successful as the teacher is able make it. It has been pointed out that the new history allows bad teachers to cover themselves as they assess a significant proportion of their own pupils' examination work. For the conscientious teacher the very ambition of the project must be a nightmare. For the children, 3 years may be devoted to puffs of hot air instead of to the acquisition of skills on which to build for themselves a real education. History in school should certainly not be the kind of party game trading in 'facts', as Dr Shemilt characterises the subject; but nor should it place a premium on the personal response, disdaining the solid work of historians of repute. The more modest aim of communicating to children a picture of the past as it is established for the time being, and the cultivation of skills necessary to inquire further should a child be so inclined, is plenty both to fill 3 years of history lessons and to lead to a body of knowledge where an objective attempt to assess a pupil can at least be made. Ultimately the success of teaching depends on the chance encounter of a teacher's enthusiasm and brilliance and a child's own interest. As this recipe cannot be predicted to work with every teacher and child, pedagogical theories exist to try to engineer this success.

Dr Shemilt's vision may be attractive, at first sight, in that it gives the illusion of success to both teacher and pupil. But any achievement is ephemeral. Therein lies its danger. No child is likely to thank his teacher in later life if he is unable to answer to himself with any degree of certainty the question whether the advent and rise of the railways in Britain was before or after the Industrial Revolution because chronology was scorned as a mere detail in the course of his history lessons. There are few fundamentals that should be taught in the history classroom, but these do include a sense of time and historical context; sadly not to be found in the new history. Those who set the GCSE history syllabus are in danger of being carried along in the enthusiasm with which the proponents of the new history boast of its success. Dr Shemilt says, 'The course is a camel each of whose separate features will excite the admiration and approbation of many, but those totality is difficult to ride.' But the real virtue of a camel is that it can carry its rider through arid desert for many hours with little or no sustenance. We should not let the teaching of new history in our schools go unchecked; for its oases of learning are few indeed, and shallow -- often no more than mirages.

A selection of recent studies on education

'HISTORY IN PERIL: may parents preserve it' Alan Beattie	£3.90
'HISTORY - AND GCSE HISTORY' Stewart Deuchar	£2.20
'ENGLISH OUR ENGLISH the new orthodoxy examined' John Marenbon	£3.90
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