



Date: March '87

Centre for Policy Studies, 8 Wilfred Street, London SW1E 6PL (01-828 1176)

History  
—and  
G.C.S.E. History

Stewart Deuchar

Price:  
£2.20

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## THE AUTHOR

Stewart Deuchar was educated at Repton and Cambridge where he took his degree in history. He has taught history in a private school and, together with his wife helps on a voluntary basis, at an ESN school.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ISBN: 1 870265 04 1

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Printed in England by Chameleon Press Ltd 5-25 Burr Road  
London SW18 4SG

## History - and GCSE history

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Now all is changed. The concept of an 'educated person' as the hoped-for end-product of our education system has disappeared without trace in the wholesale debasement of our culture in the last two decades. Moreover during this period traditional history teachers have found themselves increasingly under attack from left-wing Education Authorities and others for alleged 'racism', 'sexism', 'imperialism', 'elitism', and much else besides. Many have left the profession.

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worried.

Another result has been a tendency for the character of history teaching to change.

In addition to the pressures described above, the teaching of history has been influenced by the current educational fashion for imparting skills rather than knowledge, and also by the fashion for so-called 'child-centred learning.' Finally, there was also the extremely strong current of egalitarianism running through our education system at all levels.

From all these pressures there emerged in 1976 a 'new philosophy'<sup>2</sup> for the teaching of history which became embodied in something called the 'Schools Council History (13-16 Project)' (SCHP). Its detractors call it the 'Sacred Cow History Project,'<sup>3</sup> not without reason.

The 'new philosophy' holds that, since nothing is ultimately knowable, and the historical record is selective, subjective and inevitably biased, the actual historical content of history is almost valueless. Thus the main benefit from the study of history is the acquisition of skills and concepts. The 'skills' in question are those needed 'to interpret and evaluate a wide range of historical sources and their use as evidence' (quoted from the Assessment Objectives of MEG SHP syllabus) and the 'concepts' are 'cause and consequence, change and continuity, similarity and difference' (quoted from the same source).

SCHP was embodied in a syllabus which has been

available in the London area for ten years and has been taken by many thousands of children. It has built up an enthusiastic, one could almost say fanatical, following among teachers. Its main attraction seems to be that it is aimed at the whole ability range. Since the historical content has been reduced to a minimum it has proved to be acceptable to even the silliest Authorities, and this is clearly regarded as a point in its favour. I will try to describe it in more detail later.

In 1986 Sir Keith Joseph bowed to pressure from the egalitarian lobby and from the secretaries of the teachers' unions and agreed to phase out 'O' Levels and CSE in favour of GCSE. So what was now needed was a new set of history syllabuses aimed at the full ability range. It would have been possible to adapt the traditional syllabuses and exams for the purpose, but there were powerful reasons against doing this. Firstly there was the regrettable fact that by this time schools had become political battlegrounds. This raised the spectre of endless warfare over the content and slant of the history to be taught. Secondly there was the very powerful 'anti-racist' witch-hunt whereby anything tending towards the integration of the ethnic minorities was condemned as 'racist'. Thirdly there was the fact of the SCHP phenomenon with ten years' experience and a considerable 'head' of teacher-stridency behind it.

So it came about that DES turned its back on traditional history teaching and gratefully embraced the 'new philosophy'. The SCHP format clearly offered a very acceptable escape-route from all the hassles associated with traditional attitudes. It also has the almost irresistible attraction of being new, and therefore presumably at the leading edge of new technology. Having announced this exciting new development, Sir Keith resigned, leaving his successor holding a very strange-looking baby.

What the DES did was to incorporate SCHP (now renamed SHP) almost unchanged as one of the optional syllabuses, and to specify that the other syllabuses on offer should follow the SHP philosophy and incorporate its characteristic features.

These features are -

- 1 Emphasis on the 'skill' of source-evaluation.
- 2 Downgrading of historical content.
- 3 Emphasis on the designated 'concepts'.
- 4 Fragmented and topic-based approach.
- 5 A substantial element of teacher-assessed coursework.

It is worth noting at this point what has been lost. Firstly, there is the loss of a huge slice of our national heritage. There is no feeling in these syllabuses that we are talking about our own history. It is always referred to impersonally as 'the past'. This does not apply to the Welsh Joint Education Committee

Syllabus, which robustly aims 'to promote an awareness<sup>20</sup> of our [presumably Welsh] national heritage', and it is clear from the syllabus and the test papers that the Welsh Committee means what it says.

There is nothing in the Aims of the English Examining Boards which might suggest a desire to promote an awareness of our English national heritage. The nearest we get to it is Aim No 4 of MEG SHP which is to 'help pupils, particularly in the sections of the course on British History, towards an understanding of the development over time of social and cultural values'. I wrote to the Secondary Examinations Council, the body ultimately responsible for all this, and asked what Aim No 4 actually means. I pointed out that it is open to at least four different interpretations.

I got a reply from the Principal Professional Officer saying that Aim No 4 does permit a 'range of interpretations', so 'you must ask MEG for their particular interpretation.' In other words they have approved an important pronouncement by a subsidiary body without really knowing, or seemingly much caring, what it means. I have dwelt on this at some length because it seems to me a good illustration of the mental and moral cowardice which pervades whole sections of our intellectual establishment.

The second thing which is lost is any attempt to give our children any real understanding of our



institutions and perennial problems. Boys and girls of 14 are within four years of getting the vote. We should be trying to give them some idea of what this means.

The third loss is the life and colour of history. Children like to learn about people. GCSE lets them down.

The fourth loss is the perspective. This disappears in the fragmentary, topic-based approach.

The fifth, and possibly most important loss of all, is of the rigour and integrity of the subject. The pursuit of truth has been traded for something of very dubious validity, as I hope to show.

But first I must attempt a more detailed description of the syllabuses themselves.

#### The Syllabuses

The whole range of GCSE history syllabuses is wide and very confusing. For instance, the Northern Examining Association offers six different syllabuses, all qualified as history. Some syllabuses are not yet available. Some are available but not yet approved by SEC. All the syllabuses offer a fragmented mixture of choices. It might be supposed that the absurdly wide range of choice would be of benefit to the pupils. Not so, the choices are made by the schools to suit their own convenience and prejudices. The pupils have to accept the school's choice or drop history altogether.

Since all these syllabuses are primarily concerned with source-evaluation, and since this entails the

enormous expense of getting tooled-up with all the necessary material for a particular course, it obviously means that once a school is tooled-up for a certain course it will be extremely reluctant to change, however unsatisfactory the course might turn out to be.

The Midland Examining Group has managed to get all four of its history syllabuses approved by SEC. They are:-

History (Syllabuses in British and European History)  
History (British Social and Economic History)  
History (The Modern World, 1914 to the Present Day)  
History (Schools History Project).

Since the SHP is the one which sets the pattern, that is the one which I will try to describe in some detail

The exam for MEG SHP consists of:-

Paper 1	2 hours	30% of marks
Paper 2	1 hour 30 minutes	30% of marks
Coursework		40% of marks

Let us first get rid of Paper 2, which is the simplest. 'This Paper will consist of several compulsory questions (not less than six, and not more than nine) set on a range of source material. 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.' (Quoted from syllabus). Clearly this is a straight test of the so-

called 'skill' of source evaluation. I should perhaps say here that this type of paper seems to be peculiar to the SHP syllabuses.

Paper 1 is split between Section A, which is devoted to what is called a Study in Development (either Medicine Through Time, or Energy Through Time), and Section B which is devoted to what is called a Study in Depth (either Elizabethan England or Britain, 1815-1851, or The American West).

At this point I am compelled to warn the reader that these syllabuses are characterised by a sort of elephantine pretentiousness of Orwellian proportions. Things which the ordinary teenager might be expected to have absorbed quite unknowingly many years previously are pulled out of a hat and endowed with cosmic significance. Thus it is felt necessary to put these pupils through two years of grappling with Medicine Through Time primarily in order to enable them to acquire a grasp of the concepts of Continuity and Causation. Here it is in black and white:-

'Continuity

Candidates should appreciate that:-

- a) old ideas and old techniques continue in use in some areas long after they have been superceded in others;
- b) old and new ideas and techniques often continue side by side in the same place.'

Similar injunctions are made about the relevance of Causation.

The section about Studies in Depth is preceded by an Introduction consisting of six paragraphs of gobbledygook, of which the following extract must suffice as a sample:-

'Since empathetic understanding is a vital enabling factor in the general historical understanding of any period in the past, the most important objective for the Studies in Depth is an empathetic understanding of the values and beliefs of the time, related to individuals and situations'.

It also has to be said that there is a very impressive list of Assessment Objectives, and a remarkable table which shows exactly which Assessment Objectives are supposed to be targeted by the different parts of the exam. It all looks very impressive, not to say frightening, until you look at the Specimen Question Papers. Here is the reality lurking behind all the long words and infinitely confusing cross-references.

After two years of struggling with no less than 31 aspects of (say) Elizabethan England the pupils would typically be confronted with:-

Source A - a photocopied portrait of Drake looking  
bold as brass

Source B - quotation from an obscure Spaniard who describes Drake as a firm but fair leader who consults his crew before making any decisions



and pays on the nail, and

Source C - quotation from another Spaniard who reports that Drake has 'at night captured another ship ... bound for Panama', and lists its cargo.

There is no indication of whether Source B is based on personal acquaintance or mere hearsay.

The pupils then answer the following questions -

(a) Look carefully at Sources A and B.

How do sources A and B help us to understand Sir Francis Drake's success as a sea-captain?

(b) In what ways can Source C be used to criticise Drake?

(c) Would people in the 16th century have seen Drake as a pirate or a hero? Use sources A, B and C and your own knowledge to help you to explain your answer.

In the actual exam there would be two questions of this type, from which the pupil chooses one. Time allowed, 45 minutes.

Whether a single question of this sort is sufficient to elicit the sort of response on which to make a fair judgement of the results of two years' work seems questionable, to say the least.

Similar considerations apply to the Specimen Questions on Medicine Through Time. (No specimen questions available for Energy Through Time).

We have now covered Papers 1 and 2. There remains Coursework. This is a major commitment. Pupils are expected to submit between four and seven pieces of work over the two years. They are split between some topic of Modern World Studies, of which 7 are suggested (eg China in the Modern World), and some topic of History Around Us, (eg Roman Britain). There are very elaborate instructions to the teacher about how all this is to be organised. Five pages of fine print are devoted to 'The Objectives: Some Guidelines for Setting Assignments.' Objective No 1 is, of course, 'Evaluation and Interpretation of Sources'. It is certainly not a soft option for the teacher.

What I have been describing is the Schools History Project syllabus. The other syllabuses are somewhat less preoccupied with source-evaluation. In some, the coursework component only covers 30% or 20% of total marks. But any school wishing to carry on as nearly as possible with the traditional approach to history will certainly have to make major changes and compromises.

#### Source-evaluation

It will be clear from the foregoing that source-evaluation plays a bigger role in these syllabuses than anything else, including the historical content. This raises all sorts of important questions. Is source-evaluation really a 'skill'? Is it something of value outside the historical context? Does it encourage pupils to think for themselves? Even assuming that the answer

to each of the above questions is 'yes', is source-evaluation over-valued in these syllabuses at the expense of other things perhaps just as important?

My own opinion is that the answers to these questions are by no means clear from the evidence which is available, and there should be an urgent and realistic investigation by independent people.

Source-evaluation is obviously something which professional historians practice, and no doubt some of them are more skillful at it than others. But whether it can be regarded as a readily-acquired 'skill' like riding a bicycle seems extremely doubtful. It depends primarily on knowledge and judgement. But in these syllabuses knowledge is regarded as of secondary importance. For instance, 'It must be emphasized that the acquisition of factual knowledge should not be seen as an end in itself' (MEG SHP page 7).

Whether it encourages pupils to think for themselves and has value outside the historical context is arguable. What seems to me beyond argument is that seeing history primarily and almost exclusively through source-material distorts and diminishes it. I will take just one example.

In the Midland Group's British Social and Economic History syllabus Specimen Question Papers pages 10 and 11 we are dealing with the extremely interesting subject of universal compulsory education. Among the sources

William Cobbett is quoted as objecting to 'taxing the industrious shoemaker in order to make him pay for the education of the shoemaker who is not industrious', and he goes on to say that the proposal would 'of necessity create a new and most terrific control in the hands of the government'. Lord Chancellor Brougham is quoted as saying that 'If the people of England were forced to educate their children by penalties, education would be made absolutely hateful in their eyes and would speedily cease to be tolerated'. These are very interesting observations giving plenty of food for thought. But the questions set by the examiners concentrate almost exclusively on the sources as sources. Only one sub-question, offering 3 marks out of 30 for all six questions, touches on the issues raised. This is question 4 (a) 'Choose ONE criticism of ideas for the education of the poor from EACH of the sources. Explain what is meant by EACH of the criticisms.' This can hardly be described as encouraging the pupils to think for themselves, except on a very low interpretation of those words. I would say that this and any number of similar examples prove the point that source-evaluation on this scale distorts and diminishes history. It is also very much part of the levelling-down process already noted by Jonathan Worthen.

A study of the questions set in these Specimen papers and the 'marking guidance' section at the back of



the booklet is a very revealing exercise. It has left me in no doubt that anybody who wants to get the top marks will have to make a thorough study of the sort of answers the examiners are likely to be looking for, however silly they may appear to be on ordinary common-sense grounds. I have tried some of these questions on graduates among my friends and relations, and their scores would have been abysmal.

Clearly, the teacher is going to have to spend a lot of time habituating the pupils to shaping their answers to fit the models. For instance, a lot of questions take roughly the following form, 'Would Source A be of more use to a historian than Source B?' Most often the honest answer would have to be, 'since both sources have been lifted clean out of their contexts (as for instance 'Speech made in Cardiff during the General Election campaign of 1950<sup>5</sup> without saying by whom) it is simply not possible to arrive at a fair evaluation of either of them.' But this would obviously earn few marks. To answer simply, 'Yes' is equally unlikely to hit the jackpot. But a clever teacher will have drilled his pupils to answer such questions in a more sophisticated manner, irrespective of any knowledge or interest in the subject e.g. 'Source A might be more use as confirmation of the facts, but Source B throws light on what people thought at the time.' Whether this sort of thing can be described as cultivating 'skills', or as

'developing strategies designed simply for the purpose of producing good examining marks' (quoted from a DES letter to me) or both, is a fine point. Others might regard the whole exercise as little better than a parlour game.

#### Concepts

Concepts loom large in these syllabuses, for no very obvious reason, unless it be simply another way of burying the historical content. Why should Continuity be regarded as of cosmic significance, but Discontinuity be totally neglected? Causation is an enormously delicate and complicated business in the historical context. Motivation is surely something about which wise men refrain from pontificating. Similarity and Difference are not some exciting new discovery. A baby can spot both the similarity and the difference between its mother and its aunt long before being able to sit up.

In these syllabuses a great deal of play is made with the words 'empathetic understanding'. Obviously empathetic understanding is a desirable quality to develop, but with out knowledge, it is nothing more than generalised sentimentality. GCSE is therefore not being very sensible in encouraging empathetic understanding but failing to encourage knowledge. Also, GCSE seems in a terrible hurry to be sympathetic towards everybody else's predicament before making sure that we have a clear idea of our own standpoint.

Here is a recommended 'Typical Empathetic Exercise

(10 marks)' from the Welsh Joint Examining Committee. ✖  
'Write an article from the point of view of a supporter of President Castro living in Havana in 1962, explaining the missile crisis and condemning American policy in the earlier Bay of Pigs episode.' Is this balanced by another question saying, 'Imagine what it must have been like to be one of the forty million Russians massacred by Lenin and Stalin'? No, it is not.

#### Coursework

The same considerations apply to coursework in history as in any other subject. Since the teacher is present at all times while the assignment is being devised, planned, executed and assessed it is impossible to disentangle the input of the teacher from the input of the pupil. The syllabus (MEG SHP p17) admits that 'The single most important factor influencing candidates' performance in their course work is the nature of the assignments they are set.' This surely places an unfair responsibility on the teachers. It would have to be a strange sort of teacher who could stand by and watch a pupil making a terrible hash of his coursework without being tempted to persuade him to change it, and of course, since the pupil would be aware that it would be the teacher who was to mark it, he would have to change it even if he strongly, and perhaps reasonably, disagreed with the teacher's reasoning.

Coursework clearly gives the teachers and their union

secretaries enormous 'industrial muscle'.

Coursework is a logical extension of 'child-centred learning', which may well prove to be just one more ephemeral fashion. The whole exercise, as applied to history, is shot-through with make-believe. The pupils are not 'finding things out for themselves'. All the source-material will have been pre-selected and probably processed in order to make it intelligible. It is all enormously extravagant of time and resources in relation to what is actually learned.

#### Conclusion

This great change in the philosophy behind the teaching of history has been introduced without any regard for what the general public actually wants. If we cut ourselves off from our own history we enormously diminish ourselves. I do not believe that this is what people in general really want.

I am not advocating going back to some mythical golden age, still less am I in favour of any kind of narrow nationalism. I simply want the best education for our children and our country.

The Historical Association's suggestion of a core of British History 14-16 aimed at our voters of the future deserves our full support. The whole subject is bedevilled by the politicisation of our schools. The authors of *Whose Schools?* have indicated what seems the only realistic way of tackling this.



If we simply bury our heads in the sand we will be burying our own grandchildren.

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- 3 S F Lang 'The Sacred Cow History Project' TES, 11 March 1986.
- 4 Welsh Joint Education Committee Syllabus History (A-Modular) Aim No 1.2.
- 5 Welsh JEC. Specimen Question Papers to above, p.24.