

Pathfinder

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WHAT'S WRONG WITH HISTORY?

Order in the court! Twentieth Century, step before the bar. You are charged with crimes and high misdemeanors, to wit:

1. Teaching bolshevism.
2. Fostering treason.
3. Glorifying pacifism.
4. Minimizing a nation's sacrifices.
5. Eliminating human interest.
6. Muck-raking.

Now, prisoner, what have you to say?

Your honor, Judge Public, my defense is based on the current demand for unbiased histories, ones that deal with facts and not fancies and are terse and otherwise differ from the 19th Century History against which indictments are still pending in this court.

What are those indictments?

That the 19th Century History—

1. Teaches national egoism.
2. Bolsters theatrical patriotism.
3. Glorifies war.
4. Is prejudiced.
5. Specializes in allegory.
6. Canonizes patriots too generously.

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By resting the case at this point we have the history squabble in a nutshell.

One side complains that new histories are "internationalized," or at least "Anglicized." It scents evidence of pacifist, even bolshevist influence. It charges that the new type of history is too exacting; that it makes dull reading because it is shorn of the fine writing which formerly characterized it. Especially does this side protest the disparaging of some figures by the attempt to be fair in giving both sides of a story.

The opposition retorts that too much humbuggery and national selfishness have been practiced in histories of the past; that the new demand is for a more truthful accounting. It blames the war spirit for inculcating a spirit of militarism in American schoolchildren.

"Patriotism," remarked a venerable divine not so long ago, "too frequently is set forth in the schools as willingness to fight and die for one's country. War

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is represented as more or less natural, normal and inevitable. Seldom is the true doctrine adequately set forth, that war, objectively considered, is always wrong since one, if not both, of the belligerents uses force in the support of unjust and uncharitable demands. Two false and fatal assumptions are conveyed by this method of presenting the subject: first, that our own country is always in the right when it goes to war, and second, that there is no other feasible method of defending national rights except by armed combat.”

Perpetuation of unauthenticated anecdotes is also condemned. The head of a great historical research body points out that many of the familiar stories about George Washington rest on the more than doubtful authority of Weems, early American chronicler. In this same category are placed the story of young George and the cherry tree and Washington's supposed feat of throwing a silver dollar across the Potomac. Historians pretty generally discredit the story of Barbara Fritchie as well as some other tales familiar to schoolchildren. And now it is denied that Gen. Pershing ever uttered the words, “Lafayette, we are here!” ascribed to his visit to France during the World war.

It might be said that the average American's idea of history is what he read while at school. He probably believes that the Americans won the battle of Bunker hill, that Washington had the full co-operation of congress, that “The Man Without a Country” was a real person, and that the nation was united in plunging into the War of 1812 and the Spanish-American war. He was not told that Benedict Arnold was a hero before he turned traitor, that Benjamin Franklin's private life was not above reproach, that the British burned Washington in 1814 in retaliation for the alleged burning of the parliament buildings at York

(Toronto) and also the town of Newark, Canada, by American forces the year previous, and hundreds of other things that may have caused him to alter his views somewhat.

But if we are to believe Premier Baldwin of Great Britain, the only worthwhile histories are the ones that are biased. "Youth wants its heroes unqualified," he explains. "There will be time enough in later life to adjust one's viewpoints. Besides, you don't want to be fair until you are grown up." The essential thing, according to this authority, is to continue to turn out colored histories that will help keep up the taste for such reading.

Of practically the same mind is the head of a Minnesota historical society, who argues that flavored statements are far preferable to drab facts. In his opinion dates and other precise information are not worth recording. It makes little difference, he says, that a noted person was born on July 15th say, but it is of tremendous importance to know in what environment he was born, what circumstances entered into the shaping of his career, what he said and did and what influenced him to say and do those things.

"When one takes away the legends, the impressions, the colorful incidents of history, what is left?" asks another American—an educator. The answer is "a mere skeleton of names, dates and facts." If this is done, he warns that no longer will the reading of history be the fascinating occupation that it now is.

And a member of the American Legion comments: "Mature college students may listen to ideals being shattered without being seriously affected, but how can young children grow up to respect the government if they are taught that everything connected with its foundation was wrong; that the founders were mental and moral derelicts and that the people who bought our freedom with their blood were 'rabble'? It is just as foolish to thus poison a child's mind as it is for a father to tell his son what a bad boy he was when he was young."

It just seems as if there can never be a really truthful history. A record of any group of people is bound to be biased. National heroes will always be painted in the brightest colors. Then,

Teaching History

too, any record of past events will prove dry reading if deprived of its human interest. This is particularly true of school textbooks. However, it is not necessary to lie to children. They should be taught the good things without stressing the bad. It does not do to tell them things which they cannot understand. Complications only muddle their young minds. The real purpose of school histories is to inspire children to become good citizens and respect the nation and its heroes. Young America must have its ideals and inspirations. Textbooks cannot afford to dwell on black spots in otherwise great characters. History is not history without the proper color, spirit, warmth and personality.