Rowan Cahill,
Bowral High School

"Dwell on the past and you'll lose an eye.
Forget the past and you'll lose both eyes."

Proverb quoted by Solzhenitsyn,
The Gulag Archipelago

For well over a decade now, history as a unique subject discipline has been under attack internationally. Recently the Organisation of American Historians sponsored a nationwide study of history teaching in American schools on a state by state basis. The findings of this study, published in The Journal of American History (September 1975), showed that:

"Confidence and interest in history are not nearly as widespread and strong among students, educational administrators, and politicians as they were only a few years ago. Doubts about its usefulness for the individual and for society now exert a large influence on attitudes and decisions."

Further, the study showed that non-history trained teachers are being allowed to teach history; the concept of history as a chronological development has been abandoned in favour of "themes" examined in the light of a free wheeling union of social science, current events, and history; facts are being abandoned in favour of concepts and abstractions; the emphasis is on the recent past—a past which in some cases goes back only so far as the 1860's.

Indeed, as one American magazine commented on the findings, they show that Henry Ford's dictum "History is bunk" is becoming a reality in American schools.
This trend is also present in Australia. It crystallized in the late nineteen sixties with the emergence of a social science lobby amongst Australian educationists intent on developing "social studies as a discipline in its own right . . . to take the place that history has at present in the secondary school, certainly in the first 4 years and probably right throughout the secondary school." 3

The social science lobby to date has not been unsuccessful. As one writer recently summed it up.

"Today it appears that secondary school studies in history are fighting for survival in the junior and middle secondary school. I think that I can predict that, in the era of initiative, senior school history will have strong competition from sociology, politics and anthropology. Economics and geography are well established and, in Victoria, politics is a popular study at Higher School Certificate under the title Social Studies." 4

THE GRAVE CONSEQUENCE OF THE DECLINE OF HISTORY

The decline of history as a subject discipline is alarming because history is important to humanity generally. Man in society is an historical entity. The explicit assumption of all main currents of contemporary thought (marxism, existentialism, behaviourism, psychoanalysis) is that man "has or rather is a history". 5 As one writer expressed it, history "gives us antecedents and a place in space and time, so that we can define ourselves through our past". 6

The historian is in many regards like a psychoanalyst who "helps us to face the present and the future by enabling us to understand the forces, however shocking, which have made our world and our society what it is". 7

Or as Manning Clark has poetically stated: "I take it we can agree on one thing: that the point of knowing the past is to force our ghosts to keep their distance, and give us some liberty". 8

The importance of history was recognized by George Orwell. In Nineteen Eighty-Four he created a totalitarian anti-Utopia where the very ideas of individuality and human freedom had been eliminated via social engineering entailing the falsification and destruction of the past, and with it, the sense of history. For Orwell, history was very much the means by which we define ourselves. That gone, mankind is open to the kinds of cultural and psychological manipulation practised in Oceania.

On this theme the work of Alexander Solzhenitsyn is relevant. In his major polemical work The Gulag Archipelago, Solzhenitsyn functions as an historian seeking to recover the post-1917 past of his native Russia, a past that has been tampered with in many regards, much of it having been destroyed, distorted, altered, fabricated by a succession of bureaucratic elites and the institutions they have created. The Gulag Archipelago represents a heroic attempt to recover what is recoverable from a past that has been tampered with immensely. 9

For Solzhenitsyn history is also the means by which we come to know both ourselves and our present, the means by which we define ourselves as human beings. The use of a tampered past in this process of definition and understanding can only reproduce a variant of Orwell's Oceania, or in the case of Russia, a variant of Stalinism . . . and it is this that Solzhenitsyn is in revolt against and which earned him his exile from his homeland.

The point I am stressing is that the decline of the study of history in schools is something perhaps of very grave consequence, culturally and socially.

IS ENTHUSIASM ENOUGH?

To account for the decline of history as a subject many factors may be produced. Admittedly, part of the reason is that historians, as an educational lobby, have been outmanoeuvred by the social scientists who have been very well financed, organized, and strategically led since the 1960's. But this is not a reason, only a symptom. For primarily the crisis facing history is a crisis from within and not from the outside. One editoralist hit it on the head when he wrote:

"Enthusiastic as one may be about the value of History as a subject in the secondary school, one must realistically admit that for thousands of school pupils it is perceived as sterile and of little meaning." 10

That History is perceived as sterile and meaningless is the problem.
Clearly here, teachers of history must assume a large responsibility for the blame, and with them, by way of implication and association, the various teacher training institutions and universities.

Too many history teachers are history teachers simply because they like history. This is good . . . being enthusiastic about a subject may in turn arouse some enthusiasm in one’s pupils.

But I think the mistake is that too many history teachers like history without pursuing the question of why they like history and why they think others should like it.

Studying the past can be a means of escaping from the insistence of the present. That can lead to enthusiasm in one person, but it is not reason enough for thirty or so “here and now” schoolchildren to get enthusiastic.

Remembering dates, names, facts, etc., may come easy to a teacher because of some emotional/psychological quirk, but a quirk is not a reason why children should study history.

The point I am making is that it’s not sufficient to like history to be a history teacher. And when you do find out why history appeals to you, and pleases you as an individual, maybe it is not adequate to convince people that history is important to them as individuals and to society in general.

And so to the question, “why is history important?” What is the value of “historical perspective and historical comparisons and the importance of a sense of time and place”?11

To discover this we have to deal with historiographical and philosophical issues. What is history? What philosophies of history have existed/do exist? How did/do these originate? What are the uses and abuses of history? What are its possibilities, its limits? What are the relationships between historians and the histories they produce from social, economic and political viewpoints? In what ways can and does the past relate to the present and the future?

These issues were not dealt with during the period of my teacher training (Sydney Teachers College, class of 1969), nor were they really broached during my university studies (Sydney University, 1966–1968). By and large history teachers are abysmally ignorant when it comes to historiographical questions and issues. Yet it is only by coming to grips with them that the importance, meaning, and relevance of history becomes clear.

This avoidance of historiographical/philosophical issues is perpetuated by curriculum planners. So in N.S.W. we have them relegated to minor subsections of Section V of the Year 11–12 Modern History Syllabus, almost with the status of an afterthought.

A PLEA FOR THE COMPLEXITY OF HISTORY

What appears not to be realized generally is that history in the modern sense is an extremely complex subject.

As a concept involving a continuous and connected past, history from the early 18th century; as a concept involving the progress and development of civilization, history is a child of the Enlightenment. The human mind has taken centuries to conceive of history, and as a discipline it is only of comparatively recent origin.

Further, history requires complex intellectual processes, involving as it does at least two dimensions of conceptual thought—one of causality, the other of time (this latter involving the past, the present and the future).12

The point is that history is served up to school pupils with little or no rationale. In the space of 6 years in N.S.W. schools the student of history is expected to move conceptually the same intellectual distance it took western society centuries to accomplish. During this process neither the teacher nor the student is encouraged to look at the subject itself, its existence being accepted by its devotees as being both sacrosanct and obvious.

Now this is curious, because one of the unique things about history is that it is the most theoretical of the human disciplines.13 This perhaps explains why, since the emergence of scholarly evidential history in the 19th century, “most eminent historians at some point have justified their trade, in effect their lives”.14

As the American historian Stoughton Lynd once pointed out, history “becomes dead unless it is renewed by frequent discovery of its reason for being”.15

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Until the words of Lynd are heeded by all who have anything to do with the planning and teaching of history curriculums, history as a subject will continue in the doldrums. No amount of superficial innovation will renew it.

For the reason why history turns students off is that it is perceived as being sterile; indeed in a sense it is sterile, this sterility being a product of teacher training in our universities and C.A.E.s.

Academic historians concern themselves with fragments of history, but seldom relate these "within any larger range of events"; their quest for objectivity as an end in itself, historiographically unsound and humanly impossible, gives them the appearance of boors and makes the social sciences so much more attractive. And when it comes to writing about history itself and justifying the subject, they hesitate or refrain.

All of this is manifested in what is taught to the future teachers of history as they come through the universities and C.A.E.s and teachers colleges... to be manifested later in the classrooms.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


In the absence of documentary evidence and freely published material Solzhenitsyn had to rely extensively on his own experiences of prison camp life and the memories of his fellow prisoners which he listened to and remembered, as he put it, "on the skin of my back, and with my eyes and ears" (p. xi):

As far as documentary evidence was concerned it mainly took the form of illegally circulated typescript manuscripts and books, etc. "long since removed from libraries and destroyed" and which required "great persistence... to find even one copy which had been preserved" (p. xi).
12. This point is made by Raymond Williams, Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, Fontana Edition, 1976, pp. 119-120.
17. W. J. Hudson, loc. cit., p. 68.
18. ibid., p. 66.