

REVIEW: HISTORY EDUCATION IN SCOTLAND

Gordon Lawrie

Peter Hillis (ed.) (1999), **History Education in Scotland: Into the New Millennium**, Edinburgh, John Donald, pb., £12.99, ISBN 0859765156, pp.173 + x.

Anyone familiar with Aran-sweatered folk singing in the 1960s will recall the song 'The Work o' the Weavers', in which weavers were pictured sitting in a pub defiantly extolling the never-ending need for the weaving industry. It was, of course, a bitter-sweet song, written long after the decline of weaving in Scotland. Writers write songs lamenting the demise of industries, not rejoicing at their rise, and likewise any book on history education written by history teachers in defence of history should be approached with all the enthusiasm of the Titanic coming upon an iceberg.

In **History Education in Scotland** Peter Hillis has collected a dozen contributions from history teachers and experts on the teaching of history around Scotland. Viewed as a historical document itself, Hillis's book for the most part makes profoundly depressing reading, painting a picture of a subject whose practitioners feel under siege from a changing world about them. To begin with, the book is highly introspective, dealing as it does with history from the standpoint of history teachers in schools and in particular secondary schools; universities will be interested to learn that history education appears not to happen after the age of 18 in Scotland. Moreover, this is a book which is written very much by history experts for history teachers, and as such will be read - rightly so - by school history teachers throughout Scotland who will understand and empathise with many of the sentiments written. Indeed, one of the contributors, Ian Matheson, actually addresses his readers in the second person assuming they are secondary school history teachers, guiding them through the process of setting and marking examinations, as well as the appeals process.

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Much of the writing is quite technical, quoting extensively from official guideline publications. As a result the actual text, excluding the tabular material, quotations and sources, is not much more than a hundred pages in length, and new or prospective teachers will find the very short articles easily accessible. However, there is little new in these chapters and, in particular, there is very little radical thought. The best contributions come from those who can illustrate the difficulties schools have at the moment in delivering coherent curricula on the ground; hence Moira Laing's chapter on planning history teaching in the primary school and Duncan Toms on the general layout of the current secondary syllabus make good reading - and Toms at least is reasonably upbeat about some of the directions his subject has taken. There are straightforward chapters towards the end of the book from Sandra Chalmers on the use of games - especially home-made ones - in history teaching; and from Edmund Geraghty on the use of sources in history, although few teachers will find much particularly new here.

The teachers seem to do better than the so-called 'experts', who too often seem remote from the realities of history education in the 21st century. For example, Bob Munro displays a genuine enthusiasm for Information and Communication Technology in his chapter on its application in history teaching, but fails to grasp the real reasons why it is used so little in school. The problem with computers is not that schools cannot afford the resources or that teachers are uninterested; the real problem is that the materials take so long to develop that they are already obsolete by the time they can be integrated into a coherent history curriculum. The materials have to serve the history course, not vice versa. Certainly, he is correct in identifying that downloading material from the Internet might change this in the future but we have yet to be sure that the recent investment in hardware will be adequate to make the most of the next generation of software. In the meantime, his vision of the future reads rather like a wish list. Nor was Sydney Wood's piece on how to demonstrate differentiated tasks (in other words, matching different tasks to differing pupil abilities) altogether convincing, and indeed he rather admits as much in the latter part of his article. A practical difficulty often encountered by classroom teachers in using differentiated materials is persuading pupils to take on the tasks appropriate for them.

There are a couple of interesting comparative perspectives which are definitely worth reading. Ian McKellar notes the greater weight and status accorded to history in other European countries and, with a clear personal interest in the work of the Council of Europe, discusses European history teaching from the point of view of three key concepts: historical consciousness, collective memory and the formation of national identity. Writing from an American viewpoint, Martin Feldman clearly sees history as

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a form of civics, and suggests that Scotland should adopt an integrated social studies programme of which history would be just one component.

However, the defining articles in this book would appear to be Peter Hillis's own introduction, David Duncan's discussion of syllabus design, and Jim McGonigle's defence of history as a discrete subject at all levels of secondary education. Duncan is clearly wary of the syllabus changes which have taken place in history, and rightly complains that history has 'been kidnapped by new teaching methods which emphasise how learning takes place over what is learned'. By this he means in particular that history teaching is in danger of spending too much time teaching skills and not enough on hard knowledge. Few practising history teachers would probably disagree with him, and many would also agree that there is a tendency to concentrate overly on social history in (especially) primary classrooms. However, this comes across as a 'change and decay' view of history education, reflecting the contribution of the editor himself in the very first article who clearly sees history as a subject under attack from many quarters. Hillis warns against complacency at the end of his article, but it carries a defiant - even desperate - tone at times. He also inadvertently poses a puzzle: he indicates that more teachers teach History than either Geography or Modern Studies in Scotland, but later on reveals that greater numbers of pupils study Geography than History.

Surprisingly, then, it is left to Jim McGonigle at the end of the book to provide a few positive thoughts. McGonigle is well aware of the current demand for greater coherence - and cohesion - in social studies curricula, especially in the first two years of secondary school. Thus he advocates the increasingly popular 'rotation' system, in which the pupils' social studies course consists solely of History (or Geography or Modern Studies) for one third of the year, then the classes 'rotate' so that they receive a block of study of another social subject. McGonigle also sees his social studies colleagues as anything but a threat, but rather allies in a common cause, and he also sees such collaboration as part of a more general process in which History teachers can review their courses alongside Modern Studies and Geography equivalents to identify common aims, overlaps, and mutual benefit. Schools which operate such systems tend to deliver better social studies courses, and there is also less likely to be an atmosphere of mutual distrust.

Above all, the abiding impression of **History Education in Scotland** is that someone left a chapter out. History is actually a subject which needs little justification. The Chinese have a proverb something along the lines of 'to know a man you must know his history', and we are all of course the product of our history. But history has another bonus in that it should also be a really good story, something David Duncan touches upon at least. In this respect the

teaching of history today may well have lost its way because, in an attempt to study past societies in depth, history educationalists have surely lost that sense of theatrical narrative which, in the fifties and sixties, the best history teachers used in order to turn their subject into a running soap opera, leaving the student or pupil gasping for more. History has more scope to satisfy the current demand for 'lifelong learning' than almost any other subject, and the true value of history is that, properly taught, it should be able to communicate the joy of learning to a very large number of young people.

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