

History Teachers' Forum

HISTORY FOR ITS OWN SAKE

By THE *Editor*

The writer has taught only history, with a sprinkling of courses in government, in certain periods, since September, 1898. That is nearly forty years. In that period, he has taught large and small classes in the high school, large and small classes in teachers' colleges, and large and small university classes. He has read a vast number of examination papers, recorded many hundreds of final grades, read too many term reports, and supervised the writing of quite a few theses by graduate students. On the basis of this long and rather strenuous experience, he not long ago voiced the following opinion:

The teacher of history who cannot, at any point in the course, be it Roman, Medieval, Modern, English or American history, place himself on any part of the pathway and go forward or backward with sure steps is poorly prepared for his work. Even the college or university professor, who rightly prides himself on his skill in historical criticism, dares not lose sight of the need to make plain the pathway through the period. After all, research and historical criticism are not ends in themselves, but means to be used in reaching an understanding of events, the actors in, and the movements of history.¹

Whether a teacher of history, even when equipped with adequate knowledge, can successfully present a period in the life of any people or not, depends on his spirit and attitude. It is one thing to be able to recite facts in a lecture or in response to a question, but quite another to re-live the events of a past time. When one reads of, or hears of, or speaks of a man, a river, a mountain range, a city, the march of an army, or a parliamentary debate, he must think of flesh and blood, rivers of real water, actual mountains, real lines of travel, picture the activities of urban centers, and hear the voices of law-makers.

If the teacher, who presents or develops the course, naturally and consistently goes behind the words and the maps to people, events and geographic features, this will materially help those in his classes. Perhaps it cannot be engendered by a definite process of instruction, but somehow the habit

¹ Under the "History Teachers' Forum" in the issue of December, 1934 (XXX, 367-368), there appeared a short article "The Trodden Path" from the pen of the *Editor*. The quoted passage is from that article.

of thinking of realities, and not merely of the historical narrative or of graphic representations of areas of the earth, must be cultivated in both teacher and learner.

Lectures, the queries and answers of recitation periods, examination questions and the resulting papers or blue-books, should all be clear and definite. In all of them, however, the necessity of recreating history as something that was once in the making should be constantly recognized. It is appalling to note to what extent an able well-prepared, conscientious, hard-working teacher can ruin, or partially ruin, the study of history by using too rigidly a text-book, an outline, a required note-book, a special type of examination questions. One, or more, or all of these can kill the spirit of a class, or, if not that, leave the members with a wooden notion of history or a wooden knowledge of events.

To present accurate information, never losing sight of the fact that everything that ever happened had to happen somewhere and sometime and affect somebody, and to make clear the sequence and connection of events—these are the outstanding obligations of the teacher of history. All devices and methods are secondary to these fundamentals. The significance of past events for the people of today is not a matter of first importance. The interpretation of history comes in as a matter of course, but it should be remembered that it can easily be overdone; that the meaning of events is often not apparent; that what thinkers of one generation make out of a past age, those of another will discard; that different social classes of the same period arrive at different conclusions. Nothing is more certain than this, that the teacher of history who forces a contribution for the benefit of present day society from all past events or movements is sure to present much of doubtful value. To re-create the past is a fascinating process, and there is no danger that the study of history will ever be abandoned. It is foolish, however, to believe that peoples have lived and struggled in bygone times mainly in order that we might profit through their wisdom or by avoiding their mistakes. They lived, they achieved, they made mistakes, and the best that we can do is to strive to make the most of our heritage.