

History Teachers' Forum

TEXT BOOKS IN AMERICAN HISTORY*

There is a general course in American history in every high school and college in Indiana. This means that a great many students are using texts that cover our history from the period of discovery and exploration until some recent year. All of the high schools of the state use the same text, while the history department of each college chooses for itself. It is of great importance that such texts be accurate and well written, and it is of equal importance that they be used wisely. Better results will flow from a poor text skillfully used and supplemented by a strong teacher, than from a fine text in the hands of a bungling, weak instructor.

There can be no two opinions in regard to the matter of accuracy. All are agreed that every effort should be made to eliminate misstatements of fact. There will, of course, always be matter in any text that further research will prove to be erroneous, but this does not excuse the authors of school histories for perpetuating statements that have been proved to be untrue or for repeating interpretations that have been demonstrated to be unsound. It is not necessary that a high school or college text in history shall be written by one whose scholarship is widely recognized, but, if not, the author should be one who has thoroughly checked his account by using the writings of those who have done extensive research.

It is likewise axiomatic that a text in history should be well written. This does not necessarily mean that the narrative should be intensely interesting, but rather that the language should be clear, the sentences smoothly constructed, and the matter well organized. An excellent book is sometimes condemned because it does not impell students to read it by reason of the fascinating manner in which the story is told. Teachers often voice this criticism, and frequently without justification. There is no reason why any classes should be burdened with dull and clumsily written texts in American history, and such volumes are very properly regarded with marked disfavor. On the other hand, a well organized text, written in clear English by an author who knows his subject, is often far superior to a text which presents the story in a

* This is the first of a series of four short articles which will appear in this department during 1938, all relating to high school and college texts in general courses in history.

more gripping style. After all, text books are written to be studied, not just to be read. Any able teacher should get along well with a text that is rich in content, which is, in fact, the most desirable quality that a high school or college history can possess.

One of the problems that confronts the writer of a history text is the great variation in library facilities of the schools that may use the book when published. This fact is closely related to the preparation of lists of references, questions, lesson plans, and suggestions for teachers. Possibly such aids to study and teaching should be published separately from the history texts. This would permit the publication of two pamphlets, one made up of references, suggestions and directions for smaller schools and the other for larger schools. This would enable the authors and publishers to furnish more suitable aids to teaching for use in both large and small schools.

The best high school and college histories often fail signally in the matter of lists of references. These lists are, it would seem, frequently made up by assistants of the authors and not inspected closely enough. The lists published in numerous texts include too many dull, dry, out-of-date, non-scholarly histories and biographies. Most high school and college students who can be prevailed upon to do a considerable amount of collateral reading should not waste their time on biographies or histories that have been superseded by far better works embodying the results of research done in recent years. To give examples, there is hardly a high school or college text in American history that does not give a blanket indorsement to the "Statesmen Series" of American biography or to J. P. Gordy's *Political History of the United States*, by including them in the chapter references or general bibliography without comment. This would not be so bad if there were not so many omissions of more recent volumes that are fresher and based on more extensive research. Teachers of history often order library books from the lists of references included in history texts, and thus invest limited funds in inferior reading matter when much better is available at no greater cost. There is apt to be valuable matter in older biographies, monographs and large general works which students in advanced college courses may be encouraged to cull out, but students taking high school courses or college stu-

dents taking general courses should not be asked to read antiquated histories and biographies. The wise instructor who gives general courses in American History in high school or college will not blindly follow the suggestions of the authors of text books, no matter how valuable the content of such texts may be.