

Book Reviews

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON AMERICAN HISTORY

The New York *Times* in its issue of April 4, 1943, startled the nation and particularly its educational professions with a survey which was heralded as demonstrating much ignorance of United States history by college freshmen. The survey was regarded as revealing a lack of information in regard to basic facts and relationships and as indicating that something was decidedly wrong with the teaching of United States history in our secondary schools.

In the discussion that followed, suggestions were made that sometimes high school history courses were diluted with too much extraneous material, that social science courses had crowded history from the curriculum, that teachers were poorly prepared, that prospective teachers were required to take too many education courses and too few history courses, and that the licensing of teachers was inadequately handled. Too many prominent university leaders voiced one or more of these opinions for anyone to doubt that many intelligent persons have felt that certain developments in the educational field during the present century represent experiments rather than progress, and that as a result, the quality of the teaching of history has declined.

Before this discussion had subsided, the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, in its meeting at Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on April 23, authorized its newly elected president, Dean Theodore C. Blegen of the University of Minnesota, to appoint a committee to investigate the teaching of American history. The Committee was instructed to cooperate with the American Historical Association. Subsequently, representatives of the National Council for the Social Studies and high school teachers were added to the Committee. This Committee was given over eight thousand dollars to make the investigation. The report, which was prepared between June and October, has now appeared in print.¹ The Commit-

¹ *American History in Schools and Colleges: The Report of the Committee on American History in Schools and Colleges of The American Historical Association, The Mississippi Valley Historical Association, The National Council for the Social Studies.* Edgar B. Wesley, Director of the Committee. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1944, pp. xiv, 148. \$1.25.)

tee which made the report contained fourteen historians and educators, of whom Edgar B. Wesley, Professor of Education at the University of Minnesota, was the director.

The report begins with a chapter devoted to the question, "Do Americans Know Their Own History?" The conclusion reached was that Americans do not know factual history but that they do understand trends, appreciate past events, and see a connection between the experience of the nation and that of the individual. The importance of a knowledge of American history is then stated and a survey given of the extent of instruction in the classroom. The contribution of many agents, such as the press, towards a knowledge of history is considered "significant," but faulty. The relations between history and other social studies are described and recommendations offered as to the content of history courses. Under the heading of "The Social Studies Teacher," the problems of training, certification, and improvement of teachers are discussed and a number of recommendations are offered. That the teaching of history should be kept free of legislative restrictions is the burden of the ninth chapter. A brief summary chapter concludes the report.

As one would expect, the report is neither wholly good nor wholly bad. The recommendations enumerated in the final chapter are such that they will doubtless commend themselves to many readers. Several will be challenged and some may be rejected.

A very acceptable chapter is the sixth, entitled "Recommended Content for American History Courses." If one notices that the suggested dates are called "Representative Dates" and the persons are "Representative Persons" and are not intended to be complete lists, the suggestions should be acceptable even though many important dates and individuals are omitted. The chapter attacks a serious problem and makes a serious effort to suggest a solution. It does not assume that repetition of subject matter must be eliminated in the various courses in our school system but does suggest that the content of history is now so inclusive that it is possible to vary the emphasis in the courses taught in the different grades.

The chapter on "American History in Colleges" is one which will probably also receive general approval. It might be pointed out that many of the recommendations contain

ideas which are not much more advanced than many courses now being taught in our colleges and universities and that it is much easier to recommend a synthesis of all phases of American life in survey courses than it is to create such a synthesis. It might also be stated that to increase the content of a course as far as has been suggested means that the total course would represent a very thin treatment. When students come to college with poorer preparation in history year after year, it is demanding considerable of college instructors and students that all phases of history be taught adequately, interestingly, with class discussions and student conferences, and that all this be crowded into a three-hour two-semester course. It will require better instructors, better students, and nothing less than a miracle of organization. The Committee did not offer an outline or syllabus of such a course. The recommendations are, however, generally acceptable and deserving of support.

On the other hand, the report gives evidence of unseemly haste, which may in part account for some of its defects. Among these may be mentioned faulty and unscientific procedure. This is indicated by a failure of the Committee to regard adequately some of the evidence produced by its own testing program as well as other available evidence. The report indicates that high school boys having the senior course in American history made a median grade of only 24 as compared with a median grade of 23 for boys not having the course. The median for girls was 22 and 20 out of a possible score of 65. The senior high school history course, then, made a difference of only one or two points in the median. The Committee commented: "Some would be inclined to conclude from the performance of high school students that their instruction is either meagre or ineffective." On this the Committee seems to be correct, but in the next sentence it contradicts the above by continuing: "Such a conclusion is not justified by any evidence in this chapter or by the accumulation of similar evidence about other subjects [pp. 11-12]." Isn't this a failure to face the facts? Shouldn't good high school teaching increase the knowledge of American history more than the one or two points indicated by these findings? Did the Committee not have faith in its own test? Perhaps question 18 destroyed a little of that faith. The picture of the house which the student was expected to state

as typical of American houses in one of four periods was not typical of any.

Another evidence of imperfect procedure occurred when the Committee went to the laws of the states, the directives of the state boards of education, and lists of courses taught in forty-nine cities to find out what history courses are being taught. It seemed to realize that there was a question of interpretation of these laws and directives and that the actual performance in many schools may be very different from that contemplated by the lawmakers and state boards. The press had already called attention to this situation in two states. Apparently, however, the Committee made little or no effort to find out how courses are actually taught, or to what extent social studies courses are being substituted for history. A few years after World War I, a bright young lady in West Virginia described before a meeting of teachers a new method for teaching a course in modern European history. She started with the peace treaty and from there on any resemblance to chronological procedure was purely coincidental, but the course was called history.

The Committee also failed to distinguish between history teachers and social studies teachers. The terms "social studies teacher" and "history teacher" are used as though they were synonymous in chapter eight. This is "muddy thinking" or no thinking at all. The investigation was to concern American history and not social studies. It is quite possible that in actual practice the history teacher is the social studies teacher, or the social studies teacher gives the history courses; but if the investigation was to concern inadequate teaching of history, that subject should have been differentiated from other factors so far as possible. The failure to make this distinction may be a fundamental reason for the inadequacy of history teaching. It is surprising that a committee which contained a number of distinguished historians should have made this error. Indeed, it may justify a question as to the part played by the historians in the preparation of the report. It tends to prove the lack of wisdom in bringing the educators and the Council of the Social Studies into the investigation. The recommendations for improving the teachers are for social studies teachers, not history teachers. It is very easy to see that the requirements for teaching civics, sociology, or economics may be very different from the teach-

ing of history, but the Committee showed no realization of this fact. Indeed, the difficulty of trying to be well informed in many subjects may be an important reason why a teacher is poorly prepared to teach history.

There is also a failure to distinguish between history and tradition or between facts and myths in the fourth chapter, entitled "History Beyond the Classroom." The author of this chapter indicates that historical information, sometimes accurate and sometimes not, may be gained from the press, novels, motion pictures, plays, radio programs, libraries, historical societies and museums, monuments, pageants, speeches, family and community traditions, and place names. Caution is suggested and some of the problems connected with these agencies are briefly stated. But are works of history ever read by anyone after leaving the classroom? Why do publishers publish the works of Albert J. Beveridge or Claude G. Bowers? Wouldn't the chapter have been more satisfactory if more emphasis had been placed upon the reading of substantial history and less upon newspapers, novels, motion pictures, and the radio? No wonder the Committee's test indicated that a large percentage thought that Thomas Jefferson helped to frame the Constitution of the United States. A radio commentator had said so.

More disappointing than the shortcomings already noticed was the failure of the Committee to investigate and treat certain situations in our educational system which have developed in the present century. First of these is the training of prospective teachers in our schools of education. Some improvement has been noticed in recent years in respect to emphasis upon content courses in contrast to theory courses. How adequate has this improvement been? How much more could be achieved had the Committee executed its task less swiftly and with greater thought and courage?

The Committee has recognized that the standards of certifying teachers are "none too successful." It did not, however, illustrate the reasons for this lack of success or the extent of inadequate conditions. It seemed to be afraid to step on the toes of educationalists. Its recommendations are general and probably not far in advance of conditions that have been described as "none too successful." Why did it not try to work out some plan whereby professors of content courses could participate in the process of certification and

thus assist in making less frequent the assignment of unprepared persons to teach history?

A third failure to take advantage of the present situation is due to the Committee's not investigating the substitution of social science courses for history in colleges and secondary and elementary schools. Its assumption that laws, directives, and lists of courses, as previously noted, could be depended upon to give an adequate picture of actual conditions prevented the treatment of this important topic. Social sciences are perfectly legitimate, and they may be superior to history courses; but their introduction into the curriculum and particularly their replacing history courses are very likely to be a cause of the inadequate knowledge of history. The Committee seems not to have faced this possibility.

These three failures are so serious as to make the actual contributions of the report appear very inadequate. Every educator knows of the discussion concerning the neglect of content courses and the multiplication of educational theory courses, about the need for participation of content teachers in the certification of teachers, and the activities of the "progressive school" of educators in substituting social science methods and courses for history. Why did the Committee not treat these fundamentals? Some historians need to be told about improvements that have been made. Some educators need to be told that more improvements are needed. The Committee certainly did not take advantage of its opportunity.

One can only hope that the better portions of the report will be influential, that the poorer parts will be forgotten, and that some way may be found to make a thorough investigation of the questions which the Committee failed to treat or treated so inadequately.

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William Preston Johnston: A Transitional Figure of the Confederacy. By Arthur M. Shaw. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1943, pp. xv, 299. \$3.00.)

Because of William Preston Johnston's connections and contacts with great men of the South and because of his versatile nature and varied achievements in his own right, the author makes a good case for the worth-whileness of a