

Lewis Hertzman

THE SAD DEMISE OF HISTORY: SOCIAL STUDIES IN THE ALBERTA SCHOOLS

THERE ARE SO MANY SUBJECTS of contention in education today that it is not unusual for a Canadian to know little about the school problems of provinces where he has no personal ties. Too familiar is the Canadian's feeling of security about his educational structure and its standards. It is responsible for the citizen's rather naïve sense of assurance that "it couldn't happen here" when he is faced by trends in progressive education which he rejects. He may, like myself, find himself one day painfully astonished to learn that it *has* happened, as in the study of history which some time ago was transformed in the Western provinces.

Soon after I moved to Alberta in the autumn of 1959 to join the Department of History at the university in Edmonton, I found myself in the midst of a controversy concerning the social studies curriculum in the secondary schools of the province. "Social studies" is the subject that replaced history and geography as a result of reforms instituted during the depression years when a clean sweep was supposed to clear away the clutter of "useless" culture, and replace it with the "practical" equipment boys and girls could use in their daily lives as good citizens. The only trouble was that, in this case, the well-meaning but misguided reformers threw out the baby with the bath water, and the resulting course was a bland and confusing mixture of odds and ends. Some of my colleagues in Geography and History were taking up the cudgels again as their professional consciences required, and were expressing their criticism anew of "social studies" in theory and practice. For their trouble they received some support from the press, from some individual teachers, and from some parents. But on the whole the response was negative, even abusive, from various quarters of the educational establishment, and from uninformed elements of the public. I was asked by one particularly beleaguered colleague to look at the social studies curriculum in order to prepare a submission to the Department of Education of the province. That was the extent of my involvement in the controversy. I

learned a good deal from my study of the situation, not only about the neglect in the schools of a basic study such as history, but also about the educational closed shop. I found out, for example, that the course of study had been prepared in a haphazard and most unprofessional manner. I learned, too, that the educational establishment was intolerant to a high degree of criticism from outside its accepted group.

The Department of Education, in revising courses of studies, is still following more or less its established but inadequate procedures, and still does not care to consult its critics outside of the circle of professional educators. The curricula have not remained static, but so far the changes have scarcely been reassuring. For example, in Social Studies 10, the junior high-school course, the time allotted to ancient history—"Ancient Origins of Canadian Civilization", as the course of studies terms it—has been cut down substantially in favour of a section on consumer buying. The Department and its advisers apparently feel that the mysteries of modern credit are more important to the young citizen than what the pupils call "ancient Egypt and all that junk."

The two historians most involved in the public debate have since taken the logical step of leaving Alberta, in no small measure because of concern for the education of their children, and have settled in Ontario. There they will not find ideal circumstances, I am sure, but nevertheless a much improved context where debate is welcomed and the relative merits of contending cases are fairly aired.

A recent and valuable Ontario contribution to public discussion of education in certain fields is *Design for Learning* (University of Toronto Press, 1962), edited by Northrop Frye, which comprises reports submitted to the Joint Committee of the Toronto Board of Education and the University of Toronto. The work is by teachers and administrators from various departments of the schools, the college of education, and the university, and is concerned with the state of the study of English, the sciences, and the social sciences in the schools. The existence of such a committee, and the incisiveness of its commentary, are signs of health in the educational community of Ontario.

The group concerned with social sciences was worried principally about the teaching of their disciplines, but recognized that this was a higher stage in the improvement and perfection of courses. "The best teacher", they noted, "is wasted on an empty course, or on a cluttered course; either also encourages the indifferent teacher's indifference." In Alberta the long-simmering fight has been to obtain first a course worthy of the efforts of students and teachers.

The historians of the university in Edmonton, more than a dozen men and women trained in many parts of the country and abroad, agreed without exception

that the social studies courses in Alberta, with their present content and arrangement, did not prepare students for the study of history and allied disciplines at the college level. They felt, moreover, that the courses did not serve better the larger numbers of young people not destined to continue their formal education at the university level. The interests of the two groups of pupils are not as far apart as some people suppose, for in the long run both deserve the best courses that can be designed for their age and for their learning capacities.

Although as historians we are disturbed by students' apparent lack of even elementary factual information, a grave enough handicap, more serious in our view is their inability to develop thought on problems and ideas in history, and indeed to communicate well in either written or oral form. Yet the public has been led to believe that the scrapping of traditional subjects in the schools was beneficial, since it was part of an effort to equip students better to reason, to communicate, and to use the knowledge they acquired. Thus the social studies course sequence in Alberta was prepared, according to provincial curriculum guides, in terms of "(a) understandings; (b) skills, abilities, and habits; and (c) attitudes".

But we know that "understandings" and generalizations appear not to be "fixed" in students' minds according to the indoctrination process described on page 7 of the *Senior High School Curriculum Guide for Social Studies 10, 20 and 30* (Edmonton: September, 1955). Nor do students often show skill in appraising materials, or in making oral and written reports, or in discussion, as proposed in the curriculum, pages 8 and 9. Certainly I have not been impressed with their general "mental and neural state of readiness organized through experience. . .", in this case the social studies "experience", as expressed in the language of the curriculum (page 9).

One need not quarrel with the name "social studies" in itself. Although not a friend of the concept of social studies, I can accept an intellectually valid organization under that or any other appropriate name. Actually the Western provinces are the only ones to organize their courses as social studies in their secondary schools; here they reflect the strong influence of certain American methods. Even so, except for the curriculum in Alberta, what they do under this arrangement usually makes sense. History sections usually are taught within reasonable chronological and regional frameworks; other social sciences too are taught within well-defined, logical contexts.

The Manitoba programme of studies is an example of a social studies arrangement that, on the whole, I can accept. The Manitoba programme explains:

The course in Social Studies in the Senior High School is designed to embrace

the interplay of social, economic, historical and physical factors that affect human society. To avoid diffusiveness (with its inevitable lack of thorough and systematic treatment) in the units of work prescribed for the three levels of the course, the fields have been limited both in time and space. Some will be found to be predominantly geographical, some historical, some sociological within the bounds set for each year.

Of the core courses in Social Studies, the first, Social Studies I, is almost exclusively geographical with emphasis on the interdependence of nations and communities in the modern world. The core courses in the second and third years will be mainly historical and will aim at developing an understanding of the evolution of our own society and of modern civilization.

In each year provision will be made for an option in the field of Social Studies which will complement the core source. For the first year the option will be historical, for the second and third years the emphasis will be on the geographical conditions affecting the peoples whose history is under study.

To assist students in their studies, due attention is paid to chronology and maps. Collateral reading in biographies and historical fiction is encouraged. In Modern History III the recommended texts are on a freshman university level. The teacher is moreover reminded that

It is constantly possible for more than one opinion to be held on any historical event. Students should be made aware of alternatives and encouraged to discuss them. It is important that students should be able to express clearly the history they know in well-written and well-organized essays. The matter of liaison and cooperation between the teachers of History and the teachers of English Composition may be a fruitful field for experiment.

Turn, on the other hand, to the Alberta curriculum, which begins with a fallacious reference to the social sciences on page 6. Here an incorrect distinction is made between history and the "contemporary social sciences", as though all social sciences were not as intimately connected with the past as is the study of history with the present.

Perhaps much of the unfruitful controversy in Alberta on the teaching of history and social studies derives from the failure of some people to understand the nature of historical studies, and indeed social sciences, at this juncture of the twentieth century. It should be clearly understood that historians are immediately concerned with the work not only of social scientists, but of scholars in all areas, as well as with the literature of all countries and eras. Although our professional educators will often not admit the fact, or perhaps do not know it, history has been healthfully aerated for over half a century by contact with all the social sciences, by anthropology no less than economics, psychology, and other branches of knowledge. Of course, it is beyond the capacity of any single man to have all the knowledge he should

have to be a historian of any given period. But surely, too, it is beyond the capacity of any person to teach all that is known of any period. The conception of social studies as imagined in the Alberta curriculum is beyond the wisdom and knowledge of an Arnold Toynbee to devise; it is beyond the capacity of a Socrates to teach. But to be coherent as a study, history must remain history, not social studies.

Each of the social sciences, let it be remembered, has its own useful technical vocabulary, set of assumptions, and technical modes of operation. All make sense within their respective disciplines. But to mix them haphazardly, as has been done in the Alberta programme, is to invite incoherence and chaos.

I have a number of specific criticisms of the unit arrangement of the Alberta curriculum, of the confusion of the so-called "understandings", "skills", and "attitudes" in terms of which it is set up, of the poor literacy of the curriculum, and of the lack of balance in the whole.

For one thing, each course in social studies has an exaggerated Canadian orientation that is offensive to the historian and social scientist. On page 14 we actually find the Grade X course on Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome called "Ancient Origins of Canadian Civilization". To speak of "Canadian civilization" in this manner is to reveal ignorance of the very idea of civilization, and to leave us open to justified reproaches of arrogant nationalism.

It is curious, moreover, that each social studies course intended to approach the experience of mankind in the broadest and most general way, in effect is fragmented each year into five or six, often little related, blocs, an arrangement that surely does not aid understanding. In bewildering sequence the Grade X student is faced with units on geography, trade, demography, democracy, the family, and the church. There is little progress of thought, and the barest framework of place or time. The arrangement is no better in other grades.

Skills and attitudes are the natural results of good education and good teaching, and not the by-product of lists in a departmental publication. I am not prepared to comment on teaching methods in the schools, but I doubt that the desired results are obtained by following lists of "expressional activities" such as "asking and answering questions", "drill activities" ("practising the Social Studies skills"), and "leadership activities" ("accepting responsibility for having good work and work done on time"). All such virtues, and many more, are desirable. They are the product of character, intelligence, and environment, as well as of education. The school is demanding the impossible by requiring students to show acquired attitudes of a specified character within the framework of courses. The school, in demanding these attitudes, is undertaking an indefensible task of indoctrination, indeed of in-

vading the inmost soul. Thus a student in Grade X, unit 5, must show *concern* "for the family's permanency in performing its social function successfully." He must *desire determinedly* "to achieve and maintain worthy home membership on his own part." In unit 2 of the following year, while studying "the effect of science on our economic life", the student must show *sympathetic interest* "in the problems of labour in a highly industrialized society." Thus the student is not so much being educated as indoctrinated according to a long list of norms acceptable to the Department of Education, but not necessarily acceptable to all families, students, political parties, religions, philosophies, or the social sciences that allegedly are being taught.

Northrop Frye commented, in this connection, on the serious confusion between social and educational standards on which the old progressive educators' theories foundered:

It is because so many intellectually stunted lives result from it that all three reports [on English, sciences, and social sciences] speak out sharply about every aspect of the confusion that comes to their attention. The Social Science report attacks the "rosy cosy" view of society, of giving a child his own situation (if it *is* his own situation) in the ideal form of a Blakean song of innocence before he has any song of experience to compare it with. The point is that presenting the child's society to him in the form of a superego symbol is deliberately weighting social standards at the expense of educational ones (*Design for Learning*, p. 15).

Many of us are trying to do something to redress the balance.

The so-called "understandings", and the more numerous related "tentative conclusions"/"guides to understanding", are for scholars the most disturbing part of the Alberta curriculum. Many of them are debatable, at best, and by no means capable of simple acceptance by an informed and thoughtful individual. Some of them are quite false. Others are misleading. In the indoctrination unit on democracy (Grade X, unit 4) there is a most distressing confusion between primitive and modern democracy, a confusion that does a disservice to the understanding of both. For example, the section on Greek democracy makes no reference to the place of slavery, or to other variants from our society. "Understanding 5" is the appalling comment that "the end of the Dark Ages was marked by the emergence among the Teutonic peoples of the ideas of individual freedom and representative government." To correct the ignorance contained in that "understanding" alone would require a lengthy essay, indeed a course in itself. But the Alberta curriculum bristles with such dangerous misinformation on every page. Then, having been misinformed on early democracy, the student is given the task of applying his newly learned concepts to the modern world: to the societies of Eskimos and North American Indians, the

Ottoman Empire, Tsarist Russia, and Nazi Germany among others (page 42)! The task is, of course, impossible for teacher and student.

At another extreme, the most mundane points are also singled out for special attention: "Until the end of the 19th century, the study of Greek and Latin was strongly represented in school curricula" (p. 108). "Many musical forms have been developed and many musical instruments employed by modern composers and musicians to record and present thought and emotion" (p. 108). "Many people today are specialists" (p. 75). "The family provided shelter, physical care, food and clothing for its members" (p. 47).

Thus the writers of the curriculum have fallen into a number of serious pitfalls. In their "tentative conclusions"/"guides to understanding" they have compiled much misinformation and banal commentary, along with some perfectly acceptable material. But in doing this they again fall between two stools, for a curriculum is a plan of study and not a text book. Often the writers appear to ignore the distinction.

Moreover, the collection of "guides to understanding", haphazard, ill-informed, and ill-balanced as it is, contains more technical hazards than its compilers and collectors may have realized. For one matter, what respectable historian today calls the Middle Ages the "Dark Ages"? "The Elizabethan state", reads another "tentative conclusion" for "understanding 1" (page 97), "faced by the breakdown of former agencies and by an aggravation of the problems, was forced to assume responsibility for the control of wages, prices, apprenticeship and for Poor Laws." But do the curriculum writers themselves know truly what they mean by the "Elizabethan state", a complicated and sophisticated technicality in its own right? "In the later Middle Ages there was a revival of trade, following the Crusades" (p. 31). But anyone familiar with the well-known work of Henri Pirenne knows that the simple cause-and-effect relationship of Crusades-revived trade is untenable. The melancholy list of such fallacies in the curriculum could unhappily be continued at great length.

I strongly endorse the principle that "every teacher must be a teacher of English", and welcome the reference in the curriculum to English in social studies classes (p. 20). But what is typical of the prose in the curriculum itself? One is strongly aware of the professional educators' cant throughout the booklet. While it may not be unduly given to jargon, it is nevertheless characterized by a wordy and complicated way of expressing the obvious and trivial. Take as an example the paragraph on page 15:

In to-day's complex society, the adult lives in a bustling and scientific world. We must accept the fact that change is continually taking place. In order to prepare youth for this swift-moving type of life, school learnings must become part of their own personal living directed toward solving problems in a complex society. Educators consider it important for children to learn the techniques of meaningful problem-solving related to the direct experiences of boys, girls, and of adult citizens. They consider that the ability to view details in relation to large wholes or units of subject matter is more advantageous than to require the mere memorization of answers to questions. In fact such memorization without reference to the large problem in hand is falling into disrepute as a teaching method.

Are all these words needed to make the few, rather obvious points of the paragraph? Is "school learnings" an idiomatic English expression? What meaning is there in "meaningful problem-solving"? Does the word "memorizing" have to be abstracted to the longer, cumbersome "memorization"? These are, of course, the questions of a stylist, not of a grammarian. I would re-write the paragraph in the following way, in the interests of style and emphasis, keeping trivial thought properly subordinate:

Most people will agree that our youth are entitled to the type of education that will prepare them to face the challenge of today's incomparably complicated world. In that kind of education mere memory work has no place.

The exaggerated Canadian nationalism exemplified in the titles of all the present social studies courses in Alberta has already been commented on. It is deplorable. The emphasis on so-called immediate history is not going to achieve desired ends. On the other hand, studying people and their problems in other societies and times will by itself extend the horizon of students and help them find their own road to understanding and wisdom. *Wisdom* seems to be a word not much found in the professional educators' vocabulary. As for current events, students need only read the newspaper and listen to the CBC in time readily available to them outside of school hours. The importance of following current events, of reading the editorial columns of newspapers, of reading journals such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, of going to the theatre and to concerts—the importance of all these activities, and others, is obvious. Schools can do much to prepare students for a way of life in which all these activities are a part. But the schools must realize their limitations. Their most important contribution to individuals and society lies positively in teaching well the disciplines within their control. Among these is history. The schools have it within their power to arouse the interest of students in history, or to kill it. At present it is clear that social studies courses have generally failed to arouse stu-

dents' enthusiasm and interest in Alberta, and certainly they have left students unprepared for further work in relevant subjects.

The reintroduction of a recognizable pattern of history courses in the province will not solve by itself all problems related to the teaching and acceptance of a difficult subject of study. Teachers, professors, and students in other provinces are well aware of their own shortcomings. The Ontario investigators, in particular, found few reasons for self-congratulation; in fact, they expressed an urgent need for reform and change in many ways. The dissatisfaction lay, however, principally in the process of teaching and learning: "What is wrong can be stated very briefly. There is too much grind and not enough thought" (p. 106). The curriculum is certainly, then, not the be-all and end-all, but it stands in the central place as the basic guide and statement of values. With qualifications, I find myself able to accept the curricula in history or social studies of the other nine provinces as at least a basis of discussion. Of them, I have least enthusiasm for what appears to me as a heavily progressivist indoctrination course in Saskatchewan. But, except for Alberta, the Western provinces, even in their "social studies" courses, do in fact teach history in a recognizable, coherent form. I am pleased to note that all of the Eastern and Maritime provinces teach history as a subject in its own right, most of them in each grade through high school. In Nova Scotia, the social sciences curriculum is enriched by the following, in addition to the study of history in each grade: Geography (Grade X), Economics (Grade XI), and Social Problems (Grade XII). It strikes me that the Department of Education in Nova Scotia, with its more traditional approach, and with a literate, well-written programme of study, quite free of jargon and cant, has provided its teachers and students with a sound and basically satisfactory framework for learning.

Fortunately historians have many friends in society at large, if not among professional "educationalists", friends who value their contribution and do not believe that it should be confined to the relatively few young people who reach the university and elect to study History. The debate has been lively in Great Britain too, where the study of History has also had challengers. But there it had strong support from the educational establishment. A member of the Institute of Education in the University of London, W. H. Burston, has in counter-offence gone so far as to claim for history a place as "the foundation of the modern curriculum":

History, as the study of the past life of a community, can properly include all aspects of that life—literature, art, science, religion, politics, geographical conditions and so on Thus conceived, history can be the basis of a synthesised curriculum: not a synthesis which swallows up the separate disciplines, but one which illuminates their

relations while preserving their value as separate subjects (*Social Studies and the History Teacher* [London: Historical Association, 1954, 1962], p. 27).

Through history, properly conceived, taught, and learned, standards of excellence may be reconciled with the various requirements of a free democratic society. The debate on this important part of our educational process will, I hope, continue openly, honestly, and flexibly. The Alberta situation is an extreme, but it is a warning to other Canadians against the perils of our most serious national disease: smugness.