Review of History Teaching, Nationhood and the State
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Overview

Robert Phillips’s book *History Teaching, Nationhood and the State: A Study in Educational Politics* sets out to describe the development of the National Curriculum in history over the final years of the Thatcher government and beyond, from the proposal of the Education Reform Act in the lead-up to the 1987 General Election to the Dearing Review (1993) and its aftermath. Coverage ends in 1993. Phillips’s book is an institutional history of the development of the NC history programme which focuses on the process of ‘text production,’ the various actors who sought to influence it, and the vigorous public debate on these issues. His evidence base is broad. As well as the obvious policy documents and press reports which are required by his thematic focus, Phillips conducted for the book a series of in-depth “elite” interviews with people involved in the production of the various curriculum revisions. He was also granted access to documentation produced by these groups. During 1990–5, Phillips also conducted empirical work examining teachers responses to the policy texts produced between 1989 and 1994. One of the recurring themes of the book is the battle between ‘new’ and ‘traditional’ history during the formation of the NC, which often played out in the press, and frequently drew upon a perceived content between ‘skills’ and knowledge’ and generate fierce debate about the nature of British national identity and allegations that ‘British history’ was being abandoned.

Outline

After an introductory chapter which elucidates the book’s themes and methodology, described above, the second chapter: ‘History, History Teaching and the Shaping of a Pedagogic Discourse’ describes the formation in the 1970s and 1980s of a language and set of models for thinking about history teaching; models which the NC would go on to challenge (‘Discourse’ is thus used here in a Foucauldian sense, indicating the creative power of language and its power to enforce particular political ends.) Before bringing us up-to-date, Phillips begins by giving an impressionistic picture of the history teaching in the early twentieth century. In the first half of the century, this was characterised by a perceived ‘consensus’ centring on two issues: the independence of the individual history teacher, and the central position of British (meaning English) history. Despite a reaction against racist and imperialistic narratives in the wake of the First World War, history teaching retained much of its old focus on a ‘traditional’ English chronology. Government thus did not have to promote citizenship in this period, says Phillips, because ‘history teachers in England did it for them’.

In the 1960s, it began to be felt that history teaching was threatened by the rise of new subjects in schools as well as increasing cultural diversity, a new intellectual relativism, and developments in academic history which highlighted the ordinary person. The ‘new history’ movement – in reality a loose coalition around a set of ideas, rather than a defined ‘movement’ – which grew up in response to these concerns focused on method, process and skills, and defined the value of history in functionalist terms. The Schools History Project (SHP) similarly focused on what we today might call transferrable skills, rather than on (pointlessly) preparing children to be academic historians, and on the varieties of historical interpretation. The General Certificate of Secondary Education, introduced in 1986, focused its history programme on these areas, and also (controversially) on the
teaching of ‘empathy,’ as a transferrable skill. All these developments continued to emphasise the autonomy of the teacher in selecting historical content and developing teaching methods. Evidence from the period shows, says Phillips, that whilst history teachers were not always wholehearted in their acceptance of the ‘new history’ discourse, there was a moderate degree of acceptance, and whilst teacher autonomy may have been lower in reality, it was perceived as high, and important.

Chapter three ‘Discourse of Derision: The New Right and History Teaching,’ turns to the other side of the debate, dealing with discussion of history teaching by the ‘New Right’ during the 1980s. Focusing on a series of key figures, Phillips traces the way in which political conservatives and liberals joined forces to argue for greater state control of the educational system, and argues that one of the most successful tactics of of the new right was to ‘raise the profile of history teaching from the professional to the public domains.’ The majority of the chapter is concerned with tracing the vehemently-argued ‘antithesis’ of the new right. This involved the invocation of a mythical ‘golden age’ of history teaching that the new history and the SHP had swept away. The new historical orthodoxy ignored ‘facts,’ pandered to the perceived needs of adolescents, watered down the subject, and taught ‘hatred’ for Englishness.

Empathy came in for particular criticism, says Phillips, with new right commentators arguing that it was nearly impossible to teach in practice, resulting in ‘generalized sentiment’ and that in any case understanding ‘our own standpoint’ should be the first priority. The ‘thesis’ of the new right is also described. This argued that history should focus on Britishness and English national identity and introduce children to the (concrete, canonical) ‘reality’ of the past. Strategically, says Phillips, it was felt that to achieve these aims, the ‘stranglehold’ of history teachers on the curriculum needed to be loosened. Whilst those members of the new right at the liberal end of the political spectrum were uncomfortable with it, the proposed solution was increasing state control.

Whilst Phillips appears to be trying to adopt a purely descriptive register, it is difficult not to conclude from this chapter that the new right’s educational politics are antithetical to his own: the neutral mask occasionally slips as for example when characterising one of his case-studies Stuart Deuchar as ‘the Mary Whitehouse of the history world’ (p. 32), describing a ‘neo-conservative tirade’ (p. 28) or noting that ‘Helen Kedourie’s credentials for contributing for the debate over history was that she was studying at the College of Law in London, and had formerly been educated at St Paul’s Girls School and King’s College London.’ (p. 32).

Chapter 4 ‘Competing Discourses: History, Empathy and Politics in the 1980s’ describes the ways in which the partisans of the two movements described in the previous chapters (i.e. ‘the new history’ and ‘the new right’) clashed, and the outcome of those clashes. These focused, says Philips around a polarised debate of ‘skills versus content’ in history teaching. The chapter is again organised around key figures and organisations in the debate, in this case the Historical Association, Academics (following Robert Skidelsky), Her Majesty’s Inspectorate for schools, and Education Secretary Kenneth Baker.

The role of the Historical Association, set up in 1904 as a guardian and promoter of the subject and initially associated with the universities, was changing in the early 1980s: in response to the sense that history was under threat, it was becoming more ‘interventionist’ in its approach to history in schools. Despite its attempts to be representative, the HA was seen by some in this period as an elitist body, and ‘the government’s poodle’. It published in this period two documents recommending a programme of teaching for school history, History for Life (in 1986) and Proposals for a Core Curriculum in History (1987). Many teachers felt that these were too prescriptive. The HA was in this period attempting to please everyone, Phillips concludes, and therefore ended up pleasing no-one. Discussion then returns briefly to the discourse of derision described in the previous chapter, and in particular its out-working in the press. Phillips describes
these salvos and the robust defence from teachers (who claimed that sensationalistic claims about empathy had been taken out of context) and pupils (who attested to the value they felt they had got from new history teaching).

The contributions to the public debate from academics – who came principally from the political right are also here described, beginning with Skidelsky’s article in the Independent ‘History as Social Engineering’ and focusing on their critical response to the teaching of empathy. Three elements characterise the New Right’s success in this period, says Phillips:

1. Use of the press to make debate truly public.
2. Deployment of the language of ‘crisis’ to discredit and deride the methods of the ‘new history.’
3. The creation of an ‘artificial’ dichotomy between skills and content.

The remainder of the chapter deals with the impact of this discourse on political appointments and those appointed. Roger Hennessey was in 1987 appointed staff inspector for history inspector at HMI. Following the discourse of the ‘new right’ he felt that content had been ignored in history teaching and ‘left to chance’ for too long. Their publication Curriculum Matters, 5–16: History in 1988 thus put a much greater focus on content. This was, however a product of its time, and walked a tightrope between new history and the demands of the new right: it was a ‘wily political document’ that was produced as much for the benefit of influential observers as for teachers. The final section of the chapter describes the views of one very influential individual: Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Baker. The Baker Phillips describes is a sophisticated historian, who understood the complexities of the subject. Phillips’s own interview with Baker, as well as the latter’s autobiographical writings are used to highlight the contrast between this understanding and Margaret Thatcher’s ‘whiggish’ one. However, Baker did believe that empathy could only be meaningful unless it rested on ‘disciplined acquisition’ of historical knowledge. The chapter closes with the setting up of the History Working Group to plan the NC history curriculum, highlighting again the contested nature of this organisation, whom teachers feared as an agent of the new right and the new right viewed as being made up of functionaries of the ‘old regime’.

Chapter five, ‘Making History, The National Curriculum History Working Group and the Interim Report’ examines what Phillips refers to as the ‘context of text production;’ which is to say the composition of the HWG, influences on it, and the way in which it worked. Here the real core of the book begins, with Phillips making heavy use of documentation from the HWG’s archive. He produces a forensic institutional history, but also successfully highlights the importance of individual attitudes and agendas within this close-knit group. The chapter begins, however, by reminding us of the context within which the HWG would have to work: in short, theirs was the thankless task of navigating between the demands of the new right, the aspirations of history teachers, and governmental agendas. The chapter then moves to a set of biographical sketches of the HWG’s members, in order to establish the way in which the group would work and Kenneth Baker’s aims in setting it up. Comprised over its lifetime of four teachers, two teacher trainers and two academics, the group was chaired by Command Michael Saunders-Watson. Whilst some in the group had been against elements of the new history, it was by no means a group of ‘yes-men (or women)’ says Phillips. Indeed, the most controversial choice from teachers’ point-of-view was the chair, a member of the landed gentry at whose house Baker had once stayed. Amongst the assumptions which which the group was given to work was that the teaching of history would remain mandatory for all five- to sixteen-year-olds.

The HWG had to work to tight deadlines, with less than a year to produce both its initial and final reports. The detail with which Baker describes the group’s programme of work (11 meetings, half of which were residential lasting two days or more) gives one an appreciation of the dedication with
which they approached their task, and the serious and intellectually-engaged approach to working out how history should be taught. The key issue that emerges from Phillips’s description is how to deal with the selection and assessment of content. DES officials attended the meetings, intervening a number of times to offer ‘guidance’ to the group, was keen that attainment targets should be simple enough that the ‘layman’ could understand them, and was concerned that an insufficient focus on knowledge would lead to a return to the unproductive return to the ‘skills v content’ debate.

The second half of the chapter is dedicated to a description of the Interim Report, published in August 1989. Again, the focus is on the way in which the choppy waters of coverage and assessment were dealt with. British history was to be at the core, but not the ‘centre of gravity,’ and the Report . The group developed a double-helix model, within which the cumulative acquisition of knowledge and skills went hand in hand, and repetition of subjects in later years deepened understanding. The group was keen to state that skills and knowledge were in reality inseparable (facts without interpretation are meaningless, interpretation without facts valueless): assessment should not concerned with measuring the degree of rote-learning achieved. The group was also reluctant to separate assessment from the programme of study.

Chapter Six: Re-Making History: Towards the Final Report, is an in-depth examination of the production of the ‘central text’ in the history of NC history, making use of Phillips’s in-depth interviews with HWG members, politicians, and Department of Education and Science (DES) officials. Phillips begins by describing the publication of the Report (on April 3rd, 1990), which, significantly, was released along with a letter of response from the Secretary of State John MacGregor calling for a number of revisions: more attention to chronology, a greater percentage of British history and more focus on knowledge. The inclusion of this letter was widely reported in the press, who, had, says Phillips, a ‘field day’ portraying the clash between the Minster and the HWG. To provide grounding for subsequent discussion, Phillips then goes on to analyse the content of the report itself. Characteristically, this shied away from involvement in what it called ‘false debates’ between traditional and ‘new’ history. Phillips gives most attention to the way in which the content question was answered. The Report stated that placing ‘essential knowledge’ in the attainment targets required by the NC process would not ensure that knowledge was acquired and assessed, instead it would reduce history ‘to parrot learning and assessment to a parlour memory game.’ (p. 73, quoting the report).

The majority of the chapter is dedicated to an examination of the HWG’s process. Despite some internal disagreements, says Phillips, the group managed to present a surprisingly unified front, in part because it saw itself as defending history against possible marginalisation in primary and secondary education. Its biggest struggle was to find a way of applying ‘levels’ of assessment proscribed by the Task Group on Assessment and Teaching to history. The professional members of the group worked hard to convince Saunders-Watson (the Chair) that knowledge could not be included in the attainment targets, that history was more than just dates and the deeds of great men. Phillips interviews reveal that Saunders-Watson was ‘impressed’ by these arguments, as were DES officials who had similarly to be won round before they in turn could convince their Minister. Knowledge, they argued, could not form part of the attainment targets, as breaking it down into progressive ‘levels’ would suggest that (for example) Ancient history is easier than modern history. Government made a number of attempts to intervene and influence the group with regard to content and assessment (including in responses to Parliamentary questions on the inclusion of the Second World War, for example), but thanks in part to their solidarity and strategic approach, they managed to hold the line. Phillips’s ethnographic approach here paints a convincing picture of the hard political struggle the group had to push through its agenda. In phillips view they were broadly successful in these attempts: whilst they did not do everything the teachers wanted, they achieved a good deal of what was politically possible.
In his seventh chapter, Phillips deals with the responses to and ‘readings’ (i.e. interpretations) of the HWG’s Final Report by various interested parties during the year 1990. Whilst the previous chapter dealt almost exclusively with a single body – the HWG – analysis here returns to cover a multiplicity of groups, including the History Curriculum Association, the Historical Association, the Schools History Project and the Government, in the form of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Secretary of State for Education John MacGregor. Phillips begins by describing the circumstances surrounding the report’s publication, and the efforts made by the HWG’s chairman to pre-empt a return to unproductive debates in the press: Saunders-Watson was keen to stress that commentators should ‘read and re-read’ the report before weighing in. Despite this effort, political pressures led to MacGregor imposing a period of ‘extra consultation’ to reflect, he said, the ‘important’ and ‘potentially controversial’ nature of history teaching. Whilst Thatcher claimed that this delay was largely thanks to her intervention, Phillips’s interviews with MacGregor and DES officials suggest otherwise.

This consultation period thus saw a flurry of responses, which Phillips goes on to describe. The first of these was from the History Curriculum Association, a body set up by a group of Right-leaning academics just before the Final Report’s publication. This group was vocal in its denunciation of the Report for abandoning ‘Britishness’ and ‘nationhood’ and – more broadly – historical knowledge. Despite broad initial support, however, the group alienated many of its members with an advert in the TES, which they felt misrepresented the HWG’s Report and their own views, and generally over-reached. Despite the HWG’s attempts to diffuse the ‘new versus old’ history debates, however, these remained strong.

The Historical Association, the second of Phillips’s case studies, took a more pragmatic approach. Whilst it had some misgivings about the detail, it felt that the HWG’s report represented the best possible defence of the place of history as a foundational subject in the school curriculum: it therefore did not want to be seen to undermine the report by quibbling on points of detail. As one of the most significant bodies representing teachers, the HA adopted a strategy of ‘selling’ the report at a number of teacher-attended conferences, at which HWG members were often invited to speak. Next, Phillips briefly describes a new threat to history: rumours that it might be dropped from the curriculum altogether.

The chapter ends with an account of the proposals produced by Secretary of State MacGregor for amendments. His task, says Phillips, was to ‘produce a compromise that in the eyes of Thatcher and her team did not look like a compromise at all’. Significantly, he wanted to give greater weighting to the first assessment level, and re-name it to include reference to ‘knowledge.’ At the time, MacGregor’s proposals were viewed as evidence of the Right’s ‘victory’. Phillips, however, suggests that they were in effect more cosmetic, ‘a judicious and shrewd compromise,’ which allowed proponents of ‘knowledge’ to claim victory whilst leaving the majority of the proposals intact. Phillips’s interviews with DES officials and the Minister suggest that this was also their own view.

Chapter eight deals with the History Task Group, the next ‘text production’ body. This was tasked with reporting to the National Curriculum Committee who were to give detailed advice on the basis of consultation with teachers and other professional groups. Phillips’s interviews, however, suggest that this group would have little freedom of action: the HWG’s report and MacGregor’s proposals were to form the basis of their advice, whilst teacher opinions were to be of secondary importance. This was in fact the case, on certain key issues – including the heavier weighting to attainment target 1 – the group discounted negative teacher feedback and endorsed the existing proposals: ‘this was neither the time nor the issue’ Phillips quotes one as saying ‘to be challenging the DES or ministers [on]’. (p.100) Similarly, Phillips says, the HTG was subject to pressure over the issue of content: whilst many of its members wished to reduced the prescriptiveness of the NC, this was ‘not
open to discussion’. Response to the report was mixed, but Phillips once again suggests that press reading of it as a ‘victory for the Right’ was mis-judged: it was in fact another piece of clever diplomacy which maintained the HWG’s essence whilst managing to ‘encourage the view that all sides had won the debate’.

The second part of this chapter is dedicated to the interventions of Kenneth Clarke, the new Secretary of State for Education. Clarke made a number of dramatic forays into the NC planning. First, he abolished history as a compulsory element at Key Stage 4 (14-16), and second, he stated that history teaching would have a cut-off point around the middle of the twentieth century, to avoid it turning into ‘current affairs’. These changes were made by fiat at the last moment, and it is clear that Phillips – like many at the time – takes a dim view of them. They appeared, he comments, to undermine ‘at a stroke’ much of the careful work done over the last few months. Vocal reaction against the latter of Clarke’s changes led to its substitution for a ‘twenty year’ rule. As the chapter ends, however, Phillips reminds us that the evidence so far has been normative: teachers were allowed a degree of freedom in implementation, as the NC Orders set a bare minimum only.

In his penultimate chapter, Phillips examines the response of teachers to the NC history programme as it began to be put into effect, and the subsequent reforms initiated by Sir Ron Dearing. The chapter is once again based on in-depth research, including the author’s own attendance at consultation meetings, the written responses by teachers to the Interim Report, and the responses to a questionnaire prepared by Phillips in 1990 and sent to 85 heads of history department in 5 LEAs. The responses to the intimal report as described by Phillips were a cautious general welcome. There was concern when it came to implementing them, however, about the quantity of prescribed content, and the difficulty of cramming this all in. After initial misgivings about the assessment process, however, teachers began to find a way of coping.

Political events once again dominate in this chapter. After 1991, ‘New Right activists,’ says Phillips, were handed control of key policy-making bodies, including the NCC. Relations between teachers and the new Secretary of State John Patten were notably difficult, and a threatened teacher boycott led in part to a review of the entire NC by Sir Ron Dearing in April 1993. Dearing’s review issued a further blow to post-14 history teaching, which he confirmed was no longer to be compulsory. The principal thrust of Dearing’s work, though, was to initiate a series of review groups, in order to simplify and streamline the programmes of study, which had become overburdened: these groups were intended to slim, rather than re-write. The history review group was itself dogged by controversy, whipped-up in the press by a ‘minority report’ published by Chris McGovern, a former member of the who became convinced that its proposals were stripping out British history from the curriculum: a familiar charge. Phillips argues (as did many at the time) that this was not in fact the case: the proposals did their job of simplifying the burden, whilst British history remained around 75% of the programmes of study, according to the review group itself.

The book’s closing chapter steps back from the in-depth institutional history of the preceding discussion to examine some broader theoretical issues. Phillips here examines the issues through the changing views of Nick Tate, a former member of the HTG and the SCAA review group, who ‘came off the fence’ in the mid-1990s to advocate an increase in the proportion of British history taught. The ‘great history debate’ was, says Phillips, a result of a sort of national identity crisis. The National Curriculum process itself as presented in the previous chapters was shaped by personalities, and characterised by ‘ad hockery, serendipity and sheer messiness’. Another key theme highlighted again in this chapter is the astute use of derisive discourse in the national press by the ‘New Right’.
Phillips ends the book by ‘coming off the fence’ himself, in support of the NC text’s integration of skills and knowledge which, he says, demonstrates a ‘more complex view of what historical knowledge is.’ with his own call, that teachers, commentators and government should abandon their antagonism, recognise that neither cultural absolutism nor absolute relativism give beneficial results, and that history teaching should reflect cultural values of what England ‘is really like’ – i.e. pluralistic and enmeshed in world history – in the late twentieth century, rather than as ‘others might wish it to be’. At the beginning of this chapter, Phillips predicts that history is to remain ‘a source of contention for some time to come’. Like so much else in this book, his comment is astute.

**Analysis**

Phillips begins his book with a striking extract from the *Guardian*, which argues that in the midst of the National Curriculum debates, Margaret Thatcher was engaged in a battle for the nation’s soul and future, and that the teaching of history in particular was a ‘big prize.’ Whatever one’s personal standpoint, one thing is made abundantly clear to readers of this book: the teaching of history really matters. The forensic level of detail in this book occasionally render it heavy going for the reader. Overall, though, it is a deftly-told story of realism and political compromise, in which Phillips manages the not-inconsiderable task of weaving a lively and engaging narrative from a seemingly endless round of committee meetings and policy documents. Whilst, as Phillips himself notes, the process was labyrinthine and often subject to political interference, this book makes a byzantine political process comprehensible and interesting. Phillips’s view of the work of the various committee members involved in the production of the NC text is largely positive: they navigated dangerous waters and produced the best compromise possible. The author was evidently close to the events he describes, and his own view is on occasion made quite clear. This does not detract from the work, however – indeed, it would be poorer without it.