

# Schools: History

## *Debate*

1 pm

*Moved By Lord Luke*

To call attention to the teaching of history in schools; and to move for papers.

**Lord Luke:** My Lords, I thank all noble Lords in advance for their contributions to today's debate. I have believed for some time that some vital improvements are overdue in the teaching of, and the importance placed on, history in the United Kingdom. The knowledge afforded to us from learning history forces us to think about who we are; to consider our national identity and responsibilities; to decide whether we live in isolation and selfishness and therefore choose to be passive or whether we go forth and make a difference to the world around us—to learn, to be aware and to be considerate of others' beliefs and traditions and to ensure that previous mistakes are not repeated.

There is a common saying that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. It is obvious that we must learn from our past, but to do so we must know our past. Through learning about remarkable individuals and how they shaped our historical

**20 Oct 2011 : Column 402**

landscapes over time, it becomes clear that we all have our roles to play, as did they. Our children are our future, as we were to our forefathers, and history is the key to their future. It is imperative that history be taught, and taught properly. The history that we know does not belong to us; we merely help to contribute to it and protect it for the next generation. It is our duty to ensure that we pass on this knowledge so that our children can, we hope, benefit from it by learning from mistakes which have occurred in the past and, ultimately, by improving the world in which they live—and so the cycle continues.

If taught well, history introduces all kinds of transferable and highly valuable skills, such as an appreciation of the significance of cause and effect and the ability to understand and analyse complex arrangements. Learning about past human relations, and about human nature itself, enhances one's social awareness and, of course, our sense of national identity. In addition, good general historical knowledge produces a good grounding and jolly good common sense, which is perhaps the most important skill of all.

Knowledge of this subject is seen by many as a valuable currency. For example, the Russell group of universities openly admits that those who possess history qualifications have always been, and still are, immensely attractive candidates when deciding who to take on at degree level. That is why it worries me that the same importance is often not placed on the teaching of history at the earlier stages of the schooling process. England is now the only European country that does not require that history be taught to the age of 15 or 16, and growing numbers of pupils are being allowed to drop the subject at 13. Ofsted reported that 102 maintained secondary schools entered no students to sit GCSE history in 2010. Some 30 per cent of pupils in state schools took history at GCSE last year, and only 20 per cent in academies, compared with 50 per cent in the independent sector. I am afraid that this is

affecting the most disadvantaged young people in our society-the very ones for whom a good, well-rounded education is one of their only hopes of improving the quality of their lives.

There are concerns that some young people are being steered into more restrictive pathways, and that these are the most likely to be eligible for free school meals and to live in areas of greater social deprivation. What is being done to target these young people specifically, to ensure that they get the help and encouragement they need? Of all the pupils entered for GCSE history in 2010, roughly 67 per cent passed with grades A to C. Of all those who took GCSE history and were eligible for free school meals, 46 per cent achieved grades A to C. Similar trends can be seen at A-level, and this has a knock-on effect for universities. According to the schools White Paper, of the approximately 600,000 children who enter state education every year, some 80,000 are eligible for free school meals. Only 45 of those students made it to Oxbridge. That figure is up by 12.5 per cent on the year before, when only 40 made it. That increase is welcome, and I commend the Department for Education for it, but the figure is still very low. I would be interested to know what proportion of children eligible for free school meals made it to any university.

### **20 Oct 2011 : Column 403**

I have always believed that our primary goal in politics is to make opportunities equally available for all and to narrow the gap between rich and poor-the advantaged and the disadvantaged. As Michael Gove said recently:

"It is only through reforming education that we can allow every child the chance to take their full and equal share in citizenship, shaping their own destiny, and becoming masters of their own fate".

I completely agree. Everybody deserves this equal opportunity. Sadly, it seems that it is the most disadvantaged children who are missing out. We must not continue to fail them. Put simply, if one does not know enough, one is at serious risk of not achieving one's full potential. We must ensure that all our children, particularly the most disadvantaged, fulfil their potential. I know that the Government are acutely aware of this issue and are committed to correcting it. Can the Minister update the House on the progress of the plans in this respect?

Last month the Historical Association published a report in which it noted that the only access to specialist history teaching for two-thirds of young people is during key stage 3. From then on specialist expertise fast disappears in many schools. We in the UK are lucky to have so many fantastic teachers, but what is being done to entice more talent into the profession and to ensure that history teachers are always properly trained and possess the expertise and enthusiasm that is necessary to do the subject real justice? I mention enthusiasm specifically because that is the reason why I studied history when I was lucky enough to go to university. I was taught by some extremely able and enthusiastic teachers.

In their report, the Ofsted inspectors cited that a particular problem with the teaching of history was an unbalanced curriculum that paid too much attention to particular topics at the

expense of others. Some of our children are missing out on learning about some of the most important individuals and events of our heritage. The Prime Minister once remarked that the composition of the history curriculum was tapas-like, whereby children are given bite-sized and disconnected instruction on isolated events, and no narrative. I have to say that I agree. I am astounded when I read stories about one set of children thinking that Winston Churchill is the nodding dog character in the television adverts for insurance. I read only the other day that our colleague, the noble Lord, Lord West, was spotted on the Central line wearing his full military attire. When an eight year-old asked him why he was dressed in that way, the noble Lord replied, "Because I am in the Navy". The boy then asked him, "What is the Navy?". This is incredibly alarming and surely must not continue.

What is being done to ensure that the history curriculum is properly composed in a chronological manner so that children can place what they learn in a logical way in their minds? Can the Minister also tell us what is being done to make the subject more accessible to children and more exciting to study?

The only thing that we have learnt from history is that we never learn from history. That is a very bleak forecast, but it has been promulgated on many occasions. I just hope that it does not always happen. I dearly

**20 Oct 2011 : Column 404**

hope that it is not true. I am very aware of the work that our great team in the Department for Education is doing and I am confident that it will take on, is aware of, and is working on many of the issues that noble Lords will highlight today. I am looking forward to hearing what the Minister and all my noble colleagues have to say. I beg to move.

**1.12 pm**

**Baroness Bakewell:** My Lords, I support everything that the noble Lord has said about the teaching of history and commend his appalling account of the record of history teaching as it now stands in our schools. I deplore that situation and I call on the Minister to see that it is rectified as soon as possible.

Let me quote WH Auden, who wrote:

"I and the public know

What all school children learn, Those to whom evil is done  
Do evil in return".

It is a legendary phrase that he wrote in his poem on 1 September 1939. The phrase "all school children learn" was one that he could use then and everyone accepted it. That is no longer the case. All schoolchildren do not learn. A consensus has gone.

The consensus has gone because over the recent generation there have been what you could call curriculum wars. They arose because a generation of postmodern writers analysed history and came to the conclusion that it was merely entirely subjective and a narrative that was the propaganda of one particular segment, and that being subjective no-one could decide whose history to teach. Those wars went on in academic circles to the detriment of young people. You could imagine that, for example, over the teaching of the history of Ireland. Do we teach

the Catholic or the Protestant version? Whose version? One person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. Whose version do we teach? The chaos of these arguments over the teaching of what truth is-when can you call a fact a fact and not propaganda?-created a crisis in the teaching of history itself.

Bernard Williams, a philosopher, in his book *Truth and Truthfulness*, drew on what has been an ongoing debate since the time of the Greeks-the postmodernists did not invent it, although they aggravated it. Bernard Williams quoted Clemenceau who, when asked what future historians would say about the First World War, said:

"They will not say that Belgium invaded Germany".

We can also be confident that Archbishop Ussher, the Primate of All Ireland, was wrong to claim in the 17th century that the world began on 23 October 4004 BC-that that was the day of creation. He believed it, he spoke it as truth, and he was wrong. Knowledge changes over time.

We know that the victors write the history. We have in this building a painting that demonstrates that Wellington defeated Napoleon and that the British were the victors at Waterloo. The Prussians beg to disagree; but the overriding fact was that Napoleon was defeated. These curriculum wars have brought us to this sad state of affairs and it is important that we reinstate history for the three benefits that I shall name. I am sure that noble Lords will mention many

## **20 Oct 2011 : Column 405**

others. History teaches us the timeline of humanity. It teaches us chronology and what it means for the human race. I was asked by a small child, who was not that small and should have known better, "Did the Tudors come after the Victorians?". They need to know. There is virtue in knowing about the Normans, the Plantagenets, the Tudors and the Stuarts because in that way children can understand the nature of monarchy in this country today. That is very important, enriching and a pleasure to know.

Secondly, history teaches cause and effect, as the noble Lord, Lord Luke, said. Have we ever resolved what the causes of the French Revolution were? Have we always gone on writing essays about them? How fruitful it is to revisit such a subject-the causes of the Industrial Revolution or the Russian Revolution? Revolution figures quite a lot in these causation debates. Only this morning, Andreas Whittam-Smith, writing in the *Independent*, asks, "Is the world heading for a new revolution?". In his article, he cites the circumstances of 1848 when, as noble Lords will know, Europe was swept by revolution. He cites the causes of the 1848 revolution and suggests that they are available today, and that we should think about that. Understanding cause and effect will make us think about our present society.

History teaches judgment. Over the years, history has taught us to judge the slave trade. It has taught us to judge Victorian society-its virtues as well as child labour and squalid industrial circumstances. It has taught us to celebrate the emancipation of women. Recently, the Tricycle Theatre in London put on a series of 12 short plays in groups of four, running over three nights. Called "The Great Game", it is about British involvement in Afghanistan since 1940. It sold out. Sir David Richard, the Chief of the Defence Staff, said that it was as historically accurate as you would get in any lesson. The audience was full of people from the

Ministry of Defence, soldiers, civil servants, Sandhurst cadets, and people who wanted to know the history of British involvement in Afghanistan. The British were not the only ones. The plays then went to Washington and were played at the Pentagon.

There is a greed for history. There is a greed to know how we got here. How did this situation arise? It is directly significant in all our lives today. There is a yearning for history in people's hearts. People may miss out at school, but when the new archive building opened at Kew, it was inundated with people seeking their genealogy-those who wanted to know about their ancestry and to feed their identity.

The television programme "Who Do You Think You Are?" has a big following. It teaches people how to go to church not for the religion necessarily but to seek out records of births, marriages and deaths and of their families. History is also expressed in the civic pride we find when cities are full of plaques on the walls, indicating to us where important people lived and what they contributed. With my background, I am particularly fond of one on a rather posh Manchester hotel that records Peterloo and what that massacre stood for in the movement towards democratic reform.

**20 Oct 2011 : Column 406**

History gives us our identity and a perspective. It allows us to understand the issues of the past about which we might feel some guilt-a wish to apologise even-but it teaches us who we are. It gives us local, civic pride and national pride. We must not deprive our children of that.

**1.21 pm**

**Baroness Walmsley:** My Lords, I congratulate my noble friend Lord Luke on calling for this important debate. When thinking about it, three things occurred to me: my grandson's pet hen, the Secretary of State for Education's speech to the Conservative Party conference in 2010 and the EBacc. Let me explain. Recently my grandson got a pet chicken. When he was asked what he wanted to call it, he said, "Boudicca". We were all a little taken aback because we thought he was going to say "Henrietta", or "Hyacinth" or something like that.

It made me ask him some questions about what he was learning in his history lessons at school and he knew as much as most of us know about that mysterious and warlike queen. Then I looked in some detail at the national curriculum document for key stage 1 for 5 to 7 year-olds. It states that during key stage 1,

"pupils learn about people's lives and lifestyles. They find out about significant men, women, children and events from the recent and more distant past, including those from both Britain and the wider world. They listen and respond to stories and use sources of information to help them ask and answer questions and learn how the past is different from the present".

It goes on to indicate that they are expected to acquire a chronological understanding of events and objects, develop an understanding of events, people and changes in the past, find

out about the past from different sources, select from that knowledge and communicate it in a variety of ways.

That struck me as quite challenging and interesting and absolutely fine for a young child. Then I read what the Secretary of State for Education, Mr Michael Gove, said in his speech to the Conservative Party conference in 2010, which was:

"Children are growing up ignorant of one of the most inspiring stories I know-the history of our United Kingdom ... The current approach we have to history denies children the opportunity to hear our island story. Children are given a mix of topics at primary, a cursory run through Henry VIII and Hitler at secondary and many give up the subject at 14, without knowing how the vivid episodes of our past become a connected narrative".

If that really were the state of affairs, it would be extremely sad. However, I had difficulty in connecting the two things: the curriculum that I had read and my right honourable friend's speech. Even for such young children, the curriculum talks about the history of Britain and chronological understanding. It also seems to me to have a balance between acquiring knowledge and skills. So I looked further to see what Mr Gove's problem was and I discovered that all children have to study history up to the age of 14-that is, during their first nine years of schooling.

Perhaps there is a problem with the curriculum for older children. I found that at key stage 2, 7 to 11 year-olds do more of everything that is in key stage 1 and they also learn about changes and continuity in their own area. They are expected to look at history in a number of ways, such as political, economic, technological and scientific, social, religious, cultural

### **20 Oct 2011 : Column 407**

and aesthetic. Again they have to use different methods and sources to investigate and use dates and historical vocabulary to describe events, and learn that the past can be interpreted in different ways. They have to do three British history studies and studies in European and world history. Even those latter ones incorporate looking at Britain in a European or world context.

I was still puzzled about where the problem was. I then looked at key stage 3 for 11 to 14 year-olds. They study people and events in Britain from the Middle Ages to the 20th century, build on chronological understanding and are expected to develop further awareness of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity, changes across different historical periods, causes and consequences-the noble Baroness, Lady Bakewell, said that was important-the significance of historical events and assess the validity of different historians' interpretations. They are being asked to develop critical thinking. It occurred to me that this should really help to develop their critical skills and we do, of course, want to develop critical thinkers in this country.

When I was at school, history was a very passive subject for me and I was bored stiff. I repeated the Middle Ages for three years running, but still know far too little about it. It was better in primary school where we were able to do some project work which was much more engaging. So, looking at what the curriculum requires, it is hard to know what the problem is. Yes, I accept that the number studying history at GCSE and A-level are going down, but all children have already had nine years of history and that should be enough for many of them if it is well taught.

I will return to that. However, I do not believe that interest in history ends when you leave school. As the noble Baroness, Lady Bakewell, said, you have only to look at the popularity of history programmes on the television and the enormous membership figures of the National Trust and the National Trust for Scotland. History, personal in relation to family trees and national, has become one of the major activities for older people. Programmes such as "Who Do You Think You Are?" which I am a keen fan, and the many heritage programmes on television, have very high viewing figures and schools television programmes are also excellent. This started decades ago with the famous "Civilisation" series.

However, I listened recently to a Radio 4 programme about the teaching of history and they did a lot of vox pops. Here I heard a clue to the problem identified by the Secretary of State. Those contributors who enjoyed history and really learnt something had specialist teachers who were passionate about their subject and communicated that to their pupils. Here I think we have a problem. The Historical Association—as the noble Lord, Lord Luke, said—conducted a survey of history teachers this year and they, and Ofsted too, concluded that there is much to celebrate. They said:

"This is not a narrow curriculum, as the Secretary of State suggested, confined to Henry VIII and Hitler"

That is not my opinion, but that of the expert historians. Having looked at the curriculum, I am afraid I agree with them. However, we should also take note of something else they found: that 67 per cent of the teachers surveyed did not have a history adviser in their area; 49 per cent said they had little or no

### **20 Oct 2011 : Column 408**

training for subject leadership; and 90 per cent said there was an absence of subject-specific continuous professional development. As the noble Lord, Lord Luke, pointed out, two-thirds of young people get access to a specialist teacher only when they get to secondary school and sometimes not even then.

That makes history advisers and CPD really important if we are going to have confident teachers who can communicate a passion for the subject. Only then are we going to get enough young people taking GCSE and going on to A-level and history degrees. Only then will we produce enough history graduates to provide more specialist history teachers, as well as enough people to fill all the other posts that require professional historians.

History is important. It helps to develop in young people many of the same skills and critical attitudes and understanding of methodology as science does. If you want to know why history is important, you need look only at what happens to someone who completely loses their personal history by losing their memory. They are adrift. They lose the ability to understand themselves through the prism of their own past. Nations are the same. They understand themselves and are better equipped to face their future if they know about and understand their past.

What are the Government doing about this? That brings me to my third point: the EBacc. I understand from the statement to me of the Minister for Schools, Mr Nick Gibb, that the reason for the EBacc is,

"to ensure that more children study history".

I presume he means that more 14 to 16 year-olds study history, as all five to 14 year-olds do so anyway. The Government have been at pains to say that the EBacc is only one of many ways in which schools will be judged and that they want only to ensure that all children have the opportunity to study history at GCSE level. That may well be, but the best way to ensure that young people study hard, make an effort and come out of school with some confidence-building success behind them is to ensure that they can study those subjects which are most appropriate for them. It is also a fact that not all schools see it that way. They think that they will be judged on the EBacc, and we find that they are staffing up to deliver it at the expense of other subjects such as RE, music and vocational subjects. That is a problem.

I certainly do not agree with Simon Schama's conclusion that we are creating two nations of young Britons: those who grow up with a sense of our shared memory and those who have been encouraged to treat it as little more than an ornamental polishing for the elite. Having read his article in the *London Review of Books* of March this year, I am much more inclined to agree with Richard Evans, who says about the national curriculum:

"There seems to be plenty of factual content in all this, plenty of kings and queens too. The examples the curriculum provides for teaching history to children from 7 to 11 make mention of 36 significant individuals, ranging from Boudicea and Caractacus to Livingstone and Brunel. From 11 to 14, children study the whole sweep of British history from 1066 to 1900".

He points out that assessment concentrates 70 per cent on knowledge and 30 per cent on skills, so why Mr Gove thinks that facts and names play no part in all this is a

### **20 Oct 2011 : Column 409**

mystery. Richard Evans concludes, and I agree, that the problem is not in the curriculum but in schools' ability to deliver it. Therefore my question to my noble friend is: what do the Government plan to do about that? Are the new teacher training schools to be involved? What sort of specialist support will be available to non-specialist teachers, who will inevitably have to deliver history, in particular in primary schools?

Finally, I express the hope that those carrying out the curriculum review will not feel the need to throw the current curriculum up in the air as a kneejerk reaction to one or two critical and opinionated historians but instead to seek the views of a wide and balanced range of them. The only lesson of history may be that we do not learn the lessons of history, but we should try.

1.33 pm

**Lord Thomas of Swynnerton:** My Lords, I should perhaps declare an interest to begin with, because one of my books was a set book for Eton on the Spanish civil war. Therefore, what the Etonians had to study was something about which I had thought a good deal. Although I am not a teacher of history, I have taught in universities; although I am not a schoolboy, I have an interest in the debate.

The aim should be to give to everyone who goes to school in this country a broad knowledge of the history of the country. I do not think that foreign countries are as important in the

teaching of history as is the teaching of history in Britain. That teaching should concentrate on five things: first, the growth of political liberty; secondly, the industrial revolution; thirdly, the expansion of Britain overseas to the Empire; fourthly, some feeling of the importance of English literature and art throughout the ages, which is one of the reasons why we are admired outside this country; and, fifthly, some view of our relations with the continent of Europe, which has been such a continuous part of our political and intellectual development from the Middle Ages onwards-and, indeed, before. Do not forget that, had things gone differently at Orléans in 1430, this country would have achieved that union with France which Winston Churchill wanted to achieve in 1940.

Speaking of those five separate undertakings, I believe that the winning of political liberty in this country is something on which we should dwell. It was not as easy as it must seem. Some of those who challenge it now seem to think that it is not worth talking about. The effort to achieve habeas corpus, constant elections and the rule of law was not an easy undertaking. It took many generations to perfect it. It would be good if in most schools students-pupils-were brought up to understand the golden age of British politics. One might say that that was the 1790s, the age of Pitt, Charles James Fox, Burke, Sheridan and so on; unless one thinks that it would be better to concentrate on the 19th century, the age of Disraeli and Gladstone or of Gladstone and Salisbury.

The history of the industrial revolution should also be discussed. The industrial revolution is sometimes vilified as if it has brought ugliness, unhappiness and misery. That is not the case. It has vastly increased

### **20 Oct 2011 : Column 410**

human comfort and the number of people employed and opened up a new world to a far more satisfied population.

The Empire, the expansion of Britain, should also be discussed. There are several sections to that: the North American empire, the African empire, the Middle East empire, the empire in the Far East, concentrated on the Malay States and Singapore, and Australasia. Those are five separate undertakings by which we as a nation are judged. I belong to a family which served continuously in both India and Africa. I am aware that one can criticise my ancestors or my uncles, but I know that they thought that they were doing the right thing not only for this country but for the peoples of the countries concerned, to whom they were bringing culture, Christianity and civilisation-three major "C"s which they never forgot.

The fourth British achievement-in the arts-should also not be forgotten. We are admired as the nation of Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Shelley, Dickens and Scott just as much as we are as the nation of Pitt, Fox, and so on. There is no question but that such writers as Sir Walter Scott and Dickens are still in the mind of all educated Europeans- indeed, of all citizens of the world.

Finally, there is the relation with Europe. This is a permanently quarrelsome topic but the fact is that British history has been continuously a part of Europe. We have always been in Europe. The mere fact that our main square is called Trafalgar Square and our main station is called Waterloo is a reminder of that. Our monarchs have been alternately French and German, as well as Welsh and Scottish, but our relation with Europe characterises all our military activity throughout recorded history.

I think these five sections should play a part in national education in a major way and the subject should be approached as if they were the essential underpinnings of the historical memory which we are trying to stimulate, develop and achieve.

1.41 pm

**Lord Cormack:** My Lords, it is a great privilege to follow the noble Lord, Lord Thomas, who is a most distinguished historian. He referred very modestly to his work on the Spanish civil war but no more seminal work has been produced in this country in the past 50 years. He did not refer, modestly or otherwise, to his history of the slave trade. I wish he had because it is a book that would commend itself to all those Members of your Lordships' House who have not yet read it.

This is a very important debate and I am most grateful, as we all are, to my noble friend Lord Luke not only for introducing it but for the manner in which he did so. Over the nearly 42 years now that I have been associated with this place I have on many occasions taken parties of school children round this building, which I love and will love to my dying day. I have always taken them to the Royal Gallery and I have gone through the kings and queens whose portraits hang there from the first of the Hanoverians onwards. I have talked of the two great paintings by Daniel Maclise, which are being looked at for restoration. There is a great difference between the parties that I

**20 Oct 2011 : Column 411**

used to take round in the early 1970s and the parties that I have taken round more recently. The noble Baroness, Lady Bakewell, referred to the phrase that every schoolboy knows. In the early 1970s when I talked about the Battle of Trafalgar and the Battle of Waterloo—the pictures of which, incidentally, had to be covered up when Giscard d'Estaing addressed both Houses here—every member of the group that I was showing round would know about Waterloo and Trafalgar. In more recent years that has not been the case.

As a young man before I entered the House of Commons I was for 10 years a schoolmaster. I taught history. I had charge of the history curriculum in two schools. I made sure that the boys—I am afraid they were all boys in those days in the schools in which I taught—when they reached the age of 16 all had a reasonable, chronological knowledge of the history of their country. The noble Lord, Lord Thomas, is right to say that it is the history of our country that we should be primarily concerned with. I made sure that all those boys knew about the great events in English history and the great people who had moulded those events, be it Wycliffe and the Lollards and the first attempt at an English Bible, Hampden and Pym in the 17th century, those great orators of the 18th century to whom the noble Lord, Lord Thomas, referred, or Gladstone and Disraeli. One liked to try and enliven one's lessons by telling amusing stories. I always loved the one about Disraeli and Gladstone when Disraeli said that if Mr Gladstone fell into the Thames it would be a great misfortune but if somebody pulled him out it would be a calamity. By means of anecdotes one could bring alive the history of the country in a way to which young people responded.

In more recent years when I have shown people round there has often been a look of blank incredulity and ignorance when I have talked of some of the great names of our past. Why is that the case? I am afraid I do not share the sanguine view of the history curriculum held by the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley. What may be said in the curriculum papers is not

necessarily brought forth in the classroom. I think that Mr Gove was entirely justified in making the remarks that he made in 2010 and I hope that my noble friend, when he comes to respond to this debate, will be able to give your Lordships some encouragement. The knowledge of our history is the birthright of every child in this country. To deprive a child of his or her birthright is an act of wanton intellectual and academic vandalism. It is essential that all our children have a knowledge of our history so that when they leave school they can fit into the framework of national events the things about which they read in the contemporary press.

We were recalled to this House in August to discuss those dreadful, disfiguring riots. There was unanimous consternation here at what had happened. I put forward a suggestion, which I want to repeat. I said that every young man or woman leaving school, be it at the age of 16 or 18, should go through the same sort of ceremony that those who now aspire to British citizenship must go through and that in order to do so they must be able to demonstrate a certain knowledge of the history of their country. We have a golden opportunity coming up to do something about this.

**20 Oct 2011 : Column 412**

**Lord Lea of Crondall:** I am most grateful to the noble Lord for giving way but this point is pertinent to what he has just said about those rioters. Is he talking about teaching history, as he and the noble Lord, Lord Thomas, have described it, or should we not have more about the people's history of Britain? There is another dimension to history teaching on which a number of very commendable books have been written which turn the world upside down. Would he reflect on that as well?

**Lord Cormack:** I hope that I reflect on all sorts of things as I make my meandering remarks but I will not allow myself to be too diverted by the noble Lord's intervention.

The point I am seeking to make is that I believe that those who leave school to go into the wider world should be proud of their British birthright, which means that they must have a knowledge of the history of this country. I was going on to say that I believe there is a golden opportunity coming up because in 2015 we will be commemorating the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta. Only yesterday I was talking in my capacity as chairman of the History of Parliament Trust to Sir Robert Worcester who is chairing the committee on Magna Carta. I asked him whether it would not be a marvellous idea if in that year every school leaver in the country was given a facsimile of Magna Carta and an account of what it meant for the foundation of our liberties. That would be a good thing and would help concentrate the mind.

Anniversaries are good. This morning at Question Time—rather mischievously, because it was not relevant to the Question—the noble Lord, Lord West, talked about Trafalgar Day, which is tomorrow. How many people out there know that Trafalgar Day is tomorrow? Should it not be incumbent on those who teach history in our schools to ensure that every child knows that Trafalgar Day is tomorrow, just as they should know the significance of 11 November? Of course, in three years' time we will have an opportunity to reflect on the beginning of the First World War.

The problem today is that there is a pick and mix attitude to history teaching in schools. Very often there is a constant emphasis on the Second World War. I was born just before the beginning of that terrible war and of course I yield to no one in acknowledging how tremendously important and life-changing for everyone around the world it was. However, that is not the sum total of history. The noble Baroness, Lady Bakewell, talked about cause and effect, as did my noble friend Lord Luke. If people are going to understand the Second World War, they have to understand the First World War; and if they are going to understand the First World War, they have to understand the French revolution, to which the noble Baroness referred. If they are going to understand that, they have to understand our revolutions of the 17th century: the bloody one, which resulted in the death of the king, and the glorious one, as we often call it, through which the true foundations of parliamentary democracy were laid and the absolute power of the monarch came to an end without bloodshed. All these things they have to know.

**20 Oct 2011 : Column 413**

It is important that we should discuss these matters in the House. This evening I will have the honour of presiding at a small dinner for a group of fellow members of the Royal Historical Society. We shall meet David Willetts, the Minister in charge of universities, to discuss the teaching of history in universities. This is a follow-up to a similar dinner that I arranged last year for Royal Society members to meet Michael Gove to discuss the teaching of history in schools. A golden thread links the two: we want more young people in our schools to read history at university. We hope that when they do, it will give them a comprehensive knowledge of history such as is not always the case at the moment. I have a son of whom I am extremely proud. He read history at a great university. He knows nothing at all about the Middle Ages, although he has a very good degree. That cannot be right.

We have an opportunity today to point to and underline the fundamental importance of the study of our past. My noble friend introduced the debate very eloquently on that score. We also have a duty to ask the Minister to do all that he can with the Secretary of State to ensure that the centrality of history in the curriculum of our schools is underlined. History must be chronological and as all-embracing as possible. Young people must study it to the age of 16 at least, and when they leave school they should not only have knowledge, but knowledge of which they are truly proud.

**1.54 pm**

**Baroness Andrews:** My Lords, we are all in debt to the noble Lord, Lord Luke, for the debate. It is a pleasure to take part and to follow the noble Lord, Lord Cormack, who has done so much in his career to promote history and heritage. I declare an interest as chair of English Heritage and also, in another life, as a makeshift historian. Sadly, I was never taught either by my charismatic noble friend Lord Morgan or by any of the other historians in the Chamber—sadly, not even by the noble Lord, Lord Cormack.

The debate is extremely timely because it is timeless. At its heart are questions that surround the whole purpose of teaching history and how we find the right way to teach it. Dictatorships

have never had a problem with the importance and purpose of teaching history, and they have come up with similar solutions. Democracies, too, wrestle with this, and many questions raised in the House are fundamental to a democratic appreciation of the importance of history. Even in a country such as ours, with a very placid trajectory, we have wrestled with these questions for decades if not centuries.

The teaching of a subject that raises the issue of what constitutes the national past and what should be taught in schools is a study in history itself. It is a brave debate to embark on, and it is a brave Minister who, in summing up, will have to try to reconcile all the different views. I have been helped to find my own way through this thicket by the work of David Cannadine. I was very happy that he gave me access to a book he is about to publish called "The Teaching of History". I am very grateful to him for the brief glimpse he gave me of a very powerful thesis in which he charts the

### **20 Oct 2011 : Column 414**

disagreements over the teaching and learning of history in this country over the past century. There is no doubt that, in a very decentralised curriculum that serves an astonishing variety of schools and a diverse system generally, the teaching of history has been fraught with disagreements, at least since 1870 if not earlier-I am sure my noble friend could correct me.

Until the 1980s and the coming of the national curriculum, the power to influence through the Secretary of State was very limited. Now, with the national curriculum and its relationships with examinations, almost as many issues are being raised. Many of them were raised in this debate, with controversies around them. The fundamental question is whether history matters. If it does not, it is hard to explain the fascination demonstrated already across the Chamber, for example with "The Tudors" on television or with the great blockbusting historical novels or, indeed, the great popularity of anniversaries. If one wants an example of how government interferes with the presentation of history, the account of Prince Albert chairing the Fine Arts Commission, and the commissioning of the Maclise portraits in the new German technology, on which he insisted, is fascinating. I commend Malcolm Hay, our curator, for that knowledge.

If history does not matter, why is there so much evident concern with the fact that fewer than one-third of students take history beyond 14? Why is there anxiety among teachers themselves about the lack of specialist knowledge in primary schools? Why is there an agonised debate about narrative versus bore-hole theories of history? I hope that the Minister will be able to confirm that many of these issues will be raised in the curriculum review. History does matter, and must be seen to matter. That is crucial. In a complex, liberal and individualistic society such as ours, consciousness of the past is even more important. The more sophisticated that our society becomes and the more that we move away from linear, simplistic interpretations, the more we need history. Of course it is about identity and it is central to our sense of place, significance, perspective and proportion. I was fascinated by the account of the dramatic interpretations of British relations with Iraq. For the past 10 years I have yearned for our Governments to know more about the history of British relations with the Middle East in general.

History offers at least two particular, related motivations for learning. One is that it is full of ripping yarns and feeds our appetite for more stories. One of my GCSE heroes was Jethro Tull and the seed drill, although I cannot imagine that he is a very popular figure these days.

The Elizabethan spymasters, too, captured my imagination. Having talked to a few leading historians this week, including some from the better history forum, which involves both academics and teachers, it seems that a key issue is time itself-time in the school day. Evidence suggests that since 2007 the curriculum has been eaten away in terms of time and focus. Head teachers are under pressure to get results. One result is that in many schools the time available for history is heavily restricted. In some, the discipline survives as a discrete subject; in others, it is treated principally as serving other disciplines. The picture is very patchy, especially in primary schools.

## **20 Oct 2011 : Column 415**

In secondary schools there is a growing tendency to cram key stage 3 into two years. This can mean that, in effect, many pupils get only two years of specialist history teaching before they give the subject up. The rest of Europe might be shocked to know that we have students giving up history completely at 13. I have to ask the Minister why he thinks so many schools are losing the battle. How can we incentivise head teachers? What impact is the EBacc going to have in this respect? Crucially, does he agree with the case made by many historians these days that history should be compulsory to 16? Does he agree that this would drive a more coherent and integrated syllabus across key stages 3 and 4?

This is a salient question because, no matter how we read history, whether we are on the side of the great sweeping narrative or we see the virtues of the in-detail study of Henry VIII or Hitler, there is a tension here. We do not go in for the great historical panorama set pieces any more. I do not want to use another food analogy, but it has been described as the YO! Sushi approach to history, where one just tastes little bits of history and studies short blocks of time intensively. Whether or not this approach allows a better understanding of historical debates and engagement with original materials-and I think possibly it does-it certainly leaves students, as Ofsted put it, with,

"an episodic knowledge of history"

and a sense of time that is unclear. At GCSE level there is a sort of swerve back into narrative history but the complaint here is the isolated use of texts without the connecting tissue of context.

The question of what is taught, and how, raises questions around the need for transparency of the assessment and examination system. Again, I hope the curriculum review might address this. I do not want to put the Minister on the spot but there is a big question about whether the Government should have a greater role in determining detailed content of the curriculum to avoid, for example, eccentric programmes of study. Another subset of this tension between narrative and episodic teaching is between what could be parodied as the Gradgrind approach to history-"Facts, my boy!"-and the approach that determines that history is a splendid way of developing other analytical skills and competences. Again, this is an active debate in our schools today.

I too have read the Historical Association reports about the absence of specialist teaching and the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, was quite right to point to that as absolutely central to how we read and develop this debate into better learning and teaching. By the sound of it, it is possible that some students can go through their entire school career without ever being taught by specialist teachers. Ofsted talks about teachers failing to establish,

"a clear mental map of the past",

because they lack expertise and because of the disconnected way the national curriculum treats topics.

Finally, one point of particular relevance to bodies such as English Heritage is the proposition from the better history forum that the Government should work from the outset with professional bodies and resource providers to ensure that the curriculum is fully resourced.

### **20 Oct 2011 : Column 416**

I say amen to that, because surely history is above all an adventure—an active and participative adventure. When children are engaged with learning they are motivated to learn more, and when they visit our great monuments and sites, whether in school or sometimes more successfully out of school, they do not engage with bricks and mortar but they engage with their imaginations.

There is a problem with time and resources in schools—it is a crowded curriculum. I hope the Minister agrees that time and resources are well spent when schools commit to out-of-school learning. English Heritage is fully engaged with this, as noble Lords will understand. We have wonderful resources that we download into classrooms and then we upload students into our sites and monuments. Anyone who has seen the legions of 10 year-old Roman soldiers at Birdoswald on Hadrian's wall-making Roman lamps no less—or encountered a group of tiny children acting out the life of the Victorian servant class in Apsley House, will know that these children will always want more history and that heritage for them is not actually the past, it is something that enriches and explains their future.

One of my ambitions is to make those occasional encounters a substantial and systematic part of the relationship between local schools and local history and the national story. We have heard from the noble Lord, Lord Thomas, that he would like to see his five themes; I would actually like to see more attention in the curriculum to the local history of our country and, of course, the four countries in our nation. I would also make a plea for more study of the impact of science and technology.

For noble Lords who have not been there, I should say that Dover Castle is a brilliant example of how history reinvents itself. Dover Castle was not only an Iron Age hill fort at the beginning of our story; it concludes with the wartime tunnels—opening this summer—from which Admiral Ramsay, a rather neglected figure, saved the soldiers from Dunkirk, when 300,000 men were taken off the beaches. We have the whole story of England in one site. How much better can it get?

Finally, I do not entirely agree with the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley. I actually share Simon Schama's concerns that if less history is taught in some schools—those schools might be the academy schools, and I would like the Minister to comment on whether that is possibly

the case-there can be a schizophrenia, which is to say a sense of shared memory and shared appreciation of history among one group of people and a lack of interest and appreciation among another. That has huge implications, not just for culture but for a diverse nation which has to come to terms with a number of different stories and histories. I believe that this is an issue. As Simon Schama said,

"a truly capacious British history ...will not be the feeder of identity politics but its dissolvent".

That is one of the many very serious questions raised by this debate.

2.06 pm

**Lord Addington:** My Lords, when it comes to a debate on history I am afraid I bring a little history of my own into this. The first time I got into a really

**20 Oct 2011 : Column 417**

nasty row with a member of my own party was about 23 years ago when I spoke on a debate on history in this House. It was when we were getting rid of the old O-level and replacing it with GCSE, and it was decided that this was not fact-driven enough. We had to do something else; we just could not have this new syllabus with things like empathy coming in. When I criticised the council leader who sacked a teacher who was, bizarrely, teaching to the then Scottish O-grade, I was attacked about it over the phone. I was quite joyful as a 26 year-old to tell a 45 year-old councillor to go and shove it and read the debate before he spoke to me again. Everybody has an opinion, everybody gets paranoid about history, because everybody assumes that the bit they are interested in is the bit we should be interested in-the bit that we find speaks to us should be the bit that somebody else should take on board.

The noble Lord, Lord Cormack, spoke about the 18th and 19th centuries. I did the 18th and 19th centuries because I was at school in the 1970s. I did the O-level system where you actually learned lots of facts-we had O-level memory and we did not have any history, to be perfectly honest. Yes, we could run off all the Prime Ministers and the Acts they passed, but it did not tell you anything. It did not tell you how they related to each other or how anything went on from that. The noble Lord referred to the Glorious Revolution, so called because of course in England there was not any fighting; it was all in Ireland and Scotland-not quite so glorious there, possibly. Every time you take a little bit of history you have to look at it.

Probably the most profound historical exercise I undertook was to do with being best man at a wedding in France, believe it or not. I was best man to a university flatmate who also read history. The families were arguing over who should sit where. Over the second bottle of wine at a dinner party it was suggested that I might want to put all the French people on tables named after famous English victories over them, with the most embarrassing paragraph about that victory on the table, and the English the other way round. This was an extremely fun project. The best one I found was Yorktown for the English. You could say it was a French victory-and we had a few Americans there so they got annoyed as well; it was great-because the army of America was of course paid for by the French and there were nearly as many French soldiers outside and a French fleet besieging it, which is an interesting little fact to take back and annoy people with. You then get the idea: "But that's not really fair. No, that's not it". But that is what happened. Unless you look at and embrace your failures and the

things that went wrong in history, you will ultimately get it wrong. In looking at history, we tend to look at what makes us great. We should look at what made us bad as well and remember the fact that any nation which has been out there could almost drown in its own sins of failure or perhaps straightforward misunderstanding at any point.

Earlier, we heard that when people were in colonial service they thought that they were bringing culture and superiority to the societies which we were imperially controlling. I suggest that India might argue with us that it had a valid culture and a valid history. Its civilised and recorded history is rather better than

## **20 Oct 2011 : Column 418**

ours. It is more interesting and more colourful. India must look at why it allowed this ridiculous nation thousands of miles away to take over the whole sub-continent, which is an equally interesting question.

This comes down to the question of how one takes this information and puts it into a classroom. My noble friend Lady Walmsley got it right when she read out what is prescribed in the history curriculum. It is a huge task, which, if anything, is too big. It is possible only with specialist support. Perhaps we are too ambitious and ask everyone to do rather more than they are capable of. A limit on what you are trying to do might be important. How can we possibly bring this together?

We come back to the fashions in history. People of my age were taught about the 18th and 19th centuries. Now it seems to be World War II and the Tudors-possibly not, but they seem to be the fashionable subjects that come up most often. What is more valid? One could spend a lifetime discussing that question and still not come to a conclusion that means anything. As has been pointed out, they are part of the same continuous street.

I have met professional historians-indeed, the much missed Lord Russell, who I remember would say when you got slightly outside his spectrum, "Oh, not my period". He might have had a rough idea of what was going on but it was not his period. Most professional historians are like that. The arguments about fashion come back to the idea of the marxist versus the revisionist or the post-modernists. All of them basically play with ideas. Then we all have an opinion on the ideas. We have all done a little history or have all done some education, in that most of us have been to school. The idea of fashion comes in and out and always different pressures will be put on people as regards fashion.

We should not read too much into this. The one thing that we can be sure about is that fashion changes. People now attacking the system and the status quo will be attacked because that is what academics and politicians do. They feed off ideas. If history gives us an idea of place and of our place within our country, it will depend on how we teach that and how we connect it.

I shudder to say this with my noble friend Lady Benjamin at my left elbow: the fact is that if you come from an ethnic minority you may have a different sense of what is important in history from, for example, a white hereditary Peer. I am sure that different family connections go back through the system here. I know that my family provided people for the colonial service for quite a long time. There were different perceptions of what you did and what you

should not do. Once again, people can drown in a sort of self-loathing for things that were done in days gone by which they would never do today. That is fashion or perception.

I say to my noble friend who will answer this debate that when we talk about history, we should try to remember that there is not a right answer. There are merely answers that will give some help and understanding. Is it a narrative guide to what happened in the past or is it an academic discipline? On using history to discover other things, I had a moment from my nine year-old daughter, who asked, "What is rape?". I said, "Why do

**20 Oct 2011 : Column 419**

you want to know?". She said, "Boudicca's daughters were raped by the Romans". That was a slightly less worrying reason for being asked that question than many I can think of.

Once you use history for various parts of education, you will always have to make sacrifices. The sacrifice that you will ultimately have to make if you teach more history is whether we should teach more English and maths. We all know that English and maths is appalling and has never been as good as it was-as it always was in my youth and, indeed, my mother's youth, apparently.

English is a very difficult language to learn because of its two origins-French and German, thanks to the fact that the English were ruled over by French kings for several hundred years-which is probably one of the reasons. Perhaps history can help us with that. There is always a problem somewhere in the curriculum. Ever since we have had a national curriculum, there has been a constant cry to spend more time on the pet subject of the person speaking at the time. Recently, we have heard about nutrition, parenting, English is always coming up and now history. We must make a limit on this. History must be fit in as a coherent part of that whole. We will never get it right. A degree of flexibility may be important in the approach but if we say that there is one right way and one wrong way, all we will do is set up another row, which, after all, may be what the professional historians want.

**2.16 pm**

**Baroness Berridge:** My Lords, I thank my noble friend Lord Luke for securing today's important debate. As previously outlined by the noble Baronesses, Lady Bakewell and Lady Walmsley, history is thankfully back in fashion. People are spending time researching their family history on the internet, and "A History of Ancient Britain" and "Mixed Britannia" are just some of the 36 episodes of historical programming available today on BBC iPlayer. I do not approach this debate as a TV producer, professional educationalist or historian but merely as the recipient of inspired history teaching at GCSE and A-level.