

WRITING A TEXTBOOK
A CASE STUDY IN ENGLISH HISTORY

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Every now and then when you go to your mailbox on campus you will find there an examination copy of a new textbook. It's always interesting to browse through the illustrations and the maps, to look at the cover and all the other embellishments that we know are inducements to get the students interested in the topics which we teach, but quickly we pass on to more meaty tests. We tend to turn first to the part of the book which deals with our own academic specialties, to test the author's ability to capture the essentials of the era and to express it in clear and accurate terms. Then we turn to other parts of the book which deal with historical periods and events which our own students find it difficult to grasp, to test the author's ability to make a clear path through difficult terrain. All of us are familiar with the process. After all, we professors are the real "consumers" of textbooks, and our decisions determine whether or not the new book will ever reach our students' hands.

As a textbook consumer I confess to not having given much thought to the process which produced the book. The names of the authors and the publisher might be familiar, but what do I really know about the book that bears their names? What decisions did the authors and publisher have to make? What historical periods did they choose to emphasize and which to pass over quickly? What kind of balance did they strike between a political chronology and the other aspects of life? How will the book lend itself to the classroom? In short, what did the authors bring to the book not only of their scholarly professionalism, but also of their teaching professionalism?

I firmly believe that the textbook is necessary for teaching a foreign history, and also believe that its length should be distinctly less than half the length of all the reading assigned in the course. A brief text serves well both the diligent student who actually reads chapters in advance of classes as the syllabus suggests, and the dilatory and desperate student who reads the book only on the night before the exam. The diligent student needs to have the main lines sketched before he or she meets a wealth of detail, and both the diligent and the desperate student need a brief summary to which to turn after a fuller learning experience. A brief text also serves teachers well. We do want to impart facts about our discipline and give a solid base for understanding. But is it not crucial in a liberal education to present varied readings? Should not the books which we set before the class represent a variety of styles and information and emphasis? How can a student learn to question, if the data is of one style or viewpoint? How can the student begin to evaluate and test what is read, if there is no difference in emphasis and even conflict in fact or viewpoint? How can a student prepare for today's world if he or she does not realize the necessity of harmonizing and synthesizing information gained from a number of different sources? The text by its nature is balanced if it is good, but we as teachers deliberately choose not to be balanced when we choose major historical periods or events as centerpieces for the course, and assign reading to match these more detailed studies. It seems to me that the strong course is one with a variety of reading materials and a variety of types of classroom presentation.

In this the textbook has a vital and necessary role: it is the thread of continuity in the presentation of history; it introduces topics to be presented and summarizes the essence of what will have been learned; it is the reference work which clears up uncertainties; it provides auxiliary devices for learning such as maps; it stimulates interest through good illustration. Above all,

the textbook is the framework into which one can set in context the variety and differences found in the other parts of the course--in the lectures, discussions, and other books to be read. It seems to me that to fulfill any and all of these tasks the text must be relatively brief.

Perhaps when we just began to teach we personally looked for longer and fuller textbooks, because in reality we were teaching ourselves the first few times we offered the course. We needed fuller detail to be sure, and we had the capacity to absorb it because as graduate students we sought the full picture. But the student works on a different level, without the need for elaborate initial information because he or she has less of a conceptual framework in which detail can be mastered.

For the last three and a half years I have had the opportunity to be on the producing as well as the consuming side of textbooks, to apply these personal convictions about what a textbook should be, and actually participate in writing one. Those years have had an intangible but no less valuable result for me both as one of a writing team of five authors and as the consulting editor for the whole project, with the responsibility of knitting together the different authors' sections. Before any of us could write a single word, we had to do a lot of thinking and planning, a process which made us focus not only on the role of textbooks in our profession, but about the more fundamental matter of the teaching process itself. I would like to discuss our thoughts on the book, on texts in general, and on what we feel to be the proper role of textbooks in college level teaching. You may feel that we did not always make the right decisions, but at least you can see how one team dealt with the challenges.

Above all this was a cooperative project in which six persons had a major hand. The first author had the task of setting English history in a context which will make its value to the American student more evident. Since England had the most important contribution to make to the American experience, an introductory essay entitled "The Common Heritage" shows how the process never ended, that England and America have a common heritage after as well as before the American Revolution. My own chapters follow, beginning the English experience with Roman Britain and traversing the middle ages and early modern period to 1660, when the restoration of the monarchy ended the experiments after England's Civil Wars. The third section picks up the story there, working from the Restoration in 1660 through England's emergence as a great power, and concluding with the younger Pitt's assumption of the office of Prime Minister after the revolt of the American colonies. The next author begins with the Napoleonic and Industrial Revolutions, and handles Victorian Britain at the height of world power. The final section concludes the story, from World War I to the present, stressing the difficulties of adapting to a diminished role in world affairs.

The sixth member of the team was our publisher, who, some years ago, had helped put together another text on English history, making him the most experienced of the six. It would be a classical bit of understatement--one that would do an Englishman proud--to say that the six of us thought and planned together. It would be hard to measure the amount of consultation: four conferences in four different cities; enough phone calls within the United States and across the Atlantic to help insure the Bell System a very favorable rate of return; and a file of correspondence which measures over four inches. Perhaps I can best begin the story of the growth and shaping of the project by looking at two different types of contribution, those made by the publisher and those made by the team of academics. I think that we on the academic side tend to associate the publisher with the sale of the finished book, and to be unaware of his role in the planning stage. It is possible, of course, for the publisher merely to copy a successful format. But the real

challenge is to craft a book which will be commercially successful because it answers a real need in the profession.

The first thing a thoughtful publisher brings to the planning stage is an objective understanding of what professors want in a text. If he is capable, the publisher has not only met but also listened to more professors on more campuses than the usual professor could meet in a lifetime of attending conferences. Our publisher had heard many who teach the survey courses in English history ask for a one volume paperback with balance between political chronology and the other aspects of the English experience. There was general agreement that a textbook is needed when introducing any foreign history. Students need a chronological reference book which sets the context for the important themes which their professors choose to develop more fully in class, and the need is there above all because we cannot assume, as our colleagues in American history can, that the student has any real acquaintance with the subject to be studied. The crucial question was the length of the book. The publisher's survey found that most two-year community colleges and a surprisingly large number of the four-year institutions offered only a one-semester introductory survey in English history. Our book thus had to be brief enough to allow the professor in a one-semester survey to couple it with several books on themes he or she would stress, and yet detailed enough not to be superficial in two-semester courses. Therefore, the very nature of course offerings was a major determinant in the length of our book.

The second thing the publisher heard from textbook "consumers" was that a one-volume text was preferred over the multi-volume texts which are common in English history. It is distinctly easier to have as many volumes as there are authors, above all because it is very hard to meld different segments and writing styles into a coherent whole, and not incidentally because the inevitably late member of the team can have his part published last while the volumes finished first are already on the market. It seems to me that the use of writing teams of three to five authors is a present-day reality and necessity. I stand in awe at the achievement of single authors such as the late D. H. Willson, but I believe firmly that the explosion of historical studies in the last ten to twenty years makes it impossible for a single author to even begin to capture the 2000 years of the English experience all alone. But I also believe that a team of authors should not call for a multiplicity of volumes; no matter how diligent a team might be in trying to mesh the different volumes, a task which is impossible when the books are not ready at the same time, the student finds it nearly psychologically impossible to conceive of different books as a whole. The challenge to us was to try to mesh our contributions, and we adopted a uniform chronological infrastructure in each of the chapters to achieve this.

The third thing which our publisher heard was the demand to get away from the "old style" text in English history which concentrated almost exclusively on politics and foreign affairs, and to express instead the richness of England's history and society. We therefore planned to have at least two of the five usual subsections of each chapter deal with non-political themes. A section on high medieval culture, for example, would consider the twelfth-century renaissance, the origins of universities, the religious revival sparked by friars, and Gothic architecture.

The fourth thing the publisher stressed was an emphasis which all of us academics already realized implicitly. The book must devote more space to the more recent periods of English history and treat the earlier eras more summarily. Most of us live with this fact already. At my own university, the two-semester English history survey course breaks at 1689, thus giving me a much different challenge from my colleagues in American history who have just over two centuries to the American Civil War for the first semester and just over a century for the second half. To translate this into publishing terms,

as the author for the first third of the chapters I would have to cover 1700 of the 2000 years from Roman Britain to the present. Even within these chapters there was to be chronological imbalance, because two of my chapters cover only the 131 years from 1529 when Henry VIII's Reformation Parliament began to sit until 1660 when the monarchy was restored after the Civil Wars and Interregnum. There was, of course, an obvious reason for slowing down when the sixteenth century was reached, because the dawn of the early modern era in English history was formative in shaping those attitudes of mind which would be the "intellectual baggage" which colonists in the seventeenth century would bring to the New World. Medievalists have every right to be upset with a relatively brief treatment of their centuries, but in this matter our text is simply mirroring the structure of university courses. There are certain implications to this abbreviated treatment of the medieval era. Of necessity I had to write the four chapters on early Britain to introduce and stress the structures of English society, in order to provide the background for the changes which the other authors would be explaining later. This meant introducing concepts that in the context of English history are as foreign to the students as England is foreign, including the meaning and institution of monarchy, the aristocracy and a society of social classes, the church, feudalism, the law, and cultural expressions in literature and the visual arts.

All of these considerations dictated the format and basic structure of our book: one volume, in paperback to keep the cost low to the student; a more marked emphasis on the modern periods of English history; and a balance between a political chronology and the other aspects of English life. As we planned within these frameworks, we decided to have an introductory chapter on the common heritage of England and America, and then seventeen chronological chapters. Eighteen chapters in a brief text worked out to 7000 words per chapter, plus the illustrations and maps. 7000 words are precious few, and there began our collective and individual agonies. Only 7000 words could be used to explain Henry VIII's Reformation and the flowering of the Elizabethan era up to the Spanish Armada; only 7000 words to deal with the Glorious Revolution, the rise of political parties, and the continental wars fought under Marlborough's generalship; only 7000 words to explain the Industrial Revolution in Britain, the beginnings of governmental reform under Peel, the Parliamentary reform in 1832; only 7000 words to explain modern Britain, its loss of Empire and its courtship with the Common Market, and its economic decline; and only 7000 words to show how similar and interrelated the cultures of Britain and America were and are, before and after the American Revolution.

Now the authors were ready to begin. I would like to choose three attitudes from my own teaching experience and try to show how they translated into the prose of the text. These three aspects were the structures of society, the role of personality in history, and the attempt to capture the spirit of the times.

I have already spoken of the necessity I felt to try to explain the structures of English society. It seems to me that these are crucial in foreign histories. As Americans we have a set of implicit understandings which aid us to understand our own history. But what real chance is there that the student will bring any appreciation whatsoever for remote periods like Alfred the Great's Anglo-Saxon England, or even of media-publicized romantic eras such as Henry VIII's marriages or Glenda Jackson's Elizabeth R? Eight years of teaching English history have convinced me that one labors in vain if the structures of society are ignored. What does the "Reformation" mean to a student? The instructor has to break it down into analytical pieces so that the student who is used to modern-day religious pluralism can begin to understand the implications of substituting one faith for another. If as a teacher I help them to isolate the differences in doctrine between Sir Thomas More's Catholicism and William Tyndale's Lutheranism and John Knox's Calvinism which became England's Puritanism, and then compare them all to the state religion of Henry VIII's and

Elizabeth's Anglicanism, then the students are on the road to understanding. If next we can see what type of church structure each of doctrinal positions called for, and the different types of religious practices that each entailed, then we are really getting somewhere. Then if we put these abstract concepts into a chronological framework of stages, the student has a chance to understand the variety and fullness of the "Reformation." Although I have used the Reformation as an example of structure, the same could be said of the meaning and implications of feudalism, or of monastic life, or of the development of the common law which in due time had such importance for America.

I was eager to include this emphasis on structure because it was the result of much trial and error in my classes, and seemed to make complicated remote periods easier for students to grasp. But I quickly found that this approach could not dictate the structure within the chapters. Most of us were probably first attracted to history because of the compelling stories it told, and it seems to me today that we short-change the students if we become so intent on analyzing that we forget the thread of the story. My initial attempts to arrange the infrastructure of individual chapters in analytical blocks of "political history," "social history," "cultural history" and the like were unsuccessful. This really should have come as no surprise; I have used in class Christopher Hill's book The Century of Revolution in which he adopted such a format and have discovered that the students find it a difficult introduction to seventeenth-century England. So it was back to the drafting board with the final decision that the chapters be organized in a clear chronological narrative style into which analytical asides are worked.

A second area to which I was determined to give much emphasis was the role of personality in English history. So many characters of English history are larger than life-size; who can be neutral about Henry VIII, or Elizabeth I, or Oliver Cromwell once these striking personalities have been introduced? But one of our goals was to work into the book characterizations of English men and women who were not merely political figures. One particular device we adopted was to try to mold people and times together. We come back five times to the development of London, not to fourteenth-century, or sixteenth-century, or eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth-century London, but rather to Chaucer's London, to Shakespeare's London, to Johnson's London, to Victoria's London, and to swinging modern London. There were some problems in dealing with non-political characters. For example, as an example of monastic life I used the career of the Cistercian Abbot of Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire, but I found myself uncomfortable here and elsewhere because of the question of the intellectual honesty of sketching "typical" people. In class one can make the necessary qualifications, but on the other hand the typical can become the bland. Furthermore the extent of characterization was extremely limited by the stringent page and word requirements. Our hope is that we introduced enough different types of English men and women to give the classroom teacher a springboard for fuller characterizations.

A third area of emphasis was the attempt to capture the spirit of the times, that curious blend of intangibles which gives a particular era flavor and distinction. We tried to do this in many places through literary figures, because literature is the mirror of man's reflection on his life and times. What is there about Chaucer's England or Shakespeare's England that sketches out bold new lines which English life was taking? Another device for stressing the spirit of the times was the choice of a particular class or rank of society whose particular importance spiced and flavored the period: the aristocracy in feudal centuries and again in the early eighteenth century; the business types who were Elizabethan sea dogs such as Drake or who led the Industrial Revolution like Watts; the working class who organized in trade unions and cooperatives to win a fuller place in English society; and the women who as suffragettes struggled for political equality and who as coworkers in English factories began the move to economic equality.

It seems very important to stress as well those teaching strategies which cannot be translated into the fabric of a textbook. Several of us on the writing team make extensive use of audio-visual material in our classes, quite often as part of an inquiry approach in which we try to draw from our students who view the visuals their perceptions of the characteristics of the historical period. The inquiry approach in teaching history, as it has been developed and elaborated in recent years, works particularly well with documents which serve as materials upon which the students can work. A brief text cannot afford the luxury of presenting blocks of contemporary historical documents, nor can there really be profuse illustrations when each half-page of illustration is the equivalent of 250 words of text. Furthermore, the use of inquiry approaches or of other more novel techniques does not seem to work well in a history text. Historians are among the most conservative of all academics in regard to teaching methods and materials, and those of us who work in the history of England feel that we pick up by osmosis the English fear of "innovation." The text then remains rather standard in approach, leaving to the instructor the combination of additional resources and strategies which fit his or her own distinctive teaching style.

Another teaching technique which I use extensively is discussion, talking with the class rather than always at them. This means often the ability to use comparisons with American history and with American manners of acting with which the students are familiar, to point out distinctly English or European differences. At other times a discussion approach means brief snap reviews. One simply does not have space in a text for reviews, nor can one interrupt the narrative of English history to bring in extraneous "foreign" examples for comparative purposes. However we did incorporate one element of review into the book: individual segments of about 1500 words which occur five times throughout the book. As teachers we felt that a foreign history with 2000 years of events called for reflective moments when the student would be encouraged to step back from the flow of history to see "where we are now." These "stock-takings," as we termed the breaks, occur at the end of the section on medieval England, at 1660, at 1783 after the American Revolution, in the middle of Victorian England after the Industrial Revolution, and at the end of the book. Because these sections stand at the end of and outside the main chronological narrative, they are organized more analytically. Thus, for example, the student is invited to consider the state of development of government at the end of the medieval era, the shifting role of religion after the Civil Wars, the Empire after the loss of the American colonies, the social classes and their style of life in Victorian England, and the England of 1977 at Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee.

Now that the book is complete, we who shaped it are amazed at the number and variety of decisions which were required--teaching, interpretative, organizational, aesthetic, to name only a few. The whole process was much more complex than any of us envisaged at the outset. Of course we hope the book will please our fellow teaching professionals and help their students learn and appreciate English history. But in the process we have had a valuable experience--a reflective study and appreciation of the uses, strengths, and limitations of the various resources which form a part of our teaching.

It will be a sad day when any of us become fully satisfied with the courses we offer. To stop wanting to improve is to stop wanting to grow. As a part of a writing team I was forced to think about the role I play as teacher and the role the text plays. I hope that this recounting of our thoughts and decisions will provoke you to make a new commitment to rethink and replan your own courses, so that both of us may live up to the challenges to bring the best we have to our students.