

"THE CRAFT OF HISTORY": TEACHING HISTORY AS A SKILL

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Let it be said at once that there is no mystery about writing history, nothing esoteric or cabalistic. There is no formula for historical writing. There are no special techniques or special requirements, except the technique of writing clearly and the requirements of honesty and common sense. It is useful to have special training, as it is useful to have special training for almost anything you wish to do well . . . but special training is by no means essential, and most of the great historians have been innocent.¹

Henry Steele Commager's comment is a disturbing thought for many of today's professional historians. Many students have the capacity to write good history, but most of them never have the opportunity for the special training that could bring such talent to the fore. At most institutions, for example, only upper division history majors get even a smattering of such training, if any at all. Many have to wait until graduate school. It makes more sense, instead, to give the students an opportunity as freshmen to learn about the skills to write good history.

We propose to describe such a freshmen-level history course entitled "The Craft of History" which does this and much more. This course has been a regular part of the history curriculum at Thomas More College for the past five years. While developed conceptually by the department as a whole, Raymond G. Hebert was the first to teach it in several consecutive semesters. Two years ago, Carl Trocki also began teaching the course. Since the course is offered every semester, each has had the opportunity to teach it on several occasions.

To begin with, the course is ultimately designed to introduce interested students to history as an intellectual discipline. At the same time, it helps the student gain and develop some of the skills and attitudes required for the effective handling of the situations and problems that all college students face both within their academic careers and beyond. Since the course provides a blend of the necessary skills and some content, it is absolutely essential for beginning history majors. It is also valuable for other students, regardless of major, because, in addition to either providing or polishing the reading, writing, and research skills that will be used so frequently during their academic careers, it shows them how and why the study of history can be a meaningful part of their liberal arts education. Within these purposes, the specific goals are: (1) to show the student how written history is created and what problems historians face in creating it; (2) to develop in the student the ability to read historical works critically; (3) to improve the student's skills in research, organization, and writing.

The course can be developed in many different ways, depending on the strengths and particular interests of the instructors assigned to the course. When Hebert taught it last, for example, his background in modern European history and European historiography as well as many years of success in using the biographical approach with underclassmen dominated his thinking about how the course should be put together. He structured the course in four parts. Part I was entitled "Useful Skills and the Problem of Writing." During the first few weeks, he distributed handouts and the class discussed them. The handouts focused on such topics as: "How to take notes and use a textbook," "What to find in and how to use the library," research paper techniques and their organization and format, the writing of business letters and resumes, and "How to prepare for and take an interview."

Part II covered the "Introduction to Historical Study." Hebert used this part of the course to correct the many misconceptions that exist about history as written and dealt with academically and professionally. Selected chapters of Understanding History Through the American Experience² by Charles Poinsett and Bernard Norling served as a catalyst for such issues as "the definition of history," "can history be objective?" "primary and secondary sources," "causation," "historiography," and "philosophy of history."

Having moved in this direction, the class proceeded from the introduction to methodology and philosophy of history into a general study of such methods for interpreting past history as "the role of ideas," "organizations," "economic and technological factors," "man and his physical environment," and "Is History the Work of Great Men?" At this point the class moved to the more particular with a focus on one of these methods, the art of biography. General impressions might tend to indicate that most students consider the writing of biography as nothing more than "a mechanical process of arranging information so that it tells the story of a life." In reality, however, it appears necessary to prove that Paul Murray Kendall is probably more accurate in describing the complexity of the exercise with his definition of biography, as "the craft-science-art of the impossible."³

With these divergent definitions in mind, the class examined four different styles of biography, which introduced the range of problems inherent in the biographical approach. A well-written example of the chronological narrative is Elizabeth I by J.E. Neale.⁴ On the other hand, the problems approach is handled effectively in any number of books published by D.C. Heath or Robert Krieger. In one case, the class examined Marc Raeff's Peter the Great Changes Russia.⁵ Another possibility is Denis Mack-Smith's Garibaldi,⁶ a part of the Prentice-Hall "Great Lives Observed Series." In the words of the publisher:

Each volume in the series views the character and achievement of a great world figure in three perspectives--through his own words, through the opinions of his contemporaries and through respective judgments--thus combining the intimacy of autobiography, the immediacy of eyewitness observation and the objectivity of modern scholarship.⁷

Finally, Forum Press, among others, publishes a series of short biographies especially written for undergraduates and designed to supplement any textbook that might be used. Generally under twenty pages, these comparatively inexpensive sketches manage to provide a basic chronological portrait, some new insights, and an introduction to the politics, society, and history surrounding the individual. The class used Richard Kuisel's The Grandeur of Charles De Gaulle.⁸

Simultaneously, while the students were steeping themselves in the readings, Hebert delivered a series of accompanying background lectures on each individual. These lectures are basically designed to supplement the particular book being read where it may be weakest either in the chronological or historiographical direction. Moreover, if the individuals are selected carefully, this segment could well serve as "advertisement" or preview for other courses being taught in the history curriculum, such as, in this case, Modern Europe before or since 1815.

Early in the semester each student was asked to select a hero or villain of his own. He then began researching and organizing materials towards the eventual goal of writing a biographical research paper. All assignments, such as library research, sample file card use, footnoting, and bibliography, are directed to that purpose. And, during the final month, the class jointly examined and discussed chapters in Jacques Barzun's and Henry Graff's The

Modern Researcher⁹ and James D. Lester's Writing Research Papers.¹⁰ Hebert expected the students to glean from them the many suggestions and rules therein. Along the way he enforced a set of deadlines so that the student could experience the apparently all-too-rare opportunity to develop a paper as a full semester-long project. At least two drafts were to be submitted and the final copy of 10-15 pages served as the final examination for the course.

Having taught the course on four different occasions to majors, non-majors, and continuing education students alike, Hebert found that all three groups generally reacted favorably and found the course to be valuable. Many noted on their evaluation forms, for example, that they appreciated the "skills" components for giving them an orientation rarely provided. They felt that all too often it was assumed that the student knew how to take notes, prepared for exams, use a library, and put together a major research paper. For those students who had not as yet taken the English courses which featured some of these things, the experience was deemed invaluable. Even for those who had learned the basics of writing a research paper, this course was probably valuable because of the different perspective and the reinforcement so vital to good writing.

Carl A. Trocki, Asian and Modern American specialist, meanwhile, has recently begun teaching the course as well and has developed a different but equally effective format. By contrast, his major variation is a thematic one. But the basic objectives regarding the development of historical skills and the nature of historical study in general remain the same. Likewise, he also uses the selection of readings from Norling's and Poinsett's Understanding History Through the American Experience and James Lester's Writing Research Papers.

His thematic shift is to the general area of modern urban history. The objective is to research and write a 10-15 page term paper on an event which occurred in a particular city. After the introductory lectures and discussion of handouts dealing with note-taking, reading history books, and the use of research guides and aids, the students begin a series of assignments leading to the production of the paper. Trocki presents students with a list of cities and years (e.g., Chicago-1968; Detroit-1949; Bangkok-1973, etc.).

Since it is vital that students become familiar with the general background of the city and the events of that year, Trocki requires them to do two preparatory exercises: a chronology and a profile. The first is nothing more than a chronological list of the 20-30 major "news" stories of that year, as gathered from local newspapers, yearbooks, periodicals, and other indices. The second, a profile, is simply a one-page description of the basic geographical, economic, political, and social features of the city. Not only do these assignments give the student some of the background knowledge necessary for beginning serious research, they also allow the opportunity to become acquainted with some of the more general research aids--almanacs, encyclopedias, newspaper indices, etc.

Once these are completed, students begin the actual research and writing process. Included among the assignments are: (1) hypothesis; (2) working bibliography; (3) outline; (4) first draft; and (5) final draft. In evaluating these, particularly the hypothesis, bibliography, and outline, he finds it helpful to conduct class "seminars" and examine each paper in a general class discussion. This procedure not only aids in the evaluation for the student, but it also provides a climate for the exchange of information and approaches. The atmosphere should approximate that of a community of scholars working together on common problems.

In addition, other readings are assigned to provide general background on modern history and to give examples of the type of study the students are doing. For background, any one of a number of modern history texts could be useful and valuable. The last time Trocki offered this version of the course, he used John Morton Blum's V Was For Victory,¹¹ William E. Leuchtenburg's A Troubled Feast¹² might also be appropriate. Not only do these books provide background, but they are also used to illustrate and practice how to read a history book. He asks students to outline certain chapters, examine the structure of the arguments, and discuss the footnote references. The best book for examples on modern urban history is perhaps Henry Bedford's Trouble Downtown: The Local Context of Twentieth Century America¹³ which provides a series of case studies (Detroit, 1941; Montgomery, 1955; Watts, 1965; among others). These essays allow the student to become familiar with professional examples of the type of study they are doing.

One of the most stimulating aspects of this approach was that students soon realized that they were writing history which no one else had written before. They were very often working with primary sources--newspapers, government documents, and personal accounts. In some cases, they proved most creative in finding problems of historical importance, even going so far as to seek out and interview participants in attempts to integrate oral history into their projects.

Thus, the same course taught by different professors can have quite varied approaches. Any theme can serve as a focal point for such a course. It depends on the interests and inclinations of the instructor.

In conclusion, two primary lessons could be emphasized. First, individual idealism or perpetual pedagogical optimism notwithstanding, the instructor of such a course must never forget that the course can at best polish or develop skills rather than originate or create them. As history instructors, we must be able to assume that the student will be able to write a grammatically correct sentence and even a coherent, thematic paragraph while, at the same time, be able to abstract ideas and information from historical works in at least a rudimentary way. The course cannot become a basic course in how to write if its objectives are to be achieved. David N. Keightley has expressed the dilemma most succinctly. In his equivalent to "The Craft of History," he said, "the course was still primarily taught by specialists in history. We were not trained as English teachers and the course clearly revealed to all of us that knowing how to criticize bad writing practice is not the same as knowing how to teach good writing habits."¹⁴

More positively, however, each among us who has worked with budding, novice historians knows that, while much of their work can be exciting in bringing forth a genuine historical sense, their effort is generally raw and unpolished. Clearly, in the process of studying and appreciating the content matter of history, it is possible to develop historical-mindedness and a basic frame of reference. And it would certainly appear to be more fruitful to teach these students in the early years of their undergraduate careers the basic writing, organizational, and analytical skills necessary to write good history. Carl G. Gustavson has said of this process that it "is created in much the same fashion as other skills are developed, by practicing them until they become second nature. No formula has been developed, or ever will be, whereby proficiency is suddenly achieved."¹⁵ We should routinely start developing all of the necessary skills that the novice historian will need for survival during that all important freshman year. It can be done.

NOTES

- ¹Henry Steele Commager, The Nature and Study of History (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Books, Inc., 1965), 37.
- ²(Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976).
- ³Paul Murray Kendall, The Art of Biography (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1965).
- ⁴J.E. Neale, Queen Elizabeth I: A Biography (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1957).
- ⁵Marc Raeff, Peter the Great Changes Russia, 2nd ed. (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1974).
- ⁶Denis Mack-Smith, Garibaldi (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1971).
- ⁷Ibid., Preface.
- ⁸Richard Kuisel, The Grandeur of Charles DeGaulle (St. Charles, Missouri: Forum Press, 1976).
- ⁹Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff, The Modern Researcher, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1977).
- ¹⁰James D. Lester, Writing Research Papers A Complete Guide, 3rd ed. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1980).
- ¹¹John Morton Blum, V Was For Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1976).
- ¹²William E. Leuchtenburg, A Troubled Feast: American Society Since 1945, Revised Edition (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1979).
- ¹³Henry Bedford, Trouble Downtown: The Local Context of Twentieth Century America (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1978).
- ¹⁴David N. Keightley, "Improving Student Writing Skills in a History Lecture Course," The History Teacher, XII (February, 1979), 176-177.
- ¹⁵Carl G. Gustavson, A Preface to History (New York: McGraw-Hill Co., Inc., 1955), 10-11.