

## REVIEWS

Paul Gagnon, ed. *Historical Literacy: The Case for History in American Education*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1989. Pp. xiii, 338. Cloth, \$24.95; paper, \$10.95.

In 1987 seventeen "outstanding" scholars and teachers formed the Bradley Commission on History in Schools to "explore the conditions that contribute to or impede, the effective teaching of history in American schools." In addition, they formed the commission "to make recommendations on the curricular role of history," and to "improve the teaching of history as the core of social studies in the schools."

*Historical Literacy: The Case for History in American Education* contains the complete report of the commission and seventeen essays by leading historians and teachers about the major issues surrounding the teaching of history. The essays center around five themes: "Curriculum Reform," "The Changing Role of History in Schools," "History and Liberal Education," "Old and New Patterns of History," and "Towards Better History in Schools."

In general the essays are well-written and informative. This reviewer was particularly interested in the philosophical outlooks of such heavyweights as William McNeill, Gordon Craig, Theodore Rabb, Michael Kammen, and Gary Nash. But on the whole, the essays are disappointing, not because they lack information, but because they fail to address the salient issues with specific remedies.

The main problem of this book of essays lies with the focus of the report of the Bradley Commission. Because the commissioners took into account every conceivable framework and teaching tool in their attempt to please everyone, the result is a set of guidelines so general that they fail to address the major concerns of teachers who have to impart historical knowledge to their students on a daily basis. The commission's primary mission was to underline the importance of history as a subject that should be put back into elementary and secondary school curriculums across the country. It is disappointing that the professional heavyweights on the commission did not develop a series of model curriculum units in American, European, and world history that could be tested in pilot schools at various grade levels across the country.

There were two reasons why the commission did not address specific curriculum issues. In the first place, with a few exceptions, the commissioners are scholars whose major concern is research rather than teaching. Most of these high powered scholars have not taught a college history survey course in years and they certainly have little familiarity with the courses taught in the elementary and secondary schools.

I fear, however, the problem has deeper roots. There is a lack of consensus about the appropriate content of any survey history course. This is because the new social history with its emphasis on bottom-up rather than top-down history has revolutionized the way in which historians view peasants, slaves, minorities, laborers, and women. As marvelous as this history is, it is extremely difficult to incorporate it into traditional survey courses that emphasize the political, military, and economic achievements of great men.

Several of the essayists in this book (though interestingly not members of the Bradley Commission) address the question of synthesizing the old and new history. Thomas Bender faces this problem directly when he admits: "Few if any leading historians today are ready to propose the terms of a new synthesis of American history . . . we have many wonderful pieces but little sense of how they form a national history that can be narrated in a connected, compelling way." Bender's solution is to consciously relate the experience of these groups "to the larger historical process of human interaction in the formation of public culture." What Bender means by this is unclear to this reviewer, although he hopes that in time "teachers in the schools will have textbooks that do the work of synthesis."

Fortunately for Bender and others the newest college texts are grappling with this issue. Two of the latest texts co-authored by Mary Beth Norton and Gary Nash (whose essay in this volume on the democratization of American history is a delightful piece) are superb in their synthesis of the red, white, black, male, and female cultures of colonial America. These texts are less successful in reconciling the old and new history for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries because most of the new social history has concentrated on seventeenth and eighteenth-century America.



So where do we go from here? I have two suggestions. First, I think we need to know much more about the way history has been taught in the past. Scholars might build upon the work of the late Hazel Hertzberg whose essay on a "Century of Reform" proposals dating back to 1892 puts the report of the Bradley Commission into historical perspective. Though Hertzberg has detailed here and elsewhere the concerns of earlier generations of scholars and commissioners about the role of history in the schools, we need to know more about the way the *actual* teaching of history has been influenced by the earlier commissions.

Thus far the research in this area is abysmal. Neo-conservatives such as William Bennett, Lynne Cheney, and Chester Finn have set up an idealistic past against which they measure the current geographic and historical ignorance of today's students. Particularly fallible in this regard is Diane Ravitch's essay on "The Plight of History in American Schools." Skirting criticisms of her research about the "erosion of historical understanding among Americans," Ravitch argues "whether their counterparts in the past knew less, is beside the point." With friends like this on the Bradley Commission, who needs enemies?

My second suggestion is that we form a successor to the Bradley Commission whose major task would be to develop a model core curriculum in world, European, and American history encompassing grades K through graduate school. The panels should be composed of college, high school, and grammar school teachers of history who would work only with those university professors who are committed to teaching. For example, Gary B. Nash, an excellent scholar as well as teacher, might establish several of these panels under his mission as associate director of the UCLA/NEH National Center for History in the Schools. The new commission's primary task should be to synthesize the old and new histories with specific lessons and materials including texts in every area and for all grade levels. Perhaps a new *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* could be devised that would avoid the obvious elitist biases of some of the more recent works.

I know this suggestion sounds utopian and unrealistic, but until we develop some type of consensus on what we should be teaching in the classroom, our seventeen-year olds in the year 2020 will be as confused about the past as they are in 1990.

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Richard Marius. *A Short Guide to Writing About History*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman & Company, 1989. Pp. xv, 261. Paper, \$7.95.

Anthony Brundage. *Going to the Sources: A Guide to Historical Research and Writing*. Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1989. Pp. x, 79. Paper, \$5.95.

Overheard in the hallway outside of 201 Murkland -

Susan: "I heard we would have to do a lot of writing in this course but an essay, a book review and a paper! The prof either has a lot of time on her hands or she hates her grad assistant."

Sam: "Yes, Susan, you are going to have to work for a change. But, Dr. Wright did tell us about a couple of very useful books on historical research and writing. Let's head to the bookstore and check them out."

Would that we all had more Sams than Susans in our classes but we can at least hope that Susan follows Sam's advice and does "check out" these books. As Richard Marius writes in his preface,

In most history courses, students are required to write papers to demonstrate both a command of the facts and the ability to think about them. They are seldom given any formal instruction in how to do the special kind of writing that the study of history demands. They are expected to pick up this skill almost by osmosis. For years history teachers have ritually complained that their students do not write well. Only recently have