

Teachers, Your Countries Need You - history, nation and world war, 2014-18

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Introduction and summary

A slightly shorter version of this article was published in *Race Equality Teaching*, winter 2013/14. The article begins by recalling key points about the war made by Lord Parekh in a House of Lords debate in December 2013. It continues with notes on some of the controversies about history teaching which have arisen in early 2014 in relation to a provocative article in the Daily Mail by Michael Gove. It concludes by introducing two new educational resources – a project based at the Institute of Education, London, and a website featuring the work of the Swiss artist Eugène Burnand (1860–1921).

The four images below give an idea of Burnand's style and subject-matter.



In the last four years of his life Burnand created 104 portraits of people who had taken part, or were still taking part, in the first world war. The portraits depicted an immense diversity in terms of ethnicity, race, geographical origin, age, physical appearance, military rank and religious tradition. When published in a book in 1922 each was accompanied by a short meditation by Burnand's nephew, a military historian. The portraits and meditations are all now available at <http://www.eugene-burnand.com/> and there are English translations of the original French.

Concerns

In the House of Lords on 18 December 2013, Lord Parekh noted that plans were in hand to commemorate the centenary of the first world war, and that the government and various other organisations had provided 'a syllabus for a wide range of activities that should be undertaken'. He welcomed the syllabus, he said, but warned also that he had major concerns. What would commemorating the war involve in practice? And how should the commemoration take place? Answers to these questions are of interest and relevance to, amongst others, everyone concerned with issues of equality and diversity in education.

Explaining his concerns, Lord Parekh said:

The war needs to be placed in a context. We need to ask how the war started. How did it become a world war, so that it was not just an ordinary war but had to be given a special name: the Great War or, after 1939, the First World War? What were we doing in the war? How did we use the war to break up the Ottoman Empire? How did the Germans intervene in the war in order to urge the Ottomans to declare jihad against Britain and France, while we in turn asked the Arabs to revolt against the Ottoman Empire and change the geography of the Middle East to as it is now?

... We could use the event to exorcise the fascination with war that has sadly been an important part of our psyche. We have more statues devoted to military generals and heroes than many other countries. It is about time that we asked ourselves whether there are some elements of our national psyche that need to be addressed more carefully than we have done so far.

Lord Parekh went on to make several further points which are relevant for anyone teaching and talking in schools about the first world war:

... We need to commemorate the fact that the war was a collaborative effort. We were able to survive, maintaining our liberties and prosperity, because of the enormous contribution of the Commonwealth troops. Indians alone contributed substantially: 1,250,000 Indians were involved, of whom about 72,000 died, 12,000 won medals and about 11 won the Victoria Cross.

The country known as India in 1914-18, it is of course crucially important to remember in the current context, included not only the country now known as India but also the countries now known as Pakistan and Bangladesh. Lord Parekh stressed therefore that the whole South Asian community in UK should be involved in the planning and execution of projects commemorating the war. At present, he remarked, 'the whole thing seems to be operating over their heads'. Children and young people in Britain from South Asian backgrounds need, he said, to 'grow up knowing that they were part of this country's history long before they arrived ... after the second world war'.

In the light of Lord Parekh's remarks, and of other speeches in the House of Lords debate in which he was taking part, it is relevant to note that South Asian involvement in the first world war is vividly illustrated in newly digitised materials at the British Library. The materials in question are extracts from letters written by South Asian soldiers serving in France, and comments on them by military censors. Amongst many other topics, the letters refer to classic South Asian texts about good and evil. 'Having seen this war,' writes one man, 'all that has been written in *Mahabharat* and in the *Ramayan* is altogether true.'¹

¹ Quoted in 'The last post' by Daljit Nagra, *The Guardian*, 22 February 2014. There is substantial information about Commonwealth troops at <http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/themes/race-empire-and-colonial-troops>.

History teaching

Debate about history teaching in schools was provoked by a newspaper article by Michael Gove in early January 2014.² The Israeli scholar Avi Shlaim castigated Gove's views as 'narrow, nationalistic and blinkered'.³ War is too serious a business to be left to soldiers, he remarked, and military history is too serious to be left to politicians such as Gove. 'When politicians pontificate about the past,' he said further, 'it is rarely in the disinterested pursuit of a complex truth'. He continued:

For Gove this was a plainly just war, a patriotic war in defence of the homeland and freedom, a war forced on Britain by imperial Germany's 'aggressively expansionist war aims'. British soldiers, according to Gove, went to war in 1914 to defend 'the western liberal order' ... In Michael Gove's simple view of the slide to war, the Germans were the villains and the British soldiers were the heroes ... Debates about the origins of wars have a habit of becoming highly politicized and very heated. The reason is that they cut to the core of a nation's image of itself as well as its image of the enemy.

The stories that nations tell about themselves, like epic poems, are filled with heroes and villains and stirring events ... Nationalist versions of history, whether British or German, French or Russian, Serbian or Austro-Hungarian, have one thing in common: they tend to be simplistic, selective, self-righteous and self-serving. Nationalist movements always re-write history. A nation has been defined as a group of people united by hatred of their neighbours and a mistaken view of the past. 'Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation,' observed Ernest Renan, the 19th-century French philosopher.

Historians who challenge the reigning orthodoxy about the past, Shlaim pointed out, frequently arouse the ire of the political establishment of the day. For the task of the historian, he emphasised, is not 'to buttress nationalist narratives but to subject the claims of both sides to rigorous scrutiny in the light of all the available evidence and to discard those notions, however deeply cherished, that do not stand up to such scrutiny'. 'Indeed,' he continued, 'it is the duty of the historian to hold a mirror to society, to convey uncomfortable home truths, and to speak truth to power. From an educational point of view, the subversive role of history is thus of supreme importance.'

The subversive role of history entails providing and exploring a range of interpretations and narratives. For example, it has been claimed that the 14-18 war was 'a savage industrial slaughter perpetrated by a gang of predatory

² Michael Gove: 'Why does the Left insist on belittling true British heroes?', *Daily Mail*, 2 January 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2532930/MICHAEL-GOVE-Why-does-Left-insist-belittling-true-British-heroes.html>

³ Avi Shlaim: 'The perils and pitfalls of patriotic history', *Open Democracy*, 7 February 2014, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/avi-shlaim/perils-and-pitfalls-of-patriotic-history>.

imperial powers, locked in a deadly struggle to capture and carve up territories, markets and resources'.⁴ Germany, says the same author:

... was the rising industrial power and colonial Johnny-come-lately of the time, seeking its place in the sun from the British and French empires. The war erupted directly from the fight for imperial dominance in the Balkans, as Austria-Hungary and Russia scrapped for the pickings from the crumbling Ottoman empire. All the ruling elites of Europe, tied together in a deathly quadrille of unstable alliances, shared the blame for the murderous barbarism they oversaw. The idea that Britain and its allies were defending liberal democracy, let alone international law or the rights of small nations, is simply absurd.

Further, the subversive role of history entails identifying current agendas underlying narratives about the past. The 3D Eye educational consultancy writes inspiringly in this respect about the responsibilities of teachers:

... For the sake of our children and our children's children, let's learn from history. Let's admit our mistakes and let's stop letting people who don't know what they're talking about (or have a reactionary ideological agenda they wish to impose) dictate the way in which our children should learn. Let's be less obsessed with covering a predetermined curriculum and with relentless cramming for high-stakes tests and exams. Let's ensure that our children enjoy history at school to the extent that they want to study it even when they are on their own with books and the Internet, and even if they choose not to opt for the GCSE course in history. Let's enable them to develop an enjoyment of history for its own sake.⁵

Calls such as Gove's for patriotic teaching about the 14-18 war often include attacks on poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, and on the use which teachers make of them. Katherine Edwards writes:

Since 1918 we have certainly reconsidered the 'old lie', referred to in Owen's *Dulce Et Decorum Est* poem, that prompted the jubilant crowds to cheer in Europe's capitals in 1914 and propelled so many young men to the recruiting stations. The fact that we now have a European Union, a mature framework for international law, a United Nations Organisation, international war crimes tribunals and a Geneva Convention, shows how much has been achieved since and as a result of the two world wars.

Wilfred Owen's popularity in modern times reflects our reappraisal of our readiness as human societies to resort to violence to solve our

⁴ Seumas Milne: 'First world war: an imperial bloodbath that's a warning, not a noble cause', *The Guardian*, 8 January 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/08/first-world-war-imperial-bloodbath-warning-noble-cause>

⁵ 3D Eye Consultancy: 'The Teaching of History: the debate continues', 30 January 2014, <http://3diassociates.wordpress.com/2013/12/30/the-teaching-of-history-the-debate-continues/>

disputes. Although we still have far to go, we no longer hand out white feathers or shoot deserters or demonise foreign conscripts as baby killers. Dismissing Owen for being unrepresentative of his time is like dismissing Mary Wollstonecraft for being unrepresentative of her contemporaries on gender relations. He was ahead of his time.⁶

Certainly, Katherine Edwards acknowledges, it would be a poor history teacher who would regard the sole purpose of teaching World War One to be to impress upon young people the horrors of war. But equally, she adds, it would be a poor history teacher who failed to engage pupils with the reality of the living conditions in the trenches of the Western Front, and with the injuries caused by mechanised warfare and with the psychological and physical effects on soldiers. She concludes:

There has been much call for a genuine debate on World War One. Yet the real threat to such a debate is not from great poets or from comedy shows. It is from a government, backed by large sections of the media, who failed to transform the history curriculum into a vehicle for inculcating national pride, but is now, for political reasons and from a position of ignorance both of war and of history, attempting to use the centenary of World War One for this purpose instead ... Wilfred Owen should certainly not be presented as the spokesman for every British Tommy, but his protest against the sanitisation of war is as relevant and urgent as ever.

A positive project

In the light of the debates outlined above, it is relevant to recall the Battlefield Tours Programme, currently taking shape.⁷ The programme's key challenges, write its directors, will be 'to help teachers and their pupils to engage with different and increasingly controversial interpretations, to think critically about the war's causes, to try to understand how the war was perceived at the time, and to go beyond some of the popular myths that have since emerged'.

As a start, a national survey has been made into how the first world war is taught in schools. The results of the data analysis will give an indication of the extent to which teachers feel confident enough to tackle some of the complexities of the war in the classroom and should also reveal the degree to which pupils are given opportunities to pursue their study of the First World War through historical enquiry and whether they are given access to a sufficient variety of sources to allow for detailed and meaningful investigation.

⁶ Katherine Edwards: 'In defence of the war poets', *Left Central*, 5 January 2014, <http://leftcentral.org.uk/2014/01/05/in-defence-of-the-war-poets-2/>

⁷ There is further information at <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/study/87073.html>. For a topical article see Jerome Freeman and Stuart Foster: 'WW1: let's not go over the top', Institute of Education blog, 9 January 2014, <http://ioelondonblog.wordpress.com/2014/01/09/teaching-wwi-lets-not-go-over-the-top/>. There is information about the project entitled *The First World War in the Classroom* at the University of Exeter at <http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/history/research/projects/ww1intheclassroom/>.

The programme will move beyond a simple process of handing on a fixed narrative to young people and simply telling pupils what they should know. Rather, they want pupils and teachers to ask difficult questions and actively find things out. 'A really positive outcome of the project,' the project directors say, 'will be achieved when pupils and teachers share the results of their genuine historical enquiries with their schools and local communities'.

Portraits of participants

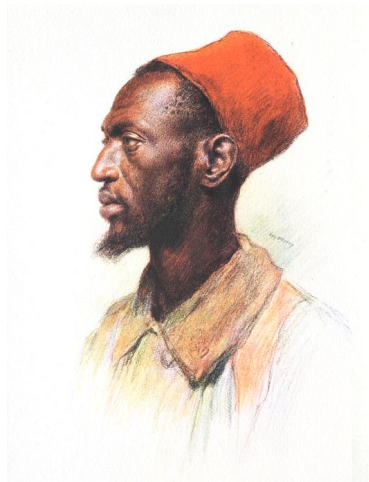


Teaching of the kind advocated by the Battlefield Tours Programme will benefit enormously from encounters with the creative arts. In this connection a remarkable resource has recently been made available on the internet. The resource is intended for the general public, not specifically for schools. But clearly it can be the basis for many kinds of educational enquiry.



Eugène Burnand (1850-1921) was well-known in his native Switzerland during his lifetime. He painted alpine and pastoral scenes, and also scenes from history and the Bible. In the last four years of his life he created a remarkable collection of 104 portraits of people who had taken part, or were still taking part, in the first world war. Most of his subjects were in the French armed services; some, however, were from other countries in the Alliance, including Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. Overall, there was an immense

diversity in terms of military rank, and in terms of ethnicity, race, geographical origin, age, physical appearance, service record and religious tradition.



The 104 portraits are now available on the internet and constitute a fascinating educational resource.⁸ Each is accompanied by a poetic meditation written by Burnand's nephew, who was a military historian and a captain in the French army. Alongside each meditation in the original French there is an English translation.

Many of the translations have been made by Shirley Darlington, who writes:

It will be obvious to anyone looking at the portraits that the artist was a man of great humanity, who captures the personalities he has depicted with great sensitivity and skill. The commentaries alongside, written by his nephew Robert, contain some outdated assumptions common at the time and some expressions describing physical attributes, characteristics and behaviour which are unacceptable today. The translations have recognised this by choosing words which maintain respect for the subjects, whilst honouring the sacrifice made in the First World War by the many different nationalities portrayed so faithfully here.

Indeed, Robert Burnand's language is in places dated and some of the sentiments do not fit comfortably with modern perspectives. But the commentaries reflect well how many people in Europe saw the world and its peoples a hundred years ago and poignantly show a soldier doing his patient and passionate best to make sense of, and see something positive in, the terrible events in which large parts of the world had been caught up.

⁸ The website was created by Dr Doug Jenkinson, a retired family doctor who is a distant relative of Eugène Burnand through his maternal grandmother. The URL is <http://www.eugene-burnand.com/>.



Burnand's drawing materials were Wolff pencils, enhanced with Hardtmuth hard pastels. He drew the portraits in three main locations, Paris, Montpellier and Marseille, and most of his subjects were recuperating before returning to duty or to their homes. All would have been deeply affected by their experiences and he captured their moods with consummate skill. He drew them up close, knee to knee, having got to know them well first. With many, indeed, he developed strong bonds of friendship and mutual trust and respect. All were offered payment for sitting but some refused payment as they considered it an honour. Most are identified by name on the website, some just by rank or unit, or by country of origin. Burnand's friend Louis Gillet, an eminent art historian and critic, commented that the circumstances of the sittings were reminiscent of a confessional.

The following brief extracts from the meditations give a sense of their humanity, observation and mood.

'Tall and spare, with his slender face made even thinner by the rough life he leads, but with a direct gaze under his bushy eyebrows, deepset eyes alight with the burning flame of faith; thus the protestant chaplain appears to us, just as he appeared to thousands upon thousands of soldiers during the hard five years' length of the course of the war ...'

'Calm and gentle, with a melancholy expression, a bit dejected, this horseman has nothing aggressive about him, nor is he a brawler. He is Algerian, reserved in temperament, of Spanish origin, and he does not forget it. He is a fine soldier, nevertheless, and full of spirit, but without letting anything show in his face of the fervour which inspires him ...'

'Allah alone is great, chants the shrill voice of the muezzin, floating over the roofs of the white buildings of Tunis. Allah is great, when he orders faithfulness to oaths. From the old city they came in crowds, the sons of Mohammed, whom our enemies hoped would revolt or prove treacherous. But these were not slaves, anxious to shake off their yoke, nor auxiliaries on the lookout for the first sign of weakness. They were brave soldiers whose hearts were without subterfuge ...'

'A warrior by race and tradition, for whom there is no other reason to live, since the world began. And he fights in the army of the Emperor of India, with the same valour deployed by his ancestors in the wars they conducted over the centuries. Though he wears the British uniform and the turned up hat, his chinstrap underlines a unique and oriental face, prominent cheekbones, narrowed eyes, stiff moustache, a mongolian face recalling nearby China. The Ghurkhas have given England a magnificent contingent, never weary, always ready, and up for the harshest tasks. On the high plateaus of India, in the oldest landscapes in the world, it seems they drank at an endless spring of strength, vitality and courage ...'

'Children will learn about and engage with history in different ways,' says 3D Eye in the article cited above. 'Some children will get chronology by osmosis. Some children will engage in history because of facts and chronology but not all. Some children will become interested in history because of other factors – such as a link to a period of history that is prevalent in their locality, or a trip to a castle, or by seeing an old object hanging about in their grandparents' houses. We all learn in different ways, and we all learn at different speeds too.'



Many children, it may be added, will learn history by attending to materials such as Eugène Burnand's portraits of real people, and by attending to the meditations and commentaries written by his nephew. In such ways children may come to enjoy and love history, too.

Concluding note

I must apologise to the Germans, writes Simon Jenkins. He explains:

They are about to suffer an avalanche of often sickening Great War memorabilia, largely at their expense. It will be the British at their worst: sanctimonious, self-congratulatory, worshipping at the tomb of the unknown, awful German. The centenary of the first world war is already flooding the television schedules before the date of its outbreak in autumn 1914. History bestseller lists focus on little else: there are no fewer than 8,000 titles on the subject. War magazines

cram newsstands. Churches will fill with candles for the fallen. Children carry flowers 'of reflection and remembrance'. The horror, the mistakes, the cruelty, the crassness of war will be revived over and over again, 'lest we forget'.⁹

This article, written in early 2014, has recalled some of the thorny issues and challenges which teachers in schools, as they seek to avoid being sanctimonious and self-congratulatory when dealing with the first world war, are required to handle. The focus has been on teaching in the UK. But the challenges spread across the whole globe, for truly it was a world war, as Lord Parekh stressed in the speech with which the article began. Now as always, as Lord Kitchener didn't quite say, 'Teachers, your countries need you!'



⁹ Simon Jenkins: 'Germany, I apologise for this sickening avalanche of first world war worship', *The Guardian*, 30 January 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/30/first-world-war-worship-sickening-avalanche>