

'But aunt, she is so very ignorant'

– history teaching and history learning, summer 2013

Robin Richardson

Introduction and summary

'But aunt, she is so very ignorant! ... How long ago is it, aunt, since we used to repeat the chronological order of the kings of England, with the dates of their accession, and most of the principal events of their reigns?' The speakers are Julia and Maria Bertram in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, published in 1814, and they are criticising their cousin Fanny Price. Their aunt replies: 'Very true indeed, my dears, but you are blessed with wonderful memories, and your poor cousin probably has none at all ... you must make allowances for your cousin, and pity her deficiency.'

Jane Austen's own comment is that, despite the 'promising talents and early information' of the Misses Bertram, they are 'entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity and humility'.

This article, written in April 2013, reviews some of the conversations and controversies about the teaching of history in schools which have been taking place in England over the last four months or so. Many have been eerily reminiscent of the exchange captured by Jane Austen two hundred years ago. Today as in the past there are those who appear to think history is little more than the chronological order of the monarchs of one country, and these same people appear deficient in self-knowledge, generosity and humility.

The article starts by recalling a controversy that surfaced in early January this year. It then continues by quoting some of the criticisms that have been made of the current government's plans and proposals for the history curriculum in England, and notes some of the childish and shallow replies which the government and its supporters have made in response, and some of the sickening racism expressed by the far right. It closes with some words by Ben Okri. 'Nations and peoples,' says Okri, 'are largely the stories they feed themselves ... If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings.'

Mary Seacole

'First,' tweeted Michael Rosen in early January 2013, echoing a famous poem by Martin Niemöller about resistance to totalitarian rule, 'they came for Mary Seacole.' 'And,' he continued, 'because I'm not a woman and I'm not black, I didn't speak out.'

Rosen himself did in fact speak out, and with characteristic eloquence, about Mary Seacole and her place in the national curriculum in England. And more than 35 thousand other people signed a petition urging that she should continue to feature explicitly in the teaching of history in schools, and there was a letter from Jesse Jackson and 50 others about this in *The Times*. The Archbishop of York weighed in with an article in the *Sun*, and an early day motion was opened for signature in parliament. The issue appeared to split the coalition government wide open, for the leader of the Liberal Democrats pledged he would strenuously oppose dropping Seacole from the national curriculum. '[But] the issue is about much more,' wrote Professor Gus John, 'than whether or not all children

get to learn about Mary Seacole and her historical feat of travelling in the 19th century from Jamaica to the Crimea ... It is about how the nation's children, whites in particular, are structurally and systematically denied the opportunity to understand the past.'¹

Adding to a widespread sense of outrage, it became known in February that access to Professor John's website had been blocked for civil servants at the Department for Education on the preposterous grounds that 'access to this site has been denied as the content of the site may be contrary to DfE standards of behaviour and decency' since it promotes 'hate and discrimination'.² Next, Michael Rosen's pastiche of Niemoller's poem might continue, they came for the academics.

Several conversations

Several different conversations have been taking place, each of them deeply emotive, significant and momentous and most of them, as Professor John pointed out, about much more than one iconic individual. Is Mary Seacole rightly considered to be an significant figure in the history of Britain and is it therefore right that she should be explicitly named in England's national curriculum? And is it similarly right that a prominent proud statue of her should be erected in central London? These are the first and most obvious questions. Or is she being used by the political correctness brigade, so-called 'equality activists'³ and 'multiculture fanatics' according to writers in the *Daily Mail*,⁴ to peddle falsehoods about Britain in schools and through a landmark memorial on the bank of the Thames? What are the motivations of the journalists and politicians who wish to remove her from the curriculum? These are further and even more complex questions.

In due course, the campaign to save Mary Seacole's position in the national curriculum was strikingly successful, having been organised and coordinated with great skill by Operation Black Vote. Wider and even more important matters, however, are still to be settled. How important in the teaching and learning of history is chronology, depth, empathy, study and comparison of original sources, grand narrative, hypothesis, awareness of bias, case-studies and vignettes, the roles of 'great men' as distinct from those of 'we the people'? Was L.P. Hartley right in those famous words about the past being a foreign country – 'they do things differently there'? And if so, what are the benefits of nevertheless encountering and studying foreign countries, whether in time or in space? Or was William Faulkner right – 'the past isn't dead and gone, it isn't even past'? And is there no such thing as an island story - since no nation is an island?

Not least, who should be involved in discussions and decisions about these matters, and how should they be involved? This question, about the voices which should be actively heard in conversations about the content and methodology of history teaching, is particularly important at the present time. Is it reasonable to expect that the general public should be represented through elected politicians such as Michael Gove and Nick Clegg, even though politicians bring with them short-term electoral considerations and personal ambitions, and a readiness to engage in crude political horse-trading? What weight should be given to views and experience of professional historians and specialist history teachers? And how are primary school teachers to be represented in the debates? It is they who, though not specialists in history, bear the brunt of responsibility for teaching history up to the age of 11.

With such questions in mind, history teachers, academics and journalists have in the last few months engaged in public debates in the print, broadcast and blogosphere media.

The Historical Association has become deeply involved⁵ and other campaigns and lobbies include Defend School History,⁶ Save School History,⁷ History not Propaganda,⁸ Curriculum for Cohesion,⁹ and an e-petition to keep the history curriculum politically neutral.¹⁰ Michael Gove, for his part, has responded to criticisms of his proposed curricular reforms by claiming the criticisms are made by people he describes as Marxists. They are, he says, 'hell-bent on destroying our schools', and are 'a set of politically motivated individuals who have been actively trying to prevent millions of our poorest children getting the education they need'.¹¹ They dominate teacher training, he says, and also have too much influence in local authorities.

Some of the principal criticisms of Mr Gove's proposals are outlined below. It is clearly eccentric to describe them as Marxist.

The nature of historical knowledge

Katharine Edwards, who is the author of the History not Propaganda website, writes:

Only those who seriously misrepresent the nature of historical knowledge, by denying that it is provisional, subjective and open to interpretation, would claim that it is possible to arrive at a perfectly apolitical curriculum. The honest way to deal with this difficulty is, firstly, to make a sincere commitment to avoid conscious bias as much as possible. (It hardly needs to be said that a curriculum designed with the explicit intention of 'celebrating' Britain's role falls woefully short of that).

She continues:

Secondly, and very importantly, it is to give pupils the critical tools needed to hold up interpretations to scrutiny for themselves. The current curriculum, while far from perfect, arguably makes a good attempt at this by encouraging evidence-based evaluation of sources, and in this respect compares favourably with many of the approaches adopted elsewhere. Children who acquire the habit in their history lessons of using evidence to question the interpretations they are given will carry that instinct with them into adult life, whether assessing politicians' claims or the latest health scare. It is therefore not simply the only intellectually honest and authentic way to go about historical study but it is also highly desirable for our democratic culture. We should resist government attempts to abandon it.

History should not be about celebration, or about a politically correct act of national contrition. We need to take out both the guilt and the pride, for how can we feel authentic pride or guilt for events over which we had no personal influence, still less try to impose these fake emotions on young people? Neither should it be about placing our trust in supposedly apolitical facts and 'core knowledge' which we require our children to learn uncritically by rote. Instead we must treat history as an academic discipline. History is about an evidence-based search for the truth and it is essential to its integrity as an academic discipline that we strive to keep the political agendas out.¹²

A petition summarising these arguments was worded as follows:¹³

We strongly object to the government's proposed new history curriculum on the following grounds:

- 1) An almost exclusively British history course encourages insularity, needlessly narrows the horizons of pupils and is a poor preparation for later life.
- 2) The content of the course is impractical to deliver, dry and likely to disengage pupils from history.
- 3) The proposals have been made without adequate consultation with professionals.
- 4) The use of the education system to promote a nationalist political agenda will stop history being a vehicle for teaching critical thought and is an assault on academic freedom.

Association of school and college leaders

A similar range of criticisms was made by the Association of school and college leaders (ASCL):¹⁴

- The focus on British history is far too narrow and does not prepare students to understand our history in relation to Europe and the wider world.
- The programmes are mainly about political and military history with little social, cultural or economic history.
- The decision to fit all ancient, medieval and early modern history into the primary phase makes little sense; pupils are likely to be left with a very simplistic understanding of these periods, and secondary teachers will be left plugging gaps in their understanding. Substantial professional development and new resources for primary teachers will be needed. This is not the way to develop a good grasp of chronology nor is there any indication of how progression might be measured in terms of historical understanding.

The following quotation from one ASCL member, said the ASCL submission, sums up the most common response to the proposals: 'More than 20 years of thoughtful and sophisticated approaches to curriculum development have been thrown away in this document.' ASCL said further it had had more negative feedback on the history curriculum than any other subject and stressed 'that school leaders believe that the proposed KS3 curriculum is un-teachable and will turn students away from history. Adoption could be seriously detrimental to the future take-up of history at KS4 and beyond.' It recommended that the government should 'engage with the full range of opinion amongst history teaching specialists and develop an approach to the content and teaching of history across all four key stages which responds to their grave concerns'.

Curriculum for cohesion

The patrons of the Curriculum for Cohesion initiative include MPs connected with the all-party parliamentary group on Islamophobia (Simon Hughes, Sadiq Khan, Jack Straw and Sarah Teather) and faith leaders (Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari, Rabbi Baroness Julia Neuberger and Rt Revd Richard Harries). There are also patrons with senior backgrounds in the diplomatic service, commerce, industry and the Conservative Party, and academic

advisers with specialisms in history, religious studies, theology and philosophy. The initiative is based at the Cambridge Muslim College and has links with the research and documentation committee of the Muslim Council of Britain.

The initiative commends the stated desire of the draft specification of the national curriculum for history to give pupils a 'rigorous civic knowledge of Britain', and commends the aspiration underlying this 'to create a shared public historical culture'.¹⁵ Further, it commends the stated aim that pupils should 'have their historical knowledge properly arranged upon a chronological framework'.

However, it considers the proposed curriculum is 'unteachable in the overwhelming quantity and detail of the topics that it will require teachers to teach' and it sees the proposed curriculum as 'highly prescriptive, which undermines the government's own stated educational agenda to increase teacher-autonomy'. Moreover it considers the curriculum to be unlearnable, since it pays no attention to the fact that pupils learn history in different ways at different ages – 'the list-like structure of topics with no differentiation in their complexity presents pupils with content that is developmentally inappropriate'. This, at best, will leave pupils 'with an 8-year-old's understanding of the ancient, early medieval and medieval periods, an 11-year-old's understanding of the early modern period and an adolescent understanding of the twentieth century'.

Further, in its form as a list of events with almost exclusive focus on the political history of Britain taken in isolation, the proposed curriculum ignores the findings of modern historical scholarship which increasingly stress the interconnectedness of civilisations and nations. It therefore fails to acknowledge that Britain's diverse population is the product of a rich and diverse history and is in danger of alienating pupils from black and other minority ethnic backgrounds, who now constitute a fifth of all pupils in English schools. More specifically, the group declares its concern that:

The complete absence of the history of Islamic civilisation and of the longstanding Muslim connection with Britain risks increasing alienation and even radicalisation amongst some young British Muslims, and also risks increasing anti-Muslim prejudice amongst non-Muslims. The absence of narratives at school through which young Muslims can identify positively with Britain and with history will abandoning them to the kinds of narrative promoting extremism that they can find on the internet.

In short, the proposed new curriculum 'fails to uphold the traditional Conservative agenda of promoting a balance between inculcating core knowledge and facilitating creative teaching, and the British tradition of history education which has hitherto led the world in creating a relationship in the classroom between national and world history'. Instead, the history curriculum in schools should be:

- o representative of a shared public culture and narrative in which the culturally diverse school population of England can actually share
- o developmentally appropriate to children's ages
- o capable of being taught in a way that inspires pupils to learn about Britain's history

- o in keeping with the findings of modern historical scholarship about the interconnectedness of civilisations and nations.

The proposals made by the Curriculum for Cohesion initiative were endorsed by the Muslim Council of Britain, reported in the *Observer* and several other papers. The publication of such views drew a sickening though predictable response from the far right. An organisation calling itself the Christian Defence League announced that the MCB is 'threatening Jihad', Kafir Crusaders said the MCB is 'one of the organisations the Muslim groups created to push Islam and engage in stealth jihad on the British public', the Bolton branch of the BNP said 'you can shove your Muslim history where the Sun don't shine, we don't want it, we don't need it', and the *English Review* said children should know that 'Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq were once Christian countries, cultured and prosperous' but that 'those countries were invaded, conquered, oppressed and dhimmified by the sword... They should know about the East African slave trade into Arabia and the Muslim lands beyond; the raids and traffic of the Barbary pirates that sent men and women from Devon and Cornwall to death and harems throughout Morocco.'

Such sentiments, if not such crude ways of expressing them, are not confined to the far right. 'At a time when Islamophobia is becoming socially acceptable in Britain,' wrote Dr Bari in the *Huffington Post*, 'it is vital we help build confidence among Muslim children of their rich heritage and provide opportunities for a better understanding of fellow Muslim citizens among the rest of the population.'¹⁶

Runnymede Trust

The proposed history content, the Runnymede Trust noted, responding in conjunction with Operation Black Vote and supported by a coalition of other race equality organisations,¹⁷ is to explore the 'story of these islands' and ensure pupils are familiar with 'the concept of nation, as it applies to Britain, and of those who have been integral to its shaping'. It commented:

The teaching of the national story is certainly important and it is necessary for children and young people to be aware of the nation in which they live and its relationship to other nations. However, what the content as outlined in the proposal presumes, is that there is one 'island' story to be told. Given the plurality of countries, cultures, religions and ethnicities of those who both live and have lived in Britain historically, such presumptions are incomplete. If this curriculum is to demonstrate that the nation it refers to is not simply that relating to England, the inclusion of the way that Scotland, Wales and Ireland have engaged with the concept of the nation should do more than make brief reference to some of these relationships during the scope of study in Key Stages 2 and 3.

Elsewhere we have noted that the inclusion of diversity within the national curriculum can contribute greatly to improved integration in classrooms and schools. The government's integration strategy notes that we should 'celebrate what we have in common and promote the shared values and shared commitments which underpin and strengthen our national identity'. The history curriculum provides an opportunity to reflect both on the ethnic diversity of our national history and the shared values that can be derived from it. Not only therefore can the recognition of themselves within the 'island story' of young people from diverse

backgrounds assist in academic achievement within the subject, it can also contribute to the prevention of conflict.

Thirteen years ago the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, set up by the Runnymede Trust and chaired by Lord Parekh, summarised some of its core arguments as follows:

A state is not only a territorial and political entity, but also 'an imagined community'. What is Britain's understanding of itself? How are the histories of England, Scotland and Wales understood by their people? What do the separate countries stand for, and what does Britain stand for? Of what may citizens be justly proud? How has the imagined nation stood the test of time? What should be preserved, what jettisoned, what revised or reworked? How can everyone have a recognised place within the larger picture? These are questions about Britain as an imagined community, and about how a genuinely multicultural Britain urgently needs to re-imagine itself. Amongst other things, such re-imagining must take account of inescapable changes of the last 30 years – not only post-war migration but also devolution, globalisation, the end of Empire, Britain's long-term decline as a world power, moral and cultural pluralism, and closer integration with Europe.¹⁸

Future flowerings

In its reflections on national identity and the national story the Runnymede commission on the future of multi-ethnic Britain quoted Ben Okri:

Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves and you change the individuals and nations.

Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings.¹⁹

¹ 'Repeating the errors of history by failing to learn from them', <http://www.gusjohn.com/2013/01/repeating-the-lessons-of-history-by-failing-to-learn-from-them/>

² Publicised by Hugh Muir in the Guardian, 19 February 2013

³ Jonathan Petre, 'Gove faces war with equality activists as he axes Labour's PC curriculum', Daily Mail, 29 December 2012, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2254705/Gove-faces-war-equality-activists-axes-Labours-PC-curriculum-dropped-greatest-figures-history-lessons-Leaked-drafts-new-history-curriculum-emerge.html#ixzz2Gwmx3eQh>

⁴ Peter Hitchens, 'How multicultural fanatics took Mary Seacole hostage', Mail Online, 6 January 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2257668/PETER-HITCHENS-How-multiculture-fanatics-took-Mary-Seacole-hostage.html#ixzz2IPfg8mr6>

⁵ Historical Association: http://www.history.org.uk/news/news_1779.html

⁶ Defend School History: <https://www.facebook.com/events/260473070756644/>

-
- ⁷ Save School History: <https://www.facebook.com/SaveSchoolHistory>
- ⁸ History not Propaganda: <http://historynotpropaganda.weebly.com/>
- ⁹ Curriculum for Cohesion: <http://curriculumforcohesion.org/>.
- ¹⁰ E-petition: <http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/petitions/46338>
- ¹¹ Michael Gove, 'I refuse to surrender to the Marxist teachers who are hell-bent on destroying our schools', *Daily Mail*, 23 March 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2298146/I-refuse-surrender-Marxist-teachers-hell-bent-destroying-schools-Education-Secretary-berates-new-enemies-promise-opposing-plans.html>
- ¹² Katharine Edwards, 'Pride, Guilt and politics in the history curriculum', 10 April 2013, <http://leftcentral.org.uk/2013/04/10/pride-guilt-and-politics-in-the-history-curriculum-a-comparative-perspective/#more-3333>
- ¹³ See note 9 above.
- ¹⁴ The ASCL response to the overall consultation on the curriculum in England is at http://www.ascl.org.uk/News_views/consultation_responses/reform_the_national_curriculum_england
- ¹⁵ Curriculum for Cohesion: <http://curriculumforcohesion.org/>. There was a useful summary of its response to the proposed new history curriculum on the BBC News website on 10 April 2013 at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-22072703>.
- ¹⁶ 'We need an inclusive history curriculum' by Mohammad Bari, *Huffington Post*, 14 April 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/.../muhammad-abdul-bari/the-need-for-an-inclusive_b_3081513.html
- ¹⁷ The Runnymede document is at <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/Runnymede%20response%20to%20the%20National%20Curriculum.doc>
- ¹⁸ *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: the Parekh report*, Profile Books 2000, pages xiv–xv.
- ¹⁹ Ben Okri, *Birds of Heaven*, Phoenix Books 1996, aphorisms 14 and 15, page 21.