

Why Use Sources? (1978)

By Elma Collins

Some history teachers are inclined to treat the current interest in the use of primary sources in teaching history as a passing fad, yet one more fashion which will pass like so many "new" methods. This is a mistaken view however. For almost a century now a few history teachers on both sides of the Atlantic have argued for the need to use sources in teaching history. They have based much of their case on the idea that primary sources are to history what the laboratory is to the science teacher: the necessary environment within which to teach the methods of historical scholarship. Without such an environment we teach the conclusions of adult scientists or historians and not the means by which these conclusions are reached. But conclusions quickly go out of date as research goes forward, leaving the students ill-equipped to deal with the world into which they will shortly go. Methods on the other hand are flexible and adaptable to new circumstances. A student trained to assess the value of an historical account will bring this training to bear on an advertiser's claims or a politician's promises.

Over the past two decades other arguments have been added. Much of the recent work on new teaching procedures has laid stress on the need for subject teaching in schools to relate to the nature of the discipline as practised by professionals. This has led to an analysis of the nature of the historian's mode of operation to see what it has to offer to the classroom teacher. We must decide what it is that historians do in order that we may try to simulate that activity in the classroom.

What do historians do? Very briefly, they study the past and try to explain it in terms which will make it intelligible to the present. But how do they know the past? They know it through the relics which it has left behind and it is these relics - documents, artefacts, buildings, pictures, etc., - which are the sources upon which historians base their reconstruction of the past. These sources are only partial, however; much of the past is gone beyond recall. Therefore the historian must interpret the sources, must read between the lines and try to guess the whole from the part. If he has a letter from an historical figure he must ask when and to whom it was written, what effect the

author was trying to have on his audience and whether he was in a position to know of the events he describes, or whether he was merely repeating gossip. If the historian has a picture, he must know the society which produced it and try to judge the effect the painter was trying to achieve. Many of these questions can only be given tentative answers but these guesses must be based on evidence either internal to the source or external, that is based on the historian's knowledge of the environment from which the source arose. Thus if he knows that his letter-writer was a habitual liar, he would have reservations about putting too much faith in the contents of the letter. If the picture is of a medieval king he will know it is unlikely to be a real likeness, since portraiture as we know it only developed with the Renaissance.

Much of the activity of the historian is therefore concerned with the formation of judgements based on primary sources which are known to be incomplete. How does this relate to the traditional methods of teaching history? Very little, since most traditional teaching is based on text-books which, because of limitations of space present an ordered narrative which appears certain and fixed. Many teachers try to get around this problem by fostering classroom discussion on particular points, but since the students have only one source of information, there is little chance for the students to grasp the tentative nature of many historical "facts" and the need to support opinions by reference to evidence. Unless students are given some of the sources upon which the historical conclusions in the textbook are based they can never practise the formation of historical judgements or the marshalling of evidence in support of those judgements.

This is not an argument for the complete abandonment of textbook teaching. Before he can attempt any judgement on the sources, the student must have some background knowledge into which to fit the source. As we saw the historian does not base all his judgements on the internal evidence of the source alone. Nor is it proposed that students be let loose on some archive material without any preparation. Rather the history teacher must simulate a piece of historical research, creating a situation in which the student has available both secondary and primary sources, suitable to his age and ability level, and leading him through the steps of criticism and judgement which are the normal mode of procedure of the professional historian. It must not be expected that the student will come up with some startling new insight, but what is important is that he is enabled to reach independently opinions and judgements which

are original to him, acquiring in the process some of the intellectual skills which belong to the discipline of history.

There is another and final argument in favour of the use of sources. While we give our students only textbook history we insulate them from the real past. History becomes a matter of dry names and dates, caught within the covers of a school book and the dusty confines of the classroom. It is not, what with sources it can become, a matter of real people leading real, though different, lives. It is surely in this actuality that the fascination of history for so many adults lies. We must not deprive our students of it.