

## HISTORY :

### TEACHING PRACTICALLY CONSIDERED.

SETTING aside theoretical considerations the problem before us is a very practical one—how history can best be taught. Perhaps the first condition of all teaching, from the point of view of scientific method, is that it should be suited to the years and intellectual development of the learner; and closely connected with this condition, that it should thoroughly arouse the interest and attention of the pupil. Keeping these considerations in view we shall probably find it convenient to approach the subject of method concretely, by separating our enquiry into three divisions, corresponding to three stages of intelligence, graduated according to the age and mental capabilities of the pupils to be taught. The first stage will commence with children of a very early age—say from three years on to seven or eight.

#### STAGE I.

As in our review (in last month's paper) of the origin of history, it has been pointed out that in its beginning there was a notable absence of any system; so in our earliest teaching of very young children the same characteristic will be reproduced: system in the meantime shall be entirely ignored. In this stage, story—personal, historic, legendary story—will form the substance of our teaching. It is a phenomenon that must have fallen under the notice of all who have the happiness of being brought into close relations with young children, that their idea of time is a very narrow one; that hardly even with the utmost difficulty can they be brought to grasp the distinction of time recent and remote. Time is a conception, whose development is matured but slowly: perhaps it is even the latest condition of existence to be fully grasped by the human intellect; it is, therefore, not to be wondered at that any complete idea of time should be

entirely beyond the apprehension of a child of tender years. Systematic time relations then—at least relations more definite than the familiar “a long time ago,” “when I was young,” and similar phrases—may, for the most part, be wisely left out of account in the earliest teaching of little children. We shall then, in the main, direct our efforts to store the mind with a wealth of vivid impressions of times, places, and customs varying from our own. The ideal form of our earliest teaching of history is the fairy tale. The vividness, the imaginative grasp, the freedom of detail, the contrast of the strange and the familiar—these arouse the interest, these stir the imagination, these enchain the memory. This power of fervent impression should be the earnestly coveted possession of every teacher, but it must be sought, not in the laboriousness of comment and explanatory remark, but in minute and direct appeal to the activity of the imagination. Another object to be aimed at, and one not of less importance, is to arouse an enthusiastic sympathy with the heroic deeds of old. To touch the springs of that heroic impulse which finds vent in action is, perhaps, not given to every teacher: heroism awakes heroism; the heroic is the ideal; the ideal teacher is the hero.

Further—as to mechanical methods—pictures should be freely used. In children the impressions of the eye are specially capable of assisting largely the impressions of the ear; while at the same time the imagination is more active and keener edged than the dulled faculty of later life, and therefore more ready to accept a rude, and what to us might seem an inadequate, pictorial representation. Pictorial representations illustrative of history are plentiful, yet it is, perhaps, by no means easy to lay our hands at the time we want it upon the picture of the right sort. In our choice, expression, even though crude and rugged, is more to be sought than technical skill or *vraisemblance* of historic detail; suggestion should be sought rather than realisation, force rather than technique.

The stories themselves might preferably be culled from the Bible, from the history and heroic tales of Greece and Rome, from the history and legends of our own land, and especially those of our own neighbourhood, where each incident may be illustrated on the spot where it occurred. In addition to

these, narratives however simple, of our own experience and of events connected with our own family history, would be exceedingly useful. And here again it may be impressed that in all these narrations imagination should not be too severely bridled, and that pedantic accuracy of detail should not be insisted on in preference to vividness of suggestion.

#### STAGE II.

Children, when they have attained the age of, say, eight or nine years, have reached a stage of intellectual development at which a more systematic method of teaching may profitably be introduced. With a longer experience of life they will naturally have expanded somewhat those conceptions of time which we have seen at an earlier age to be so limited; and it is now fitting that we should endeavour still further to develop these conceptions,—to give them definiteness, and to impart to them, in some degree at least, the qualities of a concrete reality. In the natural order of historical classification we have seen that time is the first element to claim our attention, and it will well repay us to be somewhat lavish of time and trouble, if thereby we may ensure that an adequate conception of time should be thoroughly impressed upon the learner. Our knowledge of time proceeds not from the past into the future, but the present is our starting point—time as directly known to us proceeds from the present into the past. To attain a standing ground in the past, it is necessary, by repeated acts of the imagination, to work arduously backward from the present, till a secure pathway has been trodden out, and safe landmarks and finger-posts erected. Our logical method of procedure then will be to initiate thus our chronological study of history, and to this end probably no plan will be found more convenient and effective than (in home teaching at least) to make use of the family history as our earliest basis.\* For this purpose a history chart will be found exceedingly useful.

In forming such a chart a large sheet of blue ruled paper will provide us with an excellent frame-work. Each space

\* See a valuable paper on "The Teaching of Chronology," by Miss Dorothea Beale, in *Parents' Review*, April, 1891, where such a system is wrought out in detail.

between the ruled lines might be taken to represent three months' time, so that four spaces will stand for a whole year. The three month space might be (without any need for subsidiary ruling of lines) divided into months by the eye alone—a mark near the edge-lines representing the first and third month of the quarter respectively, while a mark in the middle should clearly define the second month. This arrangement will prove quite distinct, and may be deciphered with facility, indeed perhaps more easily than with the aid of additional lines. At the completion of each year the line should be thickened; at the end of five years still further thickened; while at ten years a double line should be drawn. The eye can now, with a very little practice, distinguish at a glance the individual months and years. The various notable family events, such as births, holidays spent from home, brothers going to school, &c., should now be set down upon the chart in the proper month of the year, and to some extent classified—as, for instance, birthdays should be entered upon one horizontal level and holidays upon another. The most recent events should first be set down, and the earlier added in succession. When this has been carried backwards for several years the time has arrived for entering events of public importance, such as royal marriages, the jubilee, wars, the death of eminent personages, &c.; these events might be entered in a separate horizontal space. Each child, simultaneously, should draw out such a chart for himself, an operation he will probably find not only interesting, but also well within his powers to accomplish; allow him to suggest for himself, if possible, the facts to be noticed—and surely this should not be a difficult matter as his attention may easily be recalled, indirectly, to appropriate events within his own recollection.

The child has now created his own history chart; he has thoroughly grasped the germ idea of historical times. It will, however, be wise not yet to leave the method of progression from the present to the past. A second chart, on a much more contracted scale, allowing perhaps a single space for not less than ten years, should be drawn out. Interesting and characteristic events belonging to the centuries in order, and to various lands, should form the subject of a series of graphic and vivid word-pictures, and when clearly grasped

and familiar to the pupil's mind, each should be carefully entered in its proper place upon the chart, thus gradually leading back the mind to the earliest times of the Christian era and beyond. This process accomplished, the second stage in historical teaching has been completed.

### STAGE III.

Having now fairly made our entrance into the field of history—viewed as from some mountain-top the flowing stream of human life as it courses through the ages—at length it behoves us to become acquainted at close quarters with those various phases of man's existence of which the records of the past preserve the memorials. The question at once arises, at what period or periods are our researches to begin? First then, it will, perhaps, be wise to select as our starting point not one period, but several. Bible history of the Old Testament and the New, both will be held essential as the fountainhead of modern ethics and an important element in our own literature. Greek history, as embodying the earliest and perhaps most striking example of western civilization, will not be omitted. The history of Rome, as mother politically of the nations of modern Europe, will hardly be thrown aside, while the history of our own land should of all others be studied most intimately, not only in satisfaction of the rightful instincts of patriotism, but also as necessary to the citizen who would justly fill his position in the commonwealth. And further still, it is also needful that the history of the great European and world movements—as every such movement has profoundly affected our surroundings of to-day—should be familiar to us, though, perhaps, in some less intimate degree. The field is a large one; it can be by any one but imperfectly surveyed, and for most of us our scanty gleanings can afford but meagre samples of an abundant harvest.

We shall probably be adopting the wisest course, then, should we decide upon making our approaches upon the promised land of history simultaneously from several points of attack.

It is to be understood that we have already provided ourselves with a condensed chart representing the 3,000 years of history, during which the stream, which has now become

the river of modern history, may be traced with some degree of definiteness towards its earliest sources. Such a chart might easily be condensed to such an extent as to be made conveniently visible as a whole, say within the compass of at most a yard in length. On such a scale periods of ten years can be distinctly differentiated, while definite years may be clearly distinguished when necessary by the addition of one or two numerals. The facts recorded should be few, selected with care—key facts to the history of the time in which they occur, selected also in a catholic spirit, to represent, without bias, the real historical weight of the various political forces, which, in order to serve their purpose of historical landmarks, should already, before being introduced upon the chart, have been made thoroughly familiar to the pupil. The duration of dynasties, prolonged wars, social and religious movements, &c., might be made visible by the use of continuous lines, which will prove of great value in linking together successive events.

On approaching at close quarters the history of a special period within a defined political area, we shall in the first place provide ourselves with the appropriate frame-work for a corresponding chart, on which, as we advance, the essential facts and the duration of continuous activities, with such further detail as may seem convenient, shall be clearly marked. Foreign countries also will not fail to receive attention, and in proportion to the closeness of their relations to the focus of our studies, shall be treated in detail.

And here arises a question of the greatest importance in regard to the method of our procedure. Is it possible—is it wise to make the attempt—to carry in our mind a truly continuous image of the stream of activities which form the subject of history?

We have already in the germ approached this question. In the two earlier stages of teaching we have endeavoured to mark points—moments of action—only, giving to them, however, in the form of tales all the vividness with which by varied appliances we find it possible to invest them. In continuing to follow this course it will probably be found that we are adopting the only possible procedure. In watching the landscape from a railway carriage the scenery is visible to us not as a continuous panorama; as we pass our

eyes fix themselves by an involuntary impulse upon a single object, upon a single limited field of vision ; were we to force them to do otherwise no distinct impression, other, perhaps, than the sensation of a swimming head, would be produced upon our consciousness. Even in the process of reading, which at first sight might seem to yield contradictory results, the same is true : the mind is focussed successively upon separate distinct ideas, each one of which fades gradually out of view as the attention is again transferred to a new area of idea. The mind then is incapable not only of taking cognisance with accuracy and distinctness of more than a limited extent of surface, but at the same time it is also incapable of focussing itself upon a (mathematical) point absolutely devoid of extent. From this we may, perhaps, legitimately draw the conclusion that the normal action of the mind of man is *per saltum*, and we are therefore justified in accepting as a condition of our method that our endeavours shall be directed to vivify particular events—moments of action ; while at the same time we also exert ourselves to hook on these moments of action, one to another, into a continuous chain of associated links.

Another matter which we shall find worthy of consideration is the respective part of the teacher and the pupil in the operation of study. The aim of the teacher is to produce mental assimilation of the facts under review ; that is to say not mere memory of the facts, but a perception of their organic relations to each other, and also to the facts of daily life. How is such a perception to be produced ? Obviously only by the co-operative mental activity of the pupil. Our teaching then must be so directed, so organised, as to produce not merely a receptive activity in the pupil's mind, but also a constructive—if we may be allowed the expression—an *active* activity. One of the symptoms of complete assimilation is always to be found in the production of functional energy. The development then of constructive power—latent or active—is the sole object of education, and in proportion as this object is attained, education must be accounted either a failure or a success.

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NOTE.—It is hoped that a chart in course of preparation will be ready for publication in next month's issue.