The Re-Appearance of a Cheshire Cat:

Teaching the History of Britain at Key Stage 3

An early version of ideas I wrote about much more widely re the 2008 National Curriculum – how do we create a coherent KS3 course? How do we create continuity rather than teaching a random set of events? How do we link the past to today? This is all couched in the language of the 1995 National Curriculum. See also the Euroclio article for an update of some of the ideas.

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/downloads/IdentityEuroclio.pdf

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I was briefly tempted to begin by justifying teaching the history of Britain in terms of the requirements of the National Curriculum. This was not a good idea for two reasons. Firstly, the history of Britain, while looming large and grinning cheerfully at us in early documentation, has withered as rewrite has followed revision until, like the Cheshire Cat, it has apparently disappeared. Secondly, and more importantly, I have not noticed great numbers of teachers leaping from their chairs on reading National Curriculum documents and crying 'Wow, what a great idea! Let me have a classroom and some kids. Page 37, paragraph 2, subsection (i) has made me see why I should be teaching history!' Worthy and important though the National Curriculum is, it is not by itself a motivating force.

So where do we look for motivation? Let me turn the calendar back a quarter of a century to the beginnings of the Schools History Project. In A New Look at History David Sylvester and his colleagues discussed the aims of history teaching in terms of, among other things, adolescent needs - understandings that enable adolescents to make more sense of the work in which they are growing up[1]. The component of the SHP package that did this most startlingly and successfully was, in my experience, the Modern World Study. There pupils explore the origins and development of a current situation such as the existence of conflict in Ireland, South Africa or the Middle East and in so doing develop specifically an understanding of the complexity of that situation and generally how knowledge of the past helps us to understand the present. Some politicians have seen this as a danger to the fabric of their society, allowing teachers with extreme political views to influence unformed minds. Really the politicians should be grateful. Successful Modern World Studies have shown pupils the complexity of situations and have therefore enabled them to empathise more

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effectively and occasionally even to sympathise with politicians grappling with situations in which there is no easy answer.

How does this relate to teaching the history of Britain at Key Stage 3? The National Curriculum requires us to introduce pupils to the processes of studying history and to a sequence of key events and personalities. However, what is laid down in National Curriculum documents does not limit us. It is the basis on which a more exciting, more original syllabus can be built and one of the guiding principles of that syllabus should be what SHP defined so long ago as adolescent needs. This is not the place to review that whole package of needs in the light of the 1990s but I would contend that one of the principal aims of Key Stage 3 history should be to forge links between the past and contemporary situations, to help pupils appreciate the complexity of events they see on the news (by design or by accident) through studies of the historical development of those situations,

Let's apply this to the history of Britain. In terms of content the National Curriculum relating to Britain can be summarised as follows:

1) Medieval Realms - the relationship of the English monarchy with other countries; the ways of life of the peoples of the British Isles.

2) The Making of the U.K. - relations between England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

And that, as far as individual study units goes, is it! However the real requirements lie in the earlier part of the Programme of Study where it is explicitly stated that ‘pupils should be taught about changes in the economy, society, culture and political structure of Britain from the early Middle Ages to the twentieth century’ and that ‘Across the key stage, pupils should be given opportunities to study aspects of the histories of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales ...’

Thus, although individual Study Units do not contain the necessary references, the overall Programme of Study requires some kind of continuous history of Britain from 1066 to the twentieth century. We do not abandon Scotland after 1603 or 1707. Anglo-lrish relations in the last 300 years are not simply an option for a study in depth in either Britain 1750-1900 or The Twentieth Century World. This topic, having been begun in Medieval Realms and Making of the U.K must be followed through into our own century.

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It is this general requirement of the Programmes of Study that fits into the context of adolescents' need to understand the world they live in. If we simply adhere to the detail in the Study Units then all we do is to cover some individual incidents such as Edward I's conquest of Wales and Anglo-Scottish Treaty of 1707. As individual events, these will have, to a greater or lesser extent (perhaps much lesser extent in the context of 1707), some entertainment value. What they cannot do is to help pupils understand why the Britain that exists today exists in this form of unity and disunity - why we have a United Kingdom and an independent Eire. Perhaps even worse, these events, chosen precisely because they are landmark events, encourage the view that the current Britain was the inevitable outcome of centuries of politicking, alliances and marital chance.

What is the alternative? My starting point is today. As pupils mature they will realise that there are tensions within what, I have recently discovered, academic historians have taken to calling the Western European Archipelago! Ireland is divided (at least it was when I wrote this!) and the debate at least about the future of Ireland will long continue. Nationalism is a live issue in Scotland and Wales. Overall, the constitutional arrangement prevailing in 1994, may well have changed by 2004 or 2024, just as it did in 1707, 1800 and 1921. If pupils are to understand that such change is possible, if they are to feel comfortable with change and if, perhaps as voters, they are to have their say on whether change happens, then one of the few places they may get some understanding of these issues and attitudes is through school history.

So here are some objectives for the teaching of the history of Britain in Key Stage 3. By the end of year 9 pupils should understand:

a) why the United Kingdom became a unified state

b) why the Irish Republic is not part of this unified state

c) that on a variety of occasions the history of Britain could have taken a difference course

d) why there is a variety of attitudes among the English, Welsh, Scots and Irish to each other

Along the way, pupils will necessarily encounter the great events and personalities but remembering the detail of Edward I and Wales as isolated facts is not as important as understanding the contribution of these campaigns to the development of Britain (or in a different context, of Edward's campaign to the development of parliament). However the broader context may well

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make the assimilation of individual details more effective. Events in isolation have a frustrating tendency to make pupils' brains resemble colanders.

How Might this be Achieved?

The outline below does not attempt to provide a lesson by lesson framework. There are too many variables to make this a practical proposition, not least that schools are currently adjusting from an eight-unit to a six-unit syllabus. Instead the outline provides a topic by topic approach, some at least of which can be accommodated within single lessons.

Year 7

1. Introducing the current situation: What are the relationships between England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland now? What attitudes do these groups have to each other now? How long has it been like this? Was it like this in the Middle Ages?

These questions are the necessary starting points, identifying what pupils understand about both the present and the Middle Ages. The danger is to see this activity as a luxury when pressed for time. The reality of learning is that unless we know what pupils already understand or half-understand or misconstrue, then lessons will not be as effective as they can be. Teaching needs to be linked explicitly to pupils existing ideas. Pupils' first answers need to be recorded for comparison with their responses at the end of the unit. Equally importantly, discussion of 'now' may create a relevance and interest that is otherwise missing.

2. The pattern of events 1066-1500 - an outline story. Using a combination of a sequencing exercise, timelines or story-telling provide pupils with the story of British relations in this period[2]. This is an outline. No sources need be evaluated! The essence is that by the end of the lesson pupils should have a brief pattern of events in their books and understand that, by 1500, Scotland had resisted an English take-over, Wales had succumbed to English control and Ireland remained largely independent although England claimed control.

This answers one of the introductory questions about British relations in the Middle Ages but it also sets up other questions for future lessons. Separating the bones of the story from explanation may seem artificial but it aids learning. The explanatory lessons help to consolidate that initial story. This lesson therefore leads into the following sequence:

3. How did the English win control in Wales?

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4. Were Scotland and England always at war?

5. How much of Ireland was independent of England?

6. How did the different groups feel about each other?

How long you can give to these topics depends on how long you give to ‘Medieval Realms’.

These questions are trying to move from a chronicle of events to analysis of issues. For example ‘Were Scotland and England always at war?’ would allow pupils to discover how interlinked the nations were in the twelfth century and that war was not an inevitable outcome of border rivalries. Edward I’s planned marriage of his son to Margaret of Norway could have prevented the war of the 1300’s and 1400’s which blighted later relations .[3]

The final component of this package is:

7. Repeating the first lesson! What did you think then about medieval Britain? What do you know now? Therefore what have you learned in the last x lessons? How far along the road to the current situation had Britain come by 1500? Could the road have taken different turnings?

Repetition here seems essential to effective learning. Pupils benefit from explicitly identifying the progress they have made in understanding, comparing their answers before embarking on the unit of work with the answers they have developed by the end.

Years 8 and 9

The principles identified in Year 7 need to be revisited. Each year needs to begin by returning to the core questions. Pupils will need reminding of the current structure of Britain. They need in Year 8 to attempt verbally and then receive a summary of developments to 1500 and in Year 9 to 1750. A handout to go in books is likely to be the most economically effective method unless pupils kept Year 7 work on Britain in a separate book as part of an overall thematic approach to years 7-9. They will need to be asked in each year what they predict will be the major changes in the period to be studied. For example, in Year 9 pupils might be asked which country was most likely to seek independence after 1750, Scotland or Ireland?

After these introductions and summaries of events as in Year 7 the pattern of questions for each year could be as follows:

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Year 8

How Welsh did Wales remain 1500-1750?

How did the Scots and English react to the union of 1707 and to each other?

Why did England become more directly involved in Ireland? How did these events affect Irish and English attitudes to each other?

Was this pattern of events inevitable?

There is no avoiding the problem of balance here. Developments in Ireland are clearly of great significance for the present and therefore will probably take up as much time as Wales and Scotland together. However again this will tend to suggest the inevitability of Anglo-Scottish union and of Anglo-Irish conflict. Thus it is worth asking, however briefly, what would have produced a different sequence of events - perhaps how events might have continued without the threat of Spanish invasion under Elizabeth or without the English Civil War. Even in the eighteenth century, there was sufficient Anglo-Scottish hostility and a sufficiently calm situation in Ireland to suggest that Scotland was the more likely to break away to Independence.

Year 9

What did each nation contribute to Britain's economic development?

How did English influence in Wales develop and how powerful was Welsh desire for independence?

How powerful was the independence movement in Scotland? Why did Ireland lose its own parliament?

Why did the Irish Republic win independence?

Why did violence continue in Ireland after 1968?

This approach makes greater sense by combining Study Unit 3 (Britain 1750-1900) with Unit 4 (The Twentieth Century World). It seems likely that these units will take up the whole of Year 9 at least and perhaps some of Year 8. Far more coherence can be given to the history of Britain and to other topics by studying them over the whole period from 1750 to the present, building the syllabus

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topics around a number of current situations and using events in Britain and the world from 1750 to the present to explain how those situations have developed.

At the end of each year’s work on Britain pupils will again need to compare the answers they had offered at the beginning of the unit with their answers having completed the work. In each case timelines or other surveys going back to 1066 will consolidate overall patterns.

Resources

Adopting this strategy requires a wider range of material than that provided in textbooks produced specifically for Key Stage 3. The common pattern is for space devoted to Britain to dwindle and disappear even when Medieval Realms has provided good coverage, as in Rosemary Kelly's A Separate World (Stanley Thornes) and in Chris Culpin's Medieval Realms (Collins). The most determined effort to give space to Scotland, Wales and Ireland comes in Walter Robson' s Access to History series (Oxford University Press) but even here Wales and Scotland seem to disappear from view after 1750.

The simplest answer to this problem is to seek out texts written for schools in Ireland, Wales and Scotland as they provide material ready for use. Lengthier academic texts, though enjoyable and good for our souls, may well not be readable in the limited time available. A rich diet of material can be found in Longman's Questions in Irish History series, edited by Jon Robottom. This series consists of twelve books covering Irish history from origins to today. A single copy of all or some key periods would be a valuable departmental resource, not just for Key Stage 3 but for many GCSE and A level couses as well. Cambridge University Press's 3-book series Irish History in Perspective is also well worth noting, very much in the visual style of C.U.P.'s National Curriculum series edited by Tony McAleavy. At the time of writing in December 1994 only Change and Conflict: Britain, Ireland and Europe from the late 16th to the early 18th centuries was available. This takes as its starting points events and influences in Europe and England rather than beginning with an Irish perspective, but there is plenty of material here on the seventeenth century to supplement sparser accounts in English National Curriculum books.

Welsh history is covered by an interesting range of resources. Very valuable if you have time is Welsh History and its Sources a six volume series published by the University of Wales Press. Each volume combines commentary on key features of the period with a generous selection of source material. Again this would provide extra detail for GCSE and A level as well as Key Stage 3.

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In terms of school texts Hodder and Stoughton is developing a three-volume series to meet the demands of the Welsh orders. Currently available is Oxford University Press's 4-book Discovering Welsh History series, beautifully illustrated and full of interesting, detailed stories and Welsh perspectives, These are not textbooks in the current mould (no Attainment Targets, no exercises) but they do provide English teachers with a wealth of easily assimilated, additional material that could also be contrasted with accounts in English texts,

It has been much harder to identify useful supplementary material that provides a Scottish perspective. Ian Ferguson's History of the Scots, published by Oliver and Boyd in 3 volumes for lower secondary, provides a more detailed secondary account than English National Curriculum texts have space for and intersperses a range of useable sources. Hodder and Stoughton publish two books on Scotland after 1750 for Standard Grade classes and Oliver and Boyd have a comparable volume on Scotland and Britain since 1830.

Conclusion

This article has developed one interpretation of 'British history', that is a study of the developing unity/disunity of the countries of the British Isles. There are, of course, other aspects to 'British history', most notably the issue of 'who are the British?' looking at the blending of peoples and cultures. This issue has recently been discussed by Rozina Visram in her article 'British history: whose history? Black perspectives on British History'[4] This seems to be a separate, complementary and equally important issue that could be studied in parallel with the theme discussed above. It too would benefit from the composite approach suggested to Study Units 3 and 4 and to an approach starting from current situations. If both themes are addressed continuously throughout Key Stage 3, building on and challenging pupils' existing assumptions, then British history will once more be sitting atop the wall grinning at us and, more importantly, pupils will be better equipped to understand the world in which they are growing up.

Notes

1. Schools Council History Project, A New Look at History, Holmes McDougall, Edinburgh, pp.11-16, 1976. A pdf copy can be downloaded from the SHP site: http://www.schoolshistoryproject.org.uk/AboutSHP/downloads/NewLookAtHistory.pdf

2. See for an example of a useful rapid overview, Shephard C., et.a/Societies in Change, John Murray, London, pp.72-3, 1992.

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3. An excellent brief summary of British relations in the Middle Ages is Davies R., `The Failure of the First British Empire? England's Relations with Ireland, Scotland and Wales1066-1500' in Saul N., (ed) England in Europe 1066-1453, Collins and Brown, London, 1994.

4. Visram R., ‘British history: whose history? Black perspectives on British history’ in Bourdillon H., Teaching History, Routledge, London, 1994.

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