

Local History by L. J. Pryor

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LOCAL HISTORY.

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In a recent essay (*The Herald*, 9th June, 1945), Walter Murdoch gave eloquent support to Dame Mary Gilmore's plea* that we in Australia should devote more attention to local history. Her suggestion is that each school should give at least one day each year to the gathering of historical information about the district in which the school is situated. Murdoch reinforced this plea by pointing out that a study of local history is a sure way of creating in boys and girls an interested and intelligent attitude toward world history and world affairs.

The case for local history was capably expounded several years ago before the English Historical Association by the Rt. Rev. J. H. Masterman, when he claimed that local history is valuable for its own sake and as an approach to general history; he maintained that, by commencing with the known, simpler, smaller things of history, we are in a better position to teach the wider and more complicated aspects of world history. History has been a record of progress from the smaller to the larger unit, from stories of local initiative to the achievements of the powerful centralized states. "The real life of England", said Masterman, "was for centuries to be found in its townships and boroughs." General history must always be illustrated by local history, otherwise it becomes academic and wholly detached from the lives and hopes of the men, women, and children who have made the past. They, rather than movements, must occupy the stage if the drama of history is to grip the imaginations of boys and girls in our schools. The Agricultural Revolution becomes something concrete and personal when we witness its influence in the history of some small rural community; the *Reform Act* of 1832 assumes significance when we trace its effects on the political and economic life of a Manchester or a Birmingham. The important notion that local history can focus attention on the humanity and the reality of history is implied in Masterman's claim that "it is in the teaching of local history that we have the best opportunity of correcting the delusion that human progress is to be measured in terms of material advance." Teachers who are interested in local history might well take as their slogan the same authority's reminder that "the parish pump is the starting-point of adventures that lead to the world's end."

In Australia we have had the chance to write our history as it was made, to record, year by year, im-

portant events, and to preserve the documents and materials that future investigators may require when deliberating on our achievements and our misdeeds. We have not, however, given much assistance to posterity in this matter. The pioneers were too busy carving out settlements and establishing themselves in a new land to spare a thought for the historian, and only when the arduous work of pioneering had been completed was there leisure to render account to the future of what had been attempted and what had been accomplished. But a young nation, since it lacks a past and is a little supercilious about tradition, is not historically minded, and, in Australia, we allowed many pioneers and observers of our first century to pass from us unquestioned and unrecorded. The "oldest inhabitants" are now almost a vanished race; it would be a pity if those few who remain should leave us without telling how they and their kinsfolk helped to make Australia a nation.

Although we have neglected our history and although the drive for "waste paper" during the war no doubt decimated our ungathered records, a certain amount of material still survives, and each year sees further additions to official and semi-official collections of historical manuscripts and Australiana. Here and there, there are men like Nathaniel Spielvogel who, out of their own time and resources, have undertaken the self-appointed task of preserving the records and relics of the past. The chief libraries, such as the Mitchell Library, Sydney, and the Melbourne Public Library, have been most active in recent years in building up collections of Australian historical material. A few historical associations strive to maintain interest and, from time to time, publish statements of their members' discoveries and studies. The Clarence River Historical Association at Grafton (N.S.W.) has been conspicuously successful since its inauguration in 1931. "By degrees a fine collection was assembled, which is now housed in a large airy room in the Municipal Chambers. Documents and papers of all descriptions are filed in drawers of cabinets around the room; and photographs and paintings hang upon the walls. Exhibits include an old spinning-wheel, several fine chests, old rifles, and duelling pistols. The room is used regularly for official meetings of various kinds, and this has the advantage that the historical exhibits are continually inspected by visitors from all centres." (*Historical Studies*, July, 1945).

Is there a place for the schools in this stimulating national enterprise? Dame Mary Gilmore and Professor Murdoch believe there is a very important place. The experience of teachers in Victoria and over-seas shows that the study of local history can be made a profitable part of the history program in both elementary and secondary schools. Many schools and teachers could play their parts in adding to the archives of our nation by collecting every item of

*NOTE.—Both of these writers may be aware that the preparation of local histories (including school histories) has been encouraged by the Education Department of Victoria for many years. Here, for example, is a quotation from the history course for Grade V.:—"A Project in Local History.—If it is at all possible, the course for Grade V. should include the story of some early pioneer of the district in which the school is situated. In some cases, the project might undertake to explain the reason for the name of the town, suburb, or settlement."—EDITOR.

historical significance in their own districts. It is true that, in European countries, children can more readily be made aware of their antecedents, for all localities have their age-old customs and traditions, their ancient historical landmarks and their proud association with notable people and important past events. In Australia the glamour of antiquity cannot readily be attached to places and objects; there are few districts that can offer the sort of history that inspired the romances of Stevenson, Scott, Broster, and the rest. Ballarat has its Eureka, Sydney its Rum Rebellion, and Port Arthur its convict ruins—there is little else. On the surface, at least, Australian history is not spectacular; the highlights are few, the thrilling episodes preserved in legends are strangely rare. We have to admit that the history of Australia is a solid, simple narrative, sometimes sordid, often matter-of-fact, but frequently vibrant with the spirit and determination that we saw reproduced in 1915 and 1942. It is so much a story of felons, political exiles, explorers, sheep, rugged squatters, wheat, toiling farmers, gold-obsessed fossickers, unknown territory, wattle and daub huts, damper, cows, coaches, bullocks, politicians, visionaries, and plain, common folk that Australian history must necessarily be an ordinary account of ordinary people who cannot present their descendants with a King John or a Henry VIII., a Magna Carta or a Civil War, or any of the rich colours that are usually woven into the tapestry of history. Be that as it may, we should know something of the past to which we owe this heritage of the present and learn to appreciate the work of those who, within the last century, prepared a place for us in this well-endowed continent. For the young Australian, the past at his back door—the history made by his own folk—is an excellent introduction to this national history, and there is no doubt that the interest and the importance of the story are greater than most Australians suspect.

Early in the present century, when Victorian curricula were at a transition stage, there was a fair amount of attention given to local history, and many of our country schools gathered together some extremely useful material for the histories of their own districts. When a State Schools' Exhibition was held in Melbourne in 1906, local histories were, according to a report in the *Education Gazette*, "the most remarkable of the history exhibits . . . sent in by the teachers and scholars." Since that date interest has periodically revived and waned; the revivals have usually been fostered by a few enthusiasts among teachers who have a bent in this direction. Jubilees and centenaries often provide the excuse and the reason for local history studies. Within the next few years many districts in Victoria will celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of their settlement, for it was during the forties and fifties of last century that large runs, tiny roadside hamlets, and busy gold-fields were founded in many parts of this State; from these settlements have grown the majority of the towns, large and small, that are the cores of community life in Victoria to-day. One motive that prompted this article was the belief and the hope

that many teachers will take the opportunity to plan for local history projects during the centenary years of the districts in which their schools are located.

The post-primary stage is recommended as being the most suitable in which to interest pupils in local history. The study of local history should be treated as part of the normal course in history, and it may be presented through formal methods or, preferably, by means of individual investigation and group projects.

The study of local history should resolve itself into an investigation of two main problems: the origin of settlement in the district and, secondly, the stages in, and the factors determining, the growth of the district, as it evolved from an insignificant village to a flourishing city or from a sheep-run to a thriving pastoral or closely settled agricultural community. The approaches should be varied to include geographical, economic, and industrial aspects, so that the history is realistic and sensibly balanced. It is advisable, however, to limit the scope of the inquiry to certain definite topics which may be added to if material, time, and interest are still available when they are concluded. As a general rule the project should be directed to one or more of the following topics:—

1. Local topography, climate, and vegetation, with special attention to the origin and meaning of names of places, physical features, plants, and animals.
2. Information about the aborigines who inhabited the locality before the first Europeans appeared—names of the tribes and of any known individual members, habits and customs, relics and surviving evidence of their existence, and the circumstances in which they disappeared from the district.
3. The exploration of the district by Europeans.
4. The first occupation and settlement of the locality—the reasons for settlement. The names of the pioneers and accounts of their migration.
5. Stories of the early days.
6. Development of the district, records of productivity and expansion. Statistics relating to population, production, etc.
7. Development of transport and communications.
8. Municipal history—growth of local government.
9. Special topics—(a) "First things." (b) Eminent personages born in, or resident in, the district. (c) Influence of the district on other parts of the State.
10. Historic monuments and public works.

It should not be necessary to amplify the suggestion that the history of the home region should always be viewed against the general background of the history of the State and the Commonwealth. Nor should it be necessary to point out that such a study furnishes admirable opportunities for the correlation of history with geography, literature, science, nature-study, and art.

The sources on which pupils may draw for information vary in type, quantity, and quality. It will be found that the following sources are those most productive of useful material:—

1. General history books and magazines,
2. Explorers' narratives or records,

3. Official data, such as government documents, municipal files, survey maps, court records, and records of local churches, institutes, and associations.

4. Newspaper files.

5. Cemetery headstones, and district memorials and monuments.

6. Personal records, such as letters, reminiscences, diaries, and photographs.

As far as possible all sources should be tested as to their authenticity and accuracy. In some instances it may be practicable to build up a historical museum in which are collected together books, newspapers, letters, documents, drawings, photographs, maps, coins, aboriginal implements and weapons, pioneers' implements, souvenirs, and relics. Although each pupil should make his own special contribution to this project, it becomes most valuable when all the individual efforts are collated and expressed coherently in one planned statement, perhaps a miniature "History of—", for which pupils may prepare not only the text, but also photographs, maps, sketches, and charts.

A creditable project of this type is not beyond the powers of most normal pupils.

During the next few years, when you come to plan your history syllabus for Grades VII. or VIII., or Forms I., II., or III., consider whether you might not set aside at least one term in one year for the study of local history. The sequel might, in the following year, be a social study of the community, district, or town, as it is at present, with special attention to the occupations, activities, interests, and institutions of the people who are removed by only two or three generations from the pioneers, the men and the women, who, if Bernard O'Dowd and Dorothea Mackellar have guessed aright, helped "sailor Time" to dredge this "last sea-thing" from Space and found it pitiless and terrible yet, withal,

"An opal-hearted country,

A wilful, lavish land."

And so, in the words of Walter Murdoch, "to learn the history of Australia, let us begin with the corner of Australia where we live. Don't start with the annals of the continent; start with the annals of a parish."

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

ALGEBRA FOR THE FIRST YEAR.

By the Board of Inspectors, Secondary Schools.

"Nearly every subject has a shadow, or imitation. It would, I suppose, be quite possible to teach a deaf and dumb child to play the piano. When it played a wrong note it would see the frown of its teacher and try again. But it would obviously have no idea of what it was doing or why any one should devote hours to such an extraordinary exercise. It would have learnt an imitation of music. And it would fear the piano exactly as most students fear what is supposed to be mathematics."—W. W. SAWYER, in *Mathematicians' Delight*.

Whether this is or is not an overstatement concerning existing weaknesses in mathematics teaching in secondary schools, it must be admitted that the results of this teaching are often disappointing to both teacher and pupil. The more obvious deficiencies shown, for instance, by poor examination results are almost inevitably accompanied by the formation of unsatisfactory attitudes of thought and emotion and a lack of appreciation of the place of the subject in human thought and in the practical affairs of society.

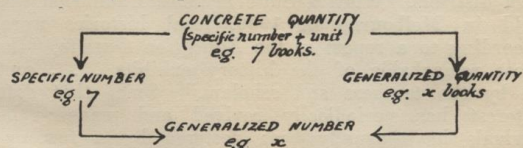
The purpose of this article is not to set out hard and fast prescriptions; it is rather to make suggestions which, when applied to the work of the first stages, may help to make the teaching of algebra less formal and more meaningful to pupils. Some of them are in current use in the best modern textbooks; others are intended to suggest more original methods which can be worked out in further detail without much difficulty.

1. Teach Algebra as a Language.

The chemist uses a special language, or perhaps we may say more correctly a modification of our ordinary language, to express ideas contained in his own field of knowledge; so does the doctor, the boy who sends a message in code, or the musician. Arithmetic is a language for expressing facts about specific numbers. In algebra we are more particularly concerned with generalized numbers,

which depend on a concept which is more difficult than it is sometimes thought to be.

In adult speech we use some nouns that refer to a particular thing or person, for example, "man" in the phrase "that man over there", and other nouns that refer to a class of things or persons, for example, "man" in the sentence "Man is a social animal". Or, again, we speak not only of specific persons such as Mr. Edwards, Mervyn Adams, Miss Smith, but also of Mr. Everyman, John Citizen, Miss Australia. In thinking about numbers the same kind of distinction is made between specific concrete quantities such as "7 books" and generalized abstract numbers such as x . The two possible ways of passing from specific concrete quantities to generalized numbers may be represented as follows:—



It is to be noted that children at an early age use only concrete specific nouns (and concrete quantities); it is only when they reach a certain stage of mental maturity that they are capable of using the process of induction so as to be able to think properly about classes of things, that is, to use generalized nouns (and generalized numbers) with understanding.

Algebra is mainly a symbolic language, the symbols used being of three kinds:—

- Those denoting numbers, e.g., x , a ;
- those denoting processes, e.g., $+$, $-$, \times , \div ;