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# "Catching Cannonballs": Reflections on a career as a History Teacher

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# "CATCHING CANNONBALLS": REFLECTIONS ON A CAREER AS A HISTORY TEACHER

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*This essay was delivered as a plenary address at a conference for high school teachers on teaching history in Maine, held October 1997 at the University of Maine. Retiring History Professor Jerome Nadelhaft reflects on his career as colonial historian at the University of Maine and suggests that the mission of the history teacher is to impart an ethical sensibility to students.*

We history teachers are engaged in an important business: that of education. It is a difficult job, given the nature of our clients—and to a certain extent, for high school teachers, the nature of parents, who are often suspicious of teachers who go beyond a chronological account of political events and figures. Heaven help those who teach values, although how you can teach anything, especially history, without implicitly teaching values escapes me.

Considering parents, I am reminded of a story. A would-be teacher in Alabama once replied to a question from the examiners: Do you think the world is round or flat? "Well," he replied, "some people think one way and some another, and I'll teach round or flat, just as the parents please." That tale was taken from a book published over 120 years ago. I offer it in part to highlight one of the functions of history: to put current concerns in focus.

While parents and school administrators look over the teachers' shoulders, there is, too, society at large, ready to blame the schools, and therefore the teachers, for whatever is wrong in America. To the best of my knowledge, the first time that happened was in early Massachusetts. When the colony lost direction, at least according to its leaders, they instructed town officials to be more exacting in their examination of the school teachers they were hiring. Social dysfunction was the schools' fault. Never mind economic depression and bad relations with England, with natives, and with their own dissenters.

Last, making the teacher's job difficult are commonly held opinions about education. Here is how one well-known American somewhat despairingly described popular opinion about education:

> Our . youth are under happier stars than you and I were. They acquire all learning in their mothers' womb, and bring it into the world ready-made. The information of books is no longer necessary; and all knowledge which is not innate, is in contempt, or neglect at least. Every folly must run its round; and so, I suppose, must that of self-learning, and self-sufficiency; of rejecting the knowledge acquired in past ages, and starting on the new ground of intuition. When sobered by experience, I hope our successors will turn their attention to the advantages of education, I mean of education on the broad scale, and not that of the petty *academies* [which] commit their pupils to the theater of the world with just taste enough of learning to be alienated from industrious pursuits, and not enough to do service in the ranks of science.

So wrote Thomas Jefferson to John Adams in a letter dated July 5, 1814, part of the extraordinarily rich late-in-life correspondence between two long-estranged but reconnected friends. Their correspondence about education continued on and off and over a year later Adams mused about how difficult—he might almost have said impossible—the task of teaching is: "Education," Adams said,

> which you brought into View in one of your Letters, is a Subject so vast, and the Systems of Writers are so various and so contradictory, that human Life is too short to examine it; and [what follows is one of my favorite lines] a Man must die before he can learn to bring up his Children. (Quincy, June 19, 1815)

I had scarcely finished typing out those quotes, with their disapproving reference to "self-learning and self-sufficiency," when I found a letter in the *New York Times* complaining about California's new math guidelines. The author was not upset with the standards, but with the way they were to be reached. They were rife with the latest "self-discovery" fads: Teachers faded into the background, and students were to stumble along on their own. I doubt the author was aware of Jefferson's similar complaint.

Working with the general idea that the unexamined life is not worth living, I have spent a considerable amount of time since my retirement in June reviewing my teaching life, evaluating my performance, asking myself why I did what I did and whether I did any good. In some respects the exercise is rather futile; it's unlikely I am going to be too hard on myself. People have a way of protecting themselves. Moreover, I lack some basic information. The value of what I did in the classroom is not determined by how well students did on exams, or even how well they did in the classes they took following mine. Rather, it's reflected in how

well the material played out in the rest of their lives. And there's the rub: How in the world will I know that? Over the years, several thousand students passed through my classes. While I had a few touching letters following my retirement, they were hardly sufficient to judge a career.

Today's talk gives me the perfect opportunity to reflect out loud about my thirty-three years of teaching, with the hope of saying something that might influence the way other teachers impart history. Thus I look back to the past—my past—in order to look ahead, which is precisely what historians ought to do. We hope our examination of the past affects, in some fashion, the future.

Now I know there are other reasons for learning history, and at the moment the public seems to be soaking up the past for its entertainment and comfort value. Documentaries by Ken Burns (and others) and the History Channel are successes. In the book *History: What and Why?* (1996), Beverley Southgate notes that two thousand years ago, the Roman historian Livy understood this. In the preface to his work, he noted that by studying an idealized republican past, he was able, in his words, to "withdrawe mine eyes from beholding the raging wickedness of the times." Obviously, too, there is intellectual meat here; some people need to do history the way others need to climb mountains: because it's there. History satisfies their need to solve puzzles, the solving being an end in itself. Perhaps more important, history has the personal value of *placing* people. Understanding our roots can be a source of stability and identity in an increasingly mobile society where people are separated by many miles from family and by experience from an older generation. We admire, in a sense, William Faulkner's characters, who are surrounded by the past, a past which mingles with, even haunts, the present. As one of them says in *Requiem for a Nun*: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Another, in *Intruder in the Dust*, comments: "It's all *Now* you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago."

I should confess that my own understanding of the need for roots is more intellectual than emotional. My family is European; my father's family fled Poland when he was a child, when it was wise and possible to flee. He never spoke of it, never wanted to return. I have no sense of place that I need to be part of, at least not as part of a family history stretching back generations. When I first came to Maine and discovered that half my class could trace themselves back to seventeenth-century America, I was shocked—and I understood then that I would always be rootless in Maine.

Entertainment aside, inquisitiveness aside, and roots aside, I believe that history is valuable because it is transformative, potentially revolutionary, for individuals and for society. Indeed, I am made extremely uneasy by history that is comforting. History should be disquieting. Discovering other possibilities in the past—not only what happened, but what could have happened—suggests alternatives for the future. As Claude Levi-Strauss wrote: "History is never only history *of*; it is always history *for*" (Southgate, 48). By changing individuals, it changes society's possibilities. Unabashedly, I confess now as I confessed quite openly throughout my career: That was what I was about. Put another way, if a student left the class the way she or he came in, then I had failed. That student didn't need my class and could have spent time better elsewhere.

I am certainly not discounting the value of the information we history teachers impart, though I believe there is a gap between what we teach and what students learn. Historical information is necessary for informed public decision making. Politicians who lecture us about family values, for instance, ought to know more about the history of the family in America. Their loud ignorance is embarrassing. Similarly, the voters they appeal to should know enough to reject their glib moralizing and prescriptions for curing society's ills. Perhaps, and I emphasize "perhaps," a history course would help. As some of you know, I have been working on wife abuse in nineteenth-century America for a long time. I know that my use of that material in class has been revelatory for many and, I think, life saving for some. Since nineteenth-century Americans had known so much about wife abuse (indeed, it is my contention that our knowledge has not advanced a great deal), the loss of that historical information cost women dearly. In other words, public policy might have been different if the public's historical awareness had been greater. Perhaps, too, knowledge of American history would help us better understand modern wars. I offer a few examples from the American Revolution and the Civil War, the latter from Phillip Shaw Paludan's *Victims: A True Story of the Civil War* (1981), which describes the cold-blooded murder of thirteen Union men, most of them captured in their homes. Tragically demonstrating the nature of that war, one of those prisoners, thirteen years old, pleaded: "You have killed my old father and my three brothers; you have shot me in both arms—I forgive you all this—I can get well. Let me go home to my mother and sisters." His captors shot him again.

For the Revolution, the details are skimpier, but the incidents are numerous, frightening, and not yet widely enough known. The American

public would do well to learn about them before rushing military supplies to support civil wars anywhere. Many people know about "Tarleton's quarter," the bayoneting of Whigs trying to surrender, but what is frightening is that such incidents were commonplace on both sides. One Whig commander explained away an action in which nearly all opposing loyalists were killed: "As this was done under the eye of the whole British camp, no prisoners could be safely taken," he noted, "which may apologize for the slaughter that took place on this occasion."

Incidents become personalized. William Gipson, for example, witnessed the punishment of two captured Tories, one condemned to death and shot, and the other spicketed; that is, in Gipson's words, "placed with one foot upon a sharp pin drove in a block, and . . . turned around . . . until the pin run through his foot." Gipson, whose widowed mother had been whipped by Tories, commented: "I cannot forbear to relate that as cruel as this punishment might seem to those who never witnessed the unrelenting cruelties of the Tories . . . yet [I] viewed the punishment with no little satisfaction." His sentiments were similar to, but not quite as extreme as those of a Southern woman quoted by Paludan who saw Lincolnites kneeling to pray before being shot. "I have no sympathy for them whatever," said the woman. "I believe it is perfectly right to kill them whenever they are caught. I have a husband and two brothers in the Southern army, and every man who is unwilling to fight for the Southern Confederacy, who may be caught in the act of running off to Kentucky, ought to be hung or shot."

Anyone who wants to follow the subject of civil war cruelties (our Civil War or any civil war) ought to look at Michael Fellman's *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri during the American Civil War* (1989). It's full of horrendous information, including accounts of soldiers taking ears and teeth for souvenir necklaces. Despite complaints that Ken Burns' Civil War series was too graphic, one of its great failings was that it ignored the atrocities that were so much a part of that story. If you want to know what Confederates really thought about the blacks they swore they cared for, you should know about what they did to captured black Union soldiers. I once heard Fellman give a talk so full of gruesome detail that people had to leave the room. Something similar happened to George Mosse, a distinguished European historian. During one of his Holocaust lectures a student fled the room to throw up. He resolved to drop those graphic details—in my opinion a terrible mistake.

The most valuable lesson we can impart to our students comes not from the details of history but from the passion and empathy these de-

tails should inspire. In his book, *The Politics of History* (1970), Howard Zinn quotes Diderot writing about Voltaire: "Other historians relate facts to inform us of facts. You relate them to excite in our hearts an intense hatred of lying, ignorance, hypocrisy, superstition, tyranny; and the anger remains even after the memory of the facts has disappeared." Science fiction writer Zenna Henderson conveyed the tale of Red Riding Hood as a parable of history in her short story "Turn the Page":

> And when we were Red Riding Hood, we knew under our terror and despair that help would come—had to come when we turned the page, because it was written that way. If we were the wolf, we knew that death waited at the end of our hunger; we leaped as compulsively to that death as we did to our feeding. As the mother and grandmother, we knew the sorrow of letting our children go, and the helpless waiting for them to find the dangers and die of them or live through them. . . . *And we found out that after you have once been the pursuer, the pursued and the watcher, you can never again be only the pursuer or the pursued or the watcher. Ever after you are a little of each of them.*

How, then, do we generate this empathy? This passion? What makes history dangerous, perhaps revolutionary? In some respects, one can easily reason backwards. Totalitarian countries understand the importance of controlling history. George Orwell summarized the notion as well as anyone in *1984*: " 'Who controls the past', ran the Party slogan, 'controls the future: Who controls the present controls the past' " (Southgate, 53). One sees further evidence of that in the oversight politicians attempt to exercise regarding museum exhibits—as in cancellation of the Enola Gay exhibit and the resignation of the director of the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum. Less well-known was a similar cancellation of a Library of Congress exhibit on slavery, and demands that an exhibit on sweatshops be "balanced," which I gather means the curators had to show the good side of sweatshops. Clearly in the minds of some, it's important to obscure the history of exploitation for fear that it might turn people (workers) against manufactures. We might see more strikes, maybe even a little redistribution of income. That great seventeenth-century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes is relevant here: "No man can have in his mind a conception of the future, for the future is not yet: but of our conceptions of the past, we make a future" (Southgate, 135). History, whether in the classroom, the museums, or on the History Channel, tells a dangerous story.

The material available to all history teachers, regardless of their subject, is so powerful that all who hear it should be permanently changed.

Here I might use a favorite line: The truth shall make you free, but first it shall make you miserable. I thought I went into the classroom prepared to the teeth with material so powerful that students would not be able to resist it. They would see the connections (and there were always connections) and be changed by what they learned. For example, there is a wonderful quote from John Winthrop, when he and other Puritans were criticized for abandoning their country. He explained that England was in terrible shape, economically and spiritually:

> What means then the bleating of so many oppressed with wronge, that drink wormwood, for righteousness? Why doe so many seely sheep that seeke shelter at the judgment seates returne with out their fleeces? *Why meet we so many wandering ghoestes in shape of men, so many spectacles of misery in all our streetes, our houses full of victuals, and our entryes of hunger starved Christians? Our shoppes full of riche wares, and under our stalles lye our own fleshe in nakedness.*

That's a quotation I used in my colonial course; obviously, though, I was also using it to comment about the homeless and affluent in contemporary America. For years, I was disappointed with the responses. I came to realize—as students willingly followed me from one class to another—that no matter how powerful my material, how careful my preparation, my students weren't getting it, or at least most of them weren't. They did fine on exams; it was obvious that they knew how to give back the facts. But it was also obvious that what I thought should have been happening simply wasn't.

I want to get at the difficulties with two stories from my classes. Like most teachers I know, I always tried to throw in material to keep students amused. For example, in my course on the American Revolution, I threw in one choice detail about military history. After the battles of Lexington and Concord, New Englanders essentially laid siege to the town of Boston. The British had a lot of firepower, and so they kept up a fairly steady barrage of cannon shot, which took a toll of sorts on New England (by now American) soldiers. And how was that? Well, the otherwise bored besieging troops developed a game to see who could catch the cannon balls on the fewest bounces. Needless to say, some of them got hurt—broken arms and legs. A good story, but what's the point here? Simply that it's one of the details of the course that students seem to remember most. And I am not at all confident that the point of the anecdote stayed with them. The game tells us something about the character of the New England army, about a certain lack of authority.

The next story is more serious and much more upsetting. About seventeen years ago, a nice young man I met in downtown Bangor said, "You're Professor Nadelhaft, aren't you? I was in your class ten years ago." He was quite complimentary, downright flattering. So, I asked which class had been so wonderful, and he said, the one on women's history. Now, since I never taught a class on women's history, the store clerk had me interested. What could he possibly have been remembering?

After numerous questions, we worked it out. He had been in the United States history survey course, in which, while I did try to remind the class that there were women in America, I only gave one lecture on the abuse of women and the women's rights movement. That one lecture, *one out of forty,* loomed large. Indeed, it had become the course. While I was certainly glad this ex-student had remembered there were women in American history, I was irritated that my efforts in other directions, that my carefully constructed course, had disappeared. And lord knows what he even remembered about those women. Nothing, I am positive, that would have informed his behavior. If I were to bet, I would wager that during the course, that man had been angry that we spent so much time—fifty minutes—on women. Certainly, enough people said that on evaluations. At the time, they remembered the facts—they gave them back on exams—but for the men at least, and for many of the women, it made no difference.

These reactions remind us painfully that students, like the rest of us, have a built-in short-term memory for some information. Like the rest of us, they learn to filter the information they confront daily. Ralph Waldo Emerson concluded that if we truly saw all the things that surround us, "we should be imprisoned and unable to move." Similarly, W. H. Auden wrote that it was "impossible to guess how much energy we have to spend each day in not-seeing, not-hearing, not-smelling, not-reacting" (Southgate, 60). And that leads me back to my early disappointment with student responses to my irresistible material. I learned that it was not what students knew—or thought they knew—about American history when they got to my classes which was interfering with my teaching, but how they already made sense of their own lives. Did they come into my class believing that the poor were responsible for their own poverty? That government was evil because they grew up hearing their fathers curse "big brother," property taxes, politicians? That God made the world in six days and on the seventh rested? Those beliefs, if unidentified and unexamined, determined whether they retained my material past the final exam and determined whether I had an impact on their

lives. To paraphrase an old economics law, bad information absorbed early in life drove out the good. Eventually, I realized that I not only needed to give students new information, I needed to help them get rid of old, erroneous information.

I want to offer you an example as I wind down this talk. It comes from a senior seminar I frequently gave on the American Revolutionary Era. One of the books I used is *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution*, edited by Richard D. Brown, a wonderful collection of essays and documents, two of which deal with the mutiny of the New Jersey line in January 1781. The students' reaction to these documents constitute some of my most depressing moments as a teacher. I need to emphasize two points. First, this was a *senior* seminar, a class involving history majors who had already taken seven or eight history courses. Second, we got to these particular documents toward the end of the course, which means the students and I had been interacting for at least eight weeks.

In the first of the documents, Gen. Robert Howe describes the New Jersey mutiny and how he put it down, having been dispatched by Washington on a forced march for precisely that purpose. To begin with, this particular mutiny, as Howe accurately reported, was rather benign. It did not occur during battle; nor did it involve desertion to the enemy. Apparently, some enlisted men told a few officers to go to hell and paraded in arms when ordered to disband. Howe quickly determined, after arriving on the scene, that "their whole behaviour was such as cried aloud for chastisement."

What did Howe do? He surrounded the so-called mutineers with other troops, disarmed them, and then turned to the officers, in fact he turned to the very people the men were resisting, for a list of "the most atrocious offenders." Howe then had them winnow the list down to three and held a field court martial which sentenced them to death. Two were executed on the spot, and one was pardoned. Howe wrote Washington: "I thought it would have a good effect to appoint the executioners from among those most active in the mutiny." Washington quickly thanked Howe for the "judicious measures" he used to crush the rebellion and said he was "happy in the lenity shewn in the execution of only two of the most guilty."

Now I need to emphasize one more point. These documents were all the students had for a discussion of the incident. They had no other information. Depressingly, they thought they needed no other information. My last senior seminar was a summer course, a small class—all

men. (I should point out that men's reactions are somewhat—but not totally—different from women.) In this case, the students agreed with Howe and Washington that crushing the mutiny was necessary. Having accepted Howe's comment that "chastisement" was called for, they accepted uncritically that the executions were justified, and they had no qualms about making friends murder friends. First I thought, "What have I been doing with my life? I should have been a carpenter. I could have built nice things for people, who would be immediately grateful." Then, rising to the challenge, I thought, "God has delivered you idiots [and I did at that point think of them as idiots] into my hands."

So, I asked, "why do you think the men mutinied?" They weren't interested. "Well, supposing the men had been wrong, bearing in mind that they did not desert during battle: Would you consider punishment other than execution? And are you confident that the officers who provided the names of the most guilty weren't just paying the men back for past affronts?" Possibly, they answered, but still Howe was there and he thought execution best, so they were prepared to accept that.

Around and around we went. Of course, most of us looking back with other information would have been quite sympathetic to the mutineers—in fact I hope we would have joined them. These were soldiers who had been forgotten by the public they were fighting for, tricked into reenlistment, and misled by incompetent officers. Unpaid, they received heart-rending letters from their wives telling them of children without food and clothes. One could go on and on. The conditions of the enlisted men and their families during the war were not shared by their officers.

With additional information forced on them, the students began to waver, though not enough to be embarrassed that they hadn't thought it necessary in the first place to wonder about causes. I switched to another tactic. To the student on my right I said: "It's 1781, you are sixteen, and you have just received word that a man who lived down the road, part of a family you had some acquaintance with, had just been executed. What do you think?" "Sorry it had to happen," he said, "but I heard he had mutinied." I gave the next student almost the same scenario, except that I made the man the father of his closest friend. I'm sure you can see where I was headed. I progressively personalized the event until finally one student was dealing with the execution of his father, a sainted man who had volunteered for service while others in the neighborhood were weaseling out.

And eventually the students began to react angrily. In the face of personal tragedy, they insisted that causes needed to be investigated, that the

punishment fit the crime, and that chastisement did not necessarily have to mean execution of otherwise loyal soldiers who had already made such extraordinary sacrifices.

I offer two explanations for their failure to react to the executions. Last week the *New York Times* wrote about the first woman to get tenure in Harvard's psychology department. She was an expert on mindlessness—illogical behavior, and in one of her experiments she has individuals approach co-workers at a copying machine and interrupt them, asking to run off copies, sometimes adding a reason: "*because* I need to run off copies." Ninety-five percent of the time, when that reason was given—and not otherwise—people stepped aside. Obviously people were hardly listening to the reason; what they heard was "*because*." They assumed the reason that followed would justify the request. Now that's trivial, but I think it partly explains my students' reactions: Howe executed the men "*because*. . . ." What followed was essentially unimportant. All that mattered was that Howe had a reason.

Their failure to react was in part mindlessness; but it was also baggage. Students want to believe in order; they want to believe authorities are not given to arbitrary behavior. Even if they know better in today's world, they will tell themselves it was different in the past—at least in America. People who are executed deserve to be executed.

And, of course, there was something else: a complete failure of empathy. Other people's lives were not real to them, not in the present and certainly not in the past. They could get there, if led. In the example I used, they began to realize the inadequacy of their response when the executions entered their homes. I should point out that empathy is not just about feeling other peoples' pain. The story about soldiers trying to catch cannonballs should have allowed the students to feel what it was like to be young and foolish, to be egged on by others. In the end, that is what I taught for: those moments when students got outside themselves to identify with someone else, a slave, even a slaveholder, a tory, a prisoner. It was only then, I thought, that what they were learning had a chance of becoming part of them, reforming their very beings and changing their lives and relationships.

While other people had other methods of proceeding, I had one and only one: the use of the most graphic material, the most telling contemporary words. "Sensationalism" was my stock and trade. I would have been a great reporter for the penny press which emerged in America in the 1830s and 40s to report on crime and murders. Let me illustrate those shock words with one example from the Great Awakening, which to some extent was an attack on the wealthy and their "holier than thou"

attitudes. As Jonathan Edwards, than whom there is no one more important in the history of the Great Awakening, put it: "If one worm be a little exalted above another, by having more dust, or a bigger dunghill, how much does he make of himself! What a distance does he keep from those that are below him!"

Having made so much of quotations through my teaching career, as any one of my students could testify, it is only fitting that I close this summary talk with a quote. And I need to insert here my thanks for the opportunity this gave me to think back over my career. It's a nice way to enter retirement. The last words are Solomon Stoddard's. Stoddard, a renowned New England Divine with one foot in the Puritan tradition and the other in the Great Awakening, said, and I sincerely believe it: "The Word is as a hammer and we should use it to break the Rocky Hearts of Men." That's what I tried to do. Break the hearts—in order to put something else in.