
The Dangers of History - II

JAMES J. RAVELL

THE PREAMBLE TO THE primary school history syllabus in the Cape Province says that the aim of the course is to give "a general picture of the story of mankind." However, it appears that the history of mankind does not include the history of the "Far" East and the Americas with regard to the development of early forms of civilisation. Thus we find that:

"the valley of the Indus, the home of one of the world's great early civilisations, is completely ignored, as are also the other river valley civilisations of the Hwango Ho and the Yangste rivers in China. The parallel development of the Mayan civilisation in what is now called Mexico, the settlement of the remote islands of the South Seas by the Incas during the same time as the river valley civilisations of the Mediterranean were flourishing: all these exciting facts of the true history of mankind and the opening of vistas of the really glorious past are locked away from the child at the primary school level by the limitation of the syllabus to the civilisations of Europe. This is, of course, in order to show the development of 'Western civilisation', a term which it would be wise for teachers to examine more closely.¹

The same writer goes on:

"This 'Western civilisation', which has roots in the soil of Africa, Persia, China and India, which, when it did reach the 'native races' of Africa in the form of the invaders (called explorers) from Portugal, brought the destruction of the oldest civilisations in Africa, the breaking up of not only families, but whole settled communities, in order to satisfy the gargantuan appetite of the slave markets of Europe and the merchants of that continent. One has only to read Basil Davidson's book, *Old Africa Rediscovered*, to find out what happened when 'western civilisation' spread like a rapacious forest fire through 'Darkest Africa!'"²

IN MOST SOUTH African history textbooks one finds a subtle—and sometimes more overt—slanting in favour of the ideology that underlies the "traditional South African way of life". Consequently we have books telling all and sundry about *Kafferoorloë*, always, yes, always caused by one section, although the evidence does not support this view, as witness the causes of

¹ B. Hammond: "History Teaching in our Schools" (II), *The Educational Journal*, November—December, 1960, p. 7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 7. See also: J. C. de Graft-Johnson: *African Glory*; W. E. B. du Bois: *The World and Africa*; J. F. Horrabin: *An Atlas of Africa* etc.

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the outbreak of the fifth Frontier War, 1818, to mention but one example.³

Forgotten is the fact, for example, that both the Xhosa and the frontiersmen were groups of people who valued cattle very much. A clash over grazing lands seemed inevitable, the Xhosa regarding the others as intruders. To put the blame on savagery, barbarism and callous disrespect for life⁴ on one side is not calculated to make the student respect his fellow "black" South African to-day. Instead of a broad humanism being inculcated, a narrowness and insular outlook and arrogance finding at times expression in blatant racialism are engendered. Impressionable children are therefore strengthened in their prejudices towards other groups by the way history is dealt with in history textbooks.⁵ This danger of the study of history i.e. the fostering of a racist ideology is, of course, not confined to the "Whites" or a particular language group.

It would be possible to go on a long way in this strain. For example, one may note that only "whites" qualify for the status of heroes in South African history. Then again there is the contemptuous manner in which "non-whites" are generally referred to in most history books. Thus Theal calls the Batwa ("Bushmen") beings "whose ordinary habits were not much more elevated than those of animals."⁶

³ See Edward Roux: *Time Longer than Rope*, p. 21.

⁴ It has been estimated that of more than 300 missionaries who entered Central and East Africa before 1884 only six were killed and then only under severe provocation. See "History and Civilisation" (3) *New Age*, 29th June 1961, p. 6.

⁵ At a conference of teachers in Cape Town in 1958 Prof. Lauwerys of the University of London referred to much of the content of South African school history textbooks then as "dangerous rubbish". *The Educational Journal*, May—June, 1961, p. 16.

⁶ Quoted by J. S. Marais in *The Cape Coloured People*, p. 14.

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IT SHOULD BE stated that to a "Non-White" it appears that there are some general presuppositions that underlie much of the history that is being written and taught in South Africa. These postulates are not based on fact and are therefore unscientific. They include the following:

1. It was God's will that the white man should come to South Africa.

2. The indigenous peoples were and are incapable of developing a civilisation of their own.

3. Without the arrival of the white man South Africa would still have been in a state of savagery and barbarism.

4. The white man saved the blacks from eliminating one another.

5. It is God's will that the white man should govern the non-whites . . ."

Although some "non-whites" have already written about South African history, the need for trained historians amongst their ranks remains. That some universities are at last realising this problem can be gauged from an article of Dr. Davenport, Senior lecturer in History at the University of Cape Town. He concludes his article entitled "How honest is our history?" by stating that a liberal historical tradition can only triumph in South Africa when, amongst other things, representative "non-whites" have been trained as historians and their writings are carefully studied and digested.⁸

It is to be regretted that "non-white" students are not able to enter universities of their choice, but are virtually kraaled off into separate tribal colleges. One fears—and there have been signs already to vindicate this—that the inculcation of broad, universally accepted scientific and humanistic values with regard to history and other disciplines will be considerably hampered at institutions whose *raison d'être* is exclusiveness, insularity, and whose lecturers are expected to subscribe to a particular separatist ideology.⁹

As has been indicated here and in a previous article in *The New African*, there are quite a number of dangers attending the writing and teaching of history in South Africa. And one is particularly perturbed at the state of our school history textbooks. I seem to think that these dangers can be eliminated once we look at South African history not from the standpoint of members of a particular group,¹⁰ but from the standpoint of the group to which we all belong viz. mankind.

The study of the past of mankind cannot be scientific if all its members are not regarded as equal in human dignity. ●

⁷ D. Upton: "The Teaching of History" (IV), *The Educational Journal*, March 1961, p. 7.

⁸ Dr. T. R. H. Davenport: "How Honest is our History?" *Forum*, Jan., 1962. p. 10.

⁹ Witness the spate of dismissals when Fort Hare was taken over by the state.

¹⁰ See T. R. H. Davenport, op. cit., p. 9. Also: J. S. Marais, "The Study of History", p. 15 (Inaugural lecture, University of the Witwatersrand, 12th September, 1945); F. A. van Jaarsveld: "Ou en Nuwe Weë in die Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedskrywing"—Intreerede, University of South Africa, 23 March 1961.

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