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Fanning the Flames

By Cecil J. S. Bowling.

The ordinary history of a country has been written with a view to arousing patriotism, and making those who study that history feel that their country was always in the right. This is not so much because facts have been garbled as it has been a case of telling half truths, telling just enough about anything to make one's country appear noble and grand in comparison with others.

Sectional differences have been emphasized improperly in American history. After the Civil War the teaching of history in the public schools came into prominence, and the histories commonly written and studied in the North presented the struggle between the North and the South, including the causes that led up to the open conflict, in such a way that the school child of the elementary grades readily came to the conclusion that there was not the slightest grounds for the stand taken by the South. Naturally the southern states could not feel justified in adopting such histories, and so for decades the pupils of the North and the pupils of the South have gone on studying the history of their country written to best satisfy the vanity of the section in which they lived. Is it any wonder that the North celebrates one date as Decoration day while the South has selected a different time for remembering their soldiers of the sixties? Is it any wonder that nine southern states observe the birthday of Robert E. Lee as a holiday and eight of the southern states celebrate the birthday of Jefferson Davis at which time Confederate flags have a prominent part in school ceremonials? Instead of healing the wounds of sectional controversy the histories studied in our schools have served to keep the wounds open.

Some decades ago the Prussians adopted a maxim which was, "Whatever you want in the nation put it into the school". It was the Prussian plan to make all German children feel that their nation was the greatest in the world—the salt of the earth, and so the history text books were written with that end in view. How successful was the plan was demonstrated in the war that became world wide in its significance and led to the smashing of the old Prussian regime in 1918.

Germany has not been the only offender in this respect. America and England and other countries, while not going to the same extreme, have nevertheless emphasized nationalism in their text histories and have thus stood in the way of a sincere understanding between nations.

Some few of the nations have recognized their error, at least a few people have done so. In 1921 a delegation in England, headed by H. G. Wells, made an appeal to England's highest educational official, for a more liberal attitude on the subject of history. At this time Mr. Wells said, "Unless we have a wider teaching of history, going beyond national range, we are bound to have impatience, and all sorts of unhappy struggles, and moods of apathy alternating with moods of hysterical combativeness; and the whole of international affairs has to go to the tune of that."

Sweden has adopted a plan of historical instruction that embraces the international viewpoint.

Before the close of the war educators in our own country began thinking of the need of more liberality in history teaching, and in the writing of histories. They recognized that narrowness and half truths were not

in keeping with the new point of view. In 1919 a speaker before the National Education Association made a plea for history to be interpreted broadly "including the life of the man in society—his industry, religion, science, literature, and art as well as his wars and politics."

The average American history text book is largely a record of wars and rumors of wars. Is it any wonder that the youth comes to think of patriotism as something concerned with donning a soldier's garb and fighting for the defense of his country? From 1775 until the present time America has had several wars, but in comparing the time that the nation has been at war with the periods of peace we recognize that the part of our history devoted to war is all out of proportion.

There has been a narrow view taken regarding the importance of events, to say nothing of the half truths concerning the matters that are discussed. Our American pupils have been going through school without learning very much about the country's past, and much that they have learned has not been true because they have not learned enough to get at the truth of the matter.

There needs to be a decided if not a radical change in this valuable and important subject. The youth has a right to know the truth about his country and the whole truth. The things that are not to the credit of the nation should not be hidden from him. We can learn by the mistakes of others as well as by their perfect accomplishments.

Text books that confine the subject to narrow limits, that take a sectional view based on prejudice concerning the internal affairs, that aim at teaching the gloriousness of America at the expense of other countries; text books of that type should not be permitted to have a place in our schools.

There is a need for the modification of the curriculum which I shall not take up, but I would emphatically plead that the bonds that have kept history study within narrow confines be broken. Give us historical freedom. Let the truth be known, "the whole truth and nothing but the truth". Let the pupils of today have a true insight into the past and the sectional prejudice and difference will be lessened within the nation while it will be less difficult to get an international viewpoint and to learn to think in international terms. Whatever we put into our schools we do get into the fibre of the nation whether we will it so or not. For the future welfare of the nation and in the interest of world peace in the days to come may we have academic freedom in preparation of history text books and freedom in the teaching of this vital subject.

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