

"Goodbye to All That: Why Americans Are Not Taught History" (1998)¹

Christopher Hitchens

"You all remember," said the Controller, in his strong deep voice, "you all remember, I suppose, that beautiful and inspired saying of Our Ford's: "History is bunk. History," he repeated slowly, "is bunk."

He waved his hand; and it was as though, with an invisible feather whisk, he had brushed away a little dust, and the dust was Harappa, was Ur of the Chaldees; some spider-webs, and they were Thebes and Babylon and Cnossos and Mycenae. Whisk. Whisk—and where was Odysseus, where was Job, where were Jupiter and Gotama and Jesus? Whisk—and those specks of antique dirt called Athens and Rome, Jerusalem and the Middle Kingdom—all were gone. Whisk—the place where Italy had been was empty. Whisk, the cathedrals; whisk, whisk, King Lear and the Thoughts of Pascal. Whisk, Passion; whisk, Requiem; whisk, Symphony; whisk.... "That's why you're taught no history," the Controller was saying.

—Brave New World, Aldous Huxley

We dwell in a present-tense culture that somehow, significantly, decided to employ the telling expression "You're history" as a choice reprobation or insult, and thus elected to speak forgotten volumes about itself. By that standard, the forbidding dystopia of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* already belongs, both as text and as date, with Ur and Mycenae, while the hedonistic nihilism of Huxley still beckons toward a painless, amusement-sodden, and stress-free consensus. Orwell's was a house of horrors. He often seemed to beg credulity because he posited a regime that would go to any lengths to own and possess history, to rewrite and reconstruct it, and to inculcate it by means of coercion. Whereas Huxley, writing of a California-style utopia of 1932, rightly foresaw that any such regime could break but could not bend. In 1988, four years after 1984, the Soviet Union scrapped its official history curriculum and announced that a newly authorized version was somewhere in the works. That was the precise moment at which the regime conceded its own extinction. For true blissed-out and vacant servitude, though, you need an otherwise sophisticated society where no serious history is taught *at all*.

And yet there is still an unmet need, an unanswered yearning, for an intelligible past. It finds its expression in surrogate forms, like the "referred pain" of a complex ailment, but it may still be registered. A few years back, just as many major university departments of English were sidelining Shakespeare or dropping him altogether, the Hollywood sensibility "kicked in" to bring us Ian McKellen as a Weimar-like Richard III, or Kenneth Branagh as Hamlet, or Laurence Fishburne as the first black man to take the part of Othello on-screen. In somewhat the same way, the departure of the historical muse from the standard curriculum has been revenged or requited by a torrent of retrospectives. Some locate this moment in the vast popular response to Ken Burns's television series on the Civil War; in any event, the "history" and "biography" menu on A&E and the History Channel, and on PBS, is not furnished by those who are quixotically

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determined to lose money for integrity's sake. Nor do the lords of celluloid believe that they are acting pro bono when they revisit the beaches and cliffs of Normandy, the fouled hulls of the Middle Passage, the suggestive outlines of Dealey Plaza or the Watergate building. Nor is their product received as mere entertainment: Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* is credited with fueling a revival of Scottish nationalism that even now discomfits Tony Blair and the monarch whose bacon he saved last September.

Consider, too, the question of memorials. Is there a major city in the United States that is not currently arguing over some statue or plaque, or disputing the name given to some school or public building? These tussles are often sorry enough to make one reel and clutch the brow (Washington National Airport was *already* named for a president before some bright sparks thought to dub it again, in honor of the nation's leading amnesiac), but even in their paltriness they disclose a readiness to take history seriously.

Yet this fluttering cultural pulse has no attending physician. According to the last "National Assessment of Educational Progress in U.S. History," which was undertaken in 1994, we can no longer call upon the traditional schoolmarm concept of history as a pageant, or even as one damn thing after another. In order to argue against this caricature, you would need to know at least the official reason why Pilgrims and Puritans first voyaged to America, which 59 percent of fourth graders were unable to do. You would certainly need to be able to name one of the original thirteen colonies, which was beyond the capacity of 68 percent of that grade. By the eighth grade, matters have got worse, as they are bound to do. Ninety percent of eighth graders could recount nothing of the debates at the Constitutional Convention. Even when prompted by mentions of Yalta, Lend-Lease, and Hiroshima, 59 percent of the eighth grade were unprepared to say which conflict these references brought to mind. In the twelfth grade, 53 percent looked blank when invited to specify "the goal that was most important in shaping United States foreign policy between 1945 and 1990."

It isn't as if today's twelfth-grade students are giving the "wrong" reply to that last question, and scrawling ironic references to "imperialism" or "folie de grandeur" or even "Globocop" on their tests, let alone some variant like "Stalinism" or "Kulturkampf." They just don't know, and very probably don't care. Their immediate past has been airbrushed, or whisked, as surely as antiquity. When Henry James was writing *The American Scene* at the very opening of this century, he fretted about what Leon Edel, James's biographer, termed "America's cult of impermanence" or what James himself called "the perpetual repudiation of the past, so far as there has been a past to repudiate." So there is perhaps an innate cultural bias against "dwelling on the past," unless it is for the sanctified purposes of good citizenship. Sheer ignorance generally stems from plain ignorance, and surveys have been turning up results like this for generations. An amazing 54 percent of eleventh graders "knew," at least by dint of multiple choice, that Joseph Stalin was the leader of the Soviet Union during World War II, according to the determinedly pessimistic 1987 work of Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn Jr. (*What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?*). Yet a poll published by the *New York Times* in 1995 discovered that only 49 percent of American adults could say with confidence that the Soviet Union had been on the same side as the United States for that period, with the rest either having no opinion or identifying "Russia" as an enemy or, most remarkably of all, as a noncombatant. And even this is salutary, by comparison with a *New York Times* survey of fifty-five years ago, which found that a quarter of entering college freshmen in 1943 could not name the man who had been president of the United States

during the Civil War. In the contemporary "debate" on the inculcation of history, the United States has even managed to forget its own amnesia.

The measure of an education is that you acquire some idea of the extent of your ignorance. And it seems at least thinkable that today's history students don't quite know what subject they are not being taught. At the time when alarm first (or last) began to be registered on this score, which was around the middle of the present decade, the good people at the National Council on History Education did some homework. They found that most states required high-school students to "take" a maximum of one year each of American and "world" history, and that several states had no history "requirement" of any kind. You might be startled to find that among the no-history-curriculum states was numbered the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. So would I have been, if I had not been a visiting professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh in 1997. Since you can't teach the American literary canon (indeed, you can't even teach people to *deconstruct* it) without some reference to historical context, I began every class with an abbreviated introduction about the period in which the author was writing. I still have the notes and papers sent me by my students, asking why they had to get all the way to college before anyone bothered to fill in this nagging blank. Michigan and Alaska also let history slide altogether, while much-derided West Virginia wanted two years of U.S. history (combined with world history) and three years of world history (combined with U.S. history). Between these two poles, Nevada stipulated three years of U.S. history, while mandating that this should include "state history and government" and omitting world history altogether. Ohio opted for a judicious and restrained 0.5 years of American history and left it at that. Numerous other states, few of them asking for more than a year's reflection on the American past, folded history, national or global, into a package that included "world geography or world cultures," "global studies," "psychology/sociology" (the Montana solution), or the babble of "outcomes-based" or "core-competency" requirements. Every classroom a hive of inactivity; every flag-draped school a factory for the mass-production of a little learning.

About four years ago I began to ask the teachers of my own children how it came to be that they could not tell Thomas Jefferson from Thomas the Tank Engine. In the preceding sentence, it is unclear whether I mean that the children didn't know unless I told them, or that the teachers didn't know unless I told *them*. The confusion is intentional. One instructor, at a rather costly District of Columbia day school, cheerfully avowed that she herself "had never been that much of a reader." Others, more candid, announced that history was a bit of a minefield subject and that "good examples" (like Pocahontas and, on a good day, Frederick Douglass) were the thing. Parson Weems himself could hardly have bettered the modern method whereby children get good reports in a subject that they have never studied in order that a tiny pump be applied to the valves of their fledgling self-esteem.

According to statistics compiled by the National Center for Education Standards, fewer than 19 percent of high-school and middle-school social-studies teachers in 1994 had majored (or minored) in history. That same year, when Alan Bennett's wonderful play *The Madness of George III* was released as a motion picture, its title was given as *The Madness of King George*. Hollywood's publicity people worried that audiences might think they had missed parts I and II.

It was time for one of those full-dress cultural sham-fights, like the earlier one about core values and "Western Civ," that animate the op-ed pages every decade or so. We need new standards! Alas, with no galvanizing Sputnik to unlock real money and talent, and with no encircling foe to spark another rewrite of the Pledge of Allegiance, federal monies went to

subsidize a rather pallid and prolix set of "guidelines" that might as well have been marketed as "American History—Making a Difference Since 1776" or "Our Past—Serving the Community with Pride." As with many such trite labelings, however, the small print should have carried the dire admonition "Contents Under Pressure" or "Some Assembly Required."

Batteries were included. The tempestuous Lynne V. Cheney, spouse of George Bush's one-time secretary of defense, found herself temporarily at a giddy and pivotal point. Not only did she chair the National Endowment for the Humanities, which the zealots in her own party desired to abolish, but this same endowment had funded, to the tune of \$2 million, the new "standards," which she found she wanted to abolish also. An article, catchily titled "The End of History," written either by or for Cheney, appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* in October 1994. You know the sort of thing—too many Native Americans and slaves in the new standards, too few pioneers, too much *political correctness*. In a matter of months, on the motion of Senator Slade Gorton, Republican of Washington, the full Senate had repudiated the "standards" in a vote of 99-1. It is safe to say that few if any of the legislators and deliberators had cleared their own passage through the offending volumes.

Thus began the current dialogue of the deaf, still raging at a school near you. Working toward his master's in tautology, John Fonte of the conservative Committee to Review National Standards said that "if you have a 99-1 vote in the Senate against it, obviously it was not consensual enough." He and his co-thinkers believe that consensus is best achieved by letting "states and local school districts" decide on the tenor of history teaching, which would certainly help insulate children from the news about McCarthyism and the Ku Klux Klan that Cheney found so depressingly salient in the original "guidelines."

Ever since the tussle between Cheney and the forces of P.C., history classes and textbooks have been oscillating between demands for a patriotic and intelligible narrative and cries for a story that is more "user-friendly" to minorities and new arrivals. School bureaucracies everywhere have responded by looking for safe and tepid waters, and educational publishers have been keen to abet the process in order to sell their bland and uncontroversial series. Combine this with lobbying from disparate confessional, regional, and ethnic groups, and each tributary blends imperceptibly to produce a uniform flow of drool:

TIME, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Content Standard A:

Students in Wisconsin will learn about history through the concepts of time, continuity and change in order to develop historical perspective and answer questions about our contemporary world and future.

Rationale:

Human beings want to understand their historical roots and to locate themselves in time. In developing these insights the students must know what things were like in the past and how things change and develop. Knowing how to reconstruct and interpret historic events provides a needed perspective in addressing where we have been, what we have become, and where we might be going. In Wisconsin schools, this teaching focus typically appears in units and courses in history and the humanities.

The above is the preamble to a "standards" blueprint of mid-1996. It seems to have been written by some kind of poorly engineered machine. It violates a principle that holds good for education as well as for medicine: "First Do No Harm." And it is the sort of prose in which "history" is increasingly packaged by state authorities.

The ensuing Wisconsin paragraphs are headed with the minatory words "Performance Standards" and assure us with more assertion than conviction that: "By grade twelve, students will:

- learn how to use a variety of sources and to check their credibility in order to interpret the past and to better understand current issues
- apply theories and historical inquiry to decision making about the future, such as citizenship responsibilities in the 21st century, the long term possibility for peace in Eastern Europe and the evolving role of China in a world economy.

It's all there—the slovenly grammar, the weary obeisance to the millennium and to "globalization," the inept repetitions: all of it boiled into a mush wherein history is offered cajolingly and apologetically as a sort of "Old News You Can Use."

Let no one doubt the extent of the damage done by comfort teaching or therapeutic education, which has reversed the idea that educators should be educated (a decent teacher will teach in order to learn) and which has made the relationship of instructor to student into an exercise in the mutual, restful softening of the cortex. Here is how the state of Illinois, long renowned for toughness and direct speech, proposed to illuminate the past to its future citizens as recently as 1996. Students were ostensibly required to:

- Assess the long-term consequences of major decisions by leaders in various nations of the world, drawing information from a variety of traditional, electronic and on-line sources.
- Explain the effects of urbanization, industrialization and technology on society and institutions throughout history.

These and other fatuities—or impossibilities, if you try and guess the real weight of the second stipulation above—were the result of a history "curriculum" that had been collapsed into the social-science department and that furthermore had to be "clear and meaningful to students, parents, educators, business representatives and the community at large." The capacious "inclusiveness" of that last gorgeous mosaic demands that the whole project be preintelligible to those who haven't studied it yet, those who missed it last time, those who need it most, and those whose business it isn't! The exhausted phraseology melds with the upward-and-onward automatic rhetoric to produce nullity. In a gesture to aspiration, the compilers of the standards quoted George Santayana to the effect that those who did not learn from the past would be condemned to repeat it. By Santayana's absurd standard, the grade-schoolers of Illinois should be entering their Babylonian epoch just about now.

In December 1950, in the course of his presidential address to the American Historical Association, Samuel Eliot Morison expressed the view that it was time to abandon the "Jefferson-Jackson-F. D. Roosevelt line" and to have at last an American history "written from a sanely conservative point of view." This was the midpoint in a reaction against "progressive" history teaching, which reaction ran almost unchecked (especially in the states of the old Confederacy) from about 1939 until the high noon of the Cold War. There was then an opposite but not equal reaction from certain revisionists, many of them excellent, such as Barton Bernstein and Christopher Lasch, but some of them callow and annoying. In due time, this collision expressed itself in a fight over history textbooks, in one of the few advanced nations that does not establish a nationally mandated curriculum where all students learn, so to speak, from the same page. The

result is a version of *News from Nowhere*, written from nobody's point of view and deferential to the largest book-buying market or the most loquacious lobby.

The Greek verb *historein* means "to ask questions" and was employed by Herodotus, who, often credited with being the first or founding historian, described his work as "inquiries" or *historiai*. In 1950, Henry Steele Commager and Samuel Eliot Morison jointly produced a textbook entitled *The Growth of the American Republic*. Describing the antebellum state of affairs below the Mason-Dixon line, they wrote:

As for Sambo, whose wrongs moved the abolitionists to wrath and tears, there is some reason to believe that he suffered less than any other class in the South from its "peculiar institution."

I would not, personally, wish to be deprived of this excerpt when teaching American history. Essay questions and classroom discussions might inquire: (1) What "reason to believe"? (2) Why were abolitionists so moved? (3) What gave rise to the notable coinage "peculiar institution"? (4) Why did both camps believe they had biblical authority? and (5) What has changed in America since 1950 to stop distinguished Yankee historians from employing the term "Sambo"? I think any competent teacher would and should have been able to cope with any "hurt feelings" that might arise in or out of the classroom. (If there were no such feelings, then something other than history would be the subject being taught.) But as matters stand, we have Southern textbooks that euphemize the Confederacy, Northern ones that scant the whole unpleasant subject, and a recent national debate on a possible presidential "apology" for slavery so etiolated that hardly anyone thought to ask whether President Lincoln's Second Inaugural had not in fact contained a rather finely worded section on the subject, dealing not just with apology for slavery but with real-time revenge for it. One can phrase the "First Do No Harm" injunction, as it applies to teaching, in another way: You must not bore young students, and you must not—may not—condescend to them. Who would dare argue, in the inculcation of geography or mathematics or French, that there are volatile elements to which the tender, rising generation ought not to be exposed? Who would dare insist that instruction in physics, for example, ought to be "clear and meaningful" to ignorant parents or to local "business representatives"?

Young Americans are at home with the concept of black holes and the imminence of cloning. The idea that human life may be a cosmic joke is well known to them. They understand that viruses and other microorganisms can be more powerful actors than dictators. The youngest of them share the wisened-up humor of *The Simpsons* ("Springfield Youth Center: Building Unrealistic Hopes Since 1966"). But can they be allowed to consider their own history as anything other than a story of uplift, or, at worst, a chronicle of obstacles overcome? Not really, says David McCullough, whose *Why History?* is widely circulated by those hoping for a revival of the subject: "History shows us how to behave. History teaches, reinforces what we believe in, what we stand for, and what we ought to be willing to stand up for. History is—or should be—the bedrock of patriotism, not the chest-pounding kind of patriotism but the real thing, love of country." And no, also, says Joy Hakim, a self-starting amateur historian who decided to write her own textbooks (marketed as *A History of US*) and ignited a brief spark of hope by breaking the monopoly of so-called educational publishing. Her introduction states:

Learning about our country's history will make you understand *what it means to be an American*. And being American is a privilege. People all over the world wish that they, too, could be American. Why?

Because we are a nation that is trying to be fair to all our citizens.... The more you study history, the more you will realize that all nations are not the same. Some are better than others.

Does that seem like an unfair thing to say? Maybe, but we believe it.

The third sentence does express a factual truth. But the reason given in the fifth sentence is mere propaganda, at least insofar as it distinguishes the United States from Italy, say, or Iceland or Chile. In what other discipline may a teacher so readily assume what has to be proved? Many critics have hailed Hakim for contesting the relativists and the guilt-trip historians head-on. But how different is her approach from the standard textbooks of the last generation, entitled as they were: *The American Pageant*, *The American Way*, *Land of Promise*, *American Adventures*, *Life and Liberty*, *The Challenge of Freedom*, *Triumph of the American Nation*? It was under this benign rule that the current crop of unlettered teachers and distracted pupils was sown.

In many ways, the low-level argument between the safe traditionalists and the ingratiating multiculturalists mirrors the dispute over the teaching of literature. And since history is literature, among other things, and since most historians have been literary authors, the comparison may be an illuminating one. In which class should students be asked to read Charles Dickens's *American Notes*, for example (not that they are given this opportunity in either English or history)? The chapter on slavery in that short book contains a list of small ads from the contemporary Southern press in which masters would identify runaway serfs: "Clog of iron on his right foot"; "several marks of lashing." It electrifies every student to whom I have shown it, partly because Dickens is a recognized "canonical" author and partly because of the stark immediacy of the reportage.

Or consider the great Samuel Clemens. *Huckleberry Finn* is one of the few books that all American children are mandated to read. Jonathan Arac, in his brilliant new study of the teaching of *Huck*, is quite right to term it "hyper-canonical." And Twain is a figure in American history as well as in American letters. The only objectors to his presence in the schoolroom are mediocre or fanatical racial nationalists or "inclusivists," like Julius Lester or the Chicago-based Dr. John Wallace, who object to Twain's use—in or out of "context"—of the expression "nigger." An empty and formal "debate" on this has dragged on for decades and flares up every now and again to bore us. But what if Twain were taught as a whole? He served briefly as a Confederate soldier and wrote a hilarious and melancholy account, *The Private History of a Campaign That Failed*. He went on to make a fortune by publishing the memoirs of Ulysses Grant. He composed a caustic and brilliant report on the treatment of the Congolese by King Leopold of the Belgians. With William Dean Howells he led the Anti-Imperialist League, to oppose McKinley's and Roosevelt's pious and sanguinary war in the Philippines. Some of the pamphlets he wrote for the league can be set alongside those of Swift and Defoe for their sheer polemical artistry. In 1900 he had a public exchange with Winston Churchill in New York City, in which he attacked American support for the British war in South Africa and British support for the American war in Cuba. Does this count as history? Just try and find any reference to it, not just in textbooks but in more general histories and biographies. The Anti-Imperialist League has gone down the Orwellian memory hole, taking with it a great swirl of truly American passion and intellect, and the grand figure of Twain has become reduced—in part because he upended the vials of ridicule over the national tendency to religious and spiritual quackery, where he discerned what Tocqueville has missed and far anticipated Mencken—to that of a drawling, avuncular fabulist.

Ours is a society wedded to the idea that "Western" and "civilization" are cognate terms, ready to do battle for the heritage of fifth-century Athens as our ancestor, consecrated in its state

architecture and statuary to the Graeco-Roman ideal—and there is not a whiff, not a hint, not a suspicion of the Socratic method in the way it instructs and elevates its young. *What Is History?* inquired E. H. Carr in a short book, published in 1961 and written well within the grasp of anyone with a reading age of sixteen, that appears on no reading list anywhere in the fifty states. Well, whatever it is (and Professor Carr had his own freely stated dogma), we know that it proceeds by means of irony, contradiction, and unintended consequence. Theodore Draper's entirely engrossing book *A Struggle for Power*, about the origins of the American Revolution, finds its locus in a "pamphlet war" in London in 1759. Anticipating the victorious outcome of the Seven Years' War, the British disputed about which French colony they should annex. The choice narrowed to Guadeloupe, rich in spices, and Canada, rich in space. The acquisition of Guadeloupe would complete British control of the Caribbean basin, while Canada would offer a great potential market for future British manufactures. Mercantile factions and lobbies formed on both sides of the question, and you can look up their exchanges and read them in plain English. The pro-Canada forces were better organized and financed. But the pro-Guadeloupe lobby made a telling point on the eve of its defeat. If we take Canada, it argued in a finely written polemic, then the ambitious American colonists will no longer require our protection from France. Indeed, they already manifest the stirrings of an independence movement... Within two decades of this debate, the Tory loyalists of His Majesty King George (Part III) were scuttling to sanctuary over the Canadian border. I have taught Draper's book in several classrooms and have had the pleasure of watching even the most indifferent students undergo the kindling of an interest: "What if the British had plumped for Guadeloupe? Would that have meant no Declaration of Independence?" "Not necessarily, but the context and conditions would have been different. Next week I want someone to tell us why the word 'czar' is an odd one to employ in today's American social engineering."

The idea of trying to teach the whole story, not just "warts and all" but as an *inquiry* or an argument, has been well advocated by Dr. James Loewen, a veteran lecturer in history at university level and the author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. Testifying to the thirst for honest and well-written discussion of history, this 1995 book has a quarter-million copies currently in print. In Loewen's opinion, the present teaching of history by rote is neither a science nor an art and has manifestly and confessedly, and for all reasonable purposes also completely, failed. There is no chance of amassing, as Bishop Stubbs once fondly hoped, a true bill of facts to be memorized. Von Ranke's famous dictum just to show "how it really was" represents a noble but impossible aspiration.

Loewen once won a benchmark case, beautifully entitled *Loewen et al. v. Turnipseed et al.*, against the crass censorship of schoolbooks in Mississippi. But unlike Joy Hakim, whose verve he admires, he does not recommend the teaching of history as any kind of inspiration. Instead, he proposes that students be given two contrasting texts: Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, for instance, as against Clarence B. Carson's *A Basic History of the United States*, published by the conservative American Textbook Committee in Alabama in 1986. When there is a basic grasp of narrative and evolution, and a corresponding grasp of the idea of differing views of the same story, it will become apt to consider theories and interpretations.

This is how the Greeks, more honored by invocation than by emulation, conceived the theory and practice of teaching by dialectics. What was the influence of Pericles' funeral oration on the Gettysburg Address? This engrossing question, open to any mind of average ability, cannot even be asked if, as was recently discovered, the majority of America's schoolchildren don't know

in which century the Civil War was fought. But if an appreciation of history as a continuous argument, and not a dull Whiggish series of "problems resolved," can be instilled, then a student entering college might be ready to attempt the pleasurable exercises of a reasonably trained mind. False and empty moralistic trails, such as "Are We Too Eurocentric?" or "Was Columbus Ecologically Friendly?" can be abandoned in favor of the real thing. Why did Basil Davidson have to refute Hegel in order to show that Africa had a history? Was Bertrand Russell right in saying that the disappearance of North American Indians was no tragedy? And why was he banned from teaching in the United States? Had Russell read Bartolomé de Las Casas, first historian of the Americas, who doubted that the "discovery" had been a good thing? Why did the first historian of the Americas have a Spanish name? Why do New Yorkers no longer speak Dutch, and who proposed that the official language of the United States be German? Was the Civil War really fought to free the slaves? Why are Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points" unthinkable without Lenin's dissolution of the Constituent Assembly? Was the Great Depression caused by too little government intervention or too much? Why is the largest military base in Cuba an American one? Why is it possible to swim from America to Russia?

Each of these questions admits of several answers, many of them equally "valid." In such cases, what matters is how you think and not what you think. E. D. Hirsch Jr. and other scholars of cultural literacy have already been solidly vindicated in their view that fresh knowledge builds on existing knowledge. It remains to apply this realization to the most despoiled and neglected subject in the curriculum. The task cannot be left to the "community of scholars"—and what an antique ring that phrase has now acquired—because they have mostly elected to desert the field or to clutter it with the wrappers of comfort food.

Those who care about cultural literacy are chiefly volunteers, and they are already hard-pressed on numerous fronts. But the potential "pool" of volunteers for a struggle to reinstate historical discourse is quite substantial. What needs to be combated is the idea, so often and so worthily expressed—and so stultifying—that "light" is to be preferred to "heat." Heat, as can be learned in other classrooms, is the only possible source of light. History must become a field of ardent contestation and not another arid patch of middle ground. If properly joined, this battle would also and of itself lead to more confident and thoughtful citizens, whose formation requires more than a mixture of Crispus Attucks, Betsy Ross, and Emma Lazarus. Pluralism is a means as well as an end. "Such a lot of things seem to me such rot," says a young girl in one of Agatha Christie's mysteries. "History, for instance. Why, it's quite different out of different books!" To this her mentor, wise in the ways of the world, replies: "That is its real interest." Confronted by the philistine verdicts of "bunk" and "rot," and the wasteland created by the attempts at an authorized version, we can, in the time where Hawking and Heisenberg are commonplaces, at least borrow the last phrase of Professor E. H. Carr's Trevelyan Lecture: "I shall look out on a world in tumult and a world in travail, and shall answer in the well-worn words of a great scientist: 'And yet—it moves.'"