
The Cause of Nowadays and the End of History? School History and the Centenary of the First World War^[1]

GARY MCCULLOCH

ABSTRACT The review of the National Curriculum and the centenary of the First World War have emphasised an orthodox patriotic and nostalgic historical ideal. The British coalition Conservative-Liberal government has aligned itself with the centenary commemorations of the First World War, while the war as social and political history may be in danger of being overshadowed by celebration and its profound and enduring implications therefore not fully understood.

Introduction

Ever since the introduction of the National Curriculum in Britain in 1988, school history has been a subject that has attracted fierce debate. Such controversy reached new levels of passion by 2013, when the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, issued first a consultation document and then a revised framework of the new National Curriculum. Following this latter announcement, no less a figure than Richard J. Evans, the Regius Professor of History at the University of Cambridge, produced an extended critique of the government's plans for school history in the pages of the *Guardian* (Evans, 2013). Evans's intervention placed particular emphasis on the place of the First World War, approaching the centenary of its outbreak in August 1914, which was to be the focus of extensive commemorative activities and funding sponsored by the British government. It reminds us that the school curriculum is contested between different groups and interests, and that in Britain, as in many other countries, school history is one of the major points of conflict (see also, e.g., Nakou & Barca, 2010; Zajda, 2010).

The First World War, far from being an uncontested list of historical events, if such a construct exists, is the subject of continuing debates reflecting both historical and contemporary issues. It is important to relate this set of

issues and the notion of the past that they project to their longer-term historical context (Phillips, 1998; Cannadine et al, 2011). In terms of an approach to the school history curriculum, there are some echoes of Sellar and Yeatman's famous parody of school history textbooks, *1066 and All That* (Sellar & Yeatman, 1930/2009). *Our Island Story* (Marshall, 1905/2005), which has often been cited as an inspiration for the curriculum review, was originally published before the First World War and only went up to Queen Victoria, but *1066 and All That*, first published in 1930, had the War well in its sights. It was indeed the culmination of a chronological, facts-based and yet crudely patriotic and nationalistic account of English history. What was then known as the 'Great War' is chapter 61 in their book, the penultimate chapter, through which history comes to an end with America as Top Nation; it is 'the cause of nowadays and the end of History' (Sellar & Yeatman, 1930/2009, p. 111). This is a light-hearted and satirical work, but one with a serious underlying message. The late Raphael Samuel, a leading social historian and a champion of the history curriculum, warned in 1998: 'If the traditionalists win their way in the current debate on the "core" curriculum, teachers might do worse than order some reprints for the school library, not only as a way of inoculating children against the more vainglorious ways of telling "Our Island Story", but also as a way of remembering it' (Samuel, 1998, p. 212).

One particular means of remembering the First World War, as its last survivors have passed on and the war itself has passed into history, is Remembrance Day, marked each year on 11 November to recall the end of hostilities on that day in 1918. Its lasting symbol is the red poppy, associated with John Macrae's poignant poem 'In Flanders Fields' which concludes:

Take up our quarrel with the foe
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch: be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders Fields. (Macrae, 1919, p. 3)

The Royal British Legion, since its formation in 1921, has promoted an annual 'Poppy Appeal' as a standing reminder of the war and latterly of the sacrifices made in all wars. It might be suggested that Remembrance Day and the Poppy Appeal are the characteristic emblems of a particular way of understanding the First World War which is a fundamentally nostalgic and idealised appeal to a romantic imperial past. At the same time, there has also grown a significant and diverse set of historical accounts of the war that have attempted to analyse it in more critical and complex social and political terms. The British coalition Conservative-Liberal government has aligned itself with the centenary commemorations of the First World War, with the result that the war as social and political history may be in danger of being overshadowed by celebration and its profound and enduring implications therefore not widely understood.

The Coalition Government and the First World War

It is worth recounting the initiatives promoted by the coalition government to prescribe a particular vision of the First World War. One dimension of this is the review of the National Curriculum that has been developed by the Department for Education since 2010, with the school history review an especially prominent aspect. The other is the role of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to support a national commemoration of the centenary of the First World War itself. These initiatives have generated powerful and complementary examples of officially sanctioned history.

It is only since the creation of the National Curriculum in 1988 that the school history curriculum has been formally prescribed on a national basis. The curriculum had figured little in the Education Act of 1944, although it was outlined in a number of official reports. During the Second World War, the restraint exercised by the central department was tested in particular by the temptation to inculcate patriotism through the history curriculum, but this was largely resisted. As is well known, the prime minister, Winston Churchill, told his new president of the Board of Education, R.A. Butler, in 1941: 'Everyone has to learn to defend himself. I should not object if you could introduce a note of patriotism into the schools.' Butler responded that he would like to influence the curriculum but that this was always difficult. Churchill looked very earnest at this, and replied: 'Of course not by instruction or order but by suggestion' (Butler, 1971, p. 90). As the war came to an end, the Foreign Office proposed a scheme for explaining to schoolchildren the proposals of the recent Potsdam Conference on international relations. The permanent secretary at the Ministry of Education, Maurice Holmes, was completely opposed to this kind of pressure, preferring instead the 'traditional and, I think, wholesome practice' in which 'We have always resisted such proposals on the ground that in this country the details of the curriculum are not controlled or directed by the Ministry but are left to the determination of the LEAs and the teachers' (Holmes, 1945; see also McCulloch, 1994, chapter 6).

There was usually little attention given to the First World War in the school history curriculum until the 1950s or even later. The Ministry of Education report *Teaching History*, published in 1952, argued that it was difficult for school history courses to achieve a 'balanced appraisal' of twentieth-century issues, which were therefore little studied even in selective schools at sixth-form level (Ministry of Education, 1952, p. 33). The First World War also received little mention in *The Teaching of History*, an official report by a committee of practising teachers in secondary schools, first published in 1950, that went into several editions in later years (Assistant Masters' Association, 1950). On the other hand, E.M. Lewis's book, *Teaching History in Secondary Schools*, published in 1960, supplied a list of the major developments of the First World War as part of a conventional account of what it described as 'The Great Wars with Germany': first, as a prelude, 'loss of commercial pre-eminence, industrial unrest, rivalry with Germany'; second, the war itself, involving alliances, and the character of the war, including 'conscription, trench warfare, unprecedented

casualties, U-boats, tanks, gas, Flying Corps, Dominions' troops'; and finally, its consequences, notably revolution in Russia and Germany, the Peace of Versailles, and 'remaking the map of Europe' (Lewis, 1960, p. 189).

Hence, debate about the place of the First World War in the school history curriculum and the role of the State in sanctioning specific versions of the conflict to be generated in public commemorations has grown only since the 1970s, with the subsequent rise in the active intervention of the State in the school curriculum and the slippage of the First World War from 'current affairs' into 'history'. These developments made it possible for the State to put into practice in a more systematic fashion the wistfully patriotic ideas of Winston Churchill and the political aspirations of the Foreign Office.

There continued to be some ambivalence about the inclusion of the First World War in the school history curriculum even when the first National Curriculum was being introduced in 1988. The advice of the Department of Education and Science, published in that year, included 'the outbreak and course of the Great War' only as part of a long list of potential topics that embraced nationalism, the rivalry of the empires, the arms race, Edwardian Britain, the radical Liberals, the women's movement and the suffragettes, militant trades unionism, Irish nationalism, and the development of modern science and technology in peace and war and their effects throughout the world (DES, 1988, p. 13). However, some teachers began to develop more 'reflective' study of the First World War in the school history curriculum, such as was recommended by Robert Phillips in 2002 in *Reflective Teaching of History 11-18*. Phillips pointed out the importance of highlighting the historical significance of the 'Great War', making use of Geoffrey Partington's ideas about significance in the history curriculum (Partington, 1980), and involving group work exercises, a teaching pack based on the Battle of Mametz Wood in July 1916, and a pack of jelly babies to demonstrate the connection with the 'peace babies' originally given to schools to mark the Armistice (Phillips, 2002, pp. 40-41).

The Department for Education (DfE) review of the National Curriculum launched in 2010 showed particular concern for a number of subjects, including history, and a public controversy arose about what should be included in the history curriculum and the general approach that should be adopted. The well-known historian Simon Schama was enlisted by the DfE to support reform of the school history curriculum (Grayson, 2010; Schama, 2010), and other historians jostled in the media to put across their ideas and often to dismiss those of others (e.g. Evans, 2011; Hunt, 2011).

Out of all this, the DfE produced a consultation framework document for the National Curriculum in which it outlined both its general aims for school history and its proposals for the content of the subject of history, framed to inculcate a 'knowledge of Britain's past, and our place in the world'. In terms of content, this document asserted a chronological approach. It was envisaged, remarkably, that pupils at Key Stage 1 (between 5 and 7 years of age) would be taught, among other things, 'concepts such as civilisation, monarchy, parliament, democracy, and war and peace that are essential to understanding

history'. Then in Key Stage 2 (from 7 to 11 years of age), they would set out on the long trek from the ancient Greeks and Romans, through early Britons and settlers, reaching the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in a final burst by the end of Key Stage 2. It then set off again in Key Stage 3 on 'The development of the modern nation' before arriving at last in the twentieth century, with a list that culminated in 'the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall' – at which point presumably history comes to an abrupt but happy conclusion (DfE, 2013a).

As part of this somewhat prescriptive list, the First World War, like the Second, is given a great deal of attention. Indeed, in terms of the number of bullet points (eight), the First World War has more detail given to it than any of the other 11 topics singled out for the twentieth century; and it is only surpassed in earlier periods by the development of a modern economy. These points encompassed, as they were set out in the consultation framework document, 'causes such as colonial rivalry, naval expansion and European alliances; key events; conscription; trench warfare; Lloyd George's coalition; the Russian Revolution; the Armistice; the Peace of Versailles' (DfE, 2013a, p. 170). This list is unremarkable, with a stress on international diplomacy and military aspects of the war, but it might also be said to lack imagination.

Following the consultation on the draft framework document, the section on history was radically revised in the subsequent version published in July 2013. This was a response to widespread criticism of the plans from many historical and educational bodies and leading historians that was difficult to ignore, including Simon Schama, who described the draft as '1066 and all that, but without the jokes' (Furness, 2013). The July framework document was much less prescriptive than its predecessor although remaining mainly chronological and factual in its approach. Its treatment of the First World War was a striking example of this, since the war and the peace settlement that followed were now given only one reference, one of eight listed in relation to 'challenges for Britain, Europe and the wider world from 1901 to the present day'. The Holocaust and the Second World War were now given greater prominence than the First World War, which perhaps suggests a certain shallowness and transience in terms of commitment to any particular area (DfE, 2013b, pp. 210-211).

The second government initiative is the attention that has been given to the centenary of the First World War and the support that is being given to this by the government. In October 2012, the prime minister, David Cameron, promised a 'truly national commemoration' to mark the centenary of the First World War, committing over £50 million of public money, including a £5 million educational programme for school children, with trips to the battlefields and support for an overhaul of the Imperial War Museum. The focus of these proposed events was of particular interest. They would, according to the prime minister, 'provide the foundations upon which to build our enduring cultural and educational legacy to put young people front and centre in our commemoration' (Cameron, 2012, p. 6). Furthermore, he added, 'Whether it's a

series of friendly football matches to mark the 1914 Christmas Day truce, or the campaign by the Greenhithe branch of the Royal British Legion to sow the western front's iconic poppies here in the UK, I think we should get out there and make this centenary a truly national moment, but also something that actually means something in every locality in our country' (Cameron, 2012, p. 7).

The DCMS produced an impressive list of events following Cameron's speech, specifying national commemorative events to mark the anniversaries of significant dates, such as the start of the First World War (2014), the first day of the Battle of the Somme (2016) and Armistice Day (2018); the £35 million refurbishment of the First World War galleries at the Imperial War Museum in London; a £5.3 million education programme, jointly funded by the DfE and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), designed to give pupils and teachers from every maintained secondary school in England the chance to go on a tour of the great battlefields; at least £15 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund, including a new £6 million community projects fund to enable young people working in their communities to conserve, explore and share the local heritage of the First World War; and a grant of up to £1 million from the National Heritage Memorial Fund to support HMS *Caroline*, the last surviving warship from the First World War fleet.

These events suggest a wide range of activities over several years that will involve schools and young people, and an emphasis on heritage and community projects designed to 'capture our national spirit' (Wintour, 2012). Yet these plans also attracted criticism, particularly from those who argued that the commemorations should not be solely about stimulating a sense of patriotism. The *Guardian*, devoting its leading article to reflections on the First World War, argued forthrightly that '[i]t would be a betrayal of the seriousness of the centenary moment if the plans were to consist predominantly of the usual military parades, royal pageants and religious ceremonies' (*Guardian*, 2012a). The letters column of the *Guardian* also swelled with indignation. 'How to commemorate the war?' asked David Moss of Rochdale, 'Easy: scrap plans to replace Trident' (*Guardian*, 2012b). There was a potential debate underlying these comments about the implications of the First World War centenary that signalled other significant aspects about the war's historical and contemporary significance. Both the National Curriculum review and the centenary commemorations emphasised the patriotic and nationalistic features of the First World War. Yet there is a significant historical literature that points out a wider range of relevant issues. It is most important to include the social and political as well as the directly military connotations of the war as part of a national debate, and to remind ourselves of their significance both for the school history curriculum and for the centenary.

The First World War as Social and Political History

In exploring the social and political ramifications of the First World War there is an abundance of historical material at our disposal. Some of this is now very well established in the literature, while there has also been a recent upsurge of detailed attention by historians. This set of scholarly and professional perspectives deserves to be widely known in order to help develop a more complex and critical understanding of the First World War and its legacy than is apparent in the National Curriculum review of the history curriculum and the commemorations of the centenary of the First World War.

There is a strong established literature, going back some decades, that explains the characteristics of the First World War in terms of social and political history. For instance, Arthur Marwick's study *The Deluge*, first published in 1965, explores the relationship between British society and the First World War. As Marwick notes, it is an attempt to describe what it was like to live in Britain while the first total war in history was being waged. It also examines the sequence and causation of the social changes that took place during the war, showing their long-term importance in the evolution of contemporary British society: 'The battles and bloodshed of the military war have been discussed, are being discussed, and no doubt ought to go on being discussed in library upon library of books; here they are dealt with only as the massive and convoluted frame round the picture which I wish to paint' (Marwick, 1965, p. 11). Most fundamental to Marwick's account is its depiction of modern warfare as an engine of social change, imposing social, cultural, political and economic pressures that characteristically lead to rejection of pre-war structures and ideas and the forging of a new consensus.

This has also been a key part of historical treatments of the Second World War, on which topic works such as this have been central to our historiography for at least forty years. Marwick's book appeared in 1965, and Paul Addison's *The Road to 1945* was published only a decade later (Addison, 1975). These are now orthodox accounts that might be represented in school history. The connections between social and political history need also to be understood. In relation to politics, one may go back even further – for example, to George Dangerfield's book, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (Dangerfield, 1936). Dangerfield seeks to understand the breakdown of Liberal society and politics in England, and how both were weakened, to be swept away by the First World War. The central features of this breakdown are Ulster, the suffragettes, and the rise of organised labour. This work has led on in more recent times to the major contributions of Peter Clarke, for example, on the New Liberalism of the early twentieth century (Clarke, 1971), and Ross McKibbin on the Labour Party (McKibbin, 1975). We may also linger on the political personalities and biographies, as A.J.P. Taylor among many others did in relation to the wartime prime minister Lloyd George (Taylor 1961/1976; see also e.g. Grigg, 2003).

Over the last few decades, moreover, detailed and significant reassessments of the First World War have been produced. The social historian Jay Winter has been to the fore in this regard. Winter's work has demonstrated

the nature of social memory and the commemoration of the traumatic events of wartime, from the bereavement of families to the memorials to war and shared sacrifice, and to the history of the pilgrimage movement which underlies our current rediscoveries of the battlefields of Europe. One of Winter's key books, *The Great War and the British People* (Winter, 1985), provides a social and demographic history of the First World War that bridges the divide between the Home Front and the frontline. It demonstrates also the paradoxical growth in life expectancy that took place in Britain during the war years, mainly due to an improvement in nutritional standards of the working class, and especially of its poorest strata (Winter, 1985, p. 280). This phenomenon, crucial though it was in its longer-term significance for British society, was nevertheless, as Winter observes, 'bound to be eclipsed by the memory of the human costs of the conflict' (Winter, 1985, p. 305). Winter's three-volume edited *Cambridge History of the First World War*, due to be published in 2014, will be not the least important centenary event.

Margaret Macmillan has also focused on the First World War, in her case on the peacemakers, and has developed this further in thinking about the uses and abuses of history. Her remarks on this seem essential reading when applied to the history of the First World War: 'History can help us to make sense of a complicated world, but it also warns us of the dangers of assuming that there is only one possible way of looking at things or only one course of action. We must always be prepared to consider alternatives and to raise objections' (Macmillan, 2009, p. 168). The origins of the war similarly repay close investigation, as Christopher Clark has recently demonstrated extensively in his book *The Sleepwalkers* (Clark, 2012), seeking to understand the outbreak of war as 'a modern event, the most complex of modern times, perhaps of any time so far' (Clark, 2012, p. xxvii). Clark's fascinating study portrays the protagonists of 1914 as 'sleepwalkers, watchful but unseeing, haunted by dreams, yet blind to the reality of the horror they were about to bring into the world' (Clark, 2012, p. 562). The wartime propaganda that underpinned the fervent patriotism of the period has also been subjected to critical scrutiny in David Monger's interesting study of the National War Aims Committee (Monger, 2012).

There are opportunities in all this work to illuminate the connections between the First World War and the culture of this period, its music and poetry, its great novels, its scientific discoveries and geographical scope (Fussell, 1975). Recent research has indeed done a great deal to highlight the nature of working class and popular culture and the role of gender in the war years (e.g. Culleton, 1999; Meyer, 2008). The educational history of the war also reveals much about its underlying tensions and conflicts. The Scout movement inspired by Robert Baden-Powell in the years before the First World War was part of an upsurge in patriotic sentiment that helped to create the conditions for war. The public schools and their creation of a gentlemanly elite were fundamental to the social and political leadership that carried Britain into war, and that perished in such large numbers during the war itself. The school leaving age was still not yet 14, and wartime social conditions made it still more difficult to encourage

young people to stay on at school. It was the Lewis Report of 1917 that exposed this as an educational and social problem (Departmental Committee on Juvenile Education, 1917). Thus, the educational reform that arose from the war might well be seen as an example of war in its relationship to social change. The work of the president of the Board of Education, Herbert Fisher, is central to this account, and the Education Act of 1918 is its culmination – to be followed by anticlimax later on as its promise was denied in the harsh years of the 1920s and 1930s (see also Sherington, 1981). Such studies tend to present the First World War in a somewhat different light to the nostalgic and idealised patriotism evoked in the National Curriculum and centenary commemoration.

Challenges and Opportunities

It is important, therefore, for the school history curriculum to be aware of the historical writing on the First World War that has developed over the past generation. Our history does change and develop over the years, and school history should not be left behind. Connections may be developed between the First World War and large accompanying movements that will allow a social and political history to be taught in our schools. This may well depend on the freedom of teachers to interpret the revised National Curriculum in different ways. The First World War does not lie only under foreign fields, although this does mark quite properly a first step in our understanding of it. It is all around us, in our memorials, in our school halls, in our social identity, in the very jelly babies of our own time. If the First World War is not to become ‘1914 and all that’, teachers will have the task of establishing such connections.

For the centenary events, too, the certainties and familiar lessons of the war deserve to be put into question and subjected to debate. The officially sanctioned patriotism to ‘capture the national spirit’ of which Churchill and the Foreign Office could only dream during the Second World War – ‘poppy history’, as it might be described – may be mediated and countered through alternative and complementary understandings of the wartime experience. Forgetting or overlooking such understandings might indeed be equivalent to rendering the First World War, in the mocking words of Sellar and Yeatman (1930/2009), ‘the cause of nowadays and the end of History’.

Note

- [1] This article is a revised version of an invited address, ‘What Should Schools Learn about the Great War and Centenary?’, presented at a special one-day conference at Wellington College on 14 March 2013.

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Correspondence: g.mcculloch@ioe.ac.uk

