

The Wonderfulness of Us (the Tory Interpretation of History)

Richard J. Evans



‘One of the under-appreciated tragedies of our time has been the sundering of our society from its past,’ Michael Gove announced at the Tory Party Conference last October:

Children are growing up ignorant of one of the most inspiring stories I know – the history of our United Kingdom. Our history has moments of pride, and shame, but unless we fully understand the struggles of the past we will not properly value the liberties of the present. The current approach we have to history denies children the opportunity to hear our island story. Children are given a mix of topics at primary, a cursory run through Henry VIII and Hitler at secondary and many give up the subject at 14, without knowing how the vivid episodes of our past become a connected narrative. Well, this trashing of our past has to stop.

Simon Schama is the person entrusted with the job of putting things right; Schama, the education secretary announced, ‘has agreed to advise us on how we can put British history at the heart of a revived national curriculum’. (Never mind that he teaches in New York.) Echoing Gove’s enthusiasm for British history in the *Guardian* a few weeks later, Schama described the story of Henry II and Thomas Becket as ‘riveting’ and ‘thrilling’, and wondered why the execution of Charles I and the rule of Oliver Cromwell, ‘this most thrilling, terrifying epic moment in British history seldom gets classroom time.’

The first task of the curriculum, as Gove and Schama see it, is to foster a sense of British national identity. ‘At a moment fraught with the possibility of social and cultural division,’ Schama writes, we need citizens ‘who grow up with a sense of our shared memory as a living, urgently present body of knowledge’. Or, as the popular historian Dominic Sandbrook puts it, we need to return to ‘the stories that make up a nation’s collective memory, that fire the imagination, that bind the generations’ – ‘Alfred and the cakes’ or ‘Drake and the Armada’. New Labour’s legacy, Gove asserts, has been a history curriculum that favours ‘themes’ over ‘actual content’; what we need is a return to narrative history. ‘Our children,’ Schama says, ‘are being short-changed of the patrimony of their story, which is to say the lineaments of the whole story, for there can be no true history that refuses to span the arc, no coherence without chronology.’

The current curriculum, its critics say, focuses too much on transmitting skills and not enough on teaching facts. The running here has been made by a self-appointed pressure group calling itself Better History, formed in 2006 to advise the Conservative shadow education team. The group, which is led by Seán Lang, a former schoolteacher, seems to have supplied Gove with many of his ideas – chief among them the notion that what most schoolchildren want from history is ‘to find out what happened’. According to the *Sunday Times*, Gove has said that ‘he wants school history teaching to place far more emphasis on factual knowledge, including the lives of kings and queens.’

None of these arguments has so far met with any serious opposition. Not one professional historian employed by a British university has spoken out either in favour of these ideas or against them. The Labour Party has remained silent.

The existing national history curriculum, taking children up to the age of 14, aims to give them a grasp of chronology, a 'knowledge and understanding of events, people and changes in the past', basic principles of historical interpretation and inquiry, and elementary skills of communication, 'developed through teaching the content relating to local, national, European and world history'. Study of a variety of topics is intended to assist children's 'spiritual development, through helping pupils to appreciate the achievements of past societies, and to understand the motivation of individuals who made sacrifices for a particular cause'. Children have to learn about the social, cultural, religious and ethnic diversity of the societies they study, which include the Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings, two later periods of British history, Ancient Greece and its influence, and one non-European society selected from among Ancient Egypt, Sumer, the Assyrian Empire, the Indus Valley, the Maya, Benin or the Aztecs.

There seems to be plenty of factual content in all this, and plenty of kings and queens too. The examples the curriculum provides for teaching history to children from seven to 11 make mention of (by my count) 36 significant individuals, ranging from Boudicca and Caractacus to Livingstone and Brunel. From 11 to 14, children study the whole sweep of British history from 1066 to 1900 in three courses. These include 'the development of the monarchy, and significant events and characteristic features of the lives of people living throughout the British Isles' as well as, for the later period, the history of Parliament and its relation to the people. More than two dozen individuals are mentioned, including Henry II and Becket, Charles I and Oliver Cromwell, Charles II and William III, Nelson and Wellington, Gladstone and Disraeli. In addition to the three British courses, students have to take one period of European history before 1914, and two world history courses, one involving an ancient society such as China or Japan, the other focusing on the world since 1900 (names here include Hitler and Churchill, and possible topics range from the Russian Revolution to European decolonisation).

So far, so factual, and indeed, the body responsible for overseeing the curriculum requires 70 per cent of assessment to be on content and only 30 per cent on skills. The best students will learn crucial skills of analysis, argument and presentation, but most will fall short of this: the curriculum lists eight levels of attainment altogether. By the time they finish history as a compulsory subject, 14-year-olds will have studied the entire course of British history and learned about a whole variety of key personalities and institutions in it, as well as learning to appreciate the achievements of a number of European and non-European civilisations.

Why Gove and his allies should think that facts and names play no part in all this is a mystery. His bizarrely counterfactual complaint that the only names mentioned in the current curriculum are the abolitionists William Wilberforce and Olaudah Equiano was too much even for the people leading the charge against it: Better History's Seán Lang pointed out that 'no one would say that because only two names are in the official documentation these are the only two that people teach about.' Nor is it clear why Gove thinks that the curriculum as it currently exists is a vehicle for the 'trashing of our past' when it covers so much of it in such detail. The real problem is not with the curriculum's content, but with the schools' failure to deliver it, as history is taught all too frequently as part of 'humanities' or 'general studies' by teachers with no training in the subject, and key parts of it get neglected in the drive to boost literacy and numeracy rates by schools keen to climb up the league tables.

Perhaps – though he doesn't say so – Gove's remarks are meant to apply to the next stage of schooling, ending with the GCSE exam at the age of 15 or 16. Here history is no longer compulsory, but for the third or so of children who decide to take it, there is a change of direction. Out goes British history, out goes the long sweep of the centuries, out go social, economic and cultural history. Students take Modern World History, which is emphatically focused on politics and international relations (Germany 1918-39, Russia/USSR 1905-41, USA 1919-41, Vietnam 1954-75, Northern Ireland 1965-85), or topics from the Schools History Project, such as Medicine through Time or the American West. In this phase there is a continuing focus on 'education for citizenship', as the exam boards put it.

In the final stage of school education, ending with A level, the curriculum is effectively a more sophisticated version of the GCSE syllabus. A-level history has gone through a number of changes in recent years. From 2000, candidates had to take six courses, one of them drawn from British history – a syllabus the Conservatives complained about. But wide dissatisfaction with its superficiality led to a further reform in 2008, which reduced the number of courses required to four, at least one of which has to be in British history, the others in British, European or world history, meaning that at least a quarter of teaching time is spent on Britain. Nevertheless, critics, far from being silenced by these reforms, have become even more vocal in demanding a still greater focus on this country.

The national curriculum for the primary years has made brilliant use of people's growing interest in the history of everyday life, from Viking longships to the Home Front during the Second World War. What's taught at more advanced levels is narrower and more problematical. Yet here it reflects not just the choices made by teachers and schools, but also the preferences of students themselves, who from the age of 14 have a good deal of freedom to choose what to study. At A level, around 40 per cent choose Hitler and the Nazis; the next most popular topic is Stalin. As far as British history is concerned, a large proportion opt for the Tudors and Stuarts. In world history, the Cold War is popular, but topics in modern American history also attract a good many. And modern China's appeal is growing fast. Is this wrong?

Certainly, it's wrong for students to be able to repeat the same topics at GCSE and A level. And the time-frame should be longer: not just modern world history but remoter periods too. Yet this doesn't mean that Nazi Germany should be ditched altogether. It appeals to teenagers for the same reasons that it appeals to adults: the collapse of German democracy in the early 1930s, the misery of the Depression, the rise of Hitler, the racism, sexism and criminality of the Nazi regime, the Holocaust, the drive to war – all of this raises critical questions of politics, morality and human behaviour in a dramatic form that has no parallel in British history. Stalin, Mao and other dictators pose similar challenges to the adolescent mind. The nearest thing British history has to offer in comparison is Henry VIII ('England's Stalin', as the Tudor historian W.G. Hoskins once called him), but otherwise to teenagers it all seems relatively dull.

The choice of Schama to serve as the government's chief adviser largely derives from his successful multi-part television history of Britain, broadcast 11 years ago. It presented history as narrative, in a way brilliantly suited to the medium. But what makes good TV doesn't necessarily make for good teaching. A return to narrative in the classroom – to passive consumption instead of active critical engagement – is more likely to be a recipe for boredom and disaffection. Aware of the possibility that some might object to his overwhelming focus on British history, Schama has declared that 'history's long look at our national make-up' is 'not an insular proposal' because it involves studying 'the way Britain has conducted itself in the world beyond the shores of Albion' and asking how Americanised or European British national identity is. But that still doesn't shift Britain from the centre of the picture.

Gove, Schama and other advocates of the new Britain-centred narrative are all essentially proponents of the Whig interpretation of history, a theory exploded by professional historians more than half a century ago under the influence of Herbert Butterfield. Gove's vision of 'our island story' is about examining the 'struggles of the past' to see how they brought about 'the liberties of the present'. Similarly, Schama wants younger generations to 'pass on the memory of our disputatious liberty' to their descendants.

The demand, really, is for a celebratory history: how otherwise could it serve as the cement of national identity? Sample exam questions proposed by the Better History group for the new curriculum have included: 'Why did Nelson and Wellington become national heroes?'; 'What liberties did English people enjoy by the end of the 17th century that they hadn't had at the start?'; and 'How dangerous was the Spanish Armada?' – the examinee, it's presumed, isn't going to answer from the point of view of the Spanish. Schama has rejected the claim that such a curriculum would be a vehicle of 'national self-congratulation'; British history, he says, should be taught not as 'the uncritical genealogy of the Wonderfulness of Us' but in all its 'rich and rowdy discord' in order to achieve 'an understanding of the identity of us'. But 'rich and rowdy discord' still ends up with winners and losers, and if we have a single national identity, then it will be that of the winners.

What lies at the root of all this is a profound division of opinion over what constitutes, or should constitute, national identity. The present curriculum for children from five to 14 offers an image of Britishness that pays at least some attention to the multiethnic composition of British society. Its critics want to replace this with a narrowly nationalistic identity built on myths about the 'British' past, as if there was such a thing before the Act of Union between England and Scotland in 1707 – or, indeed, as many Scots (or for that matter Welsh) would argue, after it. It makes far more sense to teach British children of South Asian or Afro-Caribbean background about the parts of the world where their families originated – the history of the Mughal Empire, or of Benin or Oyo, for example – than to teach them about Alfred and the cakes or Drake and the Armada.

Similarly, the present curriculum takes due account of the undeniable fact (undeniable to everyone apart from the Europhobes in the Tory Party) that Britain is part of Europe and, beyond that, is connected to the rest of the world in an age of globalisation. Undergraduates I've spoken to would like less Hitler and Stalin on the curriculum, but they don't want them to be replaced by British history: they want more world history. 'Everyone's talking about the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya,' one of them said to me recently, 'but we can't talk sensibly about them because we don't know anything about their history: it's embarrassing.' National identity is a complex, many-layered thing, and to treat it as if it were simply and exclusively the culmination of a centuries-long march of events within the narrow confines of the British Isles is a radically ignorant form of dumbing down.

Even more calamitous is the prospect of history teaching in the schools confining itself to the transmission and regurgitation of 'facts'. According to the critics, facts have all but disappeared from the classroom, and the inclusion in the curriculum of exercises in source-criticism are useless. Yet source-criticism teaches students not to accept passively every fact and argument they are presented with. When I started teaching history at university in the 1970s, many first-year students were incapable of critical reading of this kind. (I ran into trouble with one class when I began to point out the problems in the arguments put forward by one of the books I had set them to read. 'Why did you make us read it,' one of them complained, 'if you don't agree with it?') Better history teaching in schools changed all that, but now Gove wants to abandon these skills all over again. Better History declares that 'it is by the acquisition and use of historical knowledge that historians are primarily judged' – but in reality that only makes a *Mastermind* contestant.

It is possible to teach actual skills only if history is taught in depth, and that means a focus on a limited number of specialised topics. Of course, students need to know at least in outline the longer-term context of what they study. But if you make this context the core element in the curriculum, you are sacrificing depth for breadth, and you will end up with a superficial gallop through the centuries. At Oxford, when I was an undergraduate, we all nominally studied English history from the Anglo-Saxons to the 20th century, from Alfred the Great to Winston Churchill, or to put it in somewhat less heroic terms, Ethelred the Unready to Neville Chamberlain (we didn't bother in those days with the Welsh or the Scots). But in practice, if we were going to learn how to do any thinking of our own, we had time only to study discrete and often unrelated topics: the rise of the gentry and their role in the outbreak of the English Civil War (not the course of events in the 1640s), the role of party in the time of Queen Anne (not the chronology of her reign), the reasons for the failure of the 1848 Revolutions (not the actual course of the revolutions).

History is by its nature a critical, sceptical discipline. Historians commonly see one of their main tasks as puncturing myths, demolishing orthodoxies and exposing politically motivated narratives that advance spurious claims to objectivity. Schama advocates the return of 'storytelling in the classroom' as the 'necessary condition' of debate and analysis. He is confident that a narrative approach doesn't have to rule out analysis, since distinctions can be made 'between just and unjust conflicts' and students can develop 'analytical knowledge of the nature of power'. But simply telling children that British history has been full of conflict doesn't tell them anything about the distortions of power; what they need to learn is scepticism about the narratives presented by historians, including of course Schama's own account of British history.

Better History has proposed that students should be tested on how they construct a narrative. But in the time since it advanced this proposal it has done nothing to flesh it out. Perhaps it should have paid more attention to Sellar and Yeatman's imperishable *1066 and All That*, with its spoof exam questions: 'Arrange in this order: (a) Henry I; (b) Henry II; (c) Henry III. Do not attempt to answer more than once.' More than a century ago Lord Acton advised his students at Cambridge to 'study problems, not periods'. Some years ago, Eric Hobsbawm, referring to two history textbooks that presented old-fashioned narratives without interpretation, noted that they made 'the systematic consideration' of historical problems 'virtually impossible'. Gove, Schama and their allies are confusing history with memory. History is a critical academic discipline whose aims include precisely the interrogation of memory and the myths it generates. It really does matter to historians that there isn't any evidence that Alfred burned the cakes, or that Nelson and Wellington weren't national heroes to everyone. For those in power, this makes history as a discipline not only useless but dangerous too.

Letters

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In his trenchant piece attacking the current government's moves to reform history teaching, which are based in large part on the belief that the present curriculum, as he puts it, 'focuses too much on transmitting skills and not enough on teaching facts', my colleague Richard J. Evans states that 'not one professional historian employed by a British university has spoken out either in favour of these ideas or against them' (LRB, 17 March). May I hold up my hand here? In 2002, in a think-tank pamphlet, I advocated less emphasis on skills and more on knowledge, a less constraining examination system, and a curriculum in GCSE and A level History that would move away from teaching history as disconnected fragments – dismissed by Evans as 'a return to narrative'.

I doubt that anyone interested in history, professionally or otherwise, thinks that the purpose of studying the past is to acquire skills, let alone that what Evans describes as 'the transmission and regurgitation of "facts"' is unimportant. He obviously does not when he lectures on the Holocaust. He warns against 'sacrificing depth for breadth', but deftly turns the argument on its head when advocating geographical breadth over national depth. Could any curriculum provide skills-focused specialisation and yet satisfy the aspiration of students, which Evans commends, to acquire historical knowledge of every world trouble spot? Is it unreasonable for schoolchildren to gain a basic knowledge of the history of the country in which they live? Why does it make 'far more sense' to teach them about countries where 'their families originated'? A grasp of the history of one country might provide some standard of comparison with developments elsewhere. It might prevent fatuous assertions about Britain being 'the world's oldest democracy', as a prominent politician recently claimed in the context of the Arab revolutions. It might make possible a less abysmal level of debate about electoral reform. It might even enable younger people to understand Andrew O'Hagan's emotion about the NHS in your previous issue – how many have even heard of Aneurin Bevan?

The present system – curriculum, examination methods and teaching practices combined – is ineffective in producing skills or knowledge, breadth or depth. It drills students to write formulaic essays on causation and mechanically 'evaluate' miscellaneous texts for 'reliability'. And it's boring: students and teachers are stuck in a round of tests, exercises and exams, which discourages them from venturing outside the limits of a fragmented and decontextualised curriculum. Hence a level of ignorance that still sometimes makes me gasp, and complacency about that ignorance, as if no one could possibly know anything not specifically taught. Many of our colleagues lament this but universities help to perpetuate it by the inflexibility of their admissions policies. History undergraduates then unlearn the 'skills' laboriously inculcated. These weaknesses are deeply ingrained in our educational culture, and can't be changed overnight. But one has to start somewhere.

Evans's article is subtitled 'The Tory Interpretation of History', but his scorn, which I applaud, is aimed at Panglossian 'Whig history'. I'm not sure what a genuine Tory interpretation would look like: it has been absent from our culture since Hume. But if one could imagine such a thing, it would ideally be less crassly present-centred, less vapidly self-congratulatory, more appreciative of other cultures, and more able to admit that we might be doing things wrong.

Robert Tombs
University of Cambridge

Since I helped to write the current National Curriculum for History it might be assumed that I am feeling pleased at Richard J. Evans's defence of it. Sadly, this is not the case. The mass exodus of pupils when the subject becomes optional at age 14 is testimony to the failure of that curriculum. Evans underplays the importance of narrative and the way in which children, especially young children, need it to make sense of the world and its past. He argues that narrative is unreliable but

doesn't mention the degree of subjective judgment involved in selecting and using historical evidence in the classroom. He sees the 'transmission and regurgitation' of facts as 'calamitous' but fails to acknowledge the extent of factual ignorance revealed in survey after survey.

Evans has, at least, seen the flaws in the ideas of the so-called Better History Group. Its attempt to hijack school history by imposing specific questions that will frame teaching should be resisted. So where do we go from here? How about liberalising the history curriculum, sketching in a few landmark headings and letting the teachers get on with it in a way that allows them to be enthusiastic about their jobs?

Christopher McGovern
History Curriculum Association

The real problem with the school curriculum lies not in the nature of the subject matter but the insolence of politicians, and I doubt it is confined to history. For Michael Gove, government prescription in detail of what should be taught in schools is only natural, right and proper. In this he is, like the rest of the political class, only subscribing to an axiom that has been securely held for a generation or more. Well-trained history graduates are taught to think for themselves, and will find no pleasure or satisfaction working in a system that demands little of a teacher beyond diligence, conformity and a taste for pointless paperwork. They would want and expect to be trusted to make their own judgments on what and how to teach within a framework arrived at by peer consensus, not serve as *petits fonctionnaires* happy to do the bidding of the state. A recent graduate with a good history degree looking for a job with a measure of intellectual autonomy would do better going into law, journalism or finance – or running a market stall, come to that.

Peter Lloyd
Llandrindod Wells

Having recently retired as a history teacher in comprehensive schools, I was delighted and relieved to read Richard J. Evans's article. Listening to Michael Gove I had begun to wonder whether I had been teaching to a different national curriculum from everyone else. Throughout my career I tried to impart an idea of chronology to my pupils and to cover most of British history from the Anglo-Saxons through to the end of the Second World War. This necessarily meant teaching some periods in less detail but there was plenty of time for the Middle Ages as well as detailed study of the causes of the English Civil War, the Industrial Revolution and the First World War. It seemed very important to look at other parts of the world, so we studied Ancient Roman history and the Incas too. I do wonder where Gove has been getting his information: it certainly doesn't match up with the work being done in Shropshire.

Jackie Williams
Pontesbury, Shropshire

I would add a couple of points to Richard J. Evans's critique. 'National' history conflates three different ideas: those of place, group and institution. The place is the national homeland; the group is the nation; the institution is the nation-state. Although linked in modern times in the form of the democratic nation-state with a distinct territory and mass citizenry, the three ideas are always in fact distinct and in earlier times were largely unconnected. 'Whose' were the British Isles in 800, 1100, 1400, 1700 and 2000? 'Whose' state? There is no answer to such questions that everyone could agree on. To fuse these three distinct notions is an ideological move to promote an identity or interest. Once armed with this ideology one can tell stories to promote it. However, to understand narrative history properly one must be aware of what it is that is being narrated. Presenting national history in the form of ready-to-eat narratives is no way to get young people to think about the human past. Indeed, the more delicious it tastes – and Schama certainly does delicious – the more harm it can do.

John Breuilly
London School of Economics

The words 'British' and 'Britain' in Richard J. Evans's article on the Tory vision for history in schools could be replaced throughout with the words 'English' and 'England'. This is not a knee-jerk grumble: the 'island story' being espoused by Gove and Schama seems to be predicated almost entirely on an English vision of England, as Evans himself suggests. Gove's historical panorama looks like a foreign land to those of us who studied history in Scottish schools, which is extremely odd since Gove himself was educated in Aberdeen, at a school that follows the Scottish curriculum.

Margaret Graves
University of Edinburgh

'What makes good TV doesn't necessarily make for good teaching,' Richard J. Evans writes, lamenting the choice of Simon Schama as the government's adviser on history teaching in schools. The flailing performance of Schama's fellow populist David Starkey in the first episode of *Jamie's Dream School* (the current Channel 4 reality show, in which celebrities are brought in to teach disadvantaged children) effectively demonstrates Evans's point, as well as its equally depressing obverse: that bad teaching makes for great TV.

Edmund Gordon
London NW10

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Julian Bell writes drolly to protest John Lanchester's characterisation of the current political high command as white men in their forties with humanities degrees from Oxford, on the grounds that Nick Clegg is a white man in his forties with a humanities degree from Cambridge (Letters, 17 March). The wider question is whether these are men with 'humanities' degrees in any received sense of that term. Lanchester instances Cameron, Clegg, Osborne (albeit under 40), Miliband (Ed) and Balls. But Cameron read Philosophy, Politics and Economics, as did Miliband (who then studied economics at the LSE), and Balls (who then studied economics at Harvard); Clegg studied social anthropology. The academic disciplines of politics, economics and social anthropology are generally classified intellectually – and badged and organised administratively – not as humanities, but as social sciences. At Oxford, philosophy is a faculty in the Humanities Division, but politics and economics are departments within the Social Sciences Division. So even if these various PPE grads didn't drop philosophy after the first year, as many do, their degrees were preponderantly social science degrees. It is tempting to add loftily that the humanities have enough difficulties at present without being blamed for the intellectual philistinism of a cadre of social science trained politicians. But the examples of Osborne (History, Oxford) and Michael Gove (English, Oxford) – as Richard J. Evans demonstrated in the issue of 17 March – inhibit the humanities from claiming the high moral pedagogic ground.

Simon Skinner
Balliol College, Oxford

Richard J. Evans clearly isn't going to let inexperience of school teaching stand in his way (LRB, 17 March). His analysis of what children need to learn is tellingly illustrated by what interested him as an undergraduate at Oxford: here is yet another academic promoting for schools what appears to be a wishlist for university special subjects. Not only does this approach fail to take into account the enormous difference in maturity between a 14-year-old, of whatever ability, and a gifted undergraduate, it also ignores the point that university history, certainly when Evans was a lad, was able to take a breadth of historical coverage for granted. That is no longer the case. Evans can read out the topics listed in the National Curriculum as much as he likes; the reality is that the actual coverage of history in the classroom is much narrower and often more random than he thinks.

Evans claims that West Indian children should learn Caribbean history rather than British, Asian children the history of the Indian subcontinent rather than Tudors and Stuarts, and so on. The evidence is all the other way: I would recommend he walk up the road to Cambridge Muslim College,

where they teach standard British political history, Whigs, Tories and all, at the express request of the students.

Evans assumes that because the Better History Group, a research unit at Anglia Ruskin University which I chair, has offered its advice to the current government and wants children to learn about the construction of historical narrative, we must all be Tories. As Simon Schama has pointed out, there is nothing intrinsically right-wing about wanting children to learn the history of the country they live in and whose future they will shape. We do not advocate a patriotic flag-waving interpretation; indeed the questions Evans quotes from our submission (they are organisational questions for teaching, not exam questions, as Evans wrongly assumes) are specifically designed to get children thinking more deeply about the relationship between history and nation. To ask how Nelson and Wellington became national heroes is not to ask why they were so wonderful but why a hero cult was built around them and what it tells us about Britain in that period.

Evans even denies that it is the accumulation of historical knowledge that makes a good historian. The difference between us would appear to be that the Better History Group wants to help children expand their historical horizons; Evans is quite happy to see them contract.

Seán Lang
Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge

Richard J. Evans's attack on Michael Gove and Simon Schama is fundamentally misplaced. He objects to the teaching of national myths, and thinks that instead historians' primary task in regard to school students is to teach 'scepticism about the narratives presented by historians'. Professional historians should indeed begin with a recognition that their discipline is not like mathematics, or foreign languages. It does not simply build up on the basis of indisputable facts, but is constantly angling for new insights. Somebody studying French never needs to unlearn what they encountered in their first lessons; but academic historians (and economists and other social scientists) will spend most of their time refuting other work and urging their students to unlearn previous assumptions. This activity, however, cannot be conveyed at a lower level, where it will produce at best an undesirable and indeed dangerous relativism, an assumption that all historians inevitably and habitually lie and hence that the results presented are never worth taking seriously at all.

In making the case for scepticism, Evans ignores the case for school history as stimulating the imagination. The good that can be done is achieved by seeing other worlds – that exist in the past, and in different societies – not in order to provide some sort of justification for a modern pluralistic society, but rather in order to be able to see ourselves in a fuller perspective and to be able to see alternatives and options. History should fire the imagination; and in that sense at school level it may be much better to have Shakespeare's *Richard III* than a pedantic debunking of Shakespeare as a propagator of Tudor myths.

Harold James
Princeton University

Richard J. Evans misses one of the rich ironies of Michael Gove's crusade to promote Britishness in history. Gove (a Scot) is responsible for school history only in England: his writ does not run in Scotland, Wales or any part of Ireland. So his prescribed vision of Britishness will inevitably be partial and anglocentric. Whatever Britishness may mean, it certainly involves reciprocity between several different (national) traditions.

Dennis Smith
Edinburgh

Richard J. Evans is right to counter Michael Gove's assertion that the current syllabus 'trashes' our past, but he is wrong to oppose the inclusion of some long-span courses. The current history curriculum is far too episodic. Teenagers especially need connected narratives to catch their interest,

to frame the episodes, and to debate.

Why don't we have a big course on 'The Peopling of Britain' – from the Celts (and the Basques, as biologists now tell us) to the Poles in the 21st century? Such a narrative would show where we've all come from and how we've managed together; it would include conquests and conflicts as well as intermarriage and cultural sharing. We can study our collective roots without either trashing our past or celebrating the 'Wonderfulness of Us'.

Penelope Corfield
London SW11

Richard J. Evans states that 'it makes far more sense' for children from Afro-Caribbean and South Asian backgrounds to study the history of the Mughal Empire or Benin rather than 'Alfred and the cakes or Drake and the Armada'. By this logic, it makes far more sense for children from a 'British' background to study the latter two topics. Since children with this background constitute the overwhelming majority in English schools, doesn't Evans's argument here favour the Better History movement he opposes?

Matt Grist
Demos, London SE1

As a product of an older teaching environment, which presented the great stories of British history as riveting real-life dramas and which created for me a lifelong interest in the subject, I have been dismayed to watch my own son, from the age of 11 onwards, having to grind through the skills element of the present history curriculum, with its focus on source-work and presentations, as if we were training a legion of footnote editors and PowerPoint mavens for the future. A key measure of success for a curriculum has to be whether it inspires those being taught to continue in the discipline. The current statistics show large numbers of students dropping the subject for GCSE and, as Schama and others warn, they will be 'lost to history'.

Andrew Arends
Queen Mary, University of London

What's wrong with narrative? Only the word itself as used by Richard J. Evans. Why not 'story'? Children like stories, as does everyone else. Told properly, they make you read on; and having pupils wanting to read on is the forlorn dream of every teacher of anything. To listen to Evans and his supporters, teaching in this attractive and coherent way means rah-rah history with free flags, a chronicle of Top Nationhood. The story actually told should be that mix of the creditable, the discreditable and the so-so, created by the lurching course of events.

Edward Pearce
Thormanby, North Yorks

Richard J. Evans asserts that "rich and rowdy discord" still ends up with winners and losers, and if we have a single national identity, then it will be that of the winners.' My play, *The Peterloo Massacre* (with a cast of hundreds, mainly playing members of the crowd in St Peter's Field, Manchester, at the meeting to hear Orator Hunt), was performed in schools throughout the country in the 1970s and 1980s. In my own school I recall the victims' nightly unscripted utterances of fear and anguish as they fled the cutlasses and cudgels, and the brutal curses of the yeomanry hacking their way through the defenceless assembly. In the follow-up session in the classroom those same pupils struggled with the question of who 'won' and who 'lost' in that awful event. Some came to the judgment that even an extended franchise could not compensate for the suffering occasioned by the magistrates' order to break up the meeting. Here the pupils encountered their own history in all its 'rowdy discord', and faced the issues it raised: the uses of power, the costs of seeking liberty, the unending impact of historical events on human communities. A strong focus on the teaching of British history is not the same thing as a surrender to jingoism.

Richard J. Evans writes: In the weird, ideologically deformed parallel universe inhabited by Messrs Gove, Schama and Ferguson, and among your respondents in this issue and the previous one, Lang, McGovern, Arends and Tombs, history in our schools is in a state of terminal decline, facts have more or less disappeared from the curriculum, the teaching of history has abandoned the long view in favour of unrelated short-term topics divorced from any wider chronological context, and students emerge from their schooldays knowing virtually nothing about the past. As Jackie Williams pointed out, these assertions don't bear the remotest relationship to the actual teaching of history in schools, and this holds good not just for Shropshire but for the rest of England as well. For people so insistent on the importance of facts, the critics of the existing curriculum have a cavalier way of dealing with them.

Last month's Ofsted report on the teaching of history in some 166 primary and secondary schools notes that, in 2007-10, 'there were more examination entries for history than for any other optional subject at GCSE level, apart from design and technology.' There has been no significant decline in the proportion of students taking GCSE history – around a third – since GCSEs were introduced in the 1980s. 'The number of students in England choosing to study history has remained stable for the past ten years.' And 'numbers taking the subject at A level have risen steadily over the past ten years,' making history one of the 'top five subject choices at A level'.

Where's the crisis, then? The answer is that it's an imaginary crisis being manufactured by those who want to turn history in our schools into a vehicle of crude nationalist indoctrination. Hence the attempt by Niall Ferguson in a recent issue of the *Guardian* to rubbish the Ofsted report as the product of an 'educational establishment . . . in deep denial about the damage its beloved new history has done'. He seems to expect his readers to share his scepticism about the value of the imaginative teaching methods praised in the report but doesn't provide any reason why they should. The term 'new history' doesn't occur in the Ofsted report.

The report found that history was generally taught well. Pupils 'enjoyed their lessons' and 'regarded history as fun'. As one Year 8 pupil told an inspector, 'It makes us think.' Another said: 'History liberates the mind.' A third said it enabled her to 'read between the lines'. An older student said history helped develop skills 'in researching, in improving our communication skills, in interrogating evidence, in devising our own questions, in extracting information, and in helping us to understand the world in which we live'. It is precisely this spirit of critical inquiry that Gove and his allies want to crush.

The problems identified by the Ofsted report are the same as those to which I pointed in my article. In a minority of schools the curriculum is being squeezed, and bits get left out as a result, with the consequence that 'some pupils found it difficult to place the historical episodes they had studied within any coherent, long-term narrative.' As I noted, it's essential for pupils to know 'at least in outline the longer-term context of what they study', and this is indeed a key feature of the existing national curriculum's treatment of British history for 11-14-year-olds. Without this context they will flounder.

But that's quite another matter from making this the core or even the sole element in the curriculum. Penelope Corfield hasn't read my piece properly if she thinks I 'oppose the inclusion of some long-span courses'. As I pointed out, the existing national curriculum from age 11 to age 14 is built around the study of British history from the 11th century to the 20th.

As Edmund Gordon points out, reading a narrative in a book or watching it unfold in a television series is not the same as trying to teach it in schools, though Edward Pearce seems to think it is. As Bernard Porter remarked in a recent review, Ferguson's own new book, *Civilisation*, is 'an almost perfect illustration of why children need to be taught analytical skills, more than "big stories" or facts'. The problem is that there are many competing 'big stories' presenting many different facts, and Ferguson's account of 'the rise of the West' is 'only one way of looking at modern world history', just

as Gove's 'our island story' is another, a *Daily Telegraph* reader's narrative of the decline of Britain a third, John Hipkin's account of rebellion and repression a fourth, and so on. Schoolchildren, as Porter says, 'need analytical skills to sort out the strands'. To feed only one narrative to children as their only 'big story' for 'identity' purposes, as Porter says, is to confuse history with propaganda.

Harold James – yet another British historian teaching in the US – tells us that teaching a critical approach to historical narratives will create boredom and confusion in schoolchildren. The Ofsted report's conclusions are a sufficient refutation of this patronising view. James's plea for history to fire the imagination can only be applauded; but history teaching at its best already does that, as the school inspectors note, and not by purveying myths or studying fictional representations of the past either. A recent survey of first-year history undergraduates' views on how they were taught history at school concludes that 'British history received poor notices for its traditionalism and parochialism,' while the teaching of Nazi Germany 'in a multifaceted manner with reference to historiographical debate' got high praise.

My colleague Robert Tombs asks: 'Is it unreasonable for schoolchildren to gain a basic knowledge of the history of the country in which they live?' The answer is of course that the existing national curriculum already provides this. As the Ofsted report notes, 'the view that too little British history is taught in secondary schools in England is a myth. Pupils in the schools visited studied a considerable amount of British history and knew a great deal about the particular topics covered.' My objection isn't to British history being taught at all, but to the idea that it should be all that's taught. And in practice, as Dennis Smith notes, Gove and Schama are prescribing an anglocentric account of Britishness. Not that this would be so very revolutionary: the Ofsted report complains that too few schools teach British as opposed to English history.

Time and again, the critics list facts drawn from the national patriotic narrative and complain that hardly any school-leavers or indeed first-year undergraduates seem to know them. Thus the solution is to refocus the national curriculum to drum this narrative into them by rote-learning. Seán Lang says that to ask how the Duke of Wellington became a national hero is not to ask why he was so wonderful but to ask why a hero cult was built around him. If Niall Ferguson's recent complaint in the *Guardian* that students don't know who commanded the British forces at the Battle of Waterloo is anything to go by, this will not be easy. Only a minority of Wellington's army were British, and the battle was won not by Wellington and his troops but by the Germans in the shape of Blücher and his Prussian army, whose arrival late in the day turned the tide.

Teaching children from very diverse backgrounds about Alfred and the cakes is not going to help them to a mature sense of national identity in a multicultural society. One of the Ofsted report's most serious criticisms had to do with 'pupils' limited knowledge and understanding of how the United Kingdom had developed as an ethnically and culturally diverse society'. Corfield's proposal has some merit here. It was dismaying to hear the teaching of narrowly conventional British political history at the Cambridge Muslim College being praised on Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* a few months back, despite Lang's evident enthusiasm for it. Muslims deserve to be taught a modern and outward-looking curriculum as much as any other students do.

Is the critics' agenda a Tory agenda? Lang denies his group is linked to the Conservative Party. But all you need to do is to look up its website, where you will find it was formed specifically in order to advise the then Conservative Party Shadow Education Team. Still, this doesn't make the entire campaign Tory. Robert Tombs complains that the subtitle of my article – 'The Tory Interpretation of History' – is misplaced; and he is right. I didn't put it there.

One of the most dismaying aspects of the Gadarene rush to turn the teaching of history in our schools into a mindless means of building national identity is that it goes right across the political spectrum. One of the most enthusiastic participants was the last Labour prime minister; and as I noted in my article, there has been no sign so far that anyone in the Labour Party dissents from Gove's views on the subject.

Tombs caricatures my argument when he accuses me of saying that factual knowledge is unimportant for historians. As I noted, it's rightly a key part of the existing national curriculum and of history at GCSE and A level. I'm sure he would agree, however, that facts are meaningless unless put into a context of interpretation and linked to it through the exercise of critical examination. I doubt very much if in his own teaching he simply dictates lists of names, events and dates to his students and marks them on how many they get right.

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Richard J. Evans seems naive in citing the Ofsted report as evidence that children 'regarded history as fun' (Letters, 14 April). I currently study A-Level history, and the course is far from scintillating. Answers must be formulaic, and often the coursework is based on wild assumptions that can't be challenged because of the ever-present 'assessment objective' – to stray from the expected response is to risk your grades. This is rarely admitted by teachers, who presumably don't like to face up to the futility of their lessons, but every student knows that although the assessment objectives may be dull, and are often absurd, meeting them is the key to getting a good grade.

It's no wonder that Ofsted failed to get the truth from pupils: after several years of taking inane exams, I have become so jaded that rather than challenge what's expected, I try desperately to conform to it. Evans should maybe enter for a GCSE or A-Level history paper and see the truth for himself. Unless students have a full understanding not of the topic but of the bizarre machinations of the exam board, an A* is impossible. We don't spend our history lessons doing anything very much beyond trying to understand the marking scheme. Complaining about it is of no use, because although its futility does incite a rebellious spirit, to fight it would be to sacrifice one's place at university.

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Ella Raff has my sympathy when she writes about her unstimulating A-level history course (Letters, 19 May). After I retired from full-time teaching 12 years ago I offered to run a Mathematics for Adults course for the WEA. They turned me down because I didn't intend to aim for NVQ, Key Skills or any other official accreditation. It was a jolt even so to hear Charles Clarke – secretary of state for education and skills – declare that 'the age of education for education's sake has passed.'

Howard Millbank
Bristol
