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A CHILD'S EYE VIEW OF THE PAST

Kathy Emmott

The past is what all people build their present and future on (Garrison 1986, 1).

The foundations of our images of the past are laid down in childhood, with education and media presentation creating initial and perhaps lasting impressions. If, as Garrison states, these perceptions have such a fundamental influence on attitudes to the present, it is important to explore children's conceptions of the past and the factors which influence these conceptions. How do children conceive of the past and its people? Do education and media presentations shape opinions to a greater or lesser extent? Has teaching about the past changed, particularly in relation to the inclusion of more work on other countries and cultures? These are some of the questions that the survey on which this article is based sought to answer.

The survey, undertaken by members of the 'Archaeology and Education' team based at Southampton University, involved 117 children in the 10-12 age group from six classes in six schools in Southampton. The sample included schools in working class and middle class areas of the city with varying proportions of ethnic minority children. 91% were born in Britain. 66% were 'British' (ie. white, Anglo-Saxon) and 22% were 'Asian' (including children from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Kenya and Mauritius). There were also small numbers of Greek Cypriots (3.4%), others from Africa and the Caribbean (2.5%), 2.5% from Arab countries (Iraq, Saudi Arabia the Lebanon) and one individual from Iran. 4% were of mixed race.

All of the classes had some 'ethnic minority' children, but one school was predominantly 'British' (87%) while another had a high proportion of 'Asian' children (83%).¹ This variation of ethnic composition made it possible to assess whether the presence of 'ethnic minority' children affected the content of the curriculum. Only 12% of the parents of those children included in the sample agreed to be interviewed so I have included some of their comments, but no statistics associated with this part of the survey. The interviews took place at school and were based on a questionnaire, which the interviewer completed from the child's responses. Every attempt was made to put the children at their ease during the interviews.

Findings of the Survey: What is History?

Time, especially when measured in thousands of years, is a difficult concept for adults, let alone children, to grasp. Children of

10-12 years of age, such as those interviewed may only be beginning to conceive of time as an abstract concept, but research suggests that at the age of five a child starts to sequence events relating to the recent past and the present (Alexander 1984, 72).

As a consequence of the difficulties involved in grasping this concept, the survey sought to discover whether children see their own lives as part of history or whether they feel that history is remote from them. In order to ascertain this, the children were asked to choose any number of alternatives from a list of possible answers to the question "What does history include?". 93% chose a "long time ago", while 59% thought it included "10 years ago" and 32% "what is happening now". These responses may reflect the fact that prehistory, particularly dinosaurs and the Stone Age, were mentioned by children in all the schools as having formed part of their curriculum. They could also suggest that history seemed remote from their lives. In reply to another question "Is the past important?", 80% replied that it was, though many found it hard to supply any reasons. Some children said:

I don't see how it could help you nowadays. Nowadays is so different (90.B.*3).²

You're in this world now. The past is gone (39.B.*3).

Most parents were reticent about their ability to talk about history because they could not remember any dates. «Dates and history were synonymous for them, whereas in no instance did a child mention a date.» This reflects the fact that the earlier emphasis on chronology in the teaching of history has disappeared, at least in primary schools -- a positive development worthy of note.

The other alternatives focused on the content of history. A parent commented:

It seems to be in books. It's more about politics, kings and queens and battles (P.122).

Many of the children shared the same ideas, as 80% selected the lives of kings, queens and powerful people, and 76% selected wars in answer to this question. Although these alternatives were the most popular, 63% believed that history involved the lives of ordinary men and women. A child remarked:

People living and dying is history (40.B.*3).

The project approach to history favoured by all schools in the sample brings in more social history on themes such as "Transport" or "Clothes" which may explain this response. However, another made the observation:

The lives of ordinary men and women is not history because nobody writes it (14.B.*2).

This, of course, is borne out by any investigation of the content of history textbooks, which tend to focus on the lives of the elite. Even social history generally concentrates on the lives of the upper and middle classes. This emphasis may make history appear remote and discourage any sense of empathy with the past, especially for working-class children.

Did they feel that history concerned both sexes equally, or was it about men rather than women? Men and women were given separate categories in the "ordinary men and women" alternative, but most of the children gave the same response to both, treating the part about women as if it were an afterthought. The experience which led to the above quote was reinforced by responses to a subsequent question which asked the children to name important women in history. Only 20% could name even two, with girls being no more successful than boys at answering. One boy could only think of his teacher and shook his head and replied:

No, there were only men (23.B.*1).

Women most frequently mentioned were Joan of Arc, Queen Elizabeth and Florence Nightingale, although one class of children, from a more racially mixed school, mentioned Mary Seacole, the black nurse who served in the Crimea, because they had recently studied her life at school.

Girls recorded far more "don't know" answers in the questionnaire than boys. This, I suggest, results from a sense of exclusion from history. An examination of any children's books on the past reveals that women hardly feature at all (see Burt, this volume). In answer to the question: "Is learning about the past interesting?", a girl replied:

It depends on what it is -- like dinosaurs are boring for the girls. The queens and kings are more interesting -- the way they lived (27.G.*3).

The presentation of history as a succession of military conflicts or invasions was reflected in the children's belief that wars played an important part in the past. 10% more boys than girls chose this alternative: it was viewed with distaste by many of the girls, two of whom said:

It is history, you can't get history without wars (25.G.*1).

Wars -- that's the worst part of history (58.G.*3).

The children's perception of Joan of Arc and Elizabeth I as important was probably due, in part, to their participation in male activities.

Another question sought to discover if the emphasis on power conflicts in the past influenced attitudes to the present. The children

were asked "what makes a country powerful?". This was an open question, with no suggested answers. Bombs and weapons were the most popular answers (60%) and it was interesting to see that a greater number of boys than girls gave this response (80% as compared to 47%). This difference between the sexes may be due to the greater emphasis given to war toys and comics in a boy's socialisation and the fact that boys and girls are encouraged to have different emotional outlooks. Although the wide coverage of the nuclear weapons debate and numerous news programmes about wars around the world must make a strong impression on children's minds too, the fact that the past is depicted as if it were just one war after another gives a sanction to our war-torn present. If humans have always fought one another, then contemporary clashes seem inevitable. Little stress is placed on the many compromises and the peaceful co-existence of many peoples which have occurred through history.

So, many children feel that history has little relevance for them because it appears to chiefly concern the elite, military conflicts and the exploits of men. At the same time it may also seem to justify the present state of the world and our roles as men and women in it.

Conceptions: What was the Past like?

Having explored the ideas about history of the children questioned, the survey turned its attention to the children's images of people in the past. Most children learn about prehistory at primary school and so the survey attempted to evaluate their conceptions of prehistoric peoples. One question asked if early people were as clever as us and response categories of "cleverer", "the same", "less clever", "stupid" and "don't know" were given. The children were told, if they asked, to put their own interpretation on cleverness. The responses showed that most took it to refer to the possession of knowledge and technology. 19% thought early people were cleverer because of self-sufficiency and inventiveness, as these comments show:

They didn't have tools and things and they had to make them themselves. They learnt the things we take for granted nowadays (47.B.*3).

Some people say that they weren't civilised. Well they were, but in a different way. They were cleverer because they didn't have machines to help them (10.G.*1).

Other responses showed the pitfalls attendant on looking at the past through modern eyes:

It was hard for them. They had to learn to live without electricity (34.B.*1).

The most common answer, given by 41% of the sample, categorised early people as less clever than us and 8% chose "stupid" as their

response. The children cited the same reasons: early people lacked knowledge, education and sophisticated technology:

They didn't know much -- they only knew how to keep themselves alive (117.B.*7).

They were able to make things out of flint etc. We managed to do a bit better than that (101.B.*1).

They had no-one to teach them or help them to find out (83.G.*3).

They didn't learn anything because they couldn't afford schools (36.G.*1).

These comments typified an image of the past held by many of the children. It was seen as cold, bleak and disadvantaged. History was regarded as a march of progress to a more comfortable present:

They were less clever because they used stone axes and today we use chain-saws (91.B.*3).

In fact, some thought it important to learn about the past precisely because:

you realise how lucky you are (95.G.*3).

This idea of the fortunate position 'we' are in is not restricted to the past, for it influences images of non-western countries and small scale societies today. If other people do not have an education system based on the Western model and lack the same technology then they tend to be regarded disparagingly as 'primitive'. A girl from a predominantly white working-class school described her feelings about Britain:

I'm very proud to be British -- other countries have so many problems. England has more (she meant a better standard of living). It's a lovely country (76.G.*3).

This attitude has led some ethnic minority children brought up in Britain to view their country of origin negatively. An Asian child born in Britain talked about his visit to India:

It's so poor there. They don't have televisions. I wouldn't like to live there (21.B.*1).

Although it cannot be denied that beneficial advances have been made in fields such as medicine, the belief that with the passage of time there is a corresponding increase in the sophistication of ideas is

a misconception and an over-simplification. Progress is too often only measured in terms of technology, and this is reflected in children's books about the past. This appears particularly true for those about European prehistory which make the people appear gloomy, cold and moronic (Burtt 1987, 48). It would surely be more useful and realistic to encourage children to appreciate the achievements, skills and values of people in other cultures in the present or in the past, rather than to dismiss them because they are different from us or do not have, or did not have, the same material possessions. One 'British' child was convinced that no progress had been made at all because technology is harnessed to creating more sophisticated weaponry:

They were just as stupid as we are...but we've come on more about knowing more, but we're not really getting anywhere. I mean like we still hit each other with things, even though we're hitting each other with harder things, we're still hitting each other. We haven't done anything really (38.B.*3).

How the Past is Presented to Children: Television and Books

Where do these conceptions originate? Are children influenced by images of the past on television and on the printed page? All the children in the survey had a television at home. 73% watched more than 3 hours per day and 25% claimed to watch between 5 and 6 hours. Such lengthy exposure must have some effect on children's ideas and attitudes. The Swann Report referred to a study which came to some relevant conclusions about the influence of television on young people:

Hartman and Husband...found that...television was undoubtedly the most important source of information about the world...The mass media...do structure and select information we may use on which to base decisions on what attitude is appropriate. Attitudes themselves are ill-formed and may be focussed by the images and attitudes of the mass media (1986, 43).

The children were asked if they watched documentaries and films about the past. Only half of the sample said they watched either, perhaps because there are relatively few factual programmes about the past and many may not have realised how many films are about the past. This may be connected to their ideas that the past was a long time ago. 66% mentioned documentaries about history and 54% archaeology and prehistory. The programmes named, which included "The Body in the Bog", about Lindow Man, and the coverage by the children's TV programme "Blue Peter" of the recovery of the Mary Rose, were often discussed at length and with enthusiasm.

More children claimed to have seen fictional films about the past (84%) and these may therefore have a greater influence on perceptions. The children often referred to "Raiders of the Lost Ark" and "Indiana

Jones and the Temple of Doom", films about the 'Wild West' and the Second World War. Even a cursory examination of films being shown currently on television reveals that a large number still fall into the last two categories. The Swann Report makes a similar observation:

Both BBC and ITV continue to show a variety of old films, which portray Africans and American Indians as untrustworthy savages, fit peoples for subjugation and civilisation by the white man (1986, 43).

These images substantiate and contribute to the derogatory ideas of early people and non-industrialised peoples in the present mentioned in the first part of this article. Visual images leave a particularly strong impression on a child's mind, as Burtt points out with regard to the illustrations in children's books (Burtt, this volume). The following remarks concerning other countries were probably provoked by impressions gained from the television:

Germany -- you say the name and they sound like people who go round bombing things up (89.G.*3).

Colonel Gadafi's taken over everything (92.G.*3).

Are children convinced by these films about the past? It was interesting that more 'British' children (95%) were convinced of the truth of these films than those from 'ethnic minorities' (62%). This may be the result of the fact that these children receive alternative views on religion and culture from their own community and from videos from their country of origin (which many mentioned watching). In this respect the significance of cartoons such as "The Flintstones" and "Captain Caveman" must also not be overlooked, for, with their mixture of humans and dinosaurs, Stone Age and modern technology, they present a far from accurate picture of the past!

66% claimed to have read books about the past and 44% of them believed them to be accurate, with 44% saying that they did not know. Since studies have shown that many children's books about the past are a vehicle for transmitting contemporary ideology rather than an accurate presentation of the evidence (cf. Burtt, this volume), this unquestioning acceptance of the view of the past portrayed in books should cause concern.

Education and the Past

I was particularly interested in investigating the extent to which education about the past had become multicultural in order to assess whether its provision, or the lack of it, influences attitudes to other countries and to cultures in the past and the present. It was in the early 1970s that educationalists began to advocate multiculturalism rather than cultural assimilation (Sharp 1986, 17-18). The broadest interpretation of multicultural education is that it recognises and

celebrates the cultural diversity of modern society by including the study of 'host' and 'minority' cultures in the school curriculum and treating both with equal respect and seriousness. The Swann Report recommended that world history should form an important part of a multi-cultural education:

The diversity of British society today and the inter-dependence of the global community also has clear implications for the teaching of history...A global perspective to the teaching of history can help to counter and overcome the negative stereotypes of ethnic groups which lie at the heart of racism (1986, 330).

The survey revealed that 68% were taught about the history of other countries, but half the countries mentioned were in Europe. It also emerged that the coverage of other countries in the curriculum varied in direct proportion to the ethnic composition of the class. Schools with a higher percentage of pupils from the 'ethnic minorities' included more work on other countries, cultures and religions. This fulfils a need expressed by many of the children, since 87% of 'ethnic minority' children in the sample expressed a wish to learn about their country of origin at school. Such work can reinforce a child's sense of validation and identity. Multicultural education is often, wrongly, conceived to be for 'ethnic minorities' only, an attitude exemplified by this comment from a history teacher working in a predominantly white area of Southampton:

We don't need it here, we've only got two of 'those' girls (Suffield 1986, 38).

However, the Swann Report recommended:

The fundamental change that is necessary is the recognition that the problem facing the education system is not how to educate children of ethnic minorities, but how to educate all children (1986, 363).

What effect does a narrow Eurocentric education about the past have on attitudes? It appears to create a sense of insecurity and low self-image on the part of children from the ethnic minorities. The interviewers noticed that these children were often hesitant about discussing their own culture and assumed that no value would be placed on it. This attitude may stem from 'British' intolerance of other cultures and the idea that immigrants should be assimilated into the host country. The dress worn by ethnic minorities provoked this comment from a parent:

They shouldn't make it obvious that they want to be different in somebody else's country. It's like at school -- you see them wearing those funny clothes. They should only wear those clothes with their own people -- not at school (P.119).

It was particularly interesting that this woman had an Indian father; firstly, because she felt no identification with 'them' and secondly because she showed no appreciation of a culture that was part of her. An Asian parent explained to me that he had never lived in the Southampton City Centre where, as in many other cities, there is a large concentration of ethnic minorities:

I've always lived surrounded by English people in England. My wife used to wear a sari but my son hated it. It upset him, so now she doesn't wear it any more (P.125).

Children are often anxious to conform and be accepted, particularly when they are younger, and intolerant attitudes on the part of the 'British' can lead ethnic minority children to devalue their own culture.

Does a Eurocentric education about the past create an unrealistic sense of western superiority? To explore this, the survey tried to determine the children's impressions of the distribution of power in the contemporary world and in the past. Do they still see Britain as a world power? The USA was mentioned most frequently as being powerful in the present (75%), with Russia second (58%). Britain came third, with 23% still seeing it as a powerful country. The country mentioned most often as being powerful in the past was Britain (45%) with the USA (15%) and Europe (Germany, France and the USSR were named specifically) predominating in the other responses. A child said that today's most powerful countries are:

England and America. Africa is the weakest (36.G.*1).

I suggest that Africa was seen by some to be the weakest because most, if not all, the images of Africa they had been exposed to featured famine in Ethiopia and neighbouring countries. If the children had learnt about Africa, they had only dealt with the problems of the continent. Similarly, in answer to the question "what countries would you like to learn about?", a child replied:

India -- because people are starving there (28.G.*3).

The use of the word 'problem' often occurs when non-western countries and ethnic minorities in Britain are being referred to by the 'British'. This, I suggest, stems from the fact that we receive more information about their difficulties than anything else. It is interesting that we hear little about how such problems are due to

western intervention in their countries and 'British' racism. While it is important to be aware of these problems, they are not typical of the whole continent and it is surely necessary for children to know about the many positive achievements of the multiplicity of African peoples in order that children do not receive a limited and patronising view.

Very few children, mainly those from 'ethnic minorities' mentioned places such as Africa, India and Egypt as being powerful either in the past or in the present. This is hardly surprising, since children learn so little about 'Third World' countries at school and most of the images of 'Third World' countries they are exposed to in the media are negative. The term 'Third World' itself suggests that these countries are further down the ladder of progress delineated by technological sophistication. Colonialism has always been justified by the so-called 'primitive' nature of the colonised peoples and it seems that our attitudes towards them have changed little. As Crispin Jones points out:

Although the sun has set on the Empire, the attitudes and emotions that sustained it in Britain have continued to shape many thoughts and actions (1986, 32).

These ideas emerged in some of the children's comments, one of whom was, I felt, disturbingly nostalgic about the Empire for one born long after its demise:

(If we had) a good Prime Minister, a good King and Queen and a big Empire, that makes us just right; then we'd be really powerful (39.B.*3).

Some remarks on language and history displayed ethnocentrism:

All language comes from England. English is easier to say. I don't think that people should speak different languages (76.G.*3).

Britain's more interesting. The other countries don't have so much history (21.B.*1).

Such attitudes arise out of an ignorance which is not at present challenged in the British education system.

However, I found it very encouraging that multicultural education about the past had the support of almost all the children questioned, for 93% expressed an interest in learning about the past of other countries, and the figures did not vary significantly between cultural groups. Many felt non-western countries should be included and thought that a broader education about the past would increase understanding and tolerance:

Then you know about others and not just yourselves (15.B.*3).

They (people from outside Europe) are different kinds of people and they do things differently (97.B.*3). We should learn more about Africa and places like that. All European countries are the same -- it's better to do countries we've never heard of in our lives (111.B.*7).

If you were made when you were young, to just know about England, you don't realise all the things about other countries you're living with (115.G.*5).

Because then we would know what they've been doing, and they'd know what we've been doing and maybe we'd be able to get on better (88.G.*3).

I think it helps you understand other people's problems because at the moment there's racial fighting (51.B.*3).

These comments show that children are aware of the benefits to be gained from a greater understanding of other cultures. If the curriculum featured more about the past of other countries and cultures it might produce a greater awareness of their achievements and could have a positive effect on racial attitudes. A Greek Cypriot child made a comment that belied personal experience:

We should learn about little countries as well as big ones, including islands, because if you come from that country, if people don't know about it, they might make fun of it (115.G.*5).

Conclusions

The findings of this survey reveal that children often receive a distorted, ethnocentric and sexist view of the past, which forms a lasting impression and impinges on their images of the present. These images originate in the content of the school curriculum, children's books and television programmes. The contribution of other cultures and women to Britain's past too often remain unrecognised and unacknowledged. This situation fosters unrealistic attitudes on the part of the 'British' about the past and the present and encourages racism and sexism. Some Asian children mentioned racial abuse and attacks. There is only space here to mention one quotation:

I was walking one day and this old lady comes out and she says, "why don't you lot go back to your country". And I goes, "I can't because I was born here. I've got my passport from here" (23.B.*1).

The ideas that the 'British' are one homogeneous race dating back a considerable time, and that this country is their sole property, lie at the heart of racism. This misconception should be challenged. If the media and the school curriculum gave people a more thorough understanding of the mixed nature of 'British' culture, the fact that human beings have migrated from earliest times, and the historical background to migration, it could have a positive effect on racial attitudes. Television programmes such as Catherine Hill's "Blood of the British" series (Channel 4, 1986) and Michael Wood's "Domesday" (BBC, 1986) are to be commended for doing this. Some new educational materials are being developed on the theme of migration such as the Inner London Education Authority's Motherland book and video, which deals with the experience of West Indian women coming to Britain, and War on Want's From Dhaka to Dundee (1987), which explains the historical background to immigration from Bangladesh. These initiatives should be followed all over the country rather than just in areas of a high concentration of ethnic minorities. The media too should present more programmes which attempt to depict a more balanced view of the past of Britain and other countries. These programmes must also be scheduled at peak times, instead of being presented at a late hour or on a less popular channel, as often happens. A concerted effort is needed, for a single teaching pack or television programme will not change entrenched attitudes.

The most encouraging thing to emerge from the survey was that most of the children thought it would be beneficial to learn more about the past of other countries. Surely they deserve to have their needs met and receive a broader education? A parent told me:

It's narrow not to do so...like my view. I didn't do much about other countries...We had Empire Day then you know! It's a good idea for him to learn about other cultures so that my son can respect other people's customs...If there's no respect, that's when the trouble starts -- what is important to one culture isn't nearly so important as to another (P.124).

Notes

1. The term 'British' refers to white, Anglo-Saxons and is placed in inverted commas to underline the fact that this distinction is drawn only for the sake of comparison between cultural groups, and is not intended to cast doubt on any person's right to British nationality.
2. In the brackets after each quote, the numbers are the survey record numbers for each child or parent. "B" indicates a boy, "G" indicates a girl and "P" indicates a parent. In addition, the asterisk and number indicate ethnic origin: *1 is Asian, *2 is Afro-Caribbean, *3 is 'British', *5 is Greek Cypriot and *7 is mixed race.

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Illustration by Kelsey Boast

CONFESSIONS OF AN ARCHAEOLOGIST WHO DUG IN SCHOOL: OR,
IS ARCHAEOLOGY IN SCHOOLS A GOOD OR DESIRABLE THING?

J.D. Hill

Introduction

The relationship between archaeology and education is a current 'flavour-of-the-month' with archaeologists (as this ARC volume testifies). Much has been written about this subject in the last few years, giving the impression that it is only a recent marriage, though in fact archaeology has played a part in education for many years through museums and textbooks. Yet, despite the recent hype, little critical assessment of why and how it should be done has been offered. This paper takes this topic as its theme and questions whether a relationship based on use and abuse of either marriage partner is at all hopeful. In particular it discusses the question of what sort of archaeology should be taught in schools, and who should attempt to teach it.

This paper has its roots in two and half years spent working as part of Southampton University's 'Archaeology and Education' project and a recent conference entitled 'Archaeology meets Education' held in Southampton in September 1987. Here archaeologists and teachers met to discuss common aims and give each group an understanding of the other. Despite attention paid at the conference to issues such as multicultural education, it is hard to see how the uncritical and conventional forms of archaeology suggested by both archaeologists and teachers could be in any way effective in addressing this and other issues.

Use and Abuse

A history of the relationship between archaeology and the public is yet to be written, but it is important to see the current concern with archaeology and education in the context of the rise of the 'Heritage Industry'. Through visits to historic houses, museums and ancient monuments, 'the past' has become increasingly popular -- almost a middle class bingo. Hence, the ideology of 'Heritage' is the inescapable background through which teachers, children and archaeologists produce and consume the past. A full critique of the 'Heritage Industry' is yet to be undertaken (but see Wright 1985; Hewison 1987) but the view of the past presented by this industry is passive, and its perspective does not allow for a creative past. It is a replacement industry for a Britain whose traditional industries have declined, one that is incapable of changing the future. The past is packaged, priced and consumed, not something to be learnt from or experienced. We now talk about selling archaeology to the public, and, in this respect, children offer an attractive and captive market of school parties with sales of souvenirs