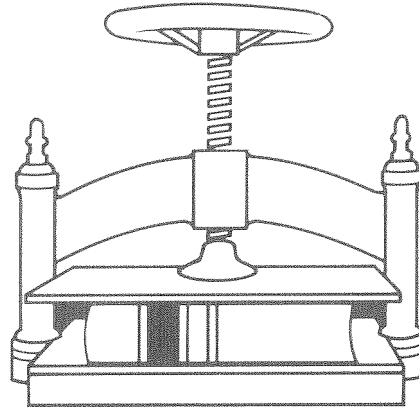

TEACHING HISTORY WITH PRIMARY SOURCES

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In George Orwell's classic, *Nineteen Eighty-four*, the main character, Winston Smith, worked in the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth. His job was to alter documents, so that historical facts agreed with current national policy. If Big Brother predicted something that did not happen, all published accounts of the prediction were changed to conform with what actually transpired. When Oceania changed enemies, the country revised its records to show that the new adversary had always been a foe. Names of leaders who fell from grace were purged, so that no reference to their existence would remain. To dominate the minds of the people, Big Brother found it essential to control their understanding of the past.

History teachers who fail to expose students to primary sources play a role similar to Winston Smith's. In their paternalistic wisdom they presume to speak with the authority of an oracle, but they limit students' access to historical documents on which alone sound judgements can be based. Almost three decades ago, when I was an undergraduate at a state university, classes revolved around lectures, textbooks, and monographs. Even when professors assigned term papers requiring primary documents, they made the papers peripheral to everything else the student was expected to learn. Since the 1960's course descriptions and interpretations have changed dramatically, but teaching techniques have remained remarkably conservative.

Unfortunately, instructors teaching large survey history classes in state colleges and universities have always felt under intense pressure to give students something less than real history. When class sizes reach fifty or more, the easy thing to do is to spend classtime lecturing with a minimum of student participation, assign textbook



chapters to be read outside class, and rely on multiple choice tests provided by textbook companies to see what students have mastered. In such an approach students generally memorize a lot of facts, which are quickly forgotten, and gain little lasting understanding.

Perceptive students must find it confusing when ideas they learn elsewhere conflict with what they hear in college. For instance, anyone who pays attention while watching *Gone With The Wind* must recognize that no current college textbook and few lecturers treat Reconstruction in the same way. Embarrassed by the racism of older interpretations, most modern scholars have tried hard to find good things to say about the Republican regimes of the postwar South.

One might argue that the beginning of wisdom for history students is the recognition that the past is complex, and no interpretation will ever be universally accepted. But how are beginning scholars supposed to reach conclusions they can call their own? Without exposure to primary sources are they not liable merely to become confused by conflicting viewpoints? Would not a student brought up on *Gone With The Wind* be justified in suspecting that historians today have merely suppressed old facts and interpretations to conform with current national policy (at the expense of white Southern traditions)?

It seems to me that historians should be alarmed by the negative attitudes

that students have toward history courses, and the apathy with which the public responds to anything said by professional historians. In a society that still thinks George Washington cut down a cherry tree and Betsy Ross sewed the original American flag, the works of professional scholars seem largely irrelevant.

Yet the public is interested in history. The number of visitors at historical and genealogical societies has never been higher. Anyone who has done research at state or national archives knows that the vast majority of the patrons are genealogists and that they are often far more skillful than academic historians in ferreting out the documents that they need for their research. Parks such as Kennesaw Mountain Battlefield and the Etowah Indian Mounds are in reality primary sources. I believe that laypersons are interested in such sites, because they allow them to learn for themselves what actually happened in the Civil War or what a prehistoric Indian culture was like. They do not have to depend on someone else to tell them. The public perhaps has a better understanding than classroom teachers that history isn't history without the freedom to evaluate, analyze, and interpret documentary evidence for oneself.

A recent report of the American Historical Association on "Liberal Learning and the History Major" attacks the overemphasis on textbooks. The AHA taskforce argues that textbooks should be limited to "reinforcing a framework . . . serving as a handy reference . . . and presenting maps, graphs, tables and pictures." The report urges the use of primary documents, including oral histories, as well as monographs, maps, and other sources. Even in foundation classes, the AHA maintains, students should be expected to do extensive writing involving the critical analysis of documents.

Such an approach to history, of course, is not new. Almost a century ago the NEA's famous Committee of Ten, headed by Harvard president Charles W. Eliot, argued that a twelfth-

