

# HEROES OF BRITISH HISTORY KILLED OFF BY NEW TEXTBOOKS\*

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The achievements of the greatest heroes and heroines of British history are being undermined by politically correct textbooks in the classroom, according to the government's chief curriculum adviser.

He says children have lost pride in such figures as Florence Nightingale, Lord Nelson and Alfred the Great, and look instead to pop stars and television characters as role models.

In a speech tomorrow, Nicholas Tate, chief executive of the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA), will blame the authors of history textbooks, claiming they have abandoned story-telling and respect for prominent characters in favour of bland and banal accounts.

While Florence Nightingale, for example, was once described as "one of the noblest women", a 1985 history book refers to her merely as the source of some statistics on hospital death rates.

Tate believes modern educationists have become "embarrassed" about the nation's culture and that there is now "distaste for the very idea that education might be about fostering national identity".

His latest onslaught follows a row two months ago after he said that all children should be taught what it means to be British, whatever their cultural or ethnic background.

"It is certainly ironic that as a society, we are sceptical about traditional heroes and heroines but at the same time tolerate the promotion of celebrities from the world of pop culture, about whom a much deeper scepticism might be in order", he will tell a Council of Europe conference in York.

Tate, who has compared history books from 70 years ago with modern texts, found that King Alfred is no longer "Alfred the Great" and that adjectives such as brave and bold, formerly used to describe the Tudors, including Henry VIII, have been deleted.

In the past, textbooks regaled children with the 900-year-old story of King Alfred "letting the cakes burn" while escaping from invading Danes. Today accounts of his life are limited to the basic facts of his victory.

Referring to a recent SCAA survey, which found modern texts littered with mistakes about dates and historical events, Tate said that one book with four pages on the "scientific revolution" of the 17th century devoted an entire page to witchcraft but only two sentences to Isaac Newton, who discovered gravity.

Tate, who has consistently alleged cultural impoverishment among young people since he took over as the SCAA's chief executive last year, will also warn that debased history degrees are producing teachers who are ill-prepared to educate children.

He claims that modular degrees, for which students choose from a range of obscure subjects, create graduates who know little about the nation's history. Citing a Luton University course, *Living and Working in Luton 1918-80*, he said: "There must be question marks over the appropriateness of such degrees as a preparation for teaching".

John McIntosh, headmaster at the London Oratory, where Tony Blair's son Euan started this month, said Tate's criticisms were justified. "A lot of material in history ... has become emasculated in our attempts to make them politically, gender and race-neutral. You are left wondering whether what remains retains anything worth saying".

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The SCAA's survey found some modern texts uninformative. Accounts of the Elizabethan reformation dwelt on the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots as the central character, it found, with few details of the Protestant side.

Many texts also included mistakes, saying, for example, that Queen Anne had no children when in fact she bore five. One son survived infancy but died, leaving her with no heir. Other texts have stated the Battle of Flodden was in 1515 instead of 1513.

Unlike most European countries, Britain has no approved text in schools. Eric Evans, professor of social history at Lancaster University and an adviser to the SCAA, said some publishers seemed more concerned with design and illustration than content. "It is sad that history teaching is no longer about telling a story and enthusing children", he said.

Evans said official guidance to teachers in 1914 had decreed that history should give children "a feeling of the splendour of heroism and loyalty". This was no longer the case, he said.

Richard Tanton, deputy head at Archbishop Tenison's school, in south London, said texts has changed beyond recognition in the past 15 years and now underplayed individual roles in pivotal events, such as Nelson's part in the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. "The battle is now illustrated by pictures and maps but the brave efforts of Nelson ... are barely mentioned".

However, Jim Lang, former education officer at English Heritage and another adviser on the SCAA study, said he was disturbed by Tate's comments. "He is trying to instil a false sense of patriotism," he said.

George Varnava, president of the National Association of Head Teachers, said modern history textbooks were a refreshing change. "We need to be more sophisticated today than just looking upon Nelson as a great hero. We are approaching the 21st century. What the British Empire viewed in the past as great victories need to be presented in a much more objective way".

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*"Knowledge of history is the precondition of political intelligence. Without history, a society shares no common memory of where it has been [or] what its core values are."*

So, laudably, write the authors of *National Standards for United States History*, a federally funded curriculum guide that was issued last week with impressive auspices - and amid swirling controversy. The 271-page document outlines what students in school should know about the American past. The guide compartmentalizes U.S. history into 10 eras, from the beginnings until 1620 to contemporary America, and proposes two to four "standards" of what students should know about each period. *National Standards* will be submitted to an independent board for approval. The proceedings are all part of congressional legislation that set up Goals 2000, a program designed to ensure that students advancing to higher grades will have shown competence in certain subjects, including history.

The National Endowment for the Humanities and the U.S. Department of Education provided a \$1.75 million grant in 1992 that got the work under way. But how well was that seed money spent? Poorly says Lynne Cheney, who headed the NEH when the grant was approved. She is the most prominent of conservative critics who charge that *National Standards* offers what Cheney call "a warped view of American history" and that its criteria for including or excluding landmark events and persons are "politically correct to a fare-thee-well." For example, Harriet Tubman, the African American who helped organize the pre-Civil War underground railroad, is cited six times in the guide, whereas Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is mentioned only once in passing. Students are expected to know about the 1848 Seneca Falls, New York, convention on women's rights (mentioned nine times) but not about the uncited Wright brothers or Thomas Alva Edison, whose inventions transformed the lives of millions. The term McCarthyism dominates the précis of the cold war.

Charlotte Crabtree, an emeritus professor of education at UCLA and co-director of the *National Standards* project, answers that Cheney's by-the-numbers critique shows "a lack of understanding of what the standards are about". One aim of the guidelines is to promote "inclusive history" by acknowledging the achievements of Americans - black, Native Americans and women, notably - who were ignored or marginalized in past textbooks. Another goal was to "get away from memorizing mind-numbing names of people."

One problem, however, is that *National Standards* is so insistent on resurrecting neglected voices that it becomes guilty of what might be called disproportionate revisionism. In a chapter on the American Revolution, for example, the guide recommends that students examine the lives of individuals who were "in the forefront of the struggle for independence." Samuel Adams and Thomas Paine are plausible candidates here. But it is unreasonable to suspect that the writer Mercy Otis Warren is mentioned in the same breath mainly because she was a woman?

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