

German town, April 8, 1951

Lieber Töchen,

In diesem Augenblick spielst Du vielleicht Geige.
Ich denke Dir. Wie denkst Du mir?

Mother has just returned from the Meeting House. She has been packing the books left over from the sale for the benefit of the library. I went over with her for a while yesterday and helped a little, mostly by buying a few De Quincey Scott's ballad collection and I forget the rest. They are still damaged and must be added up and paid for.

It is probably as pretty in Cambridge as it is here, but you have not taken a walk because I am not there to nudge you. Yesterday afternoon Mother and I worked a little in the garden; I did very little and spent most of my time admiring and teasing a very large and sleepy bumble-bee, the kind that has not got a sting. Vicky and I twiggled at the tree for a while. She and I have both gotten fat and she is almost too heavy to swing in the air.

Papa and I spent a little while discussing finances. I do not think he said anything different from his words during the Christmas conference, but I am not sure, since I don't remember the substance of that very well. He explained to me that when we got married he thought that he could give us five or six hundred dollars a year until you finished Medical School but that he did not wish to give it in a lump sum. Since he thought it better that such a large sum should be invested. He does not seem to want to give us an investment which would bear that much interest. I guess he really cannot; it would have to be a very big investment. He and Mother were given money in much the same way by my grandparents, and so I guess it seems the natural way to him.

2

Friday morning I handed in my answer to the question asked of those who had taught combined English and history courses. I spent the better part of three nights reading for it and writing it. I am not very pleased with it. In fact it embarrasses me, but I think that you should see it. I especially regret the rhetorical tone. Will you return the carbon to me Friday? Wednesday we will have a meeting in which I will have to defend my thesis.

Friday afternoon I bought your records and was promised that they could be returned in a month if they were only played once. Please remember to save room for them in your suitcase.

Eight more weeks of school. The riveting is getting worse and worse, and sometimes I feel that I cannot stand it any longer. It is so quiet and peaceful here. I could not even be cross at the birds when they woke me up at six. I stuffed plugs in my ears and went to sleep again. I have been trying to imagine how I will feel when I am here this summer without you. I hope that I will be more patient than I was last summer. I know that my studying will mean more to me, though I can never lose myself and my loneliness in it as you can.

We had a bad dinner last night that made me remember the worst of last summer all over again. Peter was very depressed and would not say why. Finally, Papa got very angry. Much more so than he has been for a long time. I saw myself in Peter, and I remembered Papa's awful explosions when I was younger. Now all is peace and solicitude, but it was very bad.

Will you come on the one o'clock? You do mean one o'clock in the afternoon and not that night train? Please come as soon as you can. We will have so little time.

Deine

Margaret.

To members of the English and History Departments:-

As you know, there has been a good deal of discussion recently about our combined English and History courses. About April 15th there will be a meeting to explore the subject. So that we may clarify our thinking to some extent beforehand, will you please write down, and hand in to Sarah Boutelle or to Jocelynn Gibson by April 6th, your answer to these questions:

What should our chief aims be in the teaching of a) English,
b) History?

In considering your answer, keep in mind broad educational objectives, as you see them, regardless of what Brearley practice has been in the past, or is at present.

3/16/51

SUB
J. G.

I think that the aims of teaching history can be divided into two categories. First, (not because it is more important, but because it is easier to summarize) we should attempt to explain the present in terms of what we have inherited from the past, and in terms of what is new - if there is anything new. The explanation of the present is essential to citizenship, both national and international. To understand our system of government and our culture, its ideals, achievements, shortcomings, and defects, we must know the history of our institutions and our civilization. To appreciate the value and defects of the jury system, a knowledge of Anglo-Saxon law is important, knowledge of Nazi or Soviet law is useful. The ideals of the New England theocracies, the causes of the American Revolution, the disagreements of the Constitutional Convention, and American attitude toward the French Revolution can tell us much about contemporary affairs. We must know not only what our ancestors did, but what they thought, why they did it. A democracy that votes without thinking, swayed by emotion, sometimes hysteria, can be a far worse place to live than a well-run monarchy or oligarchy. We cannot insure responsible and moral citizenship by teaching history, but at least we are taking a step in the right direction.

Yet the knowledge and understanding of history can do far more than help in the preparation of citizens. Our minds and spirits should be enlarged by knowing the life of man as it has been lived in other times and in other places. The ease and speed of modern travel, the abundance of information provided to us in the photographs of magazines may make us less provincial in one sense. However, we are, perhaps, even more liable to "time provincialism." The American of today who looks back two centuries or more may be so overwhelmed by enormous differences in the control of power and in production methods that the smaller differences and the underlying similarities may be masked. Still worse he may easily fall into the self-righteous fallacies of the thorough-going evolutionist; He may imagine himself at the top of the ladder, the ape at the bottom, and the ancient Greek one third of the way up. The aim of the history teacher should be to help the student to live among the Egyptians, the Greeks, in the medieval town and 18th century France. The student should see the pyramids (How did they do it?), worship on the Acropolis, hear the minstrel sing of Aucassin and Nicolette, attend the salon of Mme. Roland who is entertaining that social lion, Dr. Franklin. And he should also be a member of the mob which storms the Bastille.

In achieving this aim the teacher cannot rely on the generalizations of the textbook. The student must also be acquainted with the sources. Here the teacher must begin by saying how little we know. Only fragments of the past survive, even of the most recent past. The task of interpreting the past is one which must be approached in a spirit of humility because so much is lost in "the dark backward and abyss of time." Some of the sources of our history are laws, charters, market lists, and the records of courts. These are very incomplete fragments. In many ways the art and literature of the past gives us a more complete picture.

Historically speaking, the relationship between literature and history has been very close. Yet since the Darwinian revolution a strong trend has been shoving historians in the other direction. Science is very fashionable, and history has been described as one of the "social sciences." This seems to me a very false concept. In the collection, examination, comparison, and evaluation of historical data the historian must proceed in a careful and dispassionate manner which perhaps may be compared with the care and detachment of the scientist. But there the analogy must end. You cannot examine and test your hypothetical picture of the past by conducting an experiment; and the fragmentary nature of the historical record makes it impossible for us to be as relatively certain of our conclusions as the scientist is in his measurement of natural phenomena.

The false belief that history is scientific may be partially responsible for another development which has split history from literature. Nowadays, history, especially in this country, is very badly written. Henry Adams and Woodrow Wilson wrote with intelligence and vigor; but to find anyone who has done as well in recent years we must turn to the poet, Carl Sandburg, and the novelist, Marquis James, turned historian.

Although history is no longer written as literature, history and literature are often taught in "correlated" or "integrated" courses, both in schools and colleges. I have not recently read enough of the writings of John Dewey and other modern educators to be able to discuss their theories intelligently. But I think that a thorough analysis of the teaching of history and English in any particular school would be inadequate if it did not compare its practice and plans to the theory and practice of a wider academic world.

It seems to me almost impossible to teach a meaningful history course without reference to the literature of the period. I remember curriculum descriptions of history courses which were "enriched" with literature, as if the literature were a special treat. Very often a piece of literature may say something about a period which no amount of textbook generalization can say. Franklin's autobiography tells us more about the thinking of the 18th century American (and indeed the 20th Century American) than volumes of history. One or two passages from Tom Paine tell us a great deal about what helped the Americans get through the winter of Valley Forge. What can we say about the radicals of the 1840's that Thoreau will not say better? The simplicity and dignity of Lincoln's speeches make the sophisticated arguments of recent historians over the causes of the Civil War look absurd.

Because I have said that history is not science and have urged the correlation of history and literature, I do not mean to ~~say~~ ^{mean} that literature should be the handmaid of history. The understanding of literature is a more important educational goal than the knowledge and understanding of history. The attempt of the teacher of history to make real the life of other times and places will probably not succeed unless the mind, spirit, and heart of the student have been stirred, enlarged and trained by the study of literature. The most important task of the teacher of literature is to make the piece of literature more accessible. I do not mean that the teacher should attempt to lower the literature to the eyelevel of the student, but sometimes barriers can and should be removed. Sometimes an historical approach can remove superficial difficulties by explaining differences in institutions, manners, and speech.

~~More~~ ^{More} important ^{than} removing unnecessary barriers is the task of rousing and urging on the student so that he will reach and stretch to grasp new ideas and new emotions. Once, Conrad's Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus satisfied me as a definition of art. But now I believe that Conrad does not sufficiently emphasize the effort of understanding which is necessary. He tells us that "the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition.. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain." But when Schopenhauer in one of his essays on The Art of Literature quotes Goethe: "Was du ererbt von deinen Vatern hast, Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen, I think that this come closer to the truth. Our capacity for delight, wonder, our sense of mystery, pity, beauty, and pain do not grow without some effort on our part. The teacher must encourage. I remember that Socrates once described himself as a midwife.

The study of literature may lead naturally to the other side of the teaching of English, composition. Study of the essay seems to me particularly adapted to training in clear, logical, and forceful writing. The student should be carefully trained in the techniques of grammar, spelling, and even handwriting, since accuracy in detail usually contributes greatly to clarity and accuracy in expository writing. In speaking of composition I would like to express the opinion that the writing of history papers seems to me to be primarily a problem of English composition. During my first year of teaching I was quite bewildered by the fact that the papers which I had to read and grade were sometimes so badly expressed that it was impossible to tell whether the student knew any historical facts. Occasionally, erratic spelling, grammar, and paragraph structure seemed to be mostly due to ignorance of the facts which were to be discussed. This is often true of examination papers; the student becomes so overwhelmed by the realization that she does not know the answer, that her knowledge of the tools of expression seems to slip from her grasp completely. However, still more frequently, it seemed to me that inadequate mastery of the tools of expression prevented the student from presenting facts in a clear and logical sequence. The cart was placed before the horse simply because the student didn't know how to harness and hitch up any horse and cart.

Of course, composition is not just a matter of mastering the techniques of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and logical sequence. Recently a parent asked the difficult and embarrassing question why it is that Americans cannot express themselves as well as Europeans. I believe that she suggested that the study of Greek and Latin grammar might have something to do with the difference. But I think that the problem goes far beyond knowing how to say what you think. It goes back to thinking itself. The most important objective of both the teaching of history and English should be the teaching of thoughtful reading. Perhaps we should teach more literature. Perhaps it is simply a matter of teaching a smaller amount of literature more carefully, and encouraging the student to go further by herself. To teach students how to read and to think about what they read is the most important and the most difficult part of our task. It is made steadily more difficult because parents take so little responsibility and interest in this side of education. The Parents' Poll on Television in the March Brearley Bulletin confirms my worst suspicions. Reading despite television is mentioned once or twice, but rather as if it were a vitamin pill. The teacher's burden seems to get heavier all the time. I do not think that further specialization of function is going to make it lighter.

I apologize for not following directions. I read them carefully but paid no attention because I cannot discuss my ideas about teaching without reference to Brearley practice. Most of my experience in teaching has been at Brearley, and I do not know how to think in general terms without referring to the specific.

Margaret McPhedran, 4/6/51