FirstRand

Thoughts on the utility of history

Author: Peter Dearlove

If it be true that the only thing history teaches us is that it teaches us nothing, and if it is also true that the more things change the more they stay the same, then why on earth would we bother the next generation with truckloads of useless information?

Of all the subjects children at school are subjected to, none is as boring, or pointless, as history. Sorry. That's just a fact – filtered through the brain of most ten-year olds anyway. Later the reception changes from one person to another, some even develop an intense interest in the past, others study it at university only to add easy bulk to their degree fields. These days though, the subject is under all kinds of pressure in an increasingly nit-picky new world. Some far left outriders even want to see it struck off the list of education's basic building blocks altogether, because, they say, it cannot be trusted and it doesn't teach us anything anyway.

The trouble for history is that the accusations are probably more nearly true than more nearly false, and historians themselves are to blame, for it is they who decide what particular bits of history are worth recording and in what order. It is also they who delight in making up and spreading such catchy sayings as 'the only thing history teaches us is that history teaches us nothing', and 'the more things change the more they stay the same'. There are literally dozens of such quotes floating around at any given time, so it is no wonder that the subject itself is sometimes being looked at sideways, if not askance.

Are they true though? Is it a fact that we learn nothing from history?
In a broad sense, being humans, it surely is true that nothing changes us much; our behaviour in general stays the same, we do what our nature lets us do. But this is far from damning because it is also in our nature to learn from experience. We keep our hands away from the fire. To those who think this only applies to individuals and not to matters of state, consider the case of the atomic bombing of Japan to end World War II in 1945. Two bombs, utter devastation, millions of lives, and arguably the fastest change of heart in history. Notwithstanding a few close calls, there have been no more nuclear explosions to resolve a crisis since then. Doubters say it is too early to be smug, but 80 years is a long time, and it is comforting to reflect that the four or five nations who have made themselves members of the nuclear club since then, and very much against the wishes of everyone else at the time, have all gone on to be as careful with their dangerous property as the founders.

More to the point about ditching history as a key learning subject is the charge that it isn't true anyway. It is a charge not always easily defeated, for while it is clear that most of what we are told took place actually did indeed happen, the history of it is subject to nuance and various interpretations. Revisionists are having a field day without having to resort to basic untruths. Activists of many causes have learned they can weaponise the past. It used to be that history was written by the winners; now it can be written – or re-written – by whoever has the biggest following. Even as we chew this topic over, there is a growing belief among the young and idealistic that history should do its bit to improve the world. In other words, it is perfectly fine to engineer the narrative of the past provided it is in the interests of improving the future. To their credit, they – and most revisionists these days – are well motivated; their desire is to even things up in the world, to make all beings equal, to give everyone the same chance, and to increase the worldwide sum of happiness, contentment, and therefore peace. Long-time students might scoff and say it has never been successful before, that history is by definition the record of man's inhumanity to man, and that most manipulation of it has been in the clear and present interest of those doing the manipulating.

Historians and antiquarians, not to mention archaeologists and idle academics, have a lot of fun digging up the jiggery-pokery of the past, which happens usually to make good reading. Take for example the revelation that the Roman emperor

Caracalla murdered his brother Geta and then tried to wipe away all evidence that he had ever existed. Sharp-eyed historians were able to revive the true story after noticing inept alterations to a painting that had once obviously shown Septimus Severus and his whole family, including Geta. The past abounds with tales like that, and it seems the truth is always destined to come to light. Which, if it be indeed the case, rather foils the plans of the wicked story benders.

In the meantime, it is overwhelmingly the case that despite all objections and all efforts to amend it, history is far too interesting to be abandoned. If you are looking for love, humour, tragedy, drama or even mystery, history is where you will find it.

Perhaps the real issue should be to investigate the way the subject is taught and comes across to our children. How could we capitalise on the fact that interest in history usually matures with age, and that what bores children can fascinate adults? A suggestion doing the rounds offers the idea that the subject should be dealt with very briefly for the first six or seven years of school life – in the form, perhaps, of bullet-point instruction – and then allowed to flower into full blossom only when teenage interests are doing the same. It is an idea, something positive, but there is another one that says, “If it isn’t broken, don’t fix it.”