

Presentation to QIY October 19th 2024 Racial Justice Group

My theme today is Eurocentric history. Much of the history taught in schools is concerned with British and European history, rather than the history of the wider world. When I was at school, other parts of the world were studied in the context of the British Empire and the United States, rather than, for example, the indigenous cultures of the Americas or sub-Saharan Africa.

What were you taught in History at school? I remember medieval kings at Juniors, then at secondary leading up to O Level 19thc British history and 20thc European history. At A level I studied 18th and 19thc British political history and Europe of the Dictators: the Russian Revolution, Mussolini and Hitler. I then studied history in my first year at University, Medieval Europe and Warfare and Society in the 20thc. It was at university that I was introduced to medieval archaeology as part of my geography degree. This I found very motivating, but it was British archaeology. There is of course nothing wrong with any of this. My strong interest in my adult years is British Archaeology and Landscape History. I am now completing my PhD thesis on the early medieval landscape of the Isle of Wight. Not much scope for studying overseas developments there!

What of the school History curriculum now? A glance at the statutory guidance on DfE websites will provide an overview of National Curriculum History:

In KS1 ('Infants') should be taught about

- changes in living memory
- events beyond living memory that are significant nationally or globally
- the lives of significant individuals in the past who have contributed to national or international achievements
- and significant historical events in their own locality.

In KS2 ('Juniors') should be taught about

- changes in Britain from the Stone Age to the Iron Age
- the Roman Empire and its impact on Britain
- Britain's settlement by Anglo-Saxons and Scots
- the Viking and Anglo-Saxon struggle for the Kingdom of England to the time of Edward the Confessor
- a local history study; a study of an aspect or theme in British history that extends pupils' chronological knowledge beyond 1066
- the achievements of the earliest civilizations
- Ancient Greece
- and finally studying a non-European society that provides contrasts with British history.

In KS3 (11-14):

- the development of Church, state and society in Medieval Britain 1066-1509
- the development of Church, state and society in Britain 1509-1745
- ideas, political power, industry and empire: Britain, 1745-1901
- challenges for Britain, Europe and the wider world, 1901 to the present day
- a local history study
- the study of an aspect or theme in British history that consolidates and extends pupils' chronological knowledge from before 1066
- at least one study of a significant society or issue in world history and its interconnections with other world developments

For GCSE history is taught from three eras:

- Medieval (500-1500)
- Early Modern (1450-1750)
- Modern (1700-present day)

British history must form a minimum of 40% of the assessed content over the full course but the guidance does specify that the non-British element must not merely study British overseas involvement.

For A and AS level (the latter at age 17) the specifications require the study of the history of more than one country or state, including one outside the British Isles but a substantial (minimum of 20%) and coherent element of British history and/or the history of England, Scotland, Ireland or Wales.

As we have seen, British history forms a substantial part of today's curriculum. The guidance cited above was published over 10 years ago. Whilst it is important to know about our own history, there is much scope to broaden the curriculum and to study non-traditional perspectives.

The study of history and the teaching of history can be 'decolonised'. What does this mean? One definition is by Su Lin Lewis:

- The process of 'decolonizing history' is broadly about making historians aware of and committed to addressing the disproportionate focus on Eurocentric history in the profession, and attuned to the structures of power underlying this.

I have unashamedly got my information about decolonising the history curriculum from the internet, as it is a new concept for me. The following has been gleaned from this source.

Decolonising history is about:

1. *Breaking down the 'natural order' of current (historical) hegemony*

- History has and continues to be a powerful force in European society. Traditional national narratives may ignore or not fully address the history and lived experiences of colonised people. Critically questioning what stories are left out and why helps to dismantle systems that can privilege some groups over others.

2. *Allowing for greater critical thinking*

- A decolonised history curriculum, beginning from younger ages, can improve discourse at higher levels. Often 'challenging' or 'sensitive' topics relating to colonial history are left out of the curriculum for younger students. However, without a baseline knowledge, such important topics cannot be properly interrogated at secondary or post-secondary levels.

and 3. *History skills building*

- A key component of a decolonised history curriculum is questioning how history is formed and taught in the first place. This offers an excellent setting for students to engage critically with history as a discipline, and gain skills in history methodology and practice.

Although my passion is British landscape history, my favourite magazine is *British Archaeology*, and my favourite TV programme is Alice Roberts' *Digging for Britain*, I think that it is very important that history is seen as far more than the story of these isles and our continental neighbours. A book that I found particularly stimulating, after hearing some of it on Radio 4, is *An African History of Africa: From the Dawn of Humanity to Independence*. This is written by Zainab Badawi who is director of the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. It was only on reading this book that I fully realised how much our perception of African history is through the lens of what we learned about the British Empire at school. Here is a book to counteract this, with chapters on a wide range of African civilisations. As it says on the blurb on the back 'Everyone is originally from Africa, and this book is therefore for everyone'.

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