

## HISTORY FOR OUR TIME

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*In the Waldorf School, children begin the study of history with the earliest traditions of representative major cultures. The young part of history is the history most congenial to youngsters. It is somewhat unfortunate that this youngest part should have been given the name of ancient history. This name often prevents educators from realizing that while the origins of culture may be far away in time, they are nearest at hand in interest for children.*

*For our children history begins with the dramatic, pictorial, spiritually saturate myths that nourished the antiquity of all cultures. It progresses from them down to and through history proper. Thus between the ages of nine and fourteen the children make their first progressive survey of world history, from its mythological origins down to modern times.*

*Two features of this treatment of history are characteristic: 1) The sequence is not from the contemporary scene backwards into history, but vice versa. 2) The traditional myths of early time are taken seriously as a starting point for study of the origin of man. Each of these features deserves comment, in that each represents a marked divergence from prevailing educational practice. \**

From time to time we hear the questions from those who are less familiar with Waldorf Education, "Why isn't there more teaching of American history in the elementary grades?" "Why don't the children learn about their country?" "Isn't that the most important thing for them to learn in this modern age?" One, of course, must give serious consideration to such a question, for children growing up in the United States ought to know its heritage, its history, its heroes, its legends - and yet a further question may be raised, "Can there really be any deep understanding, can there be a meaningful appreciation of the United States in its proper place and in the perspective of world history?"

All class teachers are concerned with giving their children a feeling for American heroes. Often stories are told about great figures, both legendary and real, who have played an important part in the United States. The birthdays of the various presidents and other great figures offer a welcome opportunity. Legends of people like Pecos Bill and Johnny Appleseed offer a wide scope for exciting and interesting stories where much of American history may also be transmitted.

Further, in the study of Geography, which in the fourth grade begins with the area nearest home and gradually, in fifth and in sixth, expands in ever wider circles to the state, country, continent and to the Western Hemisphere, there is ample opportunity to cover main historical personalities and events which help to give the child a feeling of his national heritage.

In a real way the growth and development of children recapitulate the history of civilization. Many teachers who have had the privilege of taking classes through the grades can attest to the fact that children in a natural way absorb, at about their 10th year, the study of Greece very deeply and in their 11th or 12th year, the study of Rome. It is at this age of 11 or 12 that the children begin to look upon the world in a conscious, intellectual, almost adult way. Certainly they do not have the reactions of adults, but their perceptions of the world are becoming accurate and questioning. In the sixth grade there have been many discussions brought about by the children's questioning and

wondering about the world they see around them. Why is there war? Who is right? Should there be civil rights? Disorders? What is wrong with society? What about drinking, smoking and the use of drugs? These questions truly have penetrated the children of our age. And although, in a certain sense, they are too young to deal with them maturely, they have the sense of rightness and wrongness and are looking to adults for answers and guidance. They want the truth. They want explanations that will give them an understanding of this world into which they are growing. They see themselves still as children but with the realization that it will be not many years until they will be taking their place as young adults. In fact, it is, from the 12th year on, only half again as many years as they have already lived until they will be eligible to serve in the Armed Forces. Then they will be undertaking the responsibility of serving their country with their lives.

The children look for models to emulate. Hopefully they can find great people in the world to admire, to want to live up to. In the study of history they can find true-life situations and witness events from which they may learn about today.

In the study of Roman history in sixth grade, we started out with the mythological founding of Rome. This was connected to our studies in fifth grade via the Aeneid. In a sense the fall of Troy was recapitulated, as were the wanderings of Odysseus and then the founding of Rome. From here we went to a study of the Seven Kings of Rome. Beginning with Romulus, each king was portrayed in his distinctive personality, each having a particular mission. One was to expand Rome, another was to make peace, another was to unify some of the tribes living near Rome, and another took on the building of the city itself into a rich architectural experience. One was evil, one was just, and so on. Then comes the end of the kingdom and the beginning of the Republic; a bit later, the tremendous story of Camillus and how he would rather be banished than do what he thinks wrong for Rome: he returns to Rome to save it from the Gauls, who have already sacked and besieged the city and are now ready to strike the final death blow. Camillus becomes the dictator of Rome, not for his own personal gain but to guide the rebuilding of Rome. He refounds Rome with the very staff that had been used by Romulus. He serves Rome, and at his death the Republic continues in a strengthened way. All through the narration of the history of the Republic there are stories of personalities, each of whom does some great deed to help Rome: Cincinnatus leaving his plow, leaving his farm, leaving his peaceful life to take up the sword and lead the armies of Rome to victory. Horatius, Captain in the Roman army who in order to save Rome, single-handedly defends the approach to the bridge over the Tiber River while his comrades destroy it so that the advancing armies may be kept back. Caius Mucius, who to show the bravery of a Roman, puts his hand into a burning torch and lets it burn, not uttering a sound. Titus Manlius, who has his own son put to death for disobeying the laws of Rome. All of these figures, and many more, come before the children in a dramatic way to illustrate what true patriotism can be, what a respect for the law can be, what sacrifice can be. These men are not great and brilliant figures. Many of them, in fact, are rather narrow figures but in the moment, in a particular situation, they have risen to meet the role that has been given them.

With the history of the Punic Wars comes another figure — Hannibal. The children, up to this point, have sympathized always with the Romans, but now they can't help being in complete sympathy with Hannibal, for here is truly a hero. He has military genius, great bravery, a dashing and flamboyant style. Here is a man with individual brilliance who is able to lead and inspire the Carthaginian army and to exist in Italy for so many years right on the doorstep of Rome. There is no individual Roman who can stand up to him, and yet in the end he is defeated by Rome. The children take this lesson deeply, for his defeat came about through lack of support from his own country. Carthage was not willing to supply the army of Hannibal. It was not willing to send more men. It was not willing to sacrifice enough for a final victory and so Carthage went down to defeat; the great personality of Hannibal could not survive without the unselfish support of his own people.

With the defeat of Carthage in the second Punic War, and then the eventual subjugation of Greece and the East to Roman rule, the great wealth that flowed into Rome had many effects. True, Rome was ruler of the world, but she had paid a dear price! Moral decay had set in. What a dramatic

contrast can be presented between the Rome of 133 B.C. and the Rome of 240 B.C.! Rome during the first Punic War succeeded in defeating Carthage because in the end, when the Roman treasury was empty and Rome was on the verge of losing this long war, it was the very people of Rome, who out of their own free will contributed the money, the labor and the materials to build a new fleet of 200 ships which struck the final blow of the war. What a far cry from the Roman generals, senators and most of the patricians who were now milking Rome and the provinces for their own private gain! What a contrast between Regulus, who was willing to return to Carthage as a prisoner to certain death to uphold his honor, and Pompey, who returned from his campaigns in the East with a personal fortune of something approaching 20 million dollars, or Crassus, who became one of the richest men in Rome by buying up land and selling it to the state at ten times its value. With this story of corruption, greed, and wealth attained at the expense of the plebians, of the provinces and of the government itself, we see a great turning point in history. A figure such as Marcus Cato the Censor appears - he who fought valiantly but for a losing cause, who tried to stem the tide of the Hellenic influence and who tried desperately to bring honesty back to government. The contrasts are there in abundance and the children can see great figures on all sides. Figures of brilliance, such as Pompey or Sulla or of even greater brilliance ---Julius Caesar. Yet what is it that follows or accompanies this great individual brilliance? It is also a general corruption, a general death of morality and finally a dramatic loss of individual and civil freedom. The choice is made by 30 B.C. and Octavius begins a line of Emperors that stretches far into history. To gain security the early Greco-Roman ideal of democracy is buried for the next eighteen hundred years.

At this time there takes place the great event of Christianity, which plants the seed of true individual freedom for the future. To learn of the early Christian martyrs, who could stand up to the might of Rome, is to realize that the individual can pit himself against the state. In death the Christians were victorious. These experiences, along with the stories of some of the famous emperors, such as Nero, Diocletian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius and Constantine are rich material and provide in a clear, dramatic and objective way striking pictures of many aspects of human nature. In this way history begins to assume the role, not only of the narrator of events long past, but of a mirror of the inner development of mankind. The facts are there to be acquired during the process of education. Are we to stop at names and dates, or are we to open the doors of understanding to the young people before us? The answer seems obvious, but to a Waldorf teacher it is of crucial importance. Thus in the sixth grade with the children awakening to the world around them, we do not study, as a major theme, the contemporary scene. Rather, we give a rich foundation on which these young people will be able to grow.

\* From an article on the teaching of history by John F. Gardner in "Education As an Art", Autumn, 1954.