What does it mean to build powerful historical knowledge? Critical reflections on the aims and nature of school history.[1]

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I.

1.   Hereward the Wake was a good ruler over a country. He was ruler over the English people. He was born in the year 1076. He died in the year 1381.

Thomas à Becket was quite a little boy when he became king. He was a good little king. He was born in the year 1080, and he died in the year 1400.

Jack Cade was a good ruler and a good man. He was born in the year 1090, and he fought a great rebellion which was called Jack Cade's rebellion. He died in the year 1100 after many happy years.

2.   The result of the Norman Conquest was very bad. The Normans won the English at a battle near Newbury. The battle was fought by the Normans in the year 1112.

3.   The Magna Charta was a document which had to be signed by King John which was called the Great Charter. It was signed by King John because the Pope wanted King John to sign the document. It was passed in the year 1340. It was a great document. King John was a good king and a good man; he died in the year 1400 . . .

This passage, which continues on for a further five paragraphs not quoted here, is from Maurice Keatinge's pioneering *Studies in the Teaching of History* (Keatinge, 1913, pp. 108–109). It reports the answers to questions about 'historical characters and events' given by 'Muriel Howard', a 14-year-old English girl, 'educated in a secondary school', which, Keatinge noted, enjoyed funding from local taxation 'and from the State, as well as the privilege of State inspection' (Keatinge, 1913, p. 108).

I start with 'Muriel' in order to explore some of the challenges that arise in developing children's historical knowledge and understanding and also to underline the fact that these challenges are perennial and persistent – symptoms of the inherent difficulty of the task, rather than, as is often suggested, local and contingent difficulties arising solely from the erroneous framing of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.[2]

Muriel is now, of course, long dead. We can learn a good deal, nevertheless, from her errors. Muriel's answers are inaccurate – often wildly so – and exemplify a 'problem' with history education outcomes that has been identified again, again and again. Like Professor Matthews's accountancy students, *dramatis personae* in numerous political speeches in recent years in England, Muriel simply does not know the things that she 'should' know (Matthews, 2009).[3] Muriel clearly also is 'not good at establishing . . . chronology', to deploy another familiar *topos* (Ofsted, 2007, p. 4): what belongs apart –

Hereward the Wake and King John, for example – comes together in Muriel's writing, which was, it would seem, chrono-illogical to a remarkable degree.

Focusing on factual deficit and chronological lack scarcely begins to scope the dimensions of Muriel's history problem. Muriel's weak grasp of substantive political and anthropological concepts (Carretero and Lee, 2014) adds a further dimension to her difficulties: for Muriel, 'kings' lead 'rebellions' and die at the age of ten, having lived for 'many happy years'. In addition, the persons, events and occurrences in Muriel's text are all equally interchangeable. There is no sense of context, in her writing, or of the embedding of the historical figures that she discusses in the particularities of time or place: all exist in a flat narrative space redolent of the folk or fairy tale. There is still more to Muriel's difficulties, however, and, like those of many other children, they are a matter of presence as much as of absence: Muriel's answers have *form*. As Keatinge observes:

> Everything that has been placed before her is epic . . . For her nothing that is common or mean exists . . . All the kings, queens, or other personages, whether they bear their own names or those of other people, whether they live for ten years or for two hundred years, are 'good' men and 'good' women; all the battles and documents are 'great'. (Keatinge, 1913, p. 109)

Even if all Muriel's 'facts', chronological grasp and understandings of substantive political and anthropological concepts were unimpeachable and embedded in historical context, she would still be ignorant of the ways in which something that we might recognize as history is organized at a 'second-order' or structural level and at a textual level.[4] For Muriel, history is structured as chronicle (Burrow, 2009) in which disconnected moments in a nation's political history succeed each other as a series – in sequence but mostly without *con*sequence or intelligible *structural* interconnection. At the level of the moments themselves, unity is a matter of subject (the personage who

occurs in each sentence) rather than episode, in the majority of cases, and structure a matter of predication ('was a good king', 'was quite a little boy') rather than narration. Muriel's text is rich in the language of 'appraisal' (Coffin, 2006a), however, it is entirely lacking in reasoning. Muriel's evaluations are pronouncements, or statements of received opinion, not reasoned historical judgements, and where the language of explanation is present (there is one 'because' in the 195 words quoted) it is used rather than grounded.[5]

II.

Muriel is, as we have said, long dead. The problems dramatized by her case persist, however – in repeated complaints, around the world, about the ignorance of the young who are described, again and again, as not knowing their history, a lack that is often held to be an existential threat to nations and political communities (Wineburg, 2018, pp.11-30). The history that young people are often claimed not to know is valued for a wide range of reasons, for example:

- Because it provides a 'heritage' that is held to help fix and secure political and other identities and communities (Lowenthal, 1998; Wertsch, 2002); or

- Because it is held to provide a set of competencies and orientations that are held to help citizens deal with problems of time and change and to help them act reflectively in their presents (Tosh, 2008).

Many other arguments are frequently offered, drawing on the diverse range of ways in which knowledge and understanding of the past can be function materially, aesthetically and cognitively (Paul, 2015). A key argument draws on ideas advanced by Michael Young about the power that disciplined forms of knowledge embodied in subjects such

as history can have. For Young, disciplines produce powerful knowledge because they provide tools that enable those who have mastery of them to "understand and interpret the world" and, thus, "as adults" to "understand cooperate and shape the world together" (Young and Muller, 2016, p.150). Muriel's understanding of history was clearly a long way from providing her with representations and tools of this nature. What forms must historical knowledge take if it is to be capable of empowering students to think and act on the world in effective ways?

<center>III.</center>

If we focus on what children might know and on knowledge contents alone, we can analyse knowledge into a number of analytically distinct levels:

- We can speak of knowing and understanding singular factual propositions (such as the proposition that 'Gavrilo Princip… pulled out a gun and shot at Franz Ferdinand, hitting him in the jugular vein') or collections of such propositions about aspects of the past.[6]

- We can also speak of knowledge and understanding at a qualitatively different level - the level of conceptualisation (as, for example, in 'The assassination… was critical in setting off the chain of events that led to the First World War').[7]

Some knowledge and understanding of both the factual and the conceptual is necessary to historical literacy since connecting together sequences of propositions about the past involves making conceptual connections (attributing causal links, measuring change, assessing significance, and so on).[8] Conceptual knowledge and understanding can itself be differentiated into at least four aspects:

1. Knowledge and understanding of general substantive concepts ('assassination') that serve to categorize events and developments and states of affairs in various ways;

2. Knowledge and understanding of specific substantive historical concepts used by people in a particular historical period (e.g. 'The Austro-Hungarian Empire');

3. Knowledge and understanding of domain specific procedural concepts, for example, historical causation (as in a 'chain of events that led to') that enable historical questions to be asked and answered; and

4. Knowledge and understanding of historical 'colligation', through which particulars are organised into larger wholes that serve to designate and model large-scale historical phenomena (such as 'the First World War').[9]

Knowledge and understanding can also be considered at various levels of resolution. We can distinguish between 'zoomed in' narrative comprehension that might be evidenced by the ability to 'tell' a human-scale story coherently, and comprehension that 'zooms out' from historical particulars to explore patterns of causality and change over generational timescales and at higher levels of abstraction (e.g. the histories of nations rather than of individuals). 'Zooming out' entails knowing how to use concepts to organise historical particulars ('the Arch-Duke') into higher level abstractions ('the Austro-Hungarian monarchy'). Higher level abstractions, such as the concept 'revolution', enable comparisons to be made between different contexts and episodes in history.

Comprehension, at these differing levels of resolution, can also be understood in terms of differing degrees of comprehensiveness – one might be able to include relevant details about one or about a number of dimensions of a narrative, one might be able to

use this information to answer one question only or a number of questions, one might be able to use this information to answer questions of one type (e.g. 'Why?' questions) or of many types (such as 'What?', 'Why?', 'How? And 'So what?' questions), and so on. Comprehension can also be differentiated by degrees of reflexivity or meta-cognition.

III.

Muriel's difficulties are, of course, of their time in important senses. Ideas about what history is and about what school history should be have changed a very great deal in the last hundred years (Cannadine, Keating and Sheldon, 2011). Although some of our politicians might prefer it this way, school history is no longer typically understood as a 'monumental' narrative (Nietzsche, 1983), asserting and celebrating the achievements of past actors (Conway, 2005), transmitted to 'children sitting in rows, learning the kings and queens of England' (Faulkner, 2010).

What seems most clearly to be lacking in Muriel's knowledge and understanding of history is not, however, simply a matter of poor factual grasp of the facts and events of the past and of modelling history stories on fair stories and myths. It seems very clear, that Muriel's experience of history lacked key defining components of history as an enquiry and a critical exploration of the past. Keatinge's argument was that Muriel, who he conceded was 'no doubt an extreme case', illustrated what could happen if 'the critical stage' in secondary education was postponed for too long (Keatinge, 1913, p. 110). Keatinge argued that:

> It is only if thought-compelling exercises can be devised that history is worth treating as a serious school subject and, it may now be added, it is only if this formal element be there that history can be of real value as moral training. (Keatinge, 1913, p. 110)

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Keatinge's *Studies in the Teaching of History* – and extensive subsequent work in textbook production lasting over twenty years – was a sustained attempt to work out what school history might look like if it took history seriously *as a discipline* and a *mode of knowledge production* and aimed to develop children's knowledge *and* understanding of the past, their motivation to know and learn about the past and their ability to think about history in intellectually engaged ways (Chapman, 2014). Over the last forty years, and more, a nationally and internationally influential tradition has developed in the England that aims to achieve precisely these aims by understanding school history education as an education in a 'form of knowledge' or 'discipline'.[10] This tradition was inspired more by Jerome Bruner's argument that it was possible to for school 'subjects' to express the epistemological structure and logic of the academic subjects on which they were modelled in authentic ways and at an age-appropriate level of complexity (Bruner, 1966, p. 72; 1996, p. 19; Rogers, 1979; Chapman, 2010), and/or by Paul Hirst's arguments about 'forms of knowledge' as tools for curriculum organization (Hirst, 1974; Shemilt, 1983), than it was by the work of thinkers like Keatinge. The model has proved internationally influential and helped to shape thinking about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in the United States (Donovan, Bransford and Pellegrino, 1999; Wineburg, 2001, 2007; Donovan and Branford, 2005), in Canada (Lévesque, 2008; Seixas and Morton, 2013), in Australia (Taylor and Young, 2003; Parkes and Donnelly, 2014) and elsewhere (Nakou and Barca, 2010).

For this tradition, learning history involves acquiring knowledge and understanding of the past – 'first-order' or substantive knowledge of the past and of concepts essential to its comprehension and 'second-order' or structural knowledge and understanding of how history works as a form of knowing. The latter includes a grasp of the cognitive tools that are used to generate first-order knowledge (historical enquiry and

historical evidence) and of the cognitive tools that are used to organize and structure first-order knowledge and understanding in usable and intelligible ways (concepts such as change, cause, significance, and so on).

This distinction – between first- and second-order knowledge and understanding – does not map onto the overused distinction between 'knowledge' and 'skills', although it has often been understood in these ways both by critics (Cain and Chapman, 2014) and by some practitioners of the 'new history' (Lee, 2014). Second-order knowledge and understanding is not generic and not something that can be mastered merely by practice as skills can be; rather, second-order understandings are developed through reflection and through historical problem solving, processes essential to *knowledge building* and *knowledge organizing* more generally (Lee, 2005b).

The 'second-order' is not secondary – in the sense of being a mere supplement to 'primary' factual knowledge. It is better understood as *meta*historical knowledge and understanding – as knowledge and understanding *about* historical knowledge and understanding. Second-order knowledge and understanding is fundamental to the development of substantive knowledge in history above the level of isolated or aggregated 'facts': it helps both *to form* substantive knowledge (assisting in knowledge building) and gives substantive knowledge *form* (assisting in organizing and structuring substantive knowledge). To illustrate and exemplify:

- Without an understanding of the concepts of time and chronology (Blow, Lee and Shemilt, 2012) and change and continuity (Blow, 2011a), it is difficult and probably impossible to develop a *narrative* understanding of a series of discrete events *as* a *sequence* of events. Without some grasp of these concepts, it might be possible to develop understandings of isolated episodes, as Muriel perhaps did, but this is a knowledge of fragments only and not knowledge of coherent

narrative wholes. Sequences of events exist in time and colligating aspects of sequences into higher-order wholes (such a 'revolutions') entails temporal understandings with which to reflect on duration and alteration, aspects of change and continuity without which narratives are impossible, since without them there can be nothing to 'tell' (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983).

- Without an understanding of cause and effect, it is impossible to develop a coherent understanding of what makes events and developments events and developments *in a narrative*. Narrative requires 'plot' and causes and consequences are the ties that bind isolated 'story elements' together, *constituting them as a narrative* of which we can ask and answer questions such as 'Why did it happen?', 'What did that lead to?' and so on (Goldstein, 1976; Rimmon-Kenan, 1983).

- Without some understanding of what is an historical account, and of the range of different genres of historical writing and representation (Counsell, 2004b; Coffin, 2006a, 2006b; Chapman, 2011a), it is unlikely that students will develop competence and confidence in writing history – an essential tool for both the *expression* and the *integration* of knowledge fragments into intelligible wholes.

- Without some sense of the role of enquiry and evidence in the construction of historical knowledge (Collingwood, 1994), it is unlikely that students will develop a coherent sense of what it *is* that they are learning – of the *warrant* that differentiates 'fact' from myth or propaganda (Rogers, 1979) and of the degrees of certainty with which different kinds of historical claims can be held or advanced (McCullagh, 1984; Megill, 2007). Furthermore, without some understanding of historical epistemology, students will be unlikely to be able to

deal confidently with historical uncertainty when it arises in their study of the past, as it inevitably must, or with controversy and disagreement – both of which are necessary in history classrooms, if the debates through which historical knowledge develops are to be modelled and understood, and both of which are unavoidable in our contemporary present where contrasting claims about the past arise with great frequency (Lowenthal, 1985, 1998; Ankersmit, 1994; Wertsch, 2002).

IV.

Much of the labour of history teachers, curriculum developers and history education researchers working within the 'form of knowledge' tradition over the last forty years has been devoted to trying to understand how to integrate first- and second-order dimensions of historical learning organically so that both develop together, in cumulative and mutually enhancing ways, so as to enable historical knowing to be meaningfully realized in and through classroom practice (Lee, 2014). Whatever else it involves, building powerful knowledge in history involves complex content knowledge construction at differing levels of detail and organization – from the 'fact' to the 'colligation'. It also involves complex conceptual organisation at both first and second-order levels. Most importantly of all – and this is a precondition for orientation, of course – it involves the asking and answering of explicit questions, an aspect of historical thinking very clearly absent in the thinking of Muriel and many pupils like her for whom history remained and remains little more than story.

V. References

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1 This paper draws heavily on Chapman (2016) and Chapman and Hale (2017).

2 Wineburg (2001 and 2018) has shown that the 'discovery' (and rediscovery) of the alarming ignorance of the young has been a perennial theme in North American education over the last 100 years. The scenario is the same in England too (see Field, 2009 and Matthews, 2009 for examples). It seems probable that in the England, as in the USA, the one continuity for which we have compelling evidence is continuity in an adult tendency to diagnose and lament the ignorance of the young and to posit it as a new and alarming development (see Lee, 2011b, pp. 141–143 for a fuller discussion of these issues).

3 The influence on English policymakers of this polemical, non-peer-reviewed and self-published pamphlet, in the period 2009–2014 was, to say the least, remarkable (Haydn, 2011a).

4 For an outline of the 'first' and 'second-order' distinction, which has become increasingly widespread in the last decade in British history education, see Lee (2005b).

5 In Coffin's terms, Muriel is writing in one of the simplest of history's 'recording genres', the biographical 'recount', which consists of 'orientation, record of events (evaluation of person) (Coffin, 2006b, p. 418).

6 BBC. *GCSE Bitesize, History.*

7 Ibid.

8 The discussion in this section depends upon, inter alia, Lee. 'Putting principles into practice', Lévesque. *Thinking Historically,* Seixas. 'A Model of Historical Thinking' and van Drie and van Boxtel. 'Historical Reasoning'.

9 Walsh, *Colligatory Concepts in History*; and Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy.*

10 See Lee (2014) for a review of this tradition and its achievements.