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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The History Teacher*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Nov., 1985), pp. 111-121

Published by: [Society for History Education](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/493618>

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# Carl Becker's Modern History: New Roads Barely Trodden

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**H**IGH SCHOOL STUDENTS know that the textbook is the most important teaching tool in the history classroom. It is handed out on the first day, collected on the last, and used regularly throughout the year for homework assignments, class discussions, and tests.

Given its importance, why are most history textbooks for secondary school students so awful? Why are they written in flat and formulaic prose? Why are they stitched-together compendiums of names, dates, and events, ignoring broader meaning? What has happened to Carl Becker's vision of history for the high school beginner?

And Carl Becker did have a clear vision. In the preface to *Modern History*, published in 1931, he wrote that his text would intentionally "omit a great many events, and even...say very little or nothing about some countries, so that there would be space enough to describe with some fullness of detail the events and people he [did] describe."<sup>1</sup> Becker pared content and coverage to make those "Few [selected] events and...people...seem real and perhaps even more interesting."<sup>2</sup> He hoped thereby to extend his readers' personal memories, enabling them to "intelligently anticipate what [was] likely to occur during the years to come."<sup>3</sup>

*Modern History* is in print. Kenneth Cooper has updated some sections for the 1984 edition and has written new materials for the post World War I period. The bulk of the book, three quarters of it, however, is Becker's. It is a classic in the field, a secondary school history textbook *sui generis*.

As proof, compare two treatments of the same thing — Danton's and Robespierre's roles at the end of the Reign of Terror. One is from Becker's text; the other from a widely used and representative high school text. In examining both selections, consider the usefulness of each in (A) teaching history, and (B) helping students develop academic skills.

As a secondary school history teacher, I am ever mindful of the setting for which Becker intended his text's use — the classroom — and the audience he had in mind. Thus, I am evaluating how *Modern History* can be used to teach students some history, i.e., content, methodology, and interpretation, and to help them develop the academic competencies of reading, reasoning, writing, and speaking — the skills necessary for more advanced study in all fields of knowledge and for successful college work. Becker writes:

In the spring of 1794, Danton felt that the Reign of Terror had accomplished its purpose and should be relaxed. But Robespierre became ever more fanatical; he accused Danton of disloyalty to the revolution, and Danton and his followers were executed. As he mounted the scaffold, Danton is reported to have said, "Show my head to the people; they do not see the like every day."

For a hundred days, Robespierre ruled with an iron hand, carrying out a policy of suppression that aroused fear even among his supporters. Finally, the members of the Convention called a halt. In July 1794, Robespierre himself was arrested and then guillotined. The Reign of Terror was ended. The moderates, or what remained of the, were again in control. (Anatole G. Mazour and John M. Peoples, *Men and Nations*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1968, p. 412.)

One day in January, 1794, a delegation of weeping women came to the Convention, begging the release of their relatives from prison. At that time the danger from the Coalition armies was largely over, and many people felt therefore that the time had come to relax the severity of the Terror. Danton was one of them. "I had rather be guillotined," he said on one occasion, "than guillotine others."

When Danton lifted his powerful voice in favor of mercy, the Committee became alarmed, as well it might. If public opinion turned against the Terror, those who were chiefly responsible for it would be the first victims. None knew this better than Robespierre and his friends. To save themselves they charged Danton with being concerned in a Royalist plot to restore the monarchy.

Danton made no serious effort to save himself. Advised by a friend to escape from France, he made the famous reply: "Does a man carry his country away with him on the soles of his shoes?" Early in April, 1794, he was brought to trial and condemned to death. He was proud and

contemptuous to the last. Passing Robespierre's house on the way to the guillotine, he stood in the tumbrel and shouted: "Vile Robespierre! The scaffold claims you, too. You will follow me."

The prophecy proved a true one; but for three months Robespierre was the outstanding figure in the Convention and on the Committee of Safety. Robespierre was an austere and fastidious man, secretive and self-contained. Few people liked him, but many admired him, and the mass of the people had confidence in his integrity and patriotism. He lived a simple, laborious, and blameless life. Many revolutionary leaders, including Danton, were charged, and rightly charged, with using their influence to make money. Robespierre never was. He was known as "the Virtuous," "the Incorruptible."

Besides, he was a master of platitudes. His long-winded speeches were filled with phrases about liberty, humanity, virtue—words which people liked to hear. These phrases he voiced with a fervor and solemnity which made people think of the Revolution as something sacred—something for which life itself was a small sacrifice.

Robespierre is something of an enigma, and a furious battle of the books has been fought over him. Some writers maintain that he was a sincere patriot and humanitarian who suffered martyrdom in the vain effort to bring about a social revolution in behalf of the mass of the people. Others maintain that he was no more than a sinister intriguer who crushed his enemies in order to gratify his love of power. Perhaps he was a little of both, since good and evil are strangely blended in the human heart. We may think of him as a sincere fanatic who believed that the Revolution was destined to regenerate France, and all mankind, by making all men virtuous.

But perhaps he was also, without knowing it, a vain and ambitious man who convinced himself that he and his devoted followers were the only virtuous ones. The Revolution would therefore, in his opinion, be a failure unless these virtuous ones gained control and used their power to destroy the immoral and the corrupt. It was apparently Robespierre's idea that the Terror which had been organized to defend the Revolution against foreign enemies, should be continued in order to establish in France a "Reign of Virtue." "Without Terror," he said, "Virtue is helpless." Again he said: "A man is guilty against the republic if he takes pity on prisoners; he is guilty if he does not believe in virtue; he is guilty if he is opposed to the Terror." (Carl L. Becker, *Modern History*. Morristown, N.J.: Silver Burdett Company, 1958, pp. 249-51.)

Briefly, the selection by Mazour and Peoples is a succinct morality tale, like a modern Western. Danton is good; Robespierre, bad. Evil succumbs to the forces of moderation upon Robespierre's execution. Meanwhile, Danton's exit provides a stunning public spectacle as he urges the axman to "show my head to the people [since] they do not see the like every day."

Becker's passage is longer. How? Why?

First, Becker sets Danton's opposition to the Terror alongside the weeping women's delegation to the Convention and the victories of the French army in the field. Then, Becker portrays a life-like Danton. He emerges as a sobered-up-pacifist ("I had rather be guillotined than guillotine others"), somewhat weary of the whole business, and indifferent to saving himself. Still, he remains bound to the fortunes of France ("Does a man carry his country away with him on the soles of his shoes?"), and violently bitter toward his former ally Robespierre ("Vile Robespierre! The scaffolds claims you, too.")

Becker's portrait of Robespierre is similarly well-defined, and psychologically complex, like a Rembrandt portrait. "Robespierre is something of an enigma," Becker writes, "and a furious battle of the books has been fought over him." Becker adds to the debate and tries to balance opposing views of the man. The reading passage has enough substance — narrative detail, historiography, primary source quotes, and interpretation—to enable students to debate which man was the greater patriot, and to role-play an imaginary meeting between the two men arguing over the meaning of virtue. Students could practice their writing and reasoning skills in an essay asking them to assess the validity of Becker's description of Robespierre as a "sincere fanatic" in the light of the quoted passage and subsequent others on Robespierre's religious policies and acceleration of the Terror.

Lastly, in class discussion students might comment on Becker's view that "good and evil are strangely blended in the human heart" as an inborn characteristic or a conditioned one. They might also be asked whether historians should express such philosophical views in their writings. The question posed would be: What is history, anyway? A science? A humanities discipline? Both?

In comparing the two passages, I have suggested some ways to use Becker's text for teaching history and promoting the development of thinking, speaking, listening, and writing skills in the classroom. According to the College Board, "these competencies are interrelated to and interdependent with the Basic Academic Subjects....(and) the outcomes of learning and intellectual discourse," as well as being essential preparation for college.<sup>4</sup> The title of my paper, *New Roads Barely Trodden* was chosen to emphasize the utility of Becker's text as a *bona fide* teaching tool rather than as a dictionary or a reference source.

Patently, Becker took student's minds seriously. He neither impoverished his language nor monotonized his writing style to ease their reading and thinking tasks. He used sophisticated vocabulary. In the included reading passage one finds *austere*, *fastidious*,

*platitudes, enigma, and martyrdom.* On other pages appear *trenchant, acumen, scurrilous, cajoleries, supercilious, and blandishments.* Becker refused to talk down to students. He encouraged them to “stretch up,” to become historically conscious and literate.

His text presents a coherent picture of post-Renaissance European history. Although the narrative is selective in scope and coverage, political, diplomatic, economic, intellectual, social, and cultural history are woven into the account. (See Appendix for his Table of Contents). A brief introductory chapter highlights the distinctive contours of the classical, medieval, and early modern periods. The text then properly begins with the seventeenth century *Age of Kings and Nobles*. Although this major section, one of three, emphasizes the political and diplomatic events in western and eastern Europe, a separate chapter on the French people is included. In it, Becker defines the “social ladder” and describes in rich detail the life and beliefs of the ordinary people, in particular, Jacques Bonhomme, a typical peasant. “We need a clear picture of ‘the people,’ ” writes Becker, and he elaborates on the social class structure of eighteenth-century France as an example of European society in the Age of Kings and Nobles.

The two other major sections of the book are *The Age of Political Revolution* and *The Age of Industrial Revolution*. Again, the essential framework is political and economic with chapters on the revolutions of 1848, the unifications of Italy and Germany, late nineteenth-century imperialism and World War I, among others; yet intellectual and cultural history infuse the text. And the entire work builds upon the subtitle of *Modern History: The Rise of a Democratic, Scientific, and Industrialized Civilization*.

More exactly, the underlying theme of the text is the development of democratic liberalism. Becker points to its emergence in the late nineteenth century. “One marked characteristic,” he notes of the effect of Marxism on public thought, “[was] the growth among all classes of people, of a *sense of social responsibility*.” He explains: <sup>5</sup>

What does this mean? It means something more than sympathy for the poor and oppressed. Humane sympathy is nothing new in the world; but formerly the relief of poverty was commonly left to the churches and to kind-hearted individuals. It was easy enough to give to a beggar, or for the churches or the government to provide homes for the aged and the infirm. “How grateful they must be,” people were apt to think. But perhaps they were mildly surprised or indignant if the beggar scowled at them while taking their money, or if the aged seemed not entirely happy in their scrubbed homes that smelled of soap or formaldehyde. The beggar might

very well ask: "Why am I, and not you, the beggar?" And those old people in the poorhouse thought: "Why is it that after working hard all our lives we have not enough to live on when we are old and helpless?"

Nor were the poor the only ones who began to think this way. Many other people, including some of the well to do, also began to say: "Perhaps it is the beggar's misfortune, rather than his fault, that he is a beggar. Perhaps it is the fault of society—of all of us—if the common man cannot earn enough to keep himself when he is old. Perhaps it is our business to *prevent* poverty rather than simply to *relieve* it. Perhaps it is the duty of governments, with all of modern scientific knowledge at their disposal, to devise laws which will abolish poverty by distributing the accumulated wealth of society more justly." Thus it happened that many educated and well-to-do people sympathized with the industrial workers. Some of them even accepted the doctrines of "scientific" socialism; but most of them preferred a less revolutionary doctrine.

And in explaining *a sense of social responsibility*, Becker defines the modern liberal perspective he undoubtedly hopes to inculcate in his readers. He also hoped to jar some of their Panglossian sensibilities of linear progress and widening comforts.

In a chapter on the industrial revolution, Becker catalogues the improvements which science and technology have brought to modern life, particularly in the fields of medicine and agriculture. But he also warns of the dehumanizing effects of industrialization: <sup>6</sup>

Machines enslave not merely the laborer but all of us. We are so delighted with all these new toys that we scarcely realize how they insensibly shape all our activities. It is probably a mistake to think that the machines, being indifferent, haven't a sense of humor. That is only because they order us about without words. If machines could speak, they might very well say something like this: "We save you much time and effort and so provide you with immense leisure to do as you like; in return for this boon we require only that you shall do more things, do them more quickly, and do them as far as possible in the same way." This is the great practical joke machines have played on us . . .

Not in factories only, but in the ordinary relations of life, the machine urges us to acquire more uniform habits. The more we are crowded together into cities and suburbs, the faster we move about; the more we use machines for business or pleasure the more need there is for uniformity of action.

Here it is apt to comment on the humanistic aspect so evident in Becker's writing. In the widely publicized 1980 report, *The Humanities in American Life*, the Commission charged to rethink the place of the humanities in our culture defined the humanities as "a spirit or an attitude [that] show[s] how the individual is autonomous

and at the same time bound, in the ligatures of language and history, to humankind across time and throughout the world.”<sup>7</sup> The Commission acknowledged that although “in questions of value each person is largely autonomous,” the able humanist, by posing problems and “analytical distinctions of a unique sort,” can point out the boundaries “beyond which civilized societies have agreed that human dignity is in peril.”<sup>8</sup>

Becker poses the problems and defines the boundaries of his text in the epigraphs he has selected for each chapter. One from Emerson’s “Things are in the saddle and ride mankind,” heads the chapter on the industrial revolution; another from the Declaration of the Rights of Man, “Liberty consists in the power to do anything that does not injure others,” announces the chapter on the French Revolution. And discussion of the late nineteenth-century scramble for the “backward countries,” juxtaposes two quotations: Kipling’s, “Take up the white man’s burden,” and Cecil Rhodes’s, “Philanthropy is all very well, but philanthropy plus five percent is a good deal better.”

Unhappily, I suspect that some teachers will shy away from the teaching demands which this book places on their skills to probe philosophical issues and orchestrate discussion in the classroom. Also, they may criticize the language of the text, claiming that it is too difficult for the “average” student. A counter argument would stress the utility of the text as a *teaching tool* since it exposes students to a literate, literary style. Vocabulary could be taught in context, rather than as a memory list. Further, historical events would be the matrix for examination of the perennial issues of power, human rights, scientific and technological impact on the quality of life, and cultural change through successive historical time frames. Teachers would have a contextual and philosophical richness to draw upon in constructing imaginative lessons.

It should be noted that teachers cannot expect to find much in the way of women’s history in the 1984 edition. Interestingly, the 1931 edition did include references to Mary Wollstonecraft and Condorcet as active supporters of social rights for women. It is unfortunate that women’s role was not strengthened in the revised edition.

But there are few such flaws. Becker dedicated his effort to all teachers “[endeavoring] to increase knowledge and promote wisdom.” Knowledge is easy to define; wisdom is more difficult. Yet Becker’s text exhibits wisdom in his grasp of the fortunes and follies of human experience.

Current writers of textbooks could profit by treading those paths that Becker traveled. Publishers should insist that they do. And the training and certification of secondary school history teachers should

include a practicum on teaching with Becker's text as a basis for constructing lessons. History in the high schools merits such reinvigoration.

## Notes

1. Carl Becker, *Modern History* (Morristown, New Jersey: Silver Burdett Company, 1958), p. vii. The 1958 edition condensed the events surrounding World War I and left the original text largely unchanged.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. vi.
4. *Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need to Know and Be Able to do* (New York: The College Board, 1983).
5. Ibid., pp. 539-40.
6. Ibid., pp. 519-20.
7. *The Humanities in American Life*, Report of the Commission on the Humanities (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).
8. Ibid., p. 18.

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