

MY TEACHERS AND HOW THEY TAUGHT ME:
A PERSONAL REFLECTION ABOUT PEDAGOGICAL EVOLUTIONS

While I cannot remember that it happened, I know without doubt that it did happen. On 3 May 1956, I was born in Manchester, Tennessee. I changed physically and mentally, personally and socially. My eyes saw their first glimpse of light. My ears heard people saying things. My nose smelled the fragrance of springtime in Tennessee. My skin felt the soft warmth of being cuddled by another human being. All these sensory experiences increased my knowledge of the world. Over the years many teachers have added to these experiences in informal and formal ways. This sketch looks at the role of these teachers in my pedagogical evolution. I note how each influenced learning, especially the learning of history. All too often, techniques are subtle and taken for granted. As foundations for education and learning, they must be studied, and personal reflection can be an excellent tool for improvement.

Basil Fletcher and Helen Fletcher. More than anyone else, my parents have affected my basic ideas about history. Who am I? Where did I come from? Who are my ancestors? Why is this important? Often unknowingly and as a natural consequence of rearing children, they provided answers to key existential questions. During family trips to see grandparents, events like the Fletcher reunion in Summitville or the Winn family gathering in Flintville, or life's transitions such as births, weddings, or deaths, they shaped the "proper" context for my personal history. My mother did this in a matter-of-fact and simple way. This approach suited her elementary school education and rural upbringing. My father reflected analytically; he wanted us kids to understand the clan's genealogy, the family tree. To me, family connections were and are confusing. I felt satisfied to know my aunts, uncles, and cousins (i.e., those of the "first" type). These family relations, regardless, have made me what I am today. To a great extent, the way I

perceive my world started in the 1950s in a small town in Tennessee as part of a Fletcher family in a wider Fletcher clan. For good or ill, I cannot change that foundational influence. I do try, however, to counterbalance the biases of my personal history as well as value its benefits.

Grades 1 thru 12. At Westwood Elementary, College Street Elementary, Westwood Junior High, and Coffee County High, my classmates and I, like all good children in America, recited the pledge of allegiance to the flag and learned by rote many lessons of United States history. Under the rubric “Social Studies,” I assimilated the doctrines of geography, civics, current events, and history with ample “As” and “Es” and a few “Bs.” I do recall my wonderful first-grade teacher, Mrs. Blanch Kirk. She was elderly, full of wisdom, and had red hair. She cared for us and nurtured us, and she disciplined us when we needed correction. Memories of her classroom are good memories. But I do not recall any specific history lesson from her class.

Even so, I did discover in my files two Pupil’s Reading Certificates signed by J. H. Warf, the Tennessee Commissioner of Education. Mrs. Coy St. John, my fifth-grade teacher, issued one, and Edley Ramsay, my sixth-grade teacher, issued the other. Listed on these were the following books which might classify as history: *John Henry–Mighty Railroader*, *James Oglethorpe, Tennessee*, *Our Fifty States*, *They Put Out to Sea–the Story of the Map*, *Babe Ruth–Baseball Boy*, *Greece and the Greeks*, and *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*. These teachers used an important method in their pedagogy–the individual reading plan. It had a specific goal: read one book each month during the school term. And, in addition to learning new subjects, it had a specific motivation: recognition of accomplishment by an authority. What I actually learned, I do not remember. But reading was and is an essential tool for the study of history. Good reading skills need to be emphasized and put to use by educators.

In June 1973, while I was in high school, I attended American Legion Boys State at Tennessee Technological University in Cookeville. I do not recall how that came about, but I enjoyed the experience of manipulating Tennessee state politics for the week. I served as County Road Supervisor. My certificate does not specify which county, but I was part of Crump City. Of course, I did not go out and run for political office after that. However, role-play can be a powerful learning tool, although it can be time consuming in both planning and execution phases.

The only history class I took in high school was Nelson Johnson's American History. I majored in math and science and spent a lot of time with band and golf. I enjoyed typing class (which my mother forced me to take and for which I will ever be grateful), since I was the only male student in the class. Dr. Johnson taught by lecture, and it was not very exciting. The class sat around a few old tables in a mobile classroom and listened to him talk about the material in our textbook. I do not recall any special activities or much deviation from lecture, except that we took several exams.

Ted Kell. Ted Kell preached for my home church in Manchester, the Southside Church of Christ, for about five years when I was growing up. His expository sermons greatly influenced the homiletic approach I used in ministry from roughly 1978 to 1998. While similar to lecture, his method involved rhetorical questions, thoughtful analyses, deductive reasoning, and rational persuasion. In his appeals, he guided the emotions with the mind rather than visa versa. This has been an important method for my pedagogy. His Bible stories and object lessons also influenced my pedagogical formation. No one could tell a story better, and his vivid way of expressing profound ideas with simple, everyday objects brings back fond memories. The children learned Bible history, and the adults watched and learned as well. Further, he radiated an intimate care and concern for people. Ted Kell set forth an excellent model for pedagogical skills.

Freed-Hardeman College. For two years at Freed-Hardeman College (FHC) in Henderson, Tennessee, I worked as student aide for Clyde Woods who taught Old Testament classes. He shared with me the mechanics of the teaching profession. I cherish those hours we spent preparing and grading exams at his office or his house. Yet, we took time to watch our favorite sports on television.

At FHC, I learned a lot of Bible history but little United States history which was not required for graduation. In fact, the only “secular” history courses I took in my first Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) program was Survey of Civilization I and II. Thirty years later, I still have typed and legibly written notes from those world history courses. It was not that Wendell Bloomingburg impressed students; he did not. He was dry and forthright in his lectures. He presented material in a matter-of-fact way. Little happened in the classroom by way of analysis and discussion, but the scope of the material and its relevance remain vast even now.

I might compare Bloomingburg’s approach with that of William Woodson who taught Bible courses and church history. His classes were facts-based lectures as well. He was chair of the Bible department, and I think he wanted students, especially Bible majors, to feel inferior to his encyclopedic knowledge of church history. Two or three of us in his Church History II course rose to the challenge of his difficult objective-type tests (i.e., multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, identification, and true-false questions that required logical analysis). These questions pitted his mastery of obscure details and logical constructs against the lesser minds of us novice students. We worked hard, made outright “As” in the class, and broke the curve. Throughout the years, this defeat of the chair of Bible has occasioned satisfaction over a well-deserved victory.

Cincinnati Christian Seminary. I majored in New Testament studies for my Master of Divinity degree which I received from Cincinnati Christian Seminary (CCS) on 4 May 1984.

Lewis Foster, who studied at Harvard University with notable theologians like Arthur Darby Nock, served as my advisor and mentor. Most students liked Dr. Foster for his devotions, mostly anecdotal, with which he began each class. Sometimes these devotions lasted thirty to forty minutes of a ninety-minute class. Dr. Foster taught reflectively, almost to a fault. He probed deeply for meaning and led his students to do the same. It often seemed like he existed in a world different from the rest of us. He was not egotistical; he was just different.

Another professor at CCS, James North, certainly stirred my interest in history. Of all the courses I took in seminary, by far his contained the best content, the best information. Dr. North taught mechanistically, somewhat like a robot, and he related everything to practical concerns. A slight man and soft-spoken, he began his lectures promptly, and fifty or so furiously handwritten pages later, the class ended. He never failed to inform his students. He demanded a lot, but he was fair. He taught me that good historians need to be thorough but not trivial, profound but not irrelevant. I believe that under his tutelage I did my best research in seminary.

Pennsylvania years. In the early 1980s, I worked with the Valley Road Church of Christ in Warrington, Pennsylvania. I took a class with Samuel Logan at Westminster Theological Seminary (WTS) in Chestnut Hill, a suburb of Philadelphia. The seminar in Reformation Theology was really an early American church history course. I have forgotten Professor Logan's style of teaching, but I remember talking about the problems of Calvinistic faith in colonial and early national America. For my major project, I transcribed Jonathan Edward's handwritten notes, his "Miscellaneous Observations on the Holy Scriptures—Galatians through Colossians." I had to buy a magnifying glass to do the work. It was tedious, but this gave me firsthand experience with the difficulties and the rewards of working with primary documents. Dr. Logan appreciated my work quite a bit. I am sure it saved him the trouble.

In December 1982, I traveled with a group from WTS to Israel and Greece. In Jerusalem, we studied Geographical and Historical Setting of the Bible in the short term program of the Institute of Holy Land Studies (now Jerusalem University College). Intense map study prepared us for classroom lessons at the school's location in the southwest quarter of old Jerusalem. The field studies led by Jim Monson integrated the physical landscape with textual history. Mr. Monson proved to be energetic and a great motivator. He fondly answered questions, kept us upbeat and positive, and thoroughly enjoyed his work. I still can see him with arm outstretched and finger pointed toward some feature on the terrain. As he described the topography, he related appropriate stories of the biblical narrative. Field study, if possible, can vivify the reading and writing of history. This experience changed forever how I looked at the physical landscape and its history. When I returned to the United States, I saw ridges, valleys, and other topographical features that before I had not noticed. I asked questions about the land and its history that I never had asked. A new way of looking at the world opened up for me. All too often, historians neglect the role of physical geography in their discipline. The interplay of the two, I believe, is critical. I have been fortunate at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) to study with geographers like Doug Heffington and historians like Caneta Hankins who underscore the interrelationship of historical events and the physical landscape.

Military hiatus. On April Fool's Day in 1987, I took an eleven year respite from academia and served as a chaplain in the Air Force. Whether this break was needed or even beneficial, I have yet to ascertain. I cannot recall any significant educators in the military, even though I took formal courses, attended conferences, and administered seminars. Maybe the uniform nature of instruction in the military precluded my notice of such.

In May 1989, I attended the Air Force's Academic Instructor School at Maxwell Air Force Base (AFB), Alabama. The course—Principles and Methods of Teaching—carried academic credit for administration, educational foundations, communication skills, methodology, instructional technology, and evaluation. Of course, MTSU accepted none of that for required course work in their secondary education certification program. We covered it all, but I cannot remember my seminar leader's name.

I do remember, though, the senior chaplains I worked under in the Air Force. My first senior chaplain at Barksdale AFB, Louisiana, was Edward McGinty, a stern but fair Catholic priest. I appreciated how he kept my Senior Protestant Chaplain in check and allowed me to do my job. He smoked, he drank moderately, he cursed; he did all the right things a good Irish priest should do. He even got married after he retired from the Air Force, which ticked off some of the Protestants, since he kept his rank of colonel and his pension. But I liked Father McGinty. From him I learned the value of treating others equally without favoritism. I also gleaned from him the power of speaking candidly with others in such a convoluted, bureaucratic world.

My last senior chaplain at Ellsworth AFB, South Dakota, was David Cornthwaite, a Christian Science minister. Pastor Cornthwaite always believed in the good of every situation and every person. He embodied the eternal optimist. He looked for solutions to problems and discovered many. He wanted to help people and would do everything in his power to do just that. He loved children, and he loved to teach them with object lessons and stories. As much as possible, he integrated this technique into worship for adults (e.g., liturgical dance, Living Last Supper). He took his beliefs seriously. Lamentably, while stationed in the Denver area, he became ill and refused to seek medical help. A few days later he died; he was only about fifty years old.

Back to the university. After my military hiatus, I decided to go back to school and study—what else but history? Travel in Europe and three years in southwest Germany broadened my outlook on life and pushed me toward historical studies. Other factors, no doubt, brought about the decision.

A second B.A. degree with a major in history and a minor in geography put me face to face with several good instructors at MTSU. For her survey of Tennessee history, Caneta Hankins used class lectures, peer discussions, site reports, and progress exams. Jim Williams led his class through myriad interpretations of the Salem witchcraft trials with student presentations, group discussions, individual reports, and interpretive essays. Ron Messier tried to sort out the Middle East mess with guided readings, class lectures, question and answer sessions, and essay exams. Walter Renn and Fred Colvin disseminated their wisdom on Russia, the Holocaust, Tennessee, and Great Britain via the lecture method. Each one as an expert educator challenged this student with readings, reports, research, and essay exams.

For my United States history survey courses, I took summer classes at Motlow State Community College (MSCC) during Summer 1999. Michael Bradley and Don Cheatham used the lecture approach, but each did so in his own way. Quite the elderly scholar, Dr. Cheatham sat and talked about major events in United States history as well as the interplay of executive, judicial, and legislative branches of the federal government. He gave close attention to judicial decisions by the Supreme Court and how these judgments impacted the nation. He tested student comprehension with challenging short-answer exams.

By way of contrast, Dr. Bradley also lectured but usually stood and pointed to key words and phrases he had written on the blackboard. He developed his material thematically and gave particular consideration to social, technological, and economic concerns. He often told stories

which were sometimes spectacular, sometimes mundane, but always interesting. His tests had no short-answer questions; they were all essay questions. Students had a choice between questions, and he permitted notes. He even encouraged students to write their own question on each exam and answer it. I found both professors at MSCC proficient, and I learned from their instruction.

Concerning graduate studies in history at MTSU, the seminars have followed the format of reading, writing, class discussion, and peer sharing, or, research, writing, peer and instructor review, editing, more research, and rewriting. This has been a standard approach. For the student, such can be demanding but rewarding. I personally found Lisa Pruitt's "Seminar in Jacksonian America" and Nancy Rupprecht's "War and Society: the Impact of the Great War" to be the most difficult and instructive. I liked how each professor provided a list of readings for every week of class. I thought it good to let each student choose which book to read. I felt that class discussion of written book reports broadened understanding of the topic and enhanced bibliographical awareness. The professors treated students with respect and added to discussions with probing questions, insightful critique, and expert knowledge.

At this point in my life, I feel overwhelmed by the study of history. To me, history is art rather than science. For the student, any of history's subsets can be quite spectacular. By necessity, then, the teaching of history must be staggering. A good set of pedagogical tools can ease the task. I have been fortunate to have many teachers show the way. I hope that I can pass along just a few of the many, useful contributions they have made to my life.