

BRINGING HISTORY TO LIFE: A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH TO CULTURAL STUDIES

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1. INTRODUCTION

In an attempt to increase interest and motivation for historical awareness among third year students enrolled in cultural studies, the following project was designed to facilitate the assimilation of basic historical knowledge. By combining the modern newspaper format with periods of history, which for obvious reasons could not have been reported in the press, it was hoped to stimulate interest in journalistic style and presentation, approach history from a novel angle, and as a by-product, maintain language skills.

2. METHOD

The first requirement is for students to familiarize themselves with authentic examples of the British press, and to examine their format and content according to whether they are tabloid or quality papers. Visual presentation (headline and text letter size, use of photographs, captions) and linguistic content are studied in some detail. Attention should be paid to the syntactic devices commonly used in headlines, abbreviations, the avoidance of ambiguity, and the author's point of view. With respect to this last aspect, students will find that bias is easily detected in criticism or praise, and neutrality is hard to find except in the most mundane pieces of news. They should take this into account when assigning the roles of heroes or villains in historical episodes, since the narrator's point of view will depend very much on which side he happens to find himself in any conflict of interests.

The next phase involves deciding on a period of history to deal with. Students can let their imagination run free, but generally speaking, the further in the past the events narrated, the more novel the contrast between the journalistic technique used and the perception of history. Let us imagine, for example, reporters witnessing the Roman invasion of Britain, the settlement of Saxon invaders, or the Norman conquest. Or perhaps we would like to read about first-hand impressions of life in the Middle Ages, the terrible experience of the Black Death, the Wars of the Roses, the struggles between Protestants and Catholics in Tudor times, or the colonization of America. Any period of history is valid for our purposes, as long as it motivates students, and providing that there is enough data available to work with. Let us take the times of Elizabeth I as an example of this approach.

3. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ELIZABETH I ACCORDING TO THE PRESS.

Elizabeth I ruled for 45 years, though her life spans 70 years of history. Our aim should be to point out the most significant events which took place during her lifetime. The format will be headlines and press-cuttings, and the finished product will of course be an imaginary version of what the newspapers would have said, if they had existed at that time. We shall try to tell the news in journalistic style, with a visible viewpoint or ideology, in this case from the viewpoint of an English journalist writing for a hypothetically literate English audience. We shall make use of the present and present perfect tenses to denote "recent" unfinished events as though we were living in the Elizabethan period.

The Daily Gazette

7th September 1533

ANNE BOLEYN GIVES BIRTH TO A DAUGHTER: KING DISPLEASED

Greenwich Palace.

Although the Queen has given birth to a healthy daughter, his Majesty is said to be displeased because the child is not a boy, and consequently he is still without an heir.

The newborn child is to be called Elizabeth, and is half-sister to Mary, daughter of the King's first wife, Catherine of Aragon.

In only a couple of sentences, this front page article presents the situation at the time of Elizabeth's birth: the problem of the succession to the throne, Henry VIII and his many wives, and the relationship between the step-sisters Mary Tudor and Elizabeth. It could be accompanied by a photocopy of a sketch of Greenwich Palace, the royal residence, and/or even a modern photograph of a newborn baby cut out from a magazine. (The combination of text and visual material is essential for maintaining the illusion of the newspaper format, and consequently motivation.)

For our next example of a news item we jump a few years:

28th January 1547

HENRY VIII IS DEAD. LONG LIVE EDWARD VI!

*The late King's only son is to be crowned
at just 9 years old.*

King Edward and Lady Elizabeth are mourning their father's death, which has occurred after a long and painful illness. Now they must separate for the young king to fulfill his duty to his country.

After marrying six times, King Henry has managed to have three children who have survived: Mary, Elizabeth and the long-awaited heir Edward, son of Jane Seymour. The new king is only nine years old and must leave his childhood pleasures and the company of his half-sister Elizabeth. (This news item could be accompanied by photos of the old king and the young son, photocopied from history books.)

Unfortunately, the young king has only been on the throne until the age of sixteen. He was always a sickly child and at his death, he is succeeded by his elder sister Mary:

19th July 1553

**MARY TUDOR IS PROCLAIMED QUEEN.
LADY ELIZABETH IS NOW
NEXT IN LINE TO THE THRONE**

The late King Edward VI is to be buried in Westminster Abbey according to the Protestant rite, while Queen Mary has ordered a Mass for him to be said in the Tower.

Lady Elizabeth is to carry her sister's train at the coronation ceremony, and she will be obliged to swear an oath of allegiance to the new Queen.

Prominent Protestants are worried about the likely return to Catholicism in England. Some have already been sent to the Tower.

In this brief report we see how Protestant England is to return to the Catholic religion under the devout Mary Tudor. Until now, Mary has not been treated as next in line for the throne, nor even as a princess. She had been virtually disinherited because of her parents' divorce, and the subsequent birth of Edward, who, it was hoped, would continue the House of Tudor. Mary has been brought up a strict Catholic, while Elizabeth has been allowed to follow her father's less rigid idea of religion. Elizabeth has to swear her allegiance to the new queen. Many Protestants are fearing for their future safety. Lady Elizabeth will be carefully watched to make sure she does not provide a focal point for rebellion and restoration of Protestantism. Perhaps we might find an advertisement in the job columns of our hypothetical newspaper:

WANTED:

*ASSISTANT EXECUTIONER
(EXPERIENCE ESSENTIAL)*

Salary negotiable. References an advantage. Send C.V. and recent photo. Apply to the Governor, Tower of London.

The worst she could have imagined has happened: Elizabeth is imprisoned in the Tower of London. She is suspected of conspiring with others to put herself on the throne. Elizabeth insists she has never plotted anything against her sister, nor does she intend to do so. The letter, which the newspaper reproduces in full, clearly says so. We draw the reader's attention to the diagonal lines crossed at the end of the last page to stop anybody adding anything afterwards, that is before the queen receives it. (*Photocopy of manuscript.*)

16th March 1534

**LADY ELIZABETH IS TAKEN TO THE TOWER OF
LONDON UNDER ARMED GUARD.
THIS LETTER TO HER SISTER PROCLAIMS "HER INNOCENCE"**

A royal wedding is the next item of news we offer:

25th July, 1554

**MARY TUDOR MARRIES
PHILIP OF SPAIN**

Queen Mary was married to Philip of Spain today. The bride was radiant in a beautiful silk dress, and the ceremony took place at Winchester Cathedral. The bridegroom had landed five days earlier, and rode a magnificent white horse to Winchester, escorted by a hundred archers. Sadly, a sudden shower of rain left him soaked to the skin, with his richly embroidered clothes ruined.

The Queen is 38 years old, while her husband is 27. This is his second marriage.

Here again we observe attempts to secure the succession. Mary desperately needs a son, and has married Philip who is 11 years her junior. Philip is not well received by the English people who see his marriage as an attempt to get his hands on the crown of England. Hence, the anecdote of the rain spoiling his grand entrance. (*Photo of the couple after the wedding.*)

Mary dies childless, and Philip ceases to be King of England since the marriage contract stated that he was only the Queen's consort. Elizabeth I becomes queen to the delight of her supporters and Protestants throughout England:

15th January 1559

ELIZABETH I ASCENDS THRONE

Queen Elizabeth I was crowned today in Westminster Abbey. There was the traditional procession through London, where there were shows and pageants along the route. A child presented her with an English Bible, a schoolboy spoke a Latin oration, and everywhere she was received with great enthusiasm by her loyal subjects.

She can hardly believe her good fortune —from prisoner in the Tower to Queen— and she constantly gives thanks to God for her safe keeping. She has been heard to say: "I stood in danger of my life, my sister was so incensed against me." We include the official colour portrait of the Queen at her coronation. She is wearing a richly embroidered dress, with jewels, typical of the current fashion, an ermine trimmed cloak, the crown of state and she is carrying the orb and sceptre, symbols of the power of the monarchy. She is 25 years old —on the way to middle-age by "present day" standards— and is considered a fine, pale-skinned Renaissance beauty.

Elizabeth is in fact the most sought after marriageable princess in Europe. England's strategic importance with its control of the routes from the North Sea to Europe and from Spain to the Low Countries, makes her a bride worth considering. Philip has proposed marriage to his sister-in-law, but has been rejected. She has many suitors, some are official like the Duke of Alençon (whom she affectionately calls her "frog") the Archduke of Austria or Prince Erik of Sweden. Others are unofficial candidates, of whom the favourite is Lord Robert Dudley. Unfortunately he is already married and is of low status. This kind of gossip deserves treatment in the tabloid press, together with full colour exclusive photos:

DAILY MIRROR

EXCLUSIVE:

ELIZABETH'S MANY SUITORS !

FRANCIS, DUKE OF ALENÇON:
"FROG"

LORD ROBERT DUDLEY:
HANDSOME UNOFFICIAL FAVOURITE

ARCHDUKE CHARLES OF AUSTRIA
& PRINCE ERIK OF SWEDEN:
OFFICIAL CANDIDATES

PHILIP OF SPAIN: *REJECTED*

Elizabeth recognizes she must get married to make the succession secure, but she doesn't feel enthusiastic about it. Our exclusive report quotes her as saying on different occasions:

"We highly commend this single life."

or

*"Though I were offered
to the greatest prince of all Europe....."*

or

"I will marry as soon as I can conveniently."

or, even

"I must get married."

LONDONERS INDULGE IN PROTESTANT FEELING

Londoners are enjoying their new religious freedom. Impromptu plays in derision of the Catholic faith, the Church, and the clergy are being performed for money in taverns. Rogues and vagabonds are robbing churches at night, breaking windows and stealing the silver and gold objects. Several London churches are following the new form of service, omitting all mention of the Virgin, the saints, references to the Pope and prayers for the dead. The Queen, however, has issued a proclamation that, for the moment, communion is to be given in both the old and new way.

In this report from the quality press, we read how religious freedom is getting out of hand. Tolerance is absent, and society is changing its habits and values.

The new world is opening up to explorers and colonies are being established thousands of miles away. Sir Walter Raleigh, a famous sea captain and traveller, has recently imported a strange plant from America. Apparently you have to dry the leaves, make them into a roll, put it in your mouth, and set fire to it. It is not known if this strange habit will become popular! We may even find an advert for it in our Elizabethan press:

**TRY "TOBACCO" FROM THE NEW WORLD
SIR WALTER RALEIGH SAYS:**

Come to where the flavor is. Marlboro.

Apart from exciting new products arriving in England, what else is happening in the social world? Well, in the society pages of our press we find that the Renaissance is a success among intellectuals:

RENAISSANCE FLOURISHING IN ENGLAND!

The Renaissance has arrived at last in England, after a smash success on the European continent. English painters are recognized as specialists in miniature portraits, while Thomas More's *Utopia* has become a bestseller abroad. But the intellectuals enjoying greatest success right now are Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare who are filling theatres nightly with their exciting new plays. The "soldier poets" are also enjoying fame, and the general picture is one of flourishing culture and talent.

Queen Elizabeth published her first book at the age of 14, and is also an outstanding scholar, translator and writer of poems, prayers and even graffiti. Culture and learning are at their highest point for centuries. This period will probably go down in history as one of the most cultured.

However, not everything is so rosy for the lower class. In the financial and economic sections of our Elizabethan press, we find criticism of government policy and graphic information and statistics showing rising inflation and falling employment and wages:

**INFLATION: UP 500%
WAGES: DOWN TO HALF
POPULATION INCREASE:
EXPECTED TO DOUBLE**

The poor are suffering the effects of large scale unemployment and hunger. The country's economic and social situation is at its worst for many years. Sheep farming is taking over the land from crop growing. Villagers are protesting over the enclosure of common land, but the government is unable to control landowners. One observer is quoted as saying: "*these enclosures be the causes why rich men eat up poor men as beasts do eat grass.*"

**1601 POOR LAW PASSED:
JPs NOW RESPONSIBLE FOR POOR IN PARISH**

JPs are to raise money in the parish to provide food, housing and work for the poor and homeless of the same parish.

This legislation is seen as a move to prevent peasant unrest as a result of bad harvests and general hardship. The government hopes to avoid a repetition of recent riots in Oxfordshire and London.

(Photo of modern demonstrations and clashes with police.)

We also find news of changing patterns of employment:

**ENGLAND LEADS IN CLOTH PRODUCTION.
FLEMISH INDUSTRY FEELING EFFECTS
OF ENGLAND'S SUCCESS.**

The pattern of employment has changed over the last few years. Now more and more people are employed in cloth making instead of agriculture. Merchants buy raw wool, give it to spinners, who are mostly women and children in cottages, collect it and pass it on to weavers and other clothworkers. Some observers say that in this way we are creating a successful new capitalist class, and that this will be the beginning of a new era.

Back to politics again, and the ever-present problem of relations between Spain and England:

September 1580

RUPTURE IN ANGLO-SPANISH RELATIONS

Francis Drake has returned from the New World with ships full of Spanish treasure. King Philip demands the return of the treasure and the execution of Drake. But Queen Elizabeth demands an apology for Spain's interference in Ireland and the treatment of Protestant traders. The Queen visited the "*Golden Hind*" and knighted Drake with a golden sword.

(Photo of a smiling Drake newly knighted.)

During Elizabeth's reign her foreign policy has centred on her relations with Spain, France and the Low Countries. There have been moments of crisis, like this one. Francis Drake, who is part pirate, part adventurer and discoverer, has put Elizabeth in a difficult position. He had set out from England financed by several people, including the Queen, officially on a voyage of discovery. Now he has returned with Spanish treasure stolen from the King of Spain's ships he encountered on the way. Philip would like his treasure to be returned, and to have Drake punished, but the Queen likes fine jewels. To make her point clear, Elizabeth visited Drake's ship and took hold of a sword as if to cut off his head. Instead, she knighted him, making him SIR Francis Drake.

DRAKE ATTACKS & DESTROYS PART OF SPANISH FLEET IN CADIZ

The massive fleet which the King of Spain had prepared to attack and conquer England, has suffered serious damage while still in the harbour of Cadiz. Sir Francis Drake, our national hero, launched a surprise attack, and has successfully delayed Spain's attempts at an armed invasion.

(Map situating the port of Cadiz and Drake's route from England)

Sir Francis Drake is not only an adventurer and robber of Spanish treasure. He is now considered a national hero. Secret intelligence reports had told of the building of a massive invasion fleet in the Spanish port of Cadiz. Philip of Spain intends attacking and landing in England, but now, through Drake's daring surprise attack on the fleet while it was still at home, his plans, as well as his ego, will have taken a beating. Nevertheless, England's spies will have to keep a close watch on the development of Spain's plans.

MAXIMUM ALERT IN CHANNEL: QUEEN SPEAKS OUT

As Spain prepares to attack England with an "*Invincible Armada*", Queen Elizabeth I has visited her soldiers and sailors in Tilbury and has given the following moving speech to boost morale:

I am come to live or die amongst you all, to lay down for my God, and for my kingdom, and for my people, my honour and blood even in the dust. I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too" .

(Photos of Queen, and Philip with appropriate captions: THE HEART AND STOMACH OF A KING and INVINCIBLE ARMADA, respectively.)

BAD WEATHER IN CHANNEL — "ARMADA" DISPERSED: ENGLAND IS VICTORIOUS

In spite of being outnumbered, Drake's fleet has managed to defeat the Spanish attackers, by means of daring tactics, and helped by stormy weather which has blown the remaining Spanish ships northwards to the rocky coasts of Scotland and Ireland.

(Photo of naval battle, with English ships in the foreground.)

DESPITE VICTORY, ENGLAND STILL AT WAR WITH SPAIN.

This is indeed a glorious moment for England but more will still have to be spent on defence. Meanwhile, English colonists continue to settle in America. Virginia has been founded and named after our beloved Queen.

(Famous "Armada" portrait of Elizabeth with one hand on the globe, a reference to England's growing sea power and world influence.)

24th March, 1603

OLD QUEEN ON HER DEATH BED

Until last year Queen Elizabeth was in good health. She could still ride ten miles in one day and then go hunting afterwards. According to the court doctors, she has always eaten wisely and has taken long daily walks. During her long life she has overcome countless colds, fevers and even smallpox.

But now we regret to say the Queen is dying. She has lived to the very respectable old age of 70. She has already written her own epitaph, in which she is resigned to the fact that she neither married nor produced an heir to the English throne. Informed sources at court state that she would like to be remembered in the following lines:

"And in the end this shall be for me sufficient, that a marble stone shall declare that a Queen, having reigned such a time, lived and died a virgin."

4. CONCLUSIONS

This approach to the historical component of cultural studies has the advantage of being motivating, since it gives scope for students to handle historical fact while using their imagination to put themselves in the time and place of action. The contrast between modern concepts (the very existence of the mass produced press, photography, advertising, etc.) and historical events makes this kind of project both interesting and flexible. It allows students to appreciate that news is presented according to the writer's point of view, and that in the examples we have given, the "journalist" is clearly English. They could reflect on how a Spanish "journalist" would have written about Anglo-Spanish relations, Drake and the Armada. But that, perhaps, will appear in the next edition of "The Escorial Gazette", for example.

5. BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SOURCES

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