

A Handbook for History Teachers**James A. Duthie****Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2012, 302 pages*****Reviewed by Victoria Lamb Drover***
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“History is not a mere chronicle, but a dialogue between differing interpretations of the past.”¹ The subjective nature of history is at the heart of James A. Duthie’s *A Handbook for History Teachers*. It is clear from the book’s structure and thoroughness that Duthie feels at ease in both the discipline of academic history, and the field of educational curricular development and theorizing. The book begins with four chapters outlining what history is, why it is worth studying, and how to critically approach it. The author successfully presents history not as a finite collection of facts, but rather an intellectual discipline that requires the highest order of analytical skills. Although these chapters are situated in historical theory, Duthie’s writing is accessible and entertaining, providing both clear examples and wonderful quotations to support his central thesis. Duthie challenges teachers to not view history as a subject but rather a discipline based not in the acquiring of facts but in the process of interpreting historical possibilities. This title encourages students to engage with higher levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy and allows them to develop critical thinking skills that will extend beyond the history classroom.

The structure of the book parallels Duthie’s effective teaching process. In the first four chapters, the author thoroughly outlines the basic concepts; then, in the remaining chapters, the author uses this established knowledge base as a springboard for challenging questions about research methods, historical agency, source credibility, data acquisition, and divergent historical interpretations.

One excellent example of this combination of content lesson and historical methods analysis is Duthie’s ‘Gunpowder Plot’ lesson plan.² First, Duthie provides the conventional

¹ James A. Duthie, *A Handbook for History Teachers*, (University Press of America, 2012.) vii.

² Ibid. 49-52.

narrative of this historical event. On November 5th, 1605, a group of Catholic conspirators led by Guy Fawkes planted 36 barrels of gunpowder under the British Parliament to be detonated while the Protestant King James was addressing Parliament. This assassination plot was discovered and the conspirators were found guilty of treason and hanged. With this narrative established, Duthie places slips of paper around the room with small pieces of historical information that complicate and, in some cases, contradict this narrative. Circulating the room and reading these suggestive pieces of evidence, students begin to put forward questions such as, who benefitted from the discovery of this plot, how did these men acquire so much gunpowder, why are the royal gunpowder stores records missing for 1605, and why was Guy Fawkes denied the opportunity to say his final words before his hanging. All these deliciously suggestive facts guide the class to question the traditional narrative first presented to them. The students then begin to develop a revisionist history based on the new ‘facts’ discovered. The lesson demonstrates to students that history is never done being written; new sources, interpretations, and viewpoints can easily change a well-established historical ‘fact’. This lesson also allows students to go through the historical process of questioning the sources, piecing them together, and creating a plausible theory. Once the students have created a new conspiracy theory they now feel is ‘how it really happened’, Duthie informs the class that the historian who uncovered this new evidence was, in fact, a Jesuit Priest. The students must discuss whether the historian’s personal and political motivations undermine the credibility of the research. This activity acts as an introduction to a discussion on personal bias in historical writing and whether any history can be entirely impartial and without political motivation.

In order to engage in this analysis of historical process, students must begin with a base of historical knowledge. Duthie reassures teachers to be brave about being “the Sage on the Stage”³ and advises that lecturing on content must be the first step to broader student engagement with the subject matter.

After a long and distinguished career as a senior History, Social Studies, English and Humanities teacher in the British Columbia school district of Nanaimo-Ladysmith, Duthie has the background to create a handbook for history teachers based in real classroom experience and, as such, this text does not spend an undue amount of time discussing the theoretical underpinning of the educational strategies and methods presented. This is a practical, easy-to-read guide that

³ Ibid. 58.

includes marking rubrics, record-keeping strategies, ideas for innovative student projects, exercise sheets, and a final chapter on classroom management. While other works such as Stearns, Seixas, and Wineburg's *Knowing, Teaching & Learning History* attempt to provide similar essential handbooks for American history teachers,⁴ Duthie's work is situated in the educational context of Canada, and includes historical examples from all eras of world history. This international breadth, accessibility, and effective use of historical cartoons, diagrams, and educational aids make Duthie's book the Canadian teacher's superior choice for a definitive handbook in teaching history.

Coming from the perspective of an academic historian, while there are books such as Allan Megill's *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error* and James C. Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*,⁵ which focus in greater depth on the theoretical underpinning of the historical research and writing process, this is not the primary objective of *A Handbook for History Teachers*. Duthie's work provides understandings beyond the basics related to academic historical issues and concerns while also addressing the practical needs of a high school history teacher. This being said, there are a few neglected topics that have become significant historical matters in the forty years since Duthie's initial training in history at the University of Edinburgh. Oral histories, folklore, and personal testimonies now play a significant role in a variety of historical fields including Native-Newcomer Relations, African-Canadian Studies, and cultural history in general. The issues surrounding selective and collective memory as well as legacy building and credibility play a significant role in analyzing and interpreting these important historical sources. Any discussion of oral histories is entirely absent from Duthie's work. And while Duthie provides wonderful examples to elucidate his various classroom strategies, these examples are generally drawn from traditional political and military histories with little discussion of social historical subgenres such as women's history, immigration history, or material culture. These, however, are small criticisms of an engaging and practical guide that truly conveys Duthie's love of history and teaching. I finished this book energized to step into

⁴ Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg, eds. *Knowing Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, (New York: New York University Press, 2000.)

⁵ Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A contemporary Guide to Practice*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.), James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.)

my classroom and excited to experiment with Duthie's approaches. Although targeted at high school history teachers, I found this book to be a useful aid for my university classroom as well. *A Handbook for History Teachers* should be a required text in all Canadian Faculties of Education, and Department of History graduate programs.

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