

Introduction to the Florilegium Series

The Florilegium Series in History is a four-year study in which the flowers of the historical record are examined for their cultural value and moral lesson. In the first year, students are immersed in the aesthetic and investigative spirit of the ancient Greeks. In the second, they observe the Roman political and legal genius. In the third year, students follow the political and cultural development of Europe from its Christian origins to its modern catastrophes. Finally they explore the distinctive history and government of their own American nation. By uncovering our ancient and modern origins, the student arrives at deeper self-knowledge and a better appreciation of his cultural patrimony. What we have called the florilegium approach to history is no educational novelty, but rather the methodical application and intensification of what many excellent instructors have always practiced. It is best characterized by contrasting it to the “textbook” and “great book” methods. These are the extremes of secondary education to which the florilegium method is a proper mean. Consider first the strengths and weakness of these other two methods.

The “textbook” (or “lecture”) method conveys the primary facts of history, as best as these have been ascertained, together with a coherent and temporally progressive interpretation of the whole subject. This method has the virtue of simplifying and clearly organizing the material for consumption by students. If done well, it can provide a framework for the student to meaningfully locate himself, the current culture, and his nation within the larger course of human events. The deficiencies of this system are also manifest to anyone who has examined a textbook. How quickly they become dated! Although continual evolution of textbooks provides a good business model for textbook publishers, it is educationally indefensible. Should the meaning and value of the past change from one edition to the next? Modern textbook authors naturally project into the past our present attitudes and biases, and the consequent predictability also yields boredom. We shall speak nothing of the lost opportunities for learning! By no means are these histories able raise the student beyond the narrow horizon of our debased modern culture.

In response not only to the inherent weakness of such a method, but also its present abuse, the “great book” (or “tutorial”) method has been favored by many who attach signal importance to literary excellence and active rational inquiry. Great teachers of the past have, it is said, left behind for us profound works that even today inform and educate. Our education should therefore consist principally in reading and studying these texts. With rhetorical flourish, the image is presented of Thucydides and Plutarch, Livy and Tacitus, eagerly attending to the devouring intellects of our students. The real teachers, it is said, are these great minds, not the living tutor. This model naturally appeals to some who prefer to educate their children at home.

Practice, however, is generally unequal to the theory. Students are left without a common framework or timeline to unify these histories. Moreover, these works were written for educated adults. Excepting perhaps one youth in ten thousand, the intellects of adolescents are unprepared to absorb lofty genius by unguided reading. Common sense tells us that too little learning takes place, and experience confirms it. Ideas and aphorisms, poorly comprehended, are merely parroted. Minds obtain a veneer of learning which, when scratched, discloses a lack of depth, integration, and coordination. Without experience and adequate preparation in the liberal arts, many “great books” can hardly be approached. The sinews of their close argument must be attached to the rigorous skeleton of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Indeed, early exposure to

“great books” without adequate guidance can produce an allergy to all such reading or, worse yet, the presumption of having mastered what is still above one’s understanding.

The excellence of the writing notwithstanding, much that is compassed by these authors is irrelevant to the student and tedious in its detail. Let it be granted that an author is insightful and elegant; nevertheless, his intent in writing will not likely conform to our intentions in educating children. Much of his narration or explanation may have served well the original audience, but has little value today to anyone but the professional historian. The funeral oration of Pericles, the death of Caesar, the battle of Agincourt, and Edmund Burke’s observations on the character of the American colonies can make indelible marks upon impressionable minds. But endless parades of Athenian military skirmishes, Roman consuls, French dynastic squabbles, or New Deal legislation, do not produce any improvement in the student. He would be wholly justified in asking, “Why am I studying this?” We must, moreover, keep in mind that the moral standards of many famed authors depart substantially from those we would impart to our children. There can be no question of presenting without fundamental criticism the principles of Epicurus, Machiavelli, or Marx, no matter how *historically* significant their works may be. We cannot surrender children to perverse and dangerous authors simply because the latter have been inscribed by a nameless authority into a canon of “important” thinkers. Let parents and educators beware; what *we* call a “great book” must be *truly* great!

An effective answer to these difficulties is the florilegium method. The ideal remains to read the best that has been written: the most significant, the most beautiful, the most edifying. But even the greatest of authors cannot maintain himself perpetually on that high plane of wisdom. For lesser authors, brilliance is the exception, rather than the rule. Given the limited time of the student and the mountain of cultural material available to the instructor, a selection process is inevitable. Should some part of the landscape of western civilization be painted with such detail that important features of the whole scene are left out? To demand that historical records be read in their entirety is to guarantee that much of serious value is kept entirely out of view. Every Athenian military skirmish means just that much less time to concentrate on matters of greater importance. The florilegium method excerpts and gathers together what is worthy of the student’s time, thereby increasing his cultural exposure. With proper help and encouragement, he will as an adolescent acquire a taste for such reading, in which case he may, as an adult already proficient in the necessary intellectual tools, read these same works in their entirety.

To address the remaining weakness of the “great book” method, the readings are indexed to a concise outline, thereby supplying a framework in which they may hang together coherently. Typically, the student will read each chapter of the outline, mastering names, dates, and facts to be tested by the instructor. (As an aid to mastery, a pronunciation guide is appended to the outline.) He will then read the corresponding passages of the florilegium to perfect and deepen his understanding. The florilegium serves as a starting point for discussion and written essays. It is not intended to convey easily tested historical fact of the sort presented in the outline, but rather the historical, cultural, and simply human perspective that students should obtain before becoming adults. All the while, students are steeped in the fluency of fine English. For the student preparing to enter college or the seminary, this is a method of study far more fruitful than either the textbook or “great book” method.

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