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Ellis, H. (2022) Teaching Britain: Elementary Teachers and the State of the Everyday, 1846–1906. By Christopher Bischof. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. x+230. $93.00. The Journal of Modern History, 94 (1). pp. 192-193. ISSN: 0022-2801

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In this rich and detailed study, Christopher Bischof explores the role played by elementary school teachers as intermediaries between the state, on the one hand, and local communities, on the other, during the formative period in the development of mass education in Britain. *Teaching Britain* draws on an impressive range of archival evidence, from well-studied items such as school log books to little known sources such as teacher travel narratives and poetry composed by students at teacher training colleges. Bischof draws an intentional contrast between previous studies of teachers which have tended to focus on a top-down perspective, utilising "parliamentary debates and investigations, laws, policies from educational bureaucrats, and inspectors' reports" (4) and his own work which aims to explore how "teachers, pupils, and communities actually experienced schooling" (5).

This is an important aim, and in this respect, *Teaching Britain* contributes to the rich new seam of research which history of experience, sensory history and the history of emotions are providing in the historiography of education and schooling. Bischof's decision to include both male and female teachers in his analysis, as well as teachers based in rural and urban areas in both England and Scotland is very welcome and breaks new ground. The decision to leave Wales out of the study, however, is not explained in detail. Bischof certainly succeeds in encouraging the reader to view teachers in a broader context than has often been the case with previous studies. Crucially, we see how teachers fitted into a complex social, cultural and institutional world beyond the school. The chapters in the first section concentrate on key stages on the journey to becoming a teacher. Here, would-be teachers appear as pupil teachers and students in teacher training colleges. In the second section, entitled appropriately "Out in the World", we encounter teachers competing on the jobs market, engaging with families and local communities and travelling for leisure both within Britain and overseas, particularly within the confines of the British Empire.

The book, as a whole, does a good job in revealing the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which teachers' lives, activities and reflections were intertwined both with the everyday lives of the communities they served and with the wider historical developments working to transform British society in the second half of the nineteenth century, in particular, the expansion of the state into new areas of social and domestic life. Bischof makes a convincing case for viewing some teachers as interstitial negotiators, communicating across social and class boundaries, while, at the same time, helping to remake and reshape those boundaries.

For all this, however, there is a tension running through the book, between a desire, on the one hand, to capture the "messy reality" and "diversity" of teachers' experiences (14), and an equally strong desire, on the other, to rescue teachers, as a profession, from what Bischof describes as the "wooden caricatures" of previous historians (5) and unfair characterizations as "socially grasping" and "desperate" to achieve recognition as a profession (5). Instead, we are presented with an alternative, almost entirely positive assessment of teachers as "dynamic" (207), "insatiably curious", "indefatigable readers" and "innovative pedagogues" (2). While some, perhaps many, teachers' careers, activities and personalities were marked by these traits, the impression given to the reader of *Teaching Britain* is that the vast majority, if not all, were. We are told, for example, that "teachers used [log books] to defiantly record how they adapted central directives to local conditions" (5). While this may have been the case with some teachers, surely all cannot be said to have used log books *defiantly*, certainly not most of the time?

Where, for example, are the angry and abusive teachers who regularly resorted to corporal punishment and humiliation? This was not merely a stereotype. Or even the merely bored or disinterested teachers of which there were surely many? While thousands of travel narratives written by teachers as they journeyed around Britain and the Empire do indeed

provide evidence of interested engagement with the wider world, such narratives were still not produced by the majority of elementary school teachers in Britain during this period. It is difficult, I would argue, to claim, on the basis of such evidence, that "On the whole, teachers rejected pre-packaged, sanitized, and one-sided narratives of the empire. They preferred knowledge won from conversations, their own observations, and critical reading" (11). Similarly, without examining children's views on what was taught in the classroom, our understanding of teachers' impact on popular debates about empire will remain partial. Many teachers will have eschewed such wider engagement and taken a more limited view of their profession and role in their local community. At times, it feels like the book tries a little too hard to make teachers interesting (which they are) by drawing negative comparisons with other "lower middle class" occupations including those of "clerks, shop assistants and governesses" which are described as "dreary and stifling" by contrast (3).

This tension can, however, be considered a productive one as it forces us to confront the challenges of balancing a desire to narrate the complexity and richness of individual experiences (which Bischof rightly says have been lacking in studies of Victorian teaching) with the need to draw broader conclusions about the teaching profession as a whole. This tension is likely to be particularly prominent in a study such as *Teaching Britain* with its aim of placing Britain's elementary school teachers in a wider social and historical context. This engaging and carefully-researched book will nonetheless be of considerable interest to all historians of education and schooling as well as historians of childhood and to social and cultural historians of Britain more broadly.

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