



The Leys School Cambridge

Specimen

Sixth Form Scholarship Examination

H I S T O R Y

Time allowed: 60 minutes

Instructions

- You should write your answers on LINED paper
- Write your name on any paper that you use
- The use of a dictionary is not allowed
- Answer BOTH questions
- Each question carries equal marks and you should spend equal time on them
- Good prose and grammar will be rewarded

Question 1

Summarise the following 650 word passage in about 250 words.

Historian Eric Hobsbawm explores the origins of what he calls 'grassroots history', history written from the point of view of ordinary people.

Why is grassroots history, history seen from below or the history of the common people, so recent a fashion? Why did most of the history written until, say, the end of the nineteenth century, tell us so little about the great majority of the inhabitants of the countries or states it was recording?

Most history in the past was written for the glorification of rulers. Those fat biographies of politicians are certainly not read by the masses. Politicians gobble them up like popcorn. They are about eminent practitioners of their own trade, from which they can learn something. The practical business of ruling-class politics could, however, for most of history until the latter part of the nineteenth century and in most places, normally be carried on without more than an occasional reference to the mass of the subject population. This does not mean either that they were contented or that they didn't have to be taken into account. It merely means that the terms of the relationship between rulers and ruled were arranged in such a way as to keep discontent within acceptable bounds. Furthermore, mostly they were fixed at a level below that on which the top people's politics operated - for instance, locally and not nationally. Conversely, the ordinary people accepted their humble position most of the time. They regarded the king or emperor as by definition just. In a sense he was outside their world of politics and they were outside his.

Grassroots history therefore becomes part of the sort of history that was written traditionally - the history of major political decisions and events - only from the moment when the ordinary people become a constant factor in the making of such decisions and events. By and large this did not begin to happen until the era of the great revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century. The history of the common people as a special field of study therefore began with the history of mass movements at that time and especially of the French Revolution.

It was the French tradition of **historiography*** as a whole, steeped in the history not of the French ruling class but of the French people, which established most of the themes and methods of grassroots history. But the field really began to flourish in other countries only after the Second World War. In fact its real advance only began in the middle 1950s, when it became possible for Marxism to make its full contribution to it.

For the **Marxist***, interest in grassroots history had developed with the growth of the labour movement. This imposed some quite effective blinkers on these historians. They were tempted to study not just any common people, but the common people who could be regarded as ancestors of the Marxist movement: not workers as such but trade unionists and Labour Party militants. And they were also tempted to suppose that the history of the movements and organizations which led the workers' struggle could replace the history of the common people themselves. But this is not so. The history of the Irish revolution of 1916-21 is not identical with the history of the **IRA** or of **Sinn Fein**.* Not until the 1950s did Marxist historians begin to free themselves from this narrow approach.

Whatever its origins and initial difficulties, grassroots history has now taken off. And in looking back upon the history of ordinary people, we are not merely trying to give it a political significance which it did not always have, we are trying more generally to explore an unknown dimension of the past. Grassroots historians spend much of their time finding out how societies work and when they do not work as well as how they change. They start out with the enormous advantage of knowing that they are largely ignorant of either the facts or the answers to their problems. They also have the substantial advantage of knowing how little we know of the past.

Adapted from Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (1997)

- *historiography the way history is written.
- *Marxist follower of the teachings of Karl Marx, the pre-eminent founder of communism.
- *IRA, Sinn Fein Irish nationalist movements, largely working class in membership.

Question 2

Write an essay answering ONE of the following questions. You will gain credit by drawing evidence in your answer from the passage you read in question 1 and from any historical events you have studied.

- a) Is it more important to study states or individuals?
- b) Should historians avoid studying anything that matters personally to them?
- c) How important do you believe local history is to understanding the past?
- d) 'The best way to understand a society is to study its revolutions.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.

SPECIMEN