It is a pleasure and a great honour for me to be presenting this address this evening, the first inaugural address of the Brian Simon Chair of the History of Education. For me personally it is a privilege to have the opportunity to present my third inaugural address, following those in my previous posts at the Universities of Lancaster and Sheffield. I am here to say that it does not get any easier with practice, but as this completes my hat-trick I am hoping that this time they will let me keep the gown.

I am delighted in particular that this Chair is based at the Institute of Education in London, which I have always admired for its pre-eminent contribution to the field of education, and which is part of the life of this great city of London where I was born and brought up, and where I went through my schooling in the state system, owing a great deal to some excellent teachers along the way. My first history teacher was nicknamed Norman, although his true spiritual home was Sparta, and his first report on my progress in the subject was that I showed promise but I must pay more attention to the facts. I hope you will feel I have heeded his words by the end of this lecture.

It is also, may I emphasise, a Chair in the History of Education, which is rare and much to be valued, and an established Chair in this field even more so. It is very apt that this has been created at the Institute of Education, the only established Chair open to international competition in the History of Education in the country at the present
time, where such a strong tradition in the history of education has been cultivated, especially in the last twenty years or so under the leadership of Professors Peter Gordon and Richard Aldrich.

I have been committed to developing historical approaches to understanding ever since I can remember. Throughout my academic career I have been committed to promoting the cause of the history of education, in part to deepen our understanding of history but also and no less urgently to address the nature of education, to comprehend it better and also to help to improve it. It has often been argued that there is a tension between these historical and educational objectives, but I have always found them to be not only exciting and stimulating in their own right, but mutually enriching. I am happy to subscribe to the view of the British social historian Asa Briggs, that the study of the history of education is best considered as part of the wider study of the history of society, social history broadly interpreted with the politics, the economics and, it is necessary to add, the religion put in. Yet I would insist with no less force on the educational value of the history of education. For this I go to the barricades with the French sociologist and professor of pedagogy Emile Durkheim, who began his famous lectures on the formation and development of secondary education in France in 1904, exactly a century ago. It was Durkheim who said so eloquently that it is only by carefully studying the past that we can come to anticipate the future and to understand the present, and so the history of education provides the soundest basis for the study of educational theory. History could also help us to understand the organisation of education and to illuminate the educational ideals which the organisation was designed to achieve, while in broader terms it helped us to understand humanity itself and the aspirations of individuals and groups.
It was for these reasons above all, according to Durkheim, that we should carry out historical research into the manner in which educational configurations have progressively come to cluster together, to combine and to form organic relationships.  

A further point to dwell upon is that this is a named Chair in the history of education, a most unusual creation and indeed unprecedented and unique within Britain so far as I am aware. And last, and the fitting culmination of all these striking features, is the person after whom this Chair is named: the late Brian Simon, the leading and best known historian of education ever produced in this country. It is above all in tribute to his massive contribution to the field that this Chair has been established, and I am honoured to have the opportunity to acknowledge his work from this platform.

Brian commanded very wide respect, in all areas of educational studies and beyond, in Britain and internationally. Unlike many in this audience I only knew him after his retirement from the University of Leicester where he was based throughout his academic career, but since he did more in his retirement than most of us do while we are still being paid for it this hardly seemed to matter. I knew him particularly through the History of Education Society of Great Britain, which he helped to establish and energetically supported. Today, both this Society and the International Standing Conference in the History of Education, which he also led, are flourishing concerns. I counted him as a friend as well as a very supportive senior colleague in the field. Like many others I learned a great deal both from Brian and from his wife Joan, who is a considerable historian of education in her own right, and with whom he formed a formidable partnership that lasted for over sixty years. His personal influence on his many research students and colleagues was immense. And while
thinking about this inaugural lecture I’ve been struck by the number of colleagues, not all historians of education by any means, who have come up to me and said I must mention this, or that; some particular aspect of Brian’s work which reflects his very wide interests, the breadth of his contribution to education in general, from critiques of streaming and intelligence testing to discussions of pedagogy, from primary education to adult education, from local studies to international comparisons and contrasts. If I fail to convey the full measure of this enormous range tonight it is because I wish rather to concentrate on depth – the depth of his contribution to the history of education, though even this in itself is exceptionally broad in its character. It is of course his role in this area of study in particular that the Institute has honoured through the naming of this Chair; and the nature of his contribution has enthralled many who would not count themselves as historians.

In general, then, the establishment of this Chair is a major initiative on the part of the Institute of Education, one of the most promising developments in the field of the history of education in my own professional lifetime. It also reflects the Institute’s broader commitment to reaffirming and redefining the role of the disciplines of education and the importance of the foundations in education. With its size and its strong research base, the Institute of Education is probably better placed than any other institution in the country to pursue this inspiring agenda. I am pleased to give my strong support to this, and to be able to record my gratitude to the present Director for the major part that he has played in helping to bring this about.

It is especially fitting that the Brian Simon Chair is based at the Institute of Education in terms of Simon’s own educational experience of the Institute. In one obvious
sense, this relates to the time that he spent here from 1937 to 1938 in studying for a
diploma in teacher training. He recalled in his memoirs that his course ‘both provided
an induction into teaching itself and allowed for study and discussion of the broader
issues concerning education as a social phenomenon – its aims, procedures and
organisation, including psychological, historical and sociological analysis’.3 He was
taught in the history of education by Professor A.F.C. Beales of King’s College
London, and his lecturers also included the new Director of the Institute, Fred Clarke.
A former pupil teacher who had graduated in history at the University of Oxford, and
highly experienced in higher education in South Africa and Canada as well as in
Britain, Clarke favoured what Simon called a ‘more sociologically oriented, critical,
more open and questioning form of analysis’ than had been apparent before, and
couraged the Institute to be forward looking and innovative.4 This approach did
not perhaps reap immediate dividends for Simon himself. According to his student
record he graduated with a teaching assessment of B-minus, so one assumes that the
prevailing standards were fairly high.5 However, in the longer term, his broad
educational grounding, and especially his encounter with the history of education and
with Clarke himself, were to be of the greatest significance.

It is notable, if coincidental, that while Simon was studying at the Institute Clarke was
giving serious consideration to the idea of appointing a professor of the history of
education. Unlike his predecessor as Director, Percy Nunn, Clarke was inclined to
recruit a specialist to promote the history of education rather than a professor of
education in general.6 In the event, this did not happen, and King’s College
maintained its pre-eminence in the history of education within the University of
London which was to last until the retirement of Professor Kenneth Charlton in 1983.
Not for nearly sixty years was a professor of the history of education actually appointed at the Institute with the promotion of Richard Aldrich to this position. But Clarke’s evident sympathies for the history of education were also to have more lasting results, and indeed I want to argue today that it is here that we can find the clue to Brian Simon’s major legacy to the field.

My principal theme this evening is the legacy of Brian Simon, but I take on what should be a happy task in what may appear to be less than promising circumstances for celebration. Durkheim’s lectures of a century ago at the University of Paris were part of a compulsory course for intending teachers. Less than forty years ago, Brian Simon took it for granted that the study of the history of education would always be included ‘as an essential aspect of the course offered to intending teachers’, as indeed it had been for himself. Today, it has all but vanished from such courses, banished by stringent government requirements in favour of an emphasis on classroom skills. Even the history of the teaching profession itself is conspicuous by its absence, in spite of important new research that is now being published in this area. According to Professor David Vincent, ‘Teachers entering the profession at the beginning of the twenty-first century probably know less about the past of their pedagogy than any cohort since formal training began two centuries ago.’

Brian’s own work would find little or no place in such courses at present, and this is difficult to accept, still less to reconcile with his own conviction that ‘The historical approach should bring educational developments into perspective, and in so doing open the teacher’s eyes to the real nature of his work.’ He insisted that historical study ‘enables the student to understand that educational “principles” contain
historical components, some of which may no longer be relevant – or, in the light of advancing knowledge, viable – and which are, therefore open to reconsideration. Unlike the Conservative government of the late 1980s, the present Government is developing the ideal of ‘informed professionalism’ as the proper basis for a teaching profession. As yet there is little indication that this includes being informed by a historical perspective, so we must fall back on Simon’s own precept, one of my favourites, that there is, perhaps, no more liberating influence than the knowledge that things have not always been as they are and need not remain so.

Awareness of historical research is also currently at a low ebb among educational policy makers, as is amply demonstrated in the marking of the sixtieth anniversary of the Education Act of 1944 over the past few months. The anniversary, in August 2004, might have passed entirely unnoticed, eclipsed as it was even in a slow news month by the exploits of Sven-Goran Eriksson and the Football Association. What few references there were to the 1944 Act among the policy making fraternity, however, were just as significant as the silence that generally prevailed. For example, the chief inspector of schools, David Bell, celebrated the anniversary with the declared aim of exploring its lasting legacy, and considering the extent to which the education system has met the challenges set sixty years ago. His account was uncritical of the ‘visionary thinking’ of R.A. Butler who presided over the Education Act of 1944, and nostalgic for some features of school life at that time. This was to ignore the research of historians of education that has been produced over the last twenty years on the character of the 1944 Act, which has shed a great deal of light on its failures and limitations, as well as on the problematic nature of its lasting contribution to education. Brian Simon was in the vanguard of this research, and
was deeply sceptical of the vision and policies that informed the Act, but these more critical perspectives appear to have done little to shape the ideas of current educational policy makers. At a time when ‘evidence-based policy’ is in vogue, there are few signs that this includes a regard for historical evidence.

In terms of how recent educational policies have related to previous historical developments, too, Simon’s legacy seems clouded. The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has in the last few months cast serious doubt on the ideals of the 1960s; Simon was a leading champion of these. In his inaugural lecture at the University of Leicester, which he presented in 1966, Simon spoke eloquently about the ‘new perspective’ of education that he felt was emerging, which he argued was about creating ‘a system of education with a built-in capacity for change’, rather than adapting and renovating the structural peculiarities of the existing system that had been inherited from the nineteenth century. In education in particular, the reforms of the Conservatives in the 1980s and 1990s, followed by those under ‘New Labour’ since 1997, have posed severe challenges to the ideals of the comprehensive schools and teacher professionalism of Simon’s generation. This was a set of challenges to which Simon rose in his final years to defend the achievements of the 1960s, and to fight a spirited campaign against these new developments; ‘Simon pure of the fourth’, as one journalist put it in 1988, ‘at the head of the anti-government troops’.

In our present situation, then, where should we look to try to identify the nature of Simon’s legacy to the history of education? I think that we can begin by understanding Simon’s own debt to Fred Clarke, and particularly to a short book produced by Fred Clarke at the start of the Second World War, entitled *Education*
And Social Change. This book set out to examine how the English educational tradition, so secure in its general features for many years, should adapt to the challenge of world war and to the changing circumstances of the future. This led him to develop ‘an interpretation, conscious and deliberate, in terms of a social economic history, and then, in the light of that interpretation, to estimate the capacity of the English educational tradition to adapt itself without undue friction or shattering to the demands of a changed order’. This entailed trying to understand the historical determinants of English education, that is, ‘the nature of the social influences by which the forms of English educational institutions have been determined and their practical objectives defined’. In particular, he observed, ‘the mass of the English people have never yet evolved genuine schools of their own’, as they had always been ‘provided for them from above, in a form and with a content of studies that suited the ruling interests’. This tradition of ‘schooling the many for the service and convenience of the few’ continued to influence the nature of education, according to Clarke, and was not easy to throw off. Moreover, he identified three separate, segregated education systems within the English education system, which he likened to the ‘Free Front Door’, the ‘Side Entrance’, and the ‘Front Door on Conditions’ – routes based on social rather than educational differences – and he concluded in magisterial fashion: ‘We can hardly continue to contemplate an England where the mass of the people coming on by one educational path are to be governed for the most part by a minority advancing along a quite separate and more favoured path.’

Especially puzzling in Clarke’s view was the lack of scholarly attention that had been given to these issues. He confessed that he was not aware of any studies of English social structure and class distinction that had set out to establish the social effects of
these different educational routes. Over the following few years, he pursued this theme further, and singled out the importance of developing a history of English education. In a lecture to the Nottingham Education Society at the end of 1940, for example, he asserted that there was no satisfactory history of English education in the two centuries since the Industrial Revolution, ‘taking account of the social, economic and intellectual changes and forces without which the story is unintelligible’. This was, Clarke averred, a ‘great story and cruelly needed now’, but he lamented that ‘no one has told it’, and he was convinced that it could be achieved successfully especially as cognate studies had already been carried out in such areas as economic history.

Finally, in a further published study on the study of education in England, Clarke poured out his frustration at the lack of such works. He called for writings that could explore the connections between ‘English education on the one hand and English social structure and institutions on the other hand’. This would include as the most urgent priority ‘a book or books in which the story is set out, …a history of English education in its full cultural and social setting’. He acknowledged the existence of histories of particular institutions, and essays and biographies on particular reformers, topics and periods, but insisted that there was ‘nothing for education as such comparable to what has been done in economic and constitutional history’. Thus, he complained, ‘We have a vast “History of English Literature” but an adequate “History of English Education” is still to seek.’ This was an ‘extraordinary lack’, and, he concluded, ‘until it is made good we cannot regard ourselves as properly equipped for the tasks even of the immediate future’. Moreover, he added for good measure, it would be for this still unwritten history to show ‘how it came about that English
education works in two distinct sections, very unequal in size’. 26 Only in such a way would it be possible effectively to address ‘that great fissure which still cuts right across English life and education, not preventing the sections on either side from talking to one another, but offering a most formidable barrier to real mutual understanding’. 27

Clarke’s complaints were well founded. Historical studies of education in England, and in Britain as a whole, had been few and far between, and those that had been produced had failed to engage critically with social inequalities and differences. At their worst, indeed, they had combined an impregnable complacency about the virtues of the emerging education system with blindness to its defects. Some works, such as Graham Balfour’s study of the education systems of Great Britain and Ireland at the beginning of the century, set out to do no more than create what Balfour himself described as an ‘impartial and even tedious catalogue of existing agencies’, dealing only with the ‘dry bones’. 28 Others, especially in the interwar period, had identified major social issues such as the historic tensions between the State and the Church, but remained indifferent to socio-economic inequalities. 29 After the Second World War, a new generation of historians, in particular Harry Armitage of the University of Sheffield, began to deepen and extend historical approaches to social and educational change, although still generally with an emphasis on the benign progress of the system in the age of the welfare state. 30

It was Brian Simon’s distinctive and historic achievement that he responded decisively to the challenge that Clarke had set for the postwar generation. Of his many works, Simon’s massive four-volume history of education is surely his
outstanding and defining contribution. What became the first volume in the set covered the period from 1780 to 1870, and explored the nature of educational reform in England during the Industrial Revolution, up to and including the Elementary Education Act of 1870. The second volume took the story up to 1920, the third covered the interwar period, and the fourth and final volume surveyed half a century of educational change from 1940 to 1990. Even if the ensemble as a whole was modestly entitled ‘Studies in the History of Education’, it has come to be regarded as the standard text for the history of education in England, a position it retains today, almost half a century after the publication of the first volume.  

This key work was written over a thirty year period that was marked by massive upheavals but also profound continuities. The first volume was published in 1960, in the heyday of Harold Macmillan, a Conservative prime minister whose party had just won three consecutive general election victories. This was at a time when the minister of education, Sir David Eccles, could insist that, of course, Parliament would never attempt to dictate the curriculum…. It was at the height of the Cold War and the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union. The second came out in 1965, during Harold Wilson’s first Labour government, at the time of Circular 10/65 and the spread of the comprehensive schools. The third, in 1974, emerged at a time of increasing economic and industrial tension, with the fall of Edward Heath’s Conservative government, and shortly before the launch of the so-called ‘Great Debate’ in education. The fourth volume was published in 1991, soon after the downfall of Margaret Thatcher who, like Macmillan, had presided over three consecutive Conservative general election victories, in the aftermath of the Education Reform Act of 1988 which among other things introduced a legally enforced National
Curriculum. It was also after the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of a new world order, not after all the end of history but the beginnings of a new and perhaps even more threatening phase of human development.

In this history, Simon focused his attention squarely on the social significance of the differing educational routes that had developed in England, and at the ‘great fissure which still cuts right across English life and education’ that Clarke had identified before him. He was clear as to how this version of history differed from most accounts: ‘No doubt there was, in one sense, a “silent social revolution” at this time, but the changes brought about in the educational system were ultimately the outcome of battles fought out amid much noise and dust.’ Thus, he insisted, ‘This is not merely a story of philanthropy and growing enlightenment, resulting in a continuous upward curve of development but rather a history of breakthroughs and retreats from which the lesson to emerge for the Labour movement was that nothing is gained (or retained) without persistent and determined pressure.’ Moreover, as he acknowledged, ‘Even this may fail to avert severe setbacks.’

Thus, Simon’s work asserted the importance of social class conflict and social inequalities in understanding the history of education. This is summed up beautifully in the well known cover photograph on the third volume of his major history, on the politics of educational reform in the interwar years, labelled simply: ‘Eton schoolboys – and others – in 1937’.

In this respect, he was clearly aware of his debt to Clarke, and he was frank in his praise for Clarke’s role in sketching out what in Simon’s view was ‘a new function for the educational historian, that of unravelling the social and historical influences
which have played so potent a part in shaping both the schools and what is taught
inside them; and, most important, of distinguishing the genuine educational theory
from the rationalization which seeks to explain away rather than elucidate’.
According to Simon, it was precisely this that enabled the history of education to take
on a new aspect, ‘as a vital contribution to social history – rather than a flat record of
acts and ordinances, punctuated by accounts of the theories of great educators who
entertained ideas “in advance of their time”’.33 Towards the end of his life, Simon
remained committed to this central lesson, that historical study can and should make a
direct contribution to an understanding of the relationship between educational and
social change, as being ‘the crucial issue that confronts the historian’, and continued
to give full credit for this lesson to Fred Clarke.34

And yet at this point there are some significant differences between the approaches
taken by Clarke and Simon that ought to give us pause. Clarke was a liberal thinker
who regarded ideas of a rigid class structure as ‘distracting’, emphasised the value of
adapting existing traditions to new times, and called for both courage and caution,
‘lest hasty revolutionary impulses should lead to the destruction of much that is
valuable and capable of incorporation into the new order’.35 He was also devoutly
religious in his beliefs, and indeed his book *Education And Social Change* was
published in a series of Christian News-Letter Books whose general purpose was
designed ‘to assist thought upon the relation of the Christian faith to present
problems’.36 He was sensitive to the subtleties of English social differences, discreet
in his criticisms of individuals, and willing to compromise in the pursuit of long term
reform – all qualities that helped him to become the first chairman of the Central
Advisory Council of the new Ministry of Education, and to play a key role in the early
development of the postwar education system. In some ways Clarke was an unlikely hero for Simon, who was a Marxist who joined the Communist Party in 1935 when at Trinity College Cambridge, led in this direction like many of his generation by the rise of fascism in Europe and the inequities apparent in capitalism. Clarke and Simon were certainly representatives of different generations and were shaped in their thinking by distinct currents of ideas, but it is tempting also to see them as representing different types of approach to the political and social Establishment – Clarke the reformist and the consummate insider, skilful and persuasive in his dealings with entrenched interests, Simon the critic and the passionate outsider, storming the citadel with a stage army of the good.

It was Simon’s own political beliefs that underlay his specific interpretation of the history of education. This was essentially the story of what Simon called ‘the working-class struggle for education’. According to Simon, at least since 1832, ‘It is primarily in the working-class movement that there is expressed the fervent belief in the power of human reason, in science, in education as an essential means to individual and social development’. This in turn was part of what Simon regarded as ‘the continuing struggle for socialism – for a society in which classes would be abolished and the opportunity for full human development made equally available for all’. In Simon’s version of the history of education, the originators of the state education system in the nineteenth century such as Robert Lowe and Kay-Shuttleworth spoke for middle class interests in undermining those of the organised working class, in education as in society as a whole. It is the contest between these opposing class interests that Simon portrays as playing itself out in the domain of education throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
Simon succeeded brilliantly in producing a Marxist account that seemed to be plausible as a way of interpreting the development of education in England, as opposed to the liberal pieties that had held the field in thrall for many years. This allowed him to portray the Education Act of 1902, for example, in a very different way. The provision of state-aided secondary education for a small academic minority, which the Act introduced, was in his view at the expense of the educational interests of the majority of the population. He was in many ways in the vanguard of the British Marxist historians of the mid-twentieth century, for which he has not always been given full credit.

A key feature of Simon’s interpretation of educational history is its emphasis on the role of the State not as a benign or neutral umpire but as an active and often undermining agent on behalf of class interests. His general argument was that pressure for change came from the working class through its political representatives, often rebuffed but never to be thwarted in the longer term. The State was not to be trusted, whether in the guise of the Norwood committee which produced a notorious rationalisation of social inequalities in education during the Second World War that helped to justify the so-called tripartite system of secondary schools in the 1940s and 1950s; or of Labour governments that failed to pursue the cause of comprehensive schools with sufficient vigour or commitment to thwart their many critics. Although ‘some working class leaders might accept Liberal ideas, and seek to climb into the middle class themselves’, he insisted that ‘under the influence of the hard facts of life the working-class movement would always rediscover its own needs and take up the struggle for its own aims’.
Simon’s history had a potent appeal because it spoke to contemporary debates and made sense in these terms. It provided an explanation for social inequalities in education could no longer be ignored. It addressed the role of elite groups and individuals and of the State itself that seemed to loom ever larger in the control of the education system. It gave meaning to the many disappointments and failures of reform in education over the past two centuries. And yet it also contrived to offer hope and inspiration for the future, as Simon insisted that although ‘periods of advance’ were too often followed by ‘powerful and deliberate moves to turn back the clock’, or else to ‘direct breakthroughs into innocuous channels’, in the long run there would be a genuinely national system of education that met the needs of all. It was a persuasive analysis with an overarching theme, in Clarke’s terms a ‘great story’, and is still the yardstick which new work in the field must measure itself against today.

In the new century, nevertheless, we must be alert to the possibilities for developing different interpretations of our educational history. In one sense this requires us to investigate other aspects of social change over time that are not so bound up in notions of social class. Over thirty years ago, the sociologist Peter Musgrave was anxious that a dependence on social class as an analytical concept would undermine potential connections with other theoretical models, and might for this reason potentially stand in the way of relating the understanding gained in this specific field to general theories of social change. More particularly, according to Musgrave, ‘This method fails to identify other important foci in the process of educational development and of social change’. In fact, the task of identifying other important foci is now well under way. New research on gender differences, on the role of the
family, on ethnicity, culture and national identity, on religion, on the experience of
teaching and learning, on individual biography, and other areas has already done
much to supersede a preoccupation with social class, with a recognition of a wide
range of ways in which education has related to social change. This is crucial for
the health and vitality of the field in the future, for it means that there are many fresh
themes for scholars to pursue.

Within the sphere of social class itself there is also ample scope for further reflection
and research. Social class inequalities remain at all levels of our education system,
and historical research must never allow us to forget these or to take them for granted.
Yet there are a number of ways, especially informed by new sociological and
historical insights on the nature of social class in the past thirty years, in which we can
build on Simon’s work in new and interesting directions. Part of this process must
entail asking questions of previous work in the best traditions of historical
scholarship. How far did forward thinking in education really emanate principally
from the working class movement, and can we identify a broader range of approaches
to education based in different social strata? Was the State always as monolithic and
conspiratorial as it sometimes appears in Simon’s work? Does the historical
relationship between education and social change tend to simplify the basic issues, or
rather to complicate them? Is the keynote of the history of education in this country
not Security, as Clarke suggested, but insecurity, as individuals and groups have
struggled to get an edge, a fighting chance for respectability in a status-ridden society,
through the opportunities offered by education? It is important for us to continue to
evaluate these issues and to encourage debate about them.
In conclusion, how would I want to define Simon’s legacy to the history of education as the first holder of the Chair that bears his name? First, I would argue that the key role of the historian of education is to understand the relationship between education and social change, in all its many forms. Brian’s own work provides us with an excellent and well developed example of such an approach, and the impact and appeal that this can have. It is of course just one example, and there can be many other approaches in the same general tradition. Indeed, history of education when conceived in this way is a very broad church; it is not a narrow sect. There will be orthodoxies, and it will attract strong convictions, but there should be ample scope for difference, for diversity, and for vigorous debate. Only in this way can it be free to develop, to grow, to adapt to changing conditions. The relationship between Brian Simon and Fred Clarke again points us towards this – they were very different in their educational, social and political ideals, but Simon learned a great deal from Clarke and built on his ideas. So can we do with Simon, in the same spirit, even if we may have differences from him. Even as society continues to develop in the years to come we can still draw a great deal from Simon’s work.

Second, I would want to recommend a policy of active and vigorous engagement between historians of education and other educationists, historians, and social scientists of different backgrounds and interests. This points towards the forging of partnerships and alliances, as opposed to a retreat into the safe but obscure backwater. At a time of rapid changes and often intense debate in the social sciences in the early years of the twenty-first century, it is perhaps especially important for us to engage with broad problems identified in different fields of social research. It is necessary in doing so to engage in a critical and often a sceptical manner, to subject theoretical
models to rigorous analysis related to different historical contexts and different types of evidence. In our engagements and partnerships we should not be overawed by the reputations of our partners, but exploit the opportunities that exist to make our own distinctive contributions based on our own experience and expertise. In this, again, Brian Simon is an excellent role model, as he was frank and unflinching in his conversations with sociologists and other social scientists, for example on the general issue of whether education can change society, and in relation to the implications of Marxist theory. Simon did this, it seems to me, not in any spirit of hostility or rivalry, but robustly, confidently and assertively.

Nor should we retreat into a ‘Golden Age’ of the past. Some historians of education have been so nostalgic about the advances of the field in the 1960s that they cast doubt on the future of the field. But this is to idealise a previous generation, and potentially to undermine our own. We should rather give due appreciation to previous work, but learn from their weaknesses and blind spots as well as their strengths, in pursuing our new agendas for the future.

Third, if all this is not enough, I wonder whether there is now potential for a fresh synthesis in the history of education for a new generation to respond to the challenges of a new century. It is quite startling that there has been so little work of this type in the past thirty years. There has been plenty of specialist research with a great deal of depth, but breadth has been less in evidence. Little work has attempted to encompass the history of education even of the past two centuries, to say nothing of the previous millennium and beyond, and indeed there is regrettably little research to link earlier periods before the nineteenth century with our own, in the way that Joan Simon for
example once developed. Simon’s legacy, his own excellent example of synthesis, leaves us with this still unanswered challenge for the bolder souls among us. Simon also helped to point the way towards a more internationally minded history, in which we can draw comparisons and contrasts between different systems and cultures, as well as different periods of time, rather than sticking rigidly to the single case.

And fourth and last, we must strive to do so in a way that relates to ordinary readers, public debates, and everyday interests and concerns as well as to specialists and educationists, preaching the message that as Simon put it on the first page of the first volume of his greatest work, ‘the history of education is full of incident and interest, touching on all sides of life, on the outlook and interests of all classes of society’. From one of the most distinguished graduates of the Institute of Education, and one of the greatest teachers and interpreters of the Institute’s best ideals throughout his long educational career, there could surely be no finer, nor a more appropriate testament than this.
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I should like to acknowledge Professor Richard Aldrich and Professor Roy Lowe for their very helpful comments on a draft of this lecture.


4 Ibid., pp. 16-17.

5 Brian Simon, student card, Institute of Education London (Institute of Education student record archive).

6 Percy Nunn to Fred Clarke, 5 January 1937 (Fred Clarke papers, Institute of Education London, file 38).


8 See Gary McCulloch, ‘I’m a teacher, get me back into here: student teachers in history and memory’, Journal of Educational Administration and History, 2004 in press


11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.


20 Ibid., p. 4.

21 Ibid., p. 43.

22 Ibid., pp. 43-4.

23 Ibid., p. 43.

24 Fred Clarke, ‘The English idea in education’, lecture to the Nottingham Education Society, 16 November 1940 (Clarke papers, file 30. I am most grateful to Sir Fred Clarke’s daughter, Dr Claudia Clarke, for allowing me access to these papers, now located at the Institute of Education, while they were in her possession.)


26 Ibid., p. 39.

27 Ibid., p. 45.


36 Ibid., General Preface.


