

AEA

Edexcel AEA

History (9846)

This Examiners' Report relates to Mark  
Scheme Publication Code: UA018335

Summer 2006

Examiners' Report

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Publications Code UA 018335

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## Introduction

Between 2002 and 2004, the entry for AEA History was static at around five hundred candidates. In 2005 the number rose to something approaching eight hundred. This year there was a further substantial increase which took the number sitting the examination beyond one thousand for the first time. This figure remains well short of a notional target candidature for AEA History of around four thousand - the top ten per cent of the A Level entry - but it nevertheless exceeds by a significant margin the number who took the S Level qualification which the Advanced Extension Award replaced.

The increase in the candidature for AEA History has not been accompanied by any fundamental change in its nature and composition. The majority of candidates are clearly the very high attainers for whom the examination is designed. They are able readily to comprehend complex unseen source material; they can think quickly on their feet and construct arguments which address the specific demands of questions set; and, above all, they are not disconcerted by the absence of tightly prescribed content and in some cases even appear to relish the unpredictability of the examination. There continues, however, to be a minority of candidates who are manifestly not A grade candidates in A Level terms and who as a result struggle with the demands of AEA. These candidates find the source material challenging, lack the depth of contextual knowledge needed to handle effectively Qu 1(b) in particular and, perhaps above all, do not possess the high level of literacy needed to express ideas with economy and real incisiveness. Given the nature of the examination, observed one examiner, literacy matters and is bound to influence judgement to some degree. Whether it is a kindness to enter sub-A grade candidates for AEA is a point centres may wish to consider.

This year's examination in general worked effectively as a test of high attainment, discriminating satisfactorily between candidates of differing abilities and, statistically, stretching them out a little more than the 2005 examination. Statistical analysis also suggested that the examination's overall level of demand was marginally higher than in 2005. The mean mark for this year's examination was 30.6 compared with 32.6 last year in circumstances where the GCSE records of the 2006 cohort were on average a shade more distinguished than those of their 2005 counterparts. In other words, this year's candidature appears to have been a little stronger than last year's and so the reasons for the fall in the mean mark are to be sought within the examination paper rather than within the candidature. The principal reason for the increased level of demand of this year's examination may well have been Qu 1(c). Though far from inaccessible, it was a question on what in A Level terms was a relatively unfamiliar theme and in addition some candidates did not find it easy to come fully to terms with the density of argument in Source 2 in particular. These considerations may help to account for the relatively large number of narrowly-focused set piece answers on the impossibility of objectivity in history seen by examiners. Another factor which may have been responsible for depressing the mean mark was Qu 5, where a fair number of candidates succumbed to the temptation to produce work which was largely descriptive in character. Naturally, issues relating to the level of challenge of the examination paper were at the forefront of awarders' minds when this year's grade boundaries were fixed.

## Section A

Question 1(a) is essentially a comprehension question but one pitched at a higher level of demand than its AS or A2 equivalent. The source itself was in relation to A Level challenging in terms of both its wording and the sophistication of its arguments; the material on which candidates were required to draw was dotted through the source rather than being concentrated in one part of it; and if all the relevant arguments were to be teased out a well-developed capacity for making inferences was needed. Essentially, three reasons were offered within the source in support of the claim that popular history and heritage had become key zones for the 'dumbing down' of British culture: they simplified history, they falsified history and they concentrated on glamorous or notorious historical figures in a manner analogous to the contemporary obsession with celebrity. The most easily identifiable of these three reasons was the alleged simplifying tendency of popular history and heritage and very few candidates indeed were unable to make something of it. The point about the falsification of the past was less obvious and for many candidates it proved to be elusive. The author's observations about popular history on television inviting viewers briefly into the lives of the great and famous needed explanation and clarification but too many candidates contented themselves with quotation or paraphrase.

Common weaknesses in answers to Question 1(a) were much as in previous years. Some candidates failed to concentrate on the business of comprehension and instead evaluated or otherwise commented on the source - suggesting, for example, that James Sharpe was an intellectual snob. Others, quite unnecessarily, introduced knowledge of their own into their answers. The most common weakness, though, was writing at excessive length. Two sides of an answer book were not uncommon and three not unknown. The answers of those who wrote at excessive length invariably contained a significant element of paraphrase. Centres might point out to candidates that the best answers to 1(a) tend to be offered by candidates with the self-confidence not only to express the author's ideas with their own words but also to sequence these ideas in a manner of their own choosing as opposed to aping the sequence of the original. Candidates might also usefully be reminded that 1(a) is designed as a 'starter' question which ought to be despatched relatively briskly: two or three sides of the answer book are neither expected nor required. The best answers, noted one examiner, were often among the shortest.

Question 1(b) was a test of candidates' ability to identify an appropriate historical individual or episode and to select and deploy their knowledge and understanding of a specific historical context. The latter for many proved to be more difficult than the former - that is, candidates were able to make an apt choice of 'popularly held view' but lacked the detailed knowledge needed to deconstruct the view in question. Interestingly, a high proportion of the most successful answers to this question focused on medieval or early modern topics. Examples included Richard I, King John, Magna Carta, Richard III, the 'Gloriana' image of Elizabeth I, the Spanish Inquisition, Cromwell in Ireland and (especially) Mary Tudor. Some very good answers based on late modern or contemporary topics were seen, notably on the French resistance, but on the whole the modernists, in particular those specialising in the interwar dictatorships, fared less well than their medievalist or early modernist counterparts. Too many candidates who wrote about Hitler offered surveys of 'structuralist' and 'intentionalist' approaches to the history of National Socialist Germany without making enough of an attempt to adapt this material to meet the specific requirements of the question set. The best work seen on National Socialist Germany drew on Robert Gellately's *The Gestapo and German Society* (1990) to argue that the popular image of the Gestapo as an extraordinarily large organisation

possessing the manpower to keep the whole of German society under close surveillance is a myth. At the other end of the scale, a small number of candidates allowed themselves in 1(b) to be lured into terminally unprofitable discussions of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. Candidates need to be aware that Question 1(b) is designed more than anything else to test levels of historical knowledge, with the highest rewards going to those able to display what by good A Level standards is genuine depth of knowledge. Anything smacking of sketchiness or mere assertion will not impress.

Question 1(c) in 2005 was a comparatively straightforward affair which invited candidates to consider why it was that historians' interpretations so frequently differed - an issue which would inevitably have been encountered in some form in the course of mainstream A Level study. The starting-point of the 2006 1(c) - the differences between history and heritage - was less of a known quantity to candidates and thus challenged their capacity to think on their feet. The vast majority of candidates rightly concluded that consideration of the issue of historical objectivity needed to feature strongly in answers, but some offered prepared accounts which made only limited use of the sources. Responses of this kind tended simply to endorse the quotation which formed the basis of the question, effectively offering a one-dimensional argument to the effect that history and heritage are riddled with similar defects since neither could hope to be objective. Abler candidates by and large offered a more subtle, nuanced judgement, recognising the impossibility of complete objectivity but suggesting that history was more scrupulous in its regard for evidence than heritage. Answers of this sort often drew effectively on what James Sharpe had to say in Source 1 about the *modus operandi* of the academic historian and by so doing began to offer an effective synthesis of what was in the sources and 'own knowledge'. At the top end of the range were candidates who not only offered a secure discussion of the issue of objectivity but also ranged beyond it by, for example, arguing that history complicates where heritage simplifies or that history is dynamic, with interpretations subject to endless revision, where heritage tends to be static. Overall, as in previous years, candidates probably found 1(c) to be more demanding than any other question on the paper. This is not surprising: producing a well-developed, well-controlled synthesis of source material and 'own knowledge' on an unfamiliar topic under test conditions is an exceptionally difficult thing to do.

## Section B

If candidates flock to one of the four Section B questions and shun the remaining three, examiners are left to ponder whether the examination was in practice as stimulating as they would have hoped. The ideal outcome is perhaps an even four-way split among the candidature between the four Section B questions. Judged by this criterion, the 2006 examination did not do too badly at all. There were takers in significant numbers for all four of the questions, though it was Questions 2 and 5 which proved the most popular.

Question 2 provoked a range of responses and discriminated effectively between candidates of differing abilities. Many interpreted it not as a generic question about the nature of political history as a genre of historical writing but as a period-specific one - addressing, for instance, the question 'To what extent is the political history of Tudor England the history of elites?' Given the wording of the question, this was a legitimate approach and when done well exacted full reward. The least impressive work on Question 2 tended simply to endorse the quotation and offered exemplar material on the elites in action. A more profitable, though still relatively limited, approach fleshed out basic endorsement of the quotation by seeking to offer reasons why it is that political history focuses on the elites. Stronger work was invariably characterised by a more balanced judgement which accepted that elites inevitably figure prominently in political history but also argued persuasively that non-elites could not be written out of the script. Reasons given for the necessity of bringing non-elites within the pale of political history included the fear, and actuality, of riot, rebellion and revolution; the growth of the media; the emergence of democracy; and the waging of war. In the very best work arguments of this kind were supported by a formidable and impressive range of reference.

Question 3 elicited a good deal of impressive work, though in some cases candidates simply illustrated what counter-factual history is rather than evaluating it as an approach to the writing of history. Candidates who were able to argue a case tended to split roughly evenly between proponents and critics of counter-factualism. The former were often very well versed in the arguments advanced in Niall Ferguson's *Virtual History* (1997) while the latter produced some of the most engaged and lively writing seen in the examination as a whole. In the very best work, usually characterised by a recognition that there was something to be said on both sides of the case, the point that counter-factual history ceases to be valuable when it outruns the available evidence and lapses into mere speculation was often well made and impressively exemplified.

Question 4 was the least popular of the Section B questions and, as one examiner noted, polarised candidates rather than achieving steady differentiation between them. In other words, responses to Question 4 were in the main either strong or weak with comparatively little in the middle part of the range. Strong candidates were able to focus their discussions firmly on the usefulness of the arts to the social historian and were as well able to exemplify their ideas impressively. The most secure exemplification tended to come from imaginative literature, followed by the visual arts with music a poor third. The examiners were not, however, too insistent on a balance between the three in circumstances where candidates had clearly got hold of what the question was about. Weaker candidates tended to offer generic writing on the usefulness of the arts to the historian with little or no attempt to angle what they had to say towards the social historian. In work of this kind such exemplification as was offered tended to relate to political history, with observations being made, for example, about the inaccurate and tendentious character of portraits of the likes of Stalin and Elizabeth I. A minority of candidates

offered unadapted A Level essays on the use made of the arts by the inter-war dictators and by so doing sadly missed the point pretty comprehensively.

Question 5 was, along with Question 2, the most popular of the essays but on the whole it was not as well done as Question 2. The best work, as anticipated, was argument-led rather than example-led. The strongest candidates instinctively looked for themes, concepts or categories around which to organise their answer. Some chose to categorise of 'problems' as political, social or economic while others distinguished between foreign and domestic problems or long and short term problems. Work of this kind, if solidly exemplified, scored highly. Many candidates, though, produced work reminiscent of the 'narrative plus links' approach sometimes seen in A Level - that is, they offered a descriptive account of a war (usually World War One) or wars and tacked on to the end of it some observations relating to the solution or otherwise of problems.

## Statistics

### 9846 Advanced Extension Award History (1075 candidates)

Grade	Max. Mark	Dist	Merit	U
Raw boundary mark	60	37	29	0
Cumulative % of candidates		22.2	61.9	100.0

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