

## “RESEARCH” WORK:

### What it is, and how to Set about it

*We have many times urged Plebs—or groups of Plebs—to set themselves to do some research work into local history, industrial development, etc. We believe that a tremendous amount of useful work in this direction lies waiting to be tackled. But many comrades are rather terrified at the sound of the word “research.” They imagine that only those with some sort of special training can undertake research work. We believe, on the other hand, that scores of N.C.L.C. students only need a little initial encouragement to be well able to do it. With this object we have asked three or four PLEBS writers to contribute articles describing their own methods, and giving such hints as they can. Here is the first, by R. W. Postgate.*

#### I.

**S**TUDY is of two kinds : *firstly*, it may be merely study of a certain book, or of a certain subject as presented by a certain lecturer ; as, for example, Webb’s *History of Trades Unionism* or Mark Starr’s lectures upon “Surplus Value in Polynesia.” *Secondly*, it may be general study of a subject not contained in a single volume, or series of volumes, and this study may be protracted and detailed, and involve what is called original work. In this case, we commonly call it *research work*. But it is important to remember that research work is no more than an extension and enlargement of the ordinary study as carried on by an ordinary student. Any successful N.C.L.C. student can carry out a piece of research work if he chooses. Any successful student who has studied his subject at all deeply in fact *has* carried out research work, all but the final step of putting his results on paper.

Now I have been asked to describe briefly and concretely the methods of historical research. Everybody has his own pet devices, but the general method does not vary. If you want it in a nutshell, it is (1) accumulation of facts ; (2) reflections on these facts, selection of them and formation of hypotheses ; (3) testing the facts and the hypotheses ; (4) exposition.

Not much wiser ? Well, take a concrete instance. We are, say, students living in Monmouth. We first pick the subject. As we are near Newport, we decide to make a study of the Chartist Insurrection of 1839. It is to be presumed that we are not totally ignorant of English history. Let us say we have read the *PLEBS Outlines*. First of all we proceed to prepare our minds. We read Beer’s *History of Socialism* and other books mentioned in the *PLEBS What*

to Read. At this point we are not taking notes, and are doing no more than renewing an acquaintance with the period.

Having read, say, Beer, the new *PLEBS Outline*, and Webb's *Trade Unionism* (very little to help there) we decide to get to work. The first job is the accumulation of facts.

There are two kinds of historical sources, *secondary* and *primary*. Primary are original documents—letters, memoirs, contemporary journals, etc. Secondary are later histories written by people not actors in the case. It is best to start with the secondary materials, so that, when you come to write, what is most recently in your mind is not someone else's interpretation. We start, therefore, by taking full notes of Beer's book, Postgate's *Revolution*, Ch. III. (sorry !), and a history of Chartism discovered in our local reference library—Mark Hovell's. At this point we note down everything likely to become significant, with its page reference—even if we know it already. As, for example (this is imaginary) :—

BEER I. 253. Frost, John, intervened to save Duke of Beaufort from Whig Mob, 8/1/32, Newport.

255. Zephaniah Williams, a clockmaker.—N.B. No colliers among leaders.

256. Lord Tredegar as chief colliery owner in Risca area.

It is quite likely that we shall have to go back over these again, as we are not wholly sure yet as to what facts are going to be significant. But we hope for the best. We take these notes absolutely straightforwardly, not attempting to classify them in accordance with any theory. We have no theories yet.

This accumulation of facts goes on for as long as possible. "Accumulation of data should only be interrupted by death" is the remark ascribed to a Victorian scientist. We fall short of this ideal, but upon the wideness of our observation depends the value of our history. Therefore, when we have exhausted the books that obviously demand reading, and almost start out of the library shelves into our hands, we ask the librarian if he can get us certain others (from a central depot) mentioned in the bibliographies of the books we have read. If we can interest him, we are more likely to get them. While awaiting their arrival, we read the relevant chapters of the economic or social histories of England in the library—making notes without ceasing—because we find that the history cannot be written without an economic introduction. We also scan fairly quickly the memoirs of persons living at this date, in the hope of picking up some trifles. A glance at the Index for "Frost," "Chartist," "O'Connor," or "Newport" is often enough here.

We proceed to read the local histories of Monmouth and of Newport; some useful and dramatic matter here. We begin to take fuller notes, in some cases copying out whole passages likely to be useful for quotation, marking them in our notebook by some easily distinguished sign—say a big Q.

But the richest seam is the file of the local paper, the *Merlin*, which in due course provides the thickest pile of notes. We read all, including even the advertisements, of the 1839 file; earlier years we turn over fairly carefully from about 1830. We enter the West-gate Hotel, partake of refreshment, and see the marks of the Chartist bullets. We collect unreliable local gossip. The report of Frost's trial, together with some likely pamphlets, we find in the National Library of Wales, of which the librarian lends us a catalogue—or consults the catalogue for us. The fare to inspect this is, apart from a half of bitter, the only expenditure involved up to date.

But while this has been going on we have passed from stage 1 (accumulation of data) to 2 (reflection and selection). We read over our notes and try to form a general idea of the period. Conscious choice and experience act here. Suppose we say the period falls into these main divisions:—

- (A) Outline of economic background. (B) History leading up to the insurrection, viz.: Reform movement, organisation of Chartism nationally. (C) Organisation of Chartism in South Wales; preparations of insurrection. (D) The insurrection. (E) The trials and repression.

Seizing a large blue pencil we return to our notes and classify each entry, A, B, D, etc.

Then we may take one of two courses. We may adjourn any writing at all until we have everything clear in our heads. Actually we are more likely to write out right away certain sections which seem straightforward, and adjourn consideration of the more difficult parts. But as this is a small study, we will, for the sake of clearness, assume that we write nothing whatever until we have all the preliminary work completed.

We are now well into stage 2 of our work—the creative stage. The Formation of Hypotheses sounds very terrifying; it is really only asking yourself, "How are these events explained? What theory of their sequence is most probable?" It is as well to challenge yourself with every possible hypothesis, and then proceed to test it (stage 3) by the facts. As, for example:—

*Hypothesis 1.* That the Insurrection was organised by police spies.

*Hypothesis 2.* That the Chartists were betrayed by their leaders.

*Hypothesis 3.* That the rank and file carried their leaders away.

*Hypothesis 4.* That there was no insurrection.

And so forth. You may say the last hypothesis is silly. Far from it. You find that at the trial the defence made a continued attempt to suggest there was no insurrection, nothing but a noisy public meeting transformed into a riot by police provocation. In all such cases we have to remember that false stories—cunningly fabricated false stories—have often been put about for propaganda. Also pure "legpulls" are possible. (For example, I had once fully written out (but I suppressed) an account of a non-existent French revolutionary, M. Lerepaire Desmoustiques, Deputy for the Bouches-du-Rhône.

Sooner or later somebody would have suspected this "Mr. The-Haunt-of-Mosquitoes" from a blazing district occupied chiefly by stagnant pools. But I believe I should have got away with it for a long time.)

Well, you form these hypotheses on every question that arises. You check them by the facts, and find which suit the facts best. But here you are often abruptly checked by a difficulty which does not worry investigators in the exact sciences. If a scientist wishes to be sure what is the distance from the earth to the sun, or how many beans make five, he can repeat the experiments by which these truths were first discovered. But we cannot repeat the Newport insurrection. As, for example, the question arises: "Was there or was there not a secret, all-England, revolutionary organisation for which the Newport revolt was to act as a signal?" We arrange the evidence, say, something as follows:—

Lovett says "Yes." But he wishes to discredit O'Conner, his enemy, and he is only repeating gossip. Still, he was a man of good character and not a liar.

Sir John Campbell says "Yes." But he was Attorney-General and his job was to get a conviction.

Sir Frederick Pollock says "No" and knocks Campbell's tale into a cocked hat on technical grounds. But Campbell's tale is only one of several, and Pollock was defending counsel.

O'Conner says "No." But he was a liar and he was probably shielding himself.

A pamphlet, *The Newport Riots*, says "Yes" and gives full and plausible details. But it is anonymous.

When you have collected all the evidence, you have to act as judge and jury—without the possibility of cross-examination. You are not likely to arrive at more than a probability, and you may at this point most easily "show bias."

We take our decision; and now at last we raise our pen or address our docile class. Stage 4—Exposition—commences.

On this there is not much to be said. We must be able to write grammatical and clear English. This, like roller-skating, is an art within the reach of anybody. But remember, we shall not interest our readers unless we are interested ourselves. If we grind on mechanically like a sausage machine we shall only produce sausages. We shall not make our readers see Frost and his army marching on the Westgate Hotel unless we in our mind see him—see him as clearly as if we had looked at him in the flesh marching at the head, in black coat and high collar, with a blazing red tie incongruously thrusting out, and watched his hands nervously twisting and plucking at his coat. We can *talk* of oppression as much as we like, but unless we have visualised the tommyshops and the mining village, neither will our readers see them.

R. W. POSTGATE.