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Article Summary: Fling, who taught history at the University of Nebraska for more than forty years, led a drive to place better-qualified history teachers in high schools. He called for the introduction of a scientific historical method.

Cataloging Information:

Fling's Texts of Historical Methodology: *Outline of Historical Method*, 1899; *The Writing of History: An Introduction to Historical Method*, 1915

More Recent Texts of Historical Method: Jacques Barzun and Henry F Graff, *The Modern Researcher*, 1957 (6th ed, 2002); Jules R Benjamin, *A Student's Guide to History*, 1975 (7th ed, 1998); Robert V Daniels, *Studying History, How & Why*, 1966-1981; *The Student Writer's Manual*, 1998; *Writing History: A Guide for Students*, 1999

Place Names: Lincoln, Nebraska; Leipzig, Germany

Photographs / Images: J E Le Rossignol, W G Langworthy Taylor, and Fred Morrow Fling, when they were students at the University of Leipzig in the late 1880s

FRED MORROW FLING

A One-Hundred-Year Retrospective

• ON HISTORICAL METHODOLOGY •

By Oliver B. Pollak

In 1899 Fred Morrow Fling published his 124-page *Outline of Historical Method*. Fling, born in 1860, earned his doctorate in history at the University of Leipzig in 1890 and came to teach history at the University of Nebraska in 1891. He taught there more than forty years, and his students included Willa Cather and Mari Sandoz. He died in 1934. Fling's career has been reviewed by Robert Carlson in a 1981 *Nebraska History* article.¹

Fling's *Outline of Historical Method* reveals history teaching, research, and writing at the end of the nineteenth century. His *Outline* joined a newly expanding genre on historical methodology including *Methods of Teaching History* (1883), *The Methods of Historical Study* (1886), *The Study of History in American Colleges and Universities* (1887), and *Method in History for Teachers and Students* (1897).² Fling recognized that "only in our generation has literature of any size, containing treatises upon method of considerable length, come into existence."³

Fling prepared his *Outline* to "crusade" for the "better teaching of history" by qualified history teachers in high schools. It was written at the height of university influence on the high school history curriculum, and at a time when professional historians wanted to separate themselves from literature and philosophy. His first paragraph voices the perennial historian's complaint that at the high school level, anyone can be expected to be assigned to teach history,

but no one would expect Latin or Greek to be taught by other than a trained and qualified teacher. Fling, himself, had taught high school history, mathematics, and Greek for five years.⁴ He called for the introduction of a scientific historical method that would bar the well rounded amateur from teaching history.

Fling summarized two books to make them accessible to teachers "unable to read them" in the original. One was Ernst Bernheim's six-hundred-page *Lehrbuch der historischen methode* (1889) which "marks an epoch." "For the first time a real textbook on method had been produced." Fling suggested that George C. Berry's 1898 translation (as *Introduction to the Study of History*) of Charles V. Langlois's and Charles Seignobos's more popular treatise, *Introduction aux Etudes Historiques* (1897), "should be in the library of every student and teacher of history."

The study of history entered a professional and scientific period in Germany with the publication of *Historische Zeitschrift* in 1859. The founding of the American Historical Association led to the appearance of the *American Historical Review* in 1895. Science and facts gave this generation of historians a sense of certitude. Perhaps responding to French sociologist Emile Durkheim's *De la division du travail social* (1893), published as *The Division of Labor in Society* in 1933, Fling observed that "Historical work is becoming every year more differentiated, and to make it successful the heartiest co-operation must exist among workers." Fling, perhaps, had not anticipated that differentiation could lead historians down sometimes

irreconcilable paths.⁵ Fling's expectation that "all writers of a given generation will have much in common," concurred with the developing theory of the Sociology of Knowledge, reaching its height with Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*, appearing first in German in 1931.

Fling wanted history teachers to use the "auxiliary sciences" of paleography, diplomatics, and philology (the sciences of writing, documents, and language), as well as geography, ethnology, economics, sociology, philosophy, logic, anthropogeography, anthropology, and especially individual and social psychology, "the Volksgeist," for writing true history. Documents were "the traces of psychological operations." Knowledge of psychology promoted effective teaching and assisted researchers in verifying valid and spurious documents.

Historical understanding relied on knowledge of "physical, psychical, and social conditions." Georg Simmel's *Die Probleme de Geschichtsphilosophie* (1892), influenced Fling and, no doubt, John Dewey's *Psychology* (1887), William James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890), and Gustave LeBon's *Lois psychologiques de l'evolution des peuples* (1895) (translated in 1896 as *The Crowd, A Study in the Popular Mind*) did also.⁶ The influence of Charles Darwin is revealed in Fling's references to evolution and his reliance on Bernheim's definition: "History is the science of the evolution of man in his activities as a social being," to which Fling added that history treats "society in motion, evolving," rather than "in repose."⁷ The historian should be acquainted with "the spirit of the age" (the title of an 1831

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Fred Morrow Fling



Three University of Nebraska professors were fellow students at the University of Leipzig in the late 1880s: J. E. LeRossignol (left), W. G. Langworthy Taylor, and Fred Morrow Fling (right).
Nebraska Alumnus, December 1932

essay by John Stuart Mill), and must endeavor "to put one's self in the place of the historical personage and to feel and think as he felt and thought."

Fling identified three types of sources: oral, written, and pictorial. Written documents were at the center of history. Oral tradition, "the least reliable of all," became "utterly unreliable and worthless," as it passed down the gen-

erations. Photographs were an immensely useful development because artists' depictions were of "little value."

Establishing the genuineness and validity of a document, "localizing" it by determining who wrote it and when and where it was written, was "critical work *par excellence*." Students and laypeople were too easily convinced of a statement's truth, and were misled by

falsity and forgeries. Sources must be tested for external and internal validity. No inference should be drawn from a single source or an isolated observation. "The testimony of two or more eyewitnesses is sufficient to establish a fact, but on the condition that the witnesses are independent of each other."

Fling's conception of the great historian was "the man who possesses in ad-

dition to technical training the genius that enables him to combine the facts." Facts were grouped or organized around logical, chronological, and geographical themes. The lack of scientific training and histories whose main purpose was to "entertain" did a grave disservice as they "repeatedly sacrificed the truth in their effort to please." "The first demand made upon the historian is to tell the truth, to tell us exactly what he knows and what he does not know." Multivolume popular histories were "the dime novels of historical literature." As a model of a good history, Fling recommended George Burton Adams's *Civilization of the Middle Ages* (1894).

Fling's advocacy of the "source study method" resulted in his publication of several student source books. With his colleague, Howard W. Caldwell, he prepared source books on European and American history in 1897; Grecian and Roman civilization in 1898 and 1899; the French Revolution in 1899 (with Helen Dresser Fling); and wrote ten annual issues of *European History* during the academic years 1897, 1898, and 1899. All were published in Lincoln. Similar pedagogical compilations were prepared at Harvard and Columbia universities and at the Universities of Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Indiana.⁸ Greek, Roman, Medieval, and European history were the anvils for critical historical training that produced the scientific historian.

Fling's *precis* projected his ideals. Ostensibly addressed to high school teachers, the *Outline of Historical Method*'s rigorous, perhaps uncongenial, and forbidding tone seemed to ignore the psychology of teaching and probably limited its impact as a seriously read and applied high school history teacher's aid.

In 1915 Fling wrote *The Writing of History: An Introduction to Historical Method*. This 195-page volume "written for college students," extolled Bernheim's *Lehrbuch*, which had gone into a sixth edition in 1908. Langlois and

Seignobos were out of print and Freeman's *The Methods of Historical Study* was "unsystematic and incomplete." Observing technological change, Fling noted that if an individual a hundred years earlier had reported seeing a man flying in a heavier-than-air machine, or that a wireless message had gone from America to Europe, "his testimony would have been dismissed without consideration on the ground of impossibility."⁹

Teaching historical research methods to history majors and graduate students today is more flexible and diverse, less scientific and rigid. We have had a century to live with, critique, and modify the approaches of the first generation of professional historians. Fling rejected oral history, but the now classic *Oral Tradition* by Jan Vansina (1965) shows it to be indispensable for reconstructing the history of oral societies. Janice Radway's *A Feeling for Books* (1997) employs history, anthropology, and literature to study the Book-of-the-Month Club "middle-brow" culture. Fling's call for multiple, independent confirmations of a fact limited the historian's reach to strict proof of "first-hand knowledge of the source." Today, with professional standards and norms, we may usually rely on "accepting the finding of others rather than laboriously retracing well-worn paths in each new work."¹⁰ And while Fling ignored plagiarism, late twentieth-century methods guides treat it like the Surgeon General's tobacco products warning.

A postwar classic in historical and general scholarly research methods is *The Modern Researcher* by Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff. First published in 1957, and now in its fifth edition with a sixth scheduled for 2002, it is far more user-friendly than either of Fling's methods books. For almost half a century Barzun and Graff have followed changes in research design, modifying their subject matter, chapters, and illustrations. *A Student's Guide to History* by

Jules R. Benjamin appeared in 1975 and reached its seventh edition in 1998. Robert V. Daniels's *Studying History, How and Why* went through three editions between 1966 and 1981. *The History Student Writer's Manual* and *Writing History: A Guide for Students*, appeared in 1998 and 1999, respectively.

The historical profession in the late twentieth century, benefiting from the information revolution, can anticipate a steady and rapid accretion of methods and technologies that would have been alien to Professor Fling, and even to observers as recently as 1950.

Notes

¹ Fred Morrow Fling, *Outline of Historical Method* (Lincoln: J. H. Miller, 1899); Robert E. Carlson, "Professor Fred Fling: His Career and Conflicts at Nebraska University," *Nebraska History* 62 (Winter 1981): 481-96.

² G. Stanley Hall, *Methods of Teaching History* (Boston: Ginn, Heath & Co., 1883); Edward A. Freeman, *The Methods of Historical Study* (London: MacMillan, 1886); Herbert Baxter Adams, *The Study of History in American Colleges and Universities* (Washington: GPO, 1887); William Harrison Mace, *Method in History for Teachers and Students* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1897).

³ All quotes from Fling are from *Outline of Historical Method* unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Carlson, "Fred Fling," 482.

⁵ See Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁶ John A. Hobson published *The Psychology of Jingoism* in 1901.

⁷ Fred Morrow Fling, *Studies in European History, Greek and Roman Civilization*, 2d ed. (Lincoln: J. H. Miller, 1899), vi.

⁸ Richard Hofstadter, "The Department of History" in *A History of the Faculty of Political Science, Columbia University*, ed. R. Gordon Hoxie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 222.

⁹ Fred Morrow Fling, *The Writing of History: An Introduction to Historical Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920), 106. The book was translated into Chinese in 1933.

¹⁰ Hofstadter, "Department of History," 218, 227.