

Past plays a crucial role in moulding future lives

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ON SATURDAY

SINCE before the foundation of the State, history and geography have been required subjects for the junior cycle examinations, and up to the 1950s three-quarters of boys and an even higher proportion of girls chose to take history as a subject for the Leaving Certificate. Since that time the proportion taking history in the Leaving Certificate has declined to 48 per cent in 1990 and to as little as 27 per cent last year.

One would have thought that the Department of Education would be concerned about this trend at senior-cycle level; it is frankly disconcerting that its reaction, as reflected in the decision recently announced by the Minister, has been to encourage this trend by deciding to drop history and geography as required junior cycle subjects, apparently to make more room for languages, science and business subjects in the

junior cycle.

In the past the Department was widely seen, and indeed saw itself, as the guardian of our heritage and valued. Its interpretation of this role was certainly open to question.

For its concept of our heritage, reflecting the political ethos of the time, was narrowly focused on only one of the three great Irish traditions. When they were not just ignored, the Anglo-Irish and Ulster-Scots traditions were treated as alien,— and our wider heritage as part of the great European civilisation was played down — apart, of course, from the celebration of the role of Irish missionaries well over a millennium ago.

But however narrow and even perverse the Department's approach may have been in the past — and, in terms of the way history was generally taught, actually dangerous to the peace of our island — at least it was

informed by some sense of the importance of culture and by a concern to combat materialism and utilitarianism. But since the 1960s this has gradually changed, because of what seems to have been a simplistic and ill thought-out response to perceived economic needs.

This trend has manifested itself partly in a tendency to confuse education with vocational training; the latter being subtly substituted for aspects of education instead of being added to the educational part of the process of preparing young people for their future lives.

Pressures from the job market, to which young people and their parents are all too alleviated by shifts in the balance of the educational system towards useful subjects at the expense of education for personal development. In the past 15 years an insidious form of Thatcherism seems, indeed, to have crept into and virtu-

ally taken over our educational system.

MUCH of this process has been so subtle that it has been difficult to pin it down precisely enough to challenge it effectively. But on this occasion the shift in policy is so stark and dramatic that it is something that we can at last come to grips with.

The idea that children after they finish primary school should learn nothing further about the history of their country, their continent, or the world they live in, is so clearly perverse, anti-cultural and potentially dangerous to the future of our society that there is fair chance of stopping the rot at this point.

For this is a matter that goes beyond the remit of any Minister for Education but must be of concern to the Government as a whole. Has the

Government been consulted on this matter, one of major significance to our people? If not, its members should insist that the issue be brought to Cabinet; no Minister has a right to dispose of our heritage in such a cavalier manner.

But if the Government is to be convinced that it should take its responsibilities in this matter, it must not be allowed to get bogged down in the irrelevant issue of what has come to be called “revisionism” in Irish history. It is singularly unhelpful, because it is patent nonsense, to accuse the Minister for Education paranoiacally of wanting to drop history for political reasons, as part of some plot to undermine Irish nationalism.

In any event, history as taught in schools today is not a matter of chauvinist myth-making, as was the case in the past — not just here, it should be said. It is now vides both knowledge needed to understand why we are where we are today and a perspective against which to evaluate current issues.

The recurrent controversy about the commemoration of 1916 seems to me to show just how much we need this knowledge and this perspective. The current mini-controversy over the 80th anniversary of that event is, of course, a contrived one: when did we last celebrate the 80th anniversary of any-

thing? But the studied avoidance five years ago of any serious commemoration of the 75th anniversary of that event showed that we have not yet come to terms with our history.

From this “we” I exclude the younger generation, most of whom have actually been taught real history. By “we” I mean the generation that has been and is still in charge of our affairs; a generation which, having been brainwashed at school with the mythical nationalist version of our history, has had to unlearn painfully this dangerous mythology during the past quarter of a century, and has yet to come fully to terms with that fairly traumatic experience.

THE evident uncertainty with which the issue of commemorating 1916 was faced five years ago seemed to me at the time to reflect the effects of this trauma. It was concern at what seemed to me at the time to be a widespread inability to come to terms with our history that led me, in the first article I wrote for *The Irish Times* when I returned as a contributor in September 1991, to address the issue of 1916 and the struggle for Irish independence; basing my reflections on a paper I had read to a historical conference that summer.

As one of the last of the children of our revolutionaries to be writing

about public affairs it is, perhaps, easier for me than for others in public life to address these issues.

On the one hand I am as proud of my heard from them the story of their participation in the events in the GPO: my mother at Pearse’s request finding her way to Dublin Castle from the Post Office with a Tricolour inadequately wrapped in brown paper to fly over that British stronghold which Pearse erroneously believed had been captured by the Volunteers; my father working his way with the wounded to Jervis Street Hospital through holed in the walls of the building along Henry Street.

But I repudiate the right of a tiny minority at the end of the 20th century to pursue in the name of 1916 a campaign of violence largely — indeed at times almost genocidally — directed against their fellow countrymen, and doing this in defiance of the opposition of the vast bulk of the Irish people, nationalist and unionist alike.

We live today in a very different world from that of 80 years ago. The men and women of 1916 were acting in Europe where violence was still glorified and war was still seen as noble, even when fought between peoples with similar ideals and values who differed merely in their nationality. It was then still a world of kings and emperors, and one in

which serious crime was routinely punished by execution, the fate that was so unwisely meted out by the British to the leaders of that Rising.

If I had been alive then, would I have acted as my parents did? I simply do not know, although my uncertainty arises not from any sense of knowing better than they did, but rather from the knowledge that I lack some of their qualities: the kind of idealism and courage they and so many of their generation showed; in Flanders, be said as much as in Dublin during that Easter Week.

But today? No, for we live in a quite different world.

The truth is that it is only through the study of history that we learn to understand and empathise with a very different past — to see and even to feel events as contemporaries saw and felt them, rather than in terms of our very different experience.

To deprive our children in their maturing teenage years of the opportunity to see the past in context and to understand whence they themselves have come, and how the world has changed, would be a betrayal of our heritage, culture and history.

I do not believe it will be allowed to happen.