

## **It is essential to learn history's lessons**

Saturday, September 03, 2011

*"Never forget the importance of history. Not to know what has been transacted in former times is to be always a child. If no use is made of the labours of past ages, the world must remain always in the infancy of knowledge."*

Marcus Tullius Cicero

UNDERSTANDING history is how we try to reach the future without repeating the calamities of the past. Nearly every society eventually learns — or becomes extinct — that it must be open to modifying its behaviour if it is to escape the unfortunate consequences of uncompromising beliefs, traditions or tribal enmity.

The European Union may be the greatest example of this in our world. It shows how the energy needed to fuel centuries of war can be far better applied to creating a collective security rather than a self-perpetuating cycle of mutual destruction.

In an Irish context it is a tragedy that it took so very long for us to recognise that attacking the other tribe was doing little more than guaranteeing an attack on ourselves.

These are the lessons of history and we would not have learned them had we not learned our history, so it is disconcerting that from next year it may not be obligatory for second-level students to study history to junior certificate level.

In a country with such a labyrinthine, conflicted and nuanced past this would be counter-productive. It would also devalue the education we give our children.

We are beginning to realise that by not teaching the basics of mathematics or grammar that we are doing children a terrible disservice. These essential building blocks were discarded some decades ago in a bizarre flight of fancy but are being reinstated in schools right across the English speaking world by the very generation asked to face the world without them.

Education Minister Ruairí Quinn has suggested that the number of examination subjects at Junior Certificate level be reduced from a maximum of 13 to eight from this time next year. Historians fear this may make their subject optional.

Mr Quinn has to deal with very difficult circumstances and will have to make unenviable choices but it would seem almost cruel to send young Irish people out into the world without even the most basic understanding of our past and our relationships with all of our neighbours.

In those circumstances they would not understand the great significance of Queen Elizabeth's visit earlier this summer or the great celebration planned to mark the 1916 centenary in a few years' time. Their great ignorance of Ireland's long journey to the peace we all cherish would be a latent threat to that peace and the democracy that supports it.

Today, we report on recent discoveries made at Cul na Móna bog near Portlaoise, where the remains of a man believed to be at least 2,000 years old were found. "I am quite convinced we are dealing with an Iron Age male, one subjected to a ritual killing," said the National Museum of Ireland's keeper of antiquities, Ned Kelly.

So, still today, the past unfolds its mystery before us offering its lessons. It would seem foolish and almost dangerous not to learn them. All of our children should get some grounding in our history and if that means that other subjects now mandatory be made optional then so be it.

This story appeared in the printed version of the Irish Examiner Saturday, September 03, 2011

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