

## **A History of History Courses**

### **A Report on the Development of the Junior History Syllabus (1988)**

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#### Background:

For over a decade it has been the policy of the membership of the H.T.A.I to press for a liberalisation of the history courses from the constraints of a narrow examination syllabus. The main channel through which this could be achieved, prior to 1981/82 was the Syllabus Committee. The H.T.A.I. therefore welcomed the setting up of the History Research Action Programme (H.A.R.P.) by that committee. This ran from September 1983 to June 1986 and proved that a group of history teachers, mainly without previous experience of curriculum development, could devise an acceptable syllabus along with assessment procedures including new features such as projects and coursework.

While all this was going on, however, the Department of Education's role in developing syllabus and assessment was transferred to a new independent body - the Curriculum and Examination Board (C.E.B.), and the Syllabus Committee ceased to exist! Nevertheless, the Action Research Programme was completed and its final report was made available in summer 1987, recommending the implementation of large sections of the programme. However, the economic climate had changed considerably since H.A.R.P. had first been conceived in 1982 and by the time the C.E.B. turned its attention to the history syllabus it was clear that money was unlikely to be provided for such innovations as school-based assessment, externally moderated, or indeed to the resourcing of the recommendations of the H.A.R.P. report. It was against this background, therefore, that the C. E. B. called together an ad hoc working party in the summer of 1987 to draft proposals for discussion by a new History Course Committee.

#### **The History Course Committee, (1)**

The original brief of the History Course Committee was to draft proposals for syllabus and examination to be submitted to the C.E.B. In structure, it resembled somewhat the old Syllabus Committee, except with an elected chairperson. (Previously, the chair had always been taken by the Departmental inspector.) As well as the representatives from the old alphabet of organisations (H.T.A.I.; A.S.T.I.; J.M.B.; V.E.C; T.U.I.; I.N.T.O.) there were also members invited by the Board plus two inspectors representing the Department of Education. The **first** meeting of this new

Committee was called on Monday, 12 Oct. 1987 and draft proposals for the working party were made ready for its consideration. Then, three days before the meeting (Friday, 9 Oct.), it was announced that the C.E.B. was abolished!

As all arrangements for that meeting had been made, it went ahead, though under a considerable cloud. Nevertheless, constructive work was done. By the following month it became known that the C.E.B. was to be reconstituted and in anticipation, the Course Committee met again on 30 Nov. and completed a first draft for a new Intermediate Certificate History Syllabus. A report of that was sent by our representative to the Hon. Secretary of the H.T.A.I. who circulated it to members in the Newsletter of Jan./Feb. 1988. However by then the situation had again changed! The anticipated successor to the C. E. B. had been announced on 8 Dec. and this had a somewhat different brief.

### **The History Course Committee (II)**

At the next meeting of the Course Committee on 27 Jan 1988, the implications of this new brief were made clear. The successor body, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (N.C.C.A.) was not in fact to be responsible for assessment which was handed back to the Department inspectorate. Both the Inter and Group Certificate examinations were to be abolished and replaced by a new junior Certificate which however was to be examined at two levels. We had had no say in this process but a syllabus had to be ready by the end of March '88 (i.e. in two months!) if history was to be included in the revised courses to be introduced in September 1989. The reason for the haste was a long-standing agreement with the educational publishers that they would be given a minimal 18 months warning of change in the syllabus in order to have text-books ready in time.

Such were the constraints when the Course Committee met again on 27 Jan. and resumed the same meeting on 5 Feb. Out of these two days a new draft syllabus was formulated, a report of which was sent to the Hon. Secretary of the H.T.A.I. but only circulated to members of the Waterford branch as again events took over. A meeting to finalise details of that draft was held on 14 March and as there was no time for further amendment if we wanted to be in the forefront of change from Sept. '89 onwards, this had to be accepted. This draft syllabus was circulated to members of the H.T.A.I. during May, for discussion at the annual conference in Cork in August 1988.

Observations from your H.T.A.I. Representative perhaps there are ideal committees somewhere that always meet in unconstrained circumstances with infinite resources available to them. Granted this, maybe the ideal course could emerge which would please everyone. However, this observer

doubts it. What has been described above is the response of people under pressure reacting to reality rather than dreaming up Utopian schemes to be imposed on all. In fact the committee maximised the personal choice to be given to each individual teacher, though granted that the choice is going to be limited by lack of resources. Still, opportunities are there and by acting collectively through the H.T.A.I. we can make these resources available. We've also got to help those teachers who might still see history as a body of knowledge to be imparted rather than as a stimulus to be availed of.

At the time of writing (May 1988) the membership of the H.T.A.I. has not yet had the opportunity to formulate a collective response to all this. However at meetings both formal and informal, there has been a welcome for the chronological approach, for the flexibility given to each teacher and for some of the innovation, particularity in section 1. Concern has been expressed about whether the two levels could lead to streaming as early as first year; on the other hand, the suggestion has been made that there be no direct examination of Section 1 material in the junior Cert. Some people have expressed dissatisfaction with Section 1 1 1 and regard the absence of World War 1 from the syllabus as a major omission. Clearly, these issues will need to be discussed more fully and indeed other problems may well arise as we begin to teach the new course. It is important therefore that the Course Committee continues to meet and that communication between it and the membership of the H.T.A.I. is kept open. In this way, adjustments can be made where necessary and the path prepared for the extension of this spirit of innovation and flexibility into the Leaving Certificate.