

## History and the Curriculum

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The more I considered this title the more I found myself wondering why there should be a curriculum; what it should comprise, and why in particular history should have a place in that curriculum. Simplistic answers to these questions are easy to find, but if we have confidence in the process of education and in the role of history in that process, we have to contemplate very fundamental questions about the type of curriculum suitable for our society in 1984, and of the place of history in such a curriculum. They do not have valid answers to these questions, then we must ask ourselves why we are involved in education, and why we are teaching history in our schools.

The contemporary curriculum needs to be examined very minutely. Its suitability for our generation must be queried - it seems that we are 'stuck in a rut' as society demands more and more success in the Leaving Certificate from our pupils, and yet in schools generally the Leaving Certificate is regarded less as an educational experience and more as something to be got through. Change is essential if we have the interests of our pupils and of history truly at heart. If reform does not come about soon, I fear that history will go the way of Latin and Greek!

Today, history in our schools, like the Arts generally in the universities, seems to be under attack. History is regarded by our pupils as being difficult; needing too much work; it does not have economic value like mathematics and the natural sciences. Many regard history as a peripheral subject which certainly does not have a value in its own right. It is seen as being especially suitable for incorporation in integrated studies, and as having no other place in the curriculum.

History teachers should remember that we are teaching a unique discipline. Some years ago when lecturing students for the Higher Diploma in Education, I was continually amazed at how many did not really understand what was meant by the discipline of history. Professor T. W. Moody gave us a good definition of this in the *Irish Times* in 1976:

History is an endless search for truth about the past in the light of insights and values of the present. It has a social, as well as a scientific function, and never more so than in Ireland today, where so many people behave as if they were indeed prisoners of their country's past. Irish people have a reputation for being steeped in their history but it is more often mythology rather than history that possesses their imagination.

All continuing human societies have their myths and it is the business of historians to study myths as part of the past, but to study them without swallowing them. The history of Ireland has been, and

still is, used as a quarry from which to hew material to support entrenched and dogmatic attitudes in the present; and the period of the volume we are now covering, the period of the reformation, the great confiscations, and the modern English conquest, is wide open to such treatment. The Irish historians of that age were themselves generally strong partisans. and they have had many successors. But Irish historians to-day, of whom the contributors to the *New History* are a pretty good representation, have a different outlook and interests. They are concerned to inform, to explain, to interpret, rather than to condemn, to justify, or to condone. All historians have biases, being human persons, and some biases are more injurious to the pursuit of truth than others. Historians have to be aware of their biases and to be on their guard accordingly.

But there are worse dangers than bias. Prejudice, the forming of judgements in the light of preconceived opinions and without weighing the evidence, is an unmitigated evil that historians strive to be, and can succeed in being, delivered from. To know and control their biases, to discipline themselves against prejudice, to base their findings on a rigorous examination of the available evidence, to illuminate in a spirit of understanding, tolerance and compassion, what men have really done and thought, and to present the multifarious events and personalities of the past in their due perspective and proportion - these are characteristics of historians at their best. . .'

Dr. Moody's remarks, especially about history being the search for truth, have real significance. Do our pupils in our schools search for truth when they study history?

In 1972 Professor John A, Murphy, in reviewing *The Realities of Teaching History*, wrote:

Should such an adult subject be taught at all below a certain age level? Is it true that for many junior pupils the history course is a meaningless whip-through?

How are we to avoid the imperfect memorisation of the uncomprehended fact? Does the vogue for modern or 'contemporary' history put historical detachment at risk? The truth appears to be that, if history as a school subject can be enormously enriching and rewarding, it is correspondingly difficult to teach. History teachers in Ireland can feel pleased about the progress of recent years - better syllabuses, the helpful attitude of the Department of Education, some liaison with university staff (though nowhere near the level of the Sussex experiment), the spread of history teachers' associations, above all the liberation of history from its former degraded status of handmaid to nationalism and religion. Perhaps the greatest threat to-day to the place of history in the curriculum comes from the prevailing Irish utilitarian attitude to education that would question the value of any subject the usefulness of which cannot be immediately demonstrated. Hence the deplorable tendency in many schools to abandon the study of history at exactly the stage where the pupil can expect to derive real educational benefit from it.'

i wonder if these two eminent historians were asked to-day whether or not the state of history in our schools is healthier than it was when they wrote the above quotations, would they unhesitatingly answer in the affirmative - I doubt they would.

The members of the H.T.A.I. must ensure the healthy survival of history in our schools and our society. They must also know why history should be taught, and why it is so important. Some years ago Coltham & Fines and R. Ben Jones 111 produced taxonomies of educational objectives for the study of history, which set out a variety of reasons for such a study. These include the skills and abilities of vocabulary acquisition, reference skills, memorisation, comprehension, translation, analysis, extrapolation, synthesis, judgment and evaluation, and communication skills. They also emphasise attitudes needed for a study of history, and especially the educational outcome of the study which include insight, knowledge of values, reasoned judgment, making inferences for evidence, relating cause and effect, recognising bias and essential factors, etc. It does not appear that these skills are being tested in our certificate examinations, and I doubt that there exists a better basis for justifying the place of history in the educational system than that provided by these taxonomies.

The present syllabi which many felt would be an improvement on previous ones need a great deal of consideration. In a recent simple survey among 150 first year pupils I found 65% came to secondary school with a positive attitude to history, while 35% had a markedly negative attitude. Among the reasons given for liking history, the following were the more significant - 'interested in the past', 'liked writing about the past', 'the stories were exciting', 'it is easy and good fun', 'liked the contrast, now and then', 'he told us about it himself, not just the book', 'liked our history books', 'liked learning about our ancestors, - houses, art, tools, famous battles, war, 1916, etc.' 'can learn a lot from yesteryear's mistakes', 'one of these times we will be history ourselves', 'will help you later on in life to get a job'.

Among the main reasons for disliking history were the following - 'Boring', 'disliked the teacher', 'too much repeated', 'just reading', 'teacher went on and on', 'slow moving' 'too complicated', 'very hard', 'could not concentrate on it', 'books not well written', 'didn't understand', 'the teacher didn't know enough', 'no projects', 'have to memorize lots of dates, etc.', 'long speeches of senseless things', 'had to learn everything off by heart'.

These comments, while speaking for themselves, are worth pondering, and I feel that they raise serious problems regarding the syllabi of primary and secondary schools. I think that it is true that the curriculum from third class primary to intermediate should be seen, especially in history, as continuous. Why must children in sixth class (and more absurdly, in 2/3 teacher schools in fifth

class) study Ireland in the 19th and 20th centuries (and then do the earlier period in 6th class!)? These same children then repeat this for the Intermediate and for the Leaving Certificate in most cases. Where do they all study seriously Medieval times, the 17th and 18th centuries, Napoleon, etc? We now apparently have an opportunity to initiate change - would it not be wise to restrict the primary curriculum to Ireland and the World up to 1450, have Intermediate pupils study Ireland and the World to 1980, and have a variety of special topics for the Leaving Certificate?

DO the present arrangements give our pupils a real idea of the continuity of history? It seems that the idea of the development of our civilization does not really matter!

Do we really allow our pupils to experience the essence of history and the historical method? Do they feel the joy of history? The excitements of the past can too easily get lost in what becomes a meaningless jumble of political points which the younger pupils rarely understand. The use of imagination in history classes is sadly neglected - where is drama to be found in our history lessons? Where is the sheer delight in the past? Today so many people outside schools enjoy the past, and so few in secondary schools seem to. Where is archaeology in our curriculum? What of the books that are used? Indeed, there have been some great developments but still too many of the books are beyond the reading age of our pupils. Often our pupils are muddled by the text books, the amount to be covered by the course, the emphasis on political events, and the lack of time to study any period in any depth - this is certain to lead to the low priority that history has in the children's view.

History teachers have the immense responsibility, and must be prepared to make history a worthwhile subject that children enjoy learning because it has a value in itself. The H.T.A.I. must insist on the reorganisation of the total curriculum from Primary to Leaving Certificate, and demand a curriculum that will inspire the pupils and protect the discipline. The H.T.A.I. must assume primary responsibility for history in our schools, and must present a policy to the Curriculum and Examination Board and see that the policy is implemented.

As teachers of history we have at least four responsibilities: to our subject, our students, our schools, and our society. We must preserve the integrity of our discipline; we must assist our students to become mature, aware, cultured, thinking persons (of the Sussex experiment), the spread of history teachers' associations, above all the liberation of history from its former degraded status of handmaid to nationalism and religion. Perhaps the greatest threat to-day to the place of history in the curriculum comes from the prevailing Irish utilitarian attitude to education that would question the value of any subject the usefulness of which cannot be immediately demonstrated. Hence the

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As teachers of history we have at least four responsibilities: to our subject, our students, our schools, and our society. We must preserve the integrity of our discipline; we must assist our students to become mature, aware, cultured, thinking persons aware of themselves and their place within the total historical context. We must ensure that our schools are civilizing and humanising agencies: schools without history and with increasing dominance by economists who see 'cuts' as essential, will be ver'y much poorer places, and our civilization and culture will be further

diminished. Our responsibilities to our society are immense - do we approve of the status quo? Do we insist that through the historical method we help to develop a citizenry that is critical and questioning? Do we want a society where questions cannot be asked or criticism voiced?

