

In Defence of History

By Cork Branch of HTAI

The following are submissions in defence of the study of history in schools made by five history teachers from the Cork branch of HTAI.

Submission 1

The need of students to learn history is so self-evident that it is difficult to marshal specific arguments in its defense. An awareness of who we are is surely an essential component of identity. The study of history enhances this awareness by providing us with a knowledge of where we have come from. Identity is not existential. It is an accumulated thing, the sum of what we as a people have previously been, of what we have inherited from the past.

Many individuals' problems in society come from a sense of alienation, a lack of awareness of any meaning in their society. This lack of meaning stems from, among other things, a lack of historical perspective, of an awareness of their origins or roots or the worth of their forebears, or of their own individual connections with the past. This alienation is strong among people who are ill educated or not educated at all. To deprive people of a sense of history reinforces this alienation. Literally, they do not know who they are. History promotes a sense of belonging.

Given the new emphasis on Europe and its significance in our lives at all levels, it is important that the young should know about the long and manifold connections between Ireland and Europe in past times, that they should know something of our common European heritage, and have some idea of the variety of similar and dissimilar historical experiences suffered or enjoyed by the peoples of Europe.

The present is the child of the past. To understand the present we must try to understand the past for the present cannot be understood *in vacua*. There are endless lines of ramifications leading from past to present.

The study of history has an intrinsic educational value.

1. It can be seen to train the mind in various ways. In analysis, synthesis, collation, evaluation, in the use of evidence, in the detection of bias, etc.

2. The sense of process develops with the comparisons and contrasts between different ages and times. This sense of process is very important for the student and is not easily acquired otherwise.
3. History challenges and stimulates the imagination. The student is required to visualise, and imagine life in the past.
4. The romance of history has an aesthetic function in the student's development. Students can often appreciate history at the level of romance.

In practical terms, the absence of history at Junior Certificate level would sound the death knell of history at Leaving Certificate Level too, Most students study history at senior level because they have got to like it at Junior level.

Submission 2

We are made by our ancestors and our history - *culturally* as well as genetically - and history is therefore a very important dimension in our lives. We are the sum of the past as much as the sum of our parts. If history is made optional we deny some -perhaps many - students that dimension, that definite legacy. We take away from them an important cultural and sociological understanding of what they are and what do we offer in its place? If this is done in the name of choice of the democratisation of education, how and on what criteria can a twelve year old make choices about unfamiliar, even unknown courses and subjects? Should parents decide? But most have no expertise in education and are not professional educators. If history is removed in the name of work-place pragmatism, we rob children of an important, indeed vital, dimension of their lives. Can we expect the highest achievements "m them in the work- place if we leave them with less self-knowledge, understanding and focus than we could and should so easily give them through imaginative history teaching?

Submission 3

History is part of the essential core for the Junior Certificate at present. Nevertheless some schools fail to honour their obligations. In 1994, a total of 67,815 candidates sat the Junior Certificate examination. Yet only 60,100 sat the history paper. In other words, 10% of candidates did no history. In 1995 there were 67,231 Junior Certificate candidates but only 61,282 sat the history paper. If there is failure to teach students history when the schools are bound to do so. How will history fare if the obligation is removed?

Most advanced European democracies require their students to study history at least to the age of sixteen years. In some countries they are required to study history for the full duration of their second level education. Young Irish people in the future will be at a disadvantage *vis-a-vis* their European counterparts if they are not as well educated, if they do not know their history. They need history as a frame of reference for ordinary discourse, for enlightened conversation, for the understanding of art, culture, and civilization, to negotiate and make deals as informed and sophisticated Europeans. Asserting that our education system is the best in

Europe does not make it so, particularly as we seem to be eliminating much that was fine about it. The Department of Education seems in many respects to be following the lead of one of the least successful systems in Europe, that of England - and that after a time lag that should have alerted us to the undesirability of such a course of action. Why copy the British? Why not look to the French? They do not neglect history, either in education or in the public sphere of state endowment of archives, museums, libraries and repositories of French culture. Every child has to learn the history of France right through from the beginning and there must be much emphasis on French historical achievement. Neither do they neglect the history of other countries.

History has great liberating power. It is, in a profound sense, subversive. It has always been the target for control in dictatorships, most notably in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. History teaches people to think, and in our democracy, surely we want well-educated, well-informed thinking citizens. History helps to provide self-aware, focused and questioning individuals and any attempt to narrow its teaching is a retrograde step.

There is a suggestion, how well founded I do not know, that a program of civic and political education could be introduced instead of history and I am led to believe that there is a pilot scheme to test this in operation in some schools. This is no substitute for history and has unsavoury associations for anyone familiar with twentieth century European history. Our children need the real discipline and enlightenment of history, not some watered-down politically correct programme to suit present-day political perceptions.

History gives us not one but many views of the past. It helps to reveal the many-stranded nature of society. It provides for many identities, many possible sources of identity. It enriches the individual with knowledge of a wide variety of past experience -remote, recent, minority, majority, class-based, religion-based, gender-based, nation-based and so on. The many beams of light that history sends into the past that allow us to see more clearly the

human condition in its manifold facets is one of its great joys and a contribution to human development and happiness.

And students do enjoy history. It is a very popular subject. It is one which encourages them to read. It also requires them to write coherently. It demands analysis, logic, and an understanding of time and process and it is an outstanding intellectual discipline. It broadens their minds and teaches them to think and write on complex issues. It is a subject with a very high educational value and should be denied to none, not even the very weak. All benefit.

Another important point has to do with the level of general culture in the population as a whole. Culture is not autonomous; it must be recreated in each generation. An awareness of history has always played a major role in Irish consciousness. James Joyce's statement that "history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" undoubtedly evokes a sympathetic response when we think of the propaganda and partisan material that passed for history in the past. However we should think carefully before we engage on cultural engineering and we should not deny any of our students their right to be taught their history. Indeed Joyce's writings, like those of many of our finest writers, are so woven through with history that they can only be appreciated fully by those who understand their historical framework.

I believe that the teaching of history in schools at all levels has a major contribution to make to understanding and reconciliation in Ireland, north and south. For too long, history has contributed to division and dissention rather than to harmony and understanding. The unionist historian, A.T.Q. Stewart has written of the "quarry view" of Irish history: it is excavated for missiles to throw at one's political opponents. It is time to seek a more affirmative relationship between past and present and to bring it to the citizens of tomorrow. In the teaching of history we seek not unity but understanding, not a single interpretation but a pluralism in which the pasts of differing and indeed conflicting communities are studied dispassionately and sympathetically. Our goal is a tolerant and broad-minded appreciation of past and present diversity in society and culture at the most fundamental levels.

Submission 4: It seems strange to say the least that any attempt to downgrade history as a Junior Certificate subject should even be considered at this time.

History is a very popular subject among students. This has been my experience during twenty five years of teaching Inter/Junior Cert. history. It offers so much stimulation and opportunities to students that it has few equals as a broadly educational subject. I have noticed the enthusiasm which the study of an ancient civilization arouses. The archaeology module in

the First Year course has created great interest. Many students in Third Year are keen to understand the events of the past, which help them to understand the present.

History meets the natural desire to know about and understand the past. It stimulates the imagination. Students learn how to research material, how to organise it and how to interpret it. It helps them to develop an objective and fairminded view of other peoples and cultures. The skills learned in doing a good history project are many and varied and again students are really keen to do such work. It gives the opportunity for research, for creative presentation of material, including model making, art work, etc. History covers many disciplines and its educational value cannot be over stressed.

At present we see the rapidly growing interest in heritage and culture both in Ireland and abroad. It seems to be a basic contradiction that we would encourage foreigners to visit, study and enjoy our past and our heritage while denying the opportunity to our own junior citizens. The popularity of history is seen to be very much in evidence judging by the amount of interest in local history, archaeology outings, etc. A glance at TV listings illustrates the point also. There is a History Channel, a Discovery Channel. The popularity of series such as "The World at War", "The People's Century", "The Gulf War" is noteworthy. There are many other TV programmes that deal with history, for example "Timewatch" on the BBC. How strange it is then that any watering down of history as a school subject should be considered in the light of that evidence.

How can we possibly understand the present without a knowledge of the past? To deny students the study of history is to deny them the opportunity to study a subject which enriches them, develops so many skills and disciplines and develops their appreciation and understanding of our own past and the cultures and histories of others.

It seems to me that to deprive students of this opportunity is the denial of an educational right.

Submission 5

Any attempt to downgrade the importance of history within the school curriculum would, in my view, undermine the whole concept of "education for life" which underpins the current reform programme. Policy makers believe that the entire secondary school syllabus should encourage in students a concerned and lively interest in local, national and international affairs as well as preparing them for their civic and political responsibilities later in life. It is obvious that only the study of history can provide the framework for the exploration of these themes. The consultation of library books, the study of local issues and visits to historical sites

are all important facets of modern education and can only be effectively catered for as part of the history course.

One of the main concerns about modern education is the perception amongst employers that standards of literacy are declining. The reality is that this decline has little to do with changing teaching methods but can be traced to the fact that young people are reading less and less. It is important therefore that students be encouraged in the habit of reading and history and English are the only two subjects on the curriculum which are capable of doing this.

A frequent criticism of history is that it does not contribute in any significant way to the jobs market. However I would think that any subject which encourages the active participation of young people in their community, giving them a sense of achievement and broadening their horizons, is a vital subject to prepare them for the rigours and responsibilities of working life. In addition, in many areas around the country, particularly in disadvantaged rural communities, the study of history is contributing directly to the creation of employment. One cannot but be amazed at the development of Heritage Tourism in recent years. Most projects, from interpretative centres to restoration schemes have the potential to become the largest employers in their areas. Few or none of these activities could have been developed without the initiative provided by the study of history in the schools. It is therefore impossible to imagine why the Department of Education would sanction the reduction in importance of history within the school curriculum at a time when the advantages of studying the subject are being increasingly appreciated.