

AGENDA

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Making history of our history

The decision by Education Minister Niamh Bhreathnach to drop history as a core subject in the Junior Certificate is akin to a sore of national lobotomy, with far-reaching consequences for the country and for its capacity to be a civilized nation

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Opinion

Official history, in many societies, is the story of the past as told by the victorious or dominant groups within those societies. Many such groups will seek to convince the ordinary citizen to accept a view of the past which serves the objective needs of the present ruling elite. In that regard, Ireland is no different.

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The chief architect of this revision was and is Dr Conor

Cruise O'Brien, who invites us all several times each week (in his newspaper articles here and overseas) to view the past and the present through the prism of his active brain.

But there are other, highly qualified historians who have been prominent in the drive to revise our history, notably Ruth Dudley-Edwards (author of an acclaimed book on P H Pearse) and Professor John A Murphy of University College Cork. Both contribute frequently to Irish newspapers, and Ms Dudley-Edwards also writes on such matters in the British press.

In a sense, revisionist history as expressed by this articulate group – has almost become our official history, and in perfecting their arguments against 'physical force republicanism' these historians are certainly at one with the ruling elites in Dublin and Lon-

don.

But if O'Brien was the architect in chief of this process, then the doyen of this small but influential group must be Professor Roy Foster. He might not gladly accept the epithet of 'revisionist', but he did at least recognise the remarkably Anglo-centric nature of much of our historical scholarship.

It is this Anglo-centric, revisionist dominance of Irish historical scholarship which has provoked concern among other, more traditional historians, who fear that in a sense – the baby has been thrown out with the bath water. In order to supplant one form of historical scholarship with another, the revisionist may merely have succeeded in giving history in general a bad name.

These fears may have been borne out by the recent, quite breathtaking, decision of Educa-

tion Minister Niamh Bhreathnach to remove history as a core subject from the Junior Certificate syllabus.

Breathnach has not fully articulate her reasons for dropping history, and she claims quite preposterously in my view that there will not be any reduction in the number of students taking history as a subject. But there must be a strong suspicion that history is to be dumped by Labour as a core subject because of an underlying fear that the assiduous study of Irish history will, in some cases, turn young men and women into republicans. If it is one thing to revise our view of history, it is something else to drop the study of history in its entirety (and I have no doubt that over time fewer and fewer students will take the subject, just as is the case at Leaving Certificate Level).

What is being attempted here by Breathnach is akin to a sort of national lobotomy. For, if no history is to be taught in our schools, then it will be possible for politicians not merely to distort the record of the past but even to present an entirely fictional account of past events to the public. At some point in the future unscrupulous leaders could actually present an entirely invented version of history to the electorate. And any student of European history must be acutely aware of the dangers posed by such a development.

If, by a process of neglect, you

wipe out the collective memory of our past, then it will be open to others to reinvent that memory in whatever way they choose.

To their enormous credit, both Conor Cruise O'Brien and John A Murphy have risen to defend the subject of their scholarship against Breathnach's assault. Speaking last week, O'Brien rejected any suggestion that by making history an optional subject we might prevent the development of prejudices.

A thorough knowledge of proven historical facts could have the opposite effect, he said, adding that we needed more history and not less. Refreshingly, O'Brien added that this move was part of a process which began years ago with "the jettisoning of the classics".

Murphy told the Examiner that he would be deeply opposed to any proposal to drop history as a core subject. He said that "aknowledge of history is an essential component of the civilized person". He correctly pointed out that many students quit school after the Junior Cert and, thus, might never get any knowledge of their history.

At this stage, it is vital that Breathnach should explain exactly why she favours this proposal. The minister comes from a mildly socialistic party and should know that the philosophical underpinning of her own movement – both here and in Europe – derives from a systematic study of past history, eco-

nomie history in particular.

Attentive study of history does not just produce republicans, it also produces thoughtful and competent social democrats and Christian democrats.

The debate between the revisionists and the traditionalists won't be resolved in the short term, though, since the ceasefires, the tide appears to have drifted out a little for revisionist thinking. But those on each side agree that there is much to be gained from the study of the works written by the other side. Thus, a more traditional or nationalist scholar of history might learn a lot and gain great pleasure from reading books by the likes of Foster or Dudley-Edwards, even while disagreeing with their approach.

However what Breathnach proposes reeks of philistinism. We have already abandoned, more or less, the study of Latin and Greek, and the next on the target list is history. We shall end up producing a generation of uncivilized young people with no knowledge of or respect for the past. And to what end?

For, as we tear down the institutions of the past, there is no evidence at all that we are achieving any great success in giving school students a proper grounding in other, more modern disciplines: the study of modern European languages and of information technology, for example.