

## The End of History

"THOSE WHO cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." George Santayana's injunction against amnesia is so frequently quoted in defence of history that it is almost a cliché, but it is still apposite after a spectacularly violent 20th century, particularly in Ireland. The quality and quantity of the history taught in our schools are matters for debate because the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has proposed a new curriculum for Junior Cert students that would remove history as a compulsory core subject.

There are genuine and legitimate concerns about the levels of literacy and numeracy being achieved in our second-level schools, and the NCCA proposals rightly place these basic skills at the centre of the curriculum. However, moving history into an optional space is likely to have a disastrous effect on its availability to students; in battles for points, discursive disciplines such as history tend to take second place. Many of the NCCA proposals are excellent, emphasising practical living and cognitive skills, but I believe removing history from the core is a mistake.

Eric Hobsbawm, the British Marxist historian, said: "The destruction of the past or, rather, of the social mechanisms that link one's contemporary experience to that of earlier generations is one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late 20th century. Most young men and women at the century's end grow up in a sort of permanent present lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times they live in." Without good history teaching and learning up to young adulthood there is no shared idea of a public past.

While Ireland's shared ideas about our public past have been bedevilled by a lack of primary sources - although that situation is improving all the time - and by strong political motivations, at least people had points from which to begin an argument. A discussion about whether Michael Collins or Eamon de Valera was our greatest leader might be mired in inherited bias, bad biography or undue influence from Neil Jordan, but it is better than not knowing who either of them was, or that we had a civil war at the foundation of our State.

We have a lot of excellent history programming on radio and TV. The History Show on RTE Radio 1 delivers absorbing information, as does Newstalk's Talking History, and The Tenements on TV3 shed light on our urban social history and began a discussion about life in Dublin.

Britain is currently engaged in a debate about history in the curriculum, with historians such as Simon Schama, Niall Ferguson, Tristram Hunt and Robert Tombs engaging in public discussion about its importance and the best ways to teach it. History is compulsory only to the age of 14 in Britain, and proponents of change argue for its retention to GCSE or even A-level. The debate has touched on issues such as national identity, multiculturalism, understanding of colonialism, global history and labour, gender and women's history. It looks as if Michael Gove, the British education secretary, might reinstate history as a compulsory subject to GCSE level, just as we are considering removing it.

In Ireland, the History Teachers' Association has taken a lead in fighting for the subject, and has met Minister for Education and Skills Ruairi Quinn to present the argument (see <http://www.htai.ie>). The Minister has not yet decided on the status of history in the revised curriculum, so there is still time for a wider public debate about this very important issue.

What skills do we learn from the study of history? Secondary students have used the online 1911 census to engage with primary sources, a requirement of the relatively new Leaving Certificate history curriculum. They can use the forms to reconstruct a street in their town or village, and add to the documentary evidence with local knowledge. This kind of exercise teaches useful skills, including judicious evaluation of evidence, tolerance of diverse people living in one place, understanding of how communities change over time, compassion - for example, high levels of child mortality are evident from the census - and knowledge that not all questions can be answered.

These are skills for living as responsible citizens, as well as the basis for employment in all kinds of spheres; for example law, journalism, sociology, the caring professions and any occupation that involves dealing and communicating effectively with people. Instead of removing history from the junior cycle, the Government should make it compulsory up to the end of secondary schooling. If ever a country needed to teach history to its children it is Ireland, with our troubled violent past, both distant and recent, and our capacity, shared with other countries, to forget events from which we might learn something useful, and thus avoid repeating our mistakes.

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