

## **History students will no longer tolerate or believe grand narratives Ireland has torn itself apart in the name of a single view of history – a history filled with myth and prejudice, rather than scrutinised with irony and intelligence**

Simplicity is a foreign country; they do things differently there, as Mohammad Najibullah discovered in 1996 when the Taliban finally arrived in Kabul. Najibullah was president of Afghanistan between 1987 and 1992. There is a story that, while holed up in the UN compound in Kabul waiting for the Taliban to arrive, he busied himself translating into Pashto a book by Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game*, which deals with the history of the invasions of Afghanistan in the 19th century. As he worked, Najibullah realised that no one around him knew anything about Afghan history. It was a country sadly bereft of Eric Hobsbawms, Linda Colleys and Niall Fergusons, not to speak of Simon Schamas. "Afghans keep making the same mistake," he is reported to have said. And also: "Only if we understand history can we make steps to break the cycle." The Taliban had no interest in his book, however, when they took over; no one knows what happened to the manuscript.

This current decade in Ireland is filled with significant centenaries. From the signing of the Ulster covenant in 1912 to the ending of the civil war in 1923, there are many events to commemorate but, as is proper, some uncertainty about how this should be done. It seems natural, too, since the legacy of perverse decisions by politicians is long, that history, under the new plans for education in the Irish Republic, will no longer be compulsory in schools; thus it will be possible for Irish citizens of the future, like Afghans of the present, to have in their heads nothing other than some myths and prejudices about the past.

In Britain there has been much debate about what version of the past should be offered to schoolchildren. Should it attempt a "national story", whether a simple one or a version filled with ambiguity and nuance? Should it be decided by a politician? By a committee of historians? How global should it be? How local? What about Europe and ancient Rome? What about Scotland? What about the civil war? Should the word "Glorious" before Revolution be in inverted commas? Or was it indeed glorious? And then there is the small matter of the empire.

Some of this debate has itself been a rich example of how the teaching of history itself might, or must, proceed. History is a way of interpreting, rather than, say, knowing the past. It is usually a set of disputes between those who have access to the same sources. It depends on ideology as much as voting in an election does. While historians may go on attempting grand, sweeping and defining narratives, they work in a time when readers know that another narrative always lies in wait, and that the more intelligent an historian is, the more tentative and self-scrutinising the tone.

What is strange and unexpected is how much has been achieved in Ireland courtesy of historians and history teachers. For 70 years the involvement of Southern Ireland in the first world war, for example, was a question left in the margins. Now it is as close to the centre as the 1916 rebellion. The entire narrative of Irish history has, indeed, become uncertain, open to question and debate. History teachers and their students, when they come to study the events of Easter 1916, will have no trouble placing them beside the

Battle of the Somme. Or viewing the threat of conscription in Ireland as a factor in the change of public opinion as much as the Easter rebellion.

In Wexford, where I am from, because of serious scholarship and the level of debate caused by historians, it is not unusual for my fellow citizens to see the 1798 rebellion – once viewed only as glorious, and the subject of many patriotic ballads – as both part of a struggle for liberty and a savage little sectarian revolt that achieved nothing. No one seems to have any trouble conjuring with opposites, except some politicians perhaps, and bad historians.

For students now, no grand narrative is needed; indeed, it seems to me, none will be tolerated or believed. There is too much conflicting information available about everything. In the 1940s, anyone who took part in the struggle for Irish independence was asked to write down their account of what they did; 1,773 people wrote their version, with the promise that what they wrote would be kept under lock and key until they had all died.

They are all dead now, and their version of how a revolution happened is online, free of charge and fully searchable. Since the 1911 census in Ireland is also online, free of charge and fully searchable, this means that a student can check the social background of the writer – how many rooms in their house, for example, or if they had servants – and can also look at the same event from different points of view.

Studying such documents, in all their conflicting textures, is not merely a way for students to understand the past, but it is a way of creating a cast of mind, a way of making judgements and of thinking sceptically and creatively that might assist more with problem-solving, or indeed living, than algebra, say, or adding two and two.

For students of the nuances of the Irish struggle for independence, things are likely to become even more exciting and complex in the near future when two government departments stop wrangling over which of their budgets pays for the opening of the files of those who applied for Irish military pensions. These were awarded to those who were involved in the struggle for independence. (Readers of John McGahern's novel *Amongst Women* will remember the protagonist Moran's refusal to accept such a pension.)

As times were hard in the Free State, and later in the Irish Republic, these pensions were greatly coveted. Many more applied for them than got them or deserved them. The files will contain a treasure trove for anyone interested in the distinguished history of chancing your arm in Ireland. They will go online too, and if the day job I currently have ever gives up on me, I would love to retrain as a history teacher, and take a classroom through these applications, especially the ones rejected.

In the meantime, there will always be government ministers who think the case that every school student should study history has still not been proved. I just didn't expect this to happen in Ireland, which has torn itself apart in the name of a single view of history, a history filled with myth and prejudice, rather than scrutinised with irony and intelligence. The Taliban are always coming towards us in one guise or other.

Najibullah's effort at translation, at spreading light and knowledge about his country – work done in terrible circumstances as he waited for his doom – is an inspiration to students and history teachers, as it is to citizens. It may be enough to study history in all its nuance and

ambiguity for its own sake. But there is no country free of the need to find new ways of reading the past as an inspiring way of thinking about everything else, including the present. Least of all, mine.

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