

# In this golden age, let's not throw away our history

The new Junior Cert syllabus, mistakenly, is set to downgrade the study of our past



Been there, done that: Ruairi Quinn suggests the Battle of Vinegar Hill would be a good event for Enniscorthy students to study; it was illustrated by George Cruickshank in 1854. Photograph: British Library/Robana/Getty

This is, arguably, a golden age for the study of Irish history. The digitising of sources like the 1901 and 1911 censuses and the Bureau of Military History archives has revolutionised the way nonprofessional historians can explore the past. The peace process has de-escalated the wars over so-called revisionism, making the study of Irish history less embattled and tendentious. The grip of a narrow narrative of national resurrection has been relaxed, allowing other stories – the struggle of women and the poor, social and economic history, the development of institutions of control and governance – to emerge. The European context for everything that has happened in modern Ireland, the first World War in particular, is being acknowledged with increasing sophistication. The pioneering work of archival historians in the universities in the 1980s has shaped a generation of young successors who know how to use archives and how to build big pictures from tiny details.

This makes it all the more peculiar that this is also the era in which history is being marginalised in the education system. If you look at the framework document for the new Junior Cert curriculum, you won't find any discussion of history as a subject of importance for young people. This is partly because history is being dropped as a core subject (along with geography) but partly, it seems, because nobody has thought about it. There seems, if anything, to be a kind of embarrassment about history, as if it is a regrettable and unmentionable anachronism.

According to the document, one of the key things a student should be able to do by the end of the junior cycle is to “value local, national and international heritage, understand the

importance of the relationship between past and current events and the forces that drive change". So this is obviously a statement that history is a key subject. Except, bizarrely, when you look at the subject headings through which this aim is to be achieved, they are listed as follows, in strictly alphabetical order: Chinese, classics, CSPE (that's civil, social and political education), geography, history, Jewish studies and science.

I have no doubt that studying Chinese and science and religion helps us to understand the relationship between the past and the present and to appreciate the forces that drive change. But there's a short word for the field of study that brings all of these areas and many more together in a systematic attempt to relate past to present and to understand long-term change. It is history. History is not merely one among many other ways of understanding the past, any more than anatomy is one of many ways of understanding the physical structure of the body. The refusal to include even a single sentence that acknowledges this is hard to fathom.

In a rather strange article in last Saturday's Irish Independent, replying to one by Diarmaid Ferriter, Minister for Education Ruairí Quinn cited this very paragraph from the framework document as evidence that the removal of history from the core curriculum will not downgrade the subject. He suggests that the need for education in history will be met by the devising by teachers, on their own initiative, of "short courses". He gives examples: "The short courses innovation will allow, for example, young people in Enniscorthy to study in depth the 1798 Battle of Vinegar Hill, which took place on their doorstep, or teenagers in Trim to examine Norman Castles, the largest Irish example of which dominates that town." So what students are to get at junior-cycle level is patchwork history. Short courses will allow them to focus on some aspect of local history. This is all very well, even though one might expect that students in Enniscorthy will already have been up and down Vinegar Hill umpteen times in their primary-school years. But it has two severe limitations. One is that it is not accidental that both of the examples that Ruairí Quinn cited are military: big, mostly male, violent events leave more obvious marks on a local landscape than slow, complex processes. The other is something that the framework document itself puts rather well. It says that a student who has studied this thing it refuses to call history will "see how local, national and international communities change over time, how people act to bring about change, and how these changes may be connected with each other and with current events and developments".

That's exactly right. It puts its finger on two things that define good history: the idea of change over time and the need to see how that change connects up from the village to the nation to the continent and beyond. But those are precisely the two things that you can't teach in a short, hit-and-run course that focuses on a castle. To get a sense of how they work, you need to be exposed to a systematic discipline, a way of thinking and understanding.

And you need a sense of chronology. Chronology is to history as grammar is to language. It's the part that can be a bit of a slog – though knowing that the Normans came after the Vikings is much easier than the past perfect subjunctive. Unless, that is, you learn your history in disconnected chunks.

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