

## John-Paul McCarthy : Lest we forget to ask hard questions

EVEN though Ruairi Quinn's plans to end the era of compulsory history at Junior Certificate level are misguided, you have to admire his advocacy.

"Historians must advocate, argue and defend," the minister insisted. "But the target of their discourse should not be the State. They should remember that compulsion doesn't always work."

His warning about the perils of coercion here should be taken seriously. Legislative dictation in the Irish school system has amassed a poor, even disastrous track record since independence, and the minister is justified in emphasising this.

The debate about compulsory subjects must always take account of the mess compulsory Irish created. Even though every child has to learn Irish up to the Leaving Certificate, only a small fraction of people have more than conversational Irish left by their mid-20s.

Our linguistic capacities have become so disordered as a result of the mandatory regime of Irish teaching that no one has the confidence to query the more absurd implications of all this.

How many people are aware that we live today under the shadow of two Constitutions, one in Irish and one in English, and that in key areas they say fundamentally different things?

Remember that for large parts of the Seventies and Eighties the Government's case against extraditing terrorist suspects to Northern Ireland boiled down to their fixation with two ambiguous Irish words in the Irish text, "ina dtreoir", words they said that solemnly forbade them from departing from iron-clad rules laid down by international law.

How many other countries in the world decide issues of high national importance by playing word games in a language that only a small proportion of the population can really understand?

Viewed in this light, Ruairi Quinn's hard-nosed approach to compulsion makes some sense, as does his broader belief that genius will generally work its own passage without any legislative prop.

But his plans do not take account of the peculiarities of our national life here, and they risk creating a generation of unusually credulous citizens.

Now, much self-regarding nonsense has been written about the virtues of history in response to Mr Quinn's decision. And on balance it probably is not the case that you won't develop an analytical intellect if the minister swipes every copy of Leland Lyons's *Ireland Since The Famine* from the schools.

Children would do just fine if they had Stephen Greenblatt's books on Shakespeare or Louis de Paor's on the prose of Mairtin O Cadhain.

And nothing helps adolescents put away childish things quite like a well-organised class in German or French.

Despite the recent chorus, the Republic would probably not fall even if Quinn followed Gladstone's bid to reform the Trinity College syllabus during the Victorian era by banning the teaching of history.

But granted all this, there will be a distinct loss all the same under the Quinn plans.

And this loss is best appreciated by reading Tom Dunne's powerful book on what happened here during the bicentennial commemoration of the 1798 rising in Wexford, *Rebellions: Memoir, Memory and 1798* (Lilliput).

Dunne analysed the slow, choral-like formation of a national consensus that tried to present the mayhem in Wexford that summer as a sort of fateful starburst, one that was characterised by what Prof Kevin Whelan called "the living principles of democracy and pluralism which the United Irishmen formulated".

Before too long a few cabinet ministers and several local committees began to amplify this feel-good version of the Wexford rebellion, a rebellion that was really a continuation of the religious wars of the Williamite era and one that saw the death of more than half the population of Ross in a single day.

Re-reading Dunne's critique of the euphemism and vulgarity that lay at the core of this commemorative racket, it felt like the country had been taken over by Dr Phil.

There were letters in the Irish Times by tenured professors claiming that: "The United Irishmen were trying to negotiate a political structure here and with Britain, capable of representing Irish peo-

ple in all their inherited complexities and allegiances. The peace process today is trying to do the same thing."

And local 'experts' tried hard all that summer of 1998 to absolve the rebel leadership in Wexford of any meaningful responsibility for the murder of 126 people in that infamous barn at Scullabogue. (Eleven of the dead were Catholics, and the vast bulk of the rest were local Protestant farmers, servants, labourers and artisans with no known connection to the military).

It took a historical mind to cut through the government-funded commemorative propaganda that year, and it took a historical mind to show how this racket avoided all the hard questions.

If history dies a slow death in the schools in the next few years, will there be anybody on hand to do what Dunne did when the forces of reaction regroup (as they always do) for 2016, or 2037 or 2069?

<http://www.independent.ie/opinion/analysis/johnpaul-mccarthy-lest-we-forget-to-ask-hard-questions-29525794.html>

