

Teaching Irish Independence

Teaching Irish Independence:
History in Irish Schools, 1922-72

By

John O'Callaghan

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Chapter One.....	1
Introduction	
Chapter Two.....	11
The Politics and Policy of History Teaching 1922-72	
Chapter Three.....	39
History Teaching and Texts 1922-72	
Chapter Four.....	59
Conclusion	
Appendix I.....	65
History Syllabi 1922-72	
Appendix II.....	71
Ministers for Education, 1921-72	
Appendix III	73
Notes for Teachers—History	
Bibliography	89

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The impact of history teaching in Ireland has been, and continues to be, politically and culturally significant.¹ The teaching of history has proved highly relevant to the development of Irish national identity.² The question of history teaching is not of course a problem unique to Irish secondary schools in the period 1922-72 but for reasons of focus and clarity, coverage in this study has been thus restricted. This work, then, deals with the role of history, set against the background of a specific institution, the school, with special emphasis on the secondary school and reference to the primary school where appropriate, in a specific place at a specific time. The administration of education in the south of the country became the responsibility of the Provisional Government of the Free State on 1 February 1922. By 1972, extreme and concerted violence had once again erupted in Northern Ireland and the Republic was on the verge of joining the European Economic Community (EEC). This book is an analysis of the social, political, economic and cultural factors that influenced the teaching of history and the development of the history curriculum in Irish secondary schools in the half-century following the inauguration of the

¹ See, for example, Martin Hagan, 'Schooling in Northern Ireland: meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century', in *Irish Educational Studies*, vol. 22, no.1 (2003), pp 121-38; Alan Gove-Humphries, 'An evaluation of pupil perceptions of Ireland, Irish history and its contribution to history teaching in our multicultural society' in *The Curriculum Journal*, vol.14, no.2 (2003), pp 201-15; *The Irish Times*, 31 March 2003, for comments by Martin McGuinness, former education minister in Northern Ireland, on the need for a broader history curriculum in schools, and specifically on the need for governments in both parts of the island to include the 1980-81 hunger strikes in the history curriculum.

² For an analysis of the relationship between the development of national identity and history teaching in schools, see Gabriel Doherty, 'National identity and the study of Irish history in Irish schools, 1900-60' (unpublished M. A. thesis, University College, Galway, 1992); idem, 'National identity and the study of Irish history' in *English Historical Review*, vol. 111, no. 441 (1996), pp 324-49.

Irish Free State. It will assess what objectives were the most important in history teaching and what interests school history was designed to serve.

The perception is common among Irish teachers, politicians and historians that there were serious deficiencies and flaws in the approach to the teaching of history and in the process of curricular development. These defects are thought to have contributed to the phenomenon, as expressed by Joe Lee, that 'the modern Irish, contrary to popular impression, have little sense of history. What they have is a sense of grievance which they choose to dignify by calling it history'.³ It has further been suggested that the Irish 'are not preoccupied with history but obsessed with divisive and largely sectarian mythologies acquired largely outside school'.⁴ This study is concerned not only with the content of the curriculum. It will also reconstruct the experience of history in the schools from the perspective of students. Platitudes on the harmful effects of biased history teaching should consider that for most of the period, apart from the endeavours of the *Irish Historical Studies* school, academic history itself progressed little beyond an aspiration to objectivity.⁵ In 2003, Richard Comerford highlighted the tendency, particularly evident in the writing of national history, to assemble historical knowledge in the form of a narrative that leads to an ending or goal.⁶ The goal is either the current state of affairs or the one about to be achieved. Teleology limits perspective and understanding. The essentialist understanding of nationality is that nations are individually prescribed by nature or by some divine plan, that each has a naturally defined membership and extent, and that each has about it an informing spirit. A teleological construal of history is fundamental to the essentialist view of nationality, with the nation-state as the achieved or about-to-be achieved aspiration. Comerford argued that this elucidation of history is particularly evident in the case of Ireland, not only in nationalist propaganda but also in much scholarly historiography. Closely related is the tendency to see modern nations predestined in ancient and medieval societies and cultures. Thus, in most conceptualisations of Ireland, popular and scholarly, there figures an 'ancient Gaelic world' seen as the modern Irish nation in embryo.⁷

³ Joe Lee, *Ireland 1912-85: politics and society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. xiv.

⁴ The Churches Central Council, *Irish history: fact or fiction?* (Dublin, 1978), p. 16.

⁵ For developments in academic scholarship, see Theo Moody (ed.), *Irish historiography 1936-71* (Dublin, 1971).

⁶ Richard Comerford, *Inventing the nation: Ireland* (London, 2003), p. 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

At the inquest into the death of Lord Mountbatten in 1979 the coroner stated:

I believe it is necessary to stress again the great responsibility the teachers of any nation have for the way they interpret history and pass it on to the youth of their country. I believe that if history could be taught in such a fashion that it would help to create harmony among people rather than division and hatred, it would serve this nation and all nations better.⁸

This comment reflects the assumption that Irish history teaching propagated a prejudiced and potentially dangerous account of Irish history; that it presented a jingoistic version of Irish history to young people and was an underlying factor in Irish Republican Army (IRA) violence because it instilled hatred of England as an evil oppressor and glorified the militancy of the campaign for independence. A detailed analysis of such allegations will be furnished below. James Dillon, speaking in the Dáil in April 1959, felt that an interesting survey would be an enquiry into ‘the places of education of the internees recently released from the Curragh Camp’.⁹ Dillon was concerned with the kind of instruction they received, where they got it and from whom. A comprehensive survey would certainly help to put allegations about the role of nationalist-motivated history teaching as a determining factor in republican violence in context. However, whether it would provide evidence of the impact of history teaching in schools on IRA recruitment would prove highly problematic. Determining the impact of schools and teaching on social phenomena may be a matter for the educationalist or the sociologist rather than the historian. Evidence relating to the influence of schools on a given situation may lend itself to a wide variety of interpretations. It may also be unclear as to how much of an influence factors other than schools and teaching, such as popular culture and the media, have had on subsequent events and political mobilisation.

The ongoing failure of the Department of Education to open its records to full public scrutiny continues to hinder research on history teaching. While history teaching has not suffered from academic neglect, much of the work in the area has been from a pedagogical rather than a historical perspective. No substantial source of information existed to help either reject or confirm the assumptions referred to above until Mary T. Ryan

⁸ *The Times*, 10 January 1980.

⁹ *Dáil Éireann Debates*, vol. 174, 8 April 1959, col. 151.

completed her thesis on the history syllabus in 1973.¹⁰ It was a comprehensive narrative of the content of the history syllabus. However, as an educational rather than historical study, it did not address the issue of how this content was determined. It did not analyse the role played by political and social forces in the formation of the syllabus nor did it deal with the use and abuse of history in the schools. Ryan's thesis was augmented by Kenneth Milne's booklet on the teaching of Irish history in 1979 and Thomas Francis Holohan's 1988 education thesis on the function of history in schools.¹¹ Milne addressed the issue of the abuse of history in the schools and highlighted its dangers. Holohan surveyed ideas as to what history should contribute to the overall education of pupils. He concluded that the question of ascribing an appropriate function to history in schools is dictated by the aims of society, and is part of the larger question as to what is the proper relationship between the individual and the state. The majority of research that has been conducted on the Irish education system has been concerned with structural as opposed to curricular developments.¹² Historians have largely neglected developments in the teaching of history and changes in the curriculum, perhaps seeing these areas as the preserve of the professional educationalist.

The curriculum theorist Ivor Goodson argued, in 1988, that 'curriculum ... is the arena of all sorts of shifts and interests and relations of dominance'.¹³ Educational and curricular systems do not exist in a vacuum. They are not independent of the society that they represent but reflect it and, in turn, shape it. Decisions on education tend to have long-term effects and are usually intended to serve the needs of society. Curriculum may be conceived of as a tool of social construction, or reconstruction. In theory, it acts as an agent of social change and a vehicle for social reform. Schools transmit the culture, contribute to the socialisation of the young and aid in the preservation of the society as a

¹⁰ Mary T. Ryan, 'History teaching in Ireland: a study of the development of the history syllabus for secondary schools 1878-1973' (unpublished M. Ed. thesis, University College, Cork, 1974).

¹¹ Kenneth Milne, *New approaches to the teaching of Irish history* (London, 1979); Thomas Francis Holohan, 'A study of the function of history in schools in England and Ireland between 1828 and 1862' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Trinity College, Dublin, 1988).

¹² Studies in this category include Séamas O'Buachalla, *Education policy in twentieth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 1988); John Coolahan, *Irish education: its history and structures* (Dublin, 1981).

¹³ Ivor Goodson, *The making of curriculum: collected essays* (London, 1988), p. 12.

nation. They cultivate common culture. The purpose of the school is to serve society and the curriculum is society-orientated.¹⁴ The curriculum is the product of a variety of social forces. An example of that proposition was Tom O'Donoghue's 1999 study on the extent to which the Catholic Church influenced the secondary school curriculum in Ireland in the four decades after independence.¹⁵ During the period 1922-62 the position of the Catholic Church in Ireland, in terms of its role in education, was unique internationally. O'Donoghue showed how the Church worked closely with governments of the time on the provision of education while resisting any moves to bring about change in the secondary school curriculum which it viewed as potentially harmful to the pursuit of its own goals. He also showed how the Church successfully undermined the efforts of other educational interest groups, particularly parents, to influence the evolution of curriculum policy and practice. During these years secondary schools were characterised by a pervasive religious atmosphere. This came about due to the common educational philosophy shared by the religious and lay authorities.

In 1976, Seán Farren examined the cultural influences on Irish education in the years immediately following the institution of both Irish states.¹⁶ His critical analysis of the principal cultural factors to be found at work in the formative years of educational policy in the Irish Free State after 1922 is the concern here. Farren's fundamental hypothesis was that one of the main priorities of formal education is the inculcation of the beliefs, values and attitudes of dominant societal groups, in order to ensure the perpetuation of its dominant position in that society. Farren examined French and Portuguese colonial policies to provide particularly pertinent examples of the influence and power of leading groups in colonial societies. The educational systems of these societies were clearly dictated by the colonial power. This power determined both the form the educational structures should take and the nature of the curricula to be provided within these structures. Education in the colonies was designed explicitly to transmit the beliefs, values and attitudes of the dominant groups in the mother country. The structural and curricular frameworks,

¹⁴ These are some of the arguments presented to Higher Diploma in Education candidates in National University of Ireland, Galway. See Josephine Boland, *Curriculum and assessment course handbook* (Education Department, National University of Ireland, Galway, 2001).

¹⁵ Tom O'Donoghue, *The Catholic Church and the secondary school curriculum in Ireland 1922-62* (New York, 1999).

¹⁶ Seán Farren, 'Culture and education in Ireland' in *Compass, Journal of the Irish Association for Curriculum Development*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1976), pp 24-38.

then, were those that existed within the educational systems in the colonial power itself. The close modelling of the mother country's system of education meant that indigenous cultures rarely, if ever, received attention in curricula. This meant that many members of the educated classes became alienated from their own culture. This alienation was never total however. In all colonial societies, certain sections attempted to idealise the indigenous culture in order to provide an alternative to that disseminated by the colonial power. Dissenting voices help to provide ideological justification for political struggle and in the post-colonial phase urge newly independent people that as well as removing the colonial power in political terms, they must develop a greater sense of their own identity and reassess basic civic beliefs, values and attitudes.

Conor Cruise O'Brien, in 1962, eloquently expressed the Irish nationalist anti-colonial sentiment:

This is not just a question of 'brooding on the past' – although it is hard to read history without doing some brooding on the past – but of a present-day contrast rooted in history. Ireland is still a relatively backward country, next door to a highly advanced one. The culture of the advanced country has almost completely destroyed, but only partially replaced, the culture of the backward one. The replacement can only be partial, for the conquered can never properly assimilate one central element in the conquering culture: the psychological attitudes of racial superiority.¹⁷

Cruise O'Brien, of course, was later to repudiate such sentiments with increasing hostility.

Farren considered the situation that existed in Ireland during the revolutionary period 1916-21 and found that claims and sentiments of this nature were being expressed by those who were thinking ahead to the kind of Ireland that might emerge following the achievement of independence. Thus, he quoted Michael Collins' argument that 'we can fill our minds with Gaelic ideas and our lives with Gaelic customs, until there is no room for any other'.¹⁸ Collins' idea was that indigenous culture be studied and fostered as a means of developing a sense of national identity. As part of this process, history teaching, in particular, took on a very patriotic tone, and sought to provide justification for the nationalist cause in terms that have been accused of bias and a lack of proper historical perspective. The overall effect of Farren's argument is to convey the impression of an educational system based on the twin aims of developing a state that was

¹⁷ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *To Katanga and back* (London, 1962), pp 30-1.

¹⁸ Farren, 'Culture and education in Ireland', p. 27.

both Gaelic and Christian, or perhaps, more accurately, Gaelic and predominantly Roman Catholic in outlook and spirit.

Gabriel Doherty, in his 1996 analysis of Irish national identity as manifested in the teaching of history, rejected the argument that history teaching created, rather than simply reflected, popular ideology. His work is particularly relevant here because it addressed the fact that the revisionist analysis of the teaching of history in Irish schools 'is itself one of the few subject areas untouched by the methodological rigours of revisionism'.¹⁹ In attempting to assess the development of national identity as manifested in the teaching of history in primary and secondary schools in Ireland between 1900 and 1960, Doherty sought to refute the claim of Seamus Deane that there has been within Ireland an 'absence of a system of cultural consent that would effectively legitimise and secure the existing political arrangements'.²⁰ He made the opposing case that it was precisely because the popular intellectual realignments contingent upon the achievement of independence had so successively consolidated the legitimacy of the Irish state, that dissenting voices within the academic community stood out so clearly. Doherty's argument was that the inculcation of belief in the inherent spirituality of the Irish people, which was the fundamental theme in school instruction, complemented a more refined popular historical consciousness than has usually been identified. The central point to be emphasised here is that the process of Irish historical reflection, as manifested by the teaching of history, defied the categories prescribed for it by intellectuals, and has produced a far from uniform cultural environment in which the body politic rests easily.

Farren concluded that the image of the Irish as a people, with a distinct spiritual morality, was one that had to be imposed through education. Doherty examined the basis of the historical spiritualistic self-image he found among the Irish school population and concluded that the potent nature of this self-image of a free people, with unique spiritual qualities, was primarily a result of its concurrence with public opinion. As far as popular history was concerned, the drive for social unity was the most important consideration. Interpreted in this way, official policy, rather than forming public opinion, was forced to conform to popular demands.²¹ In his 1992 thesis, Doherty argued that the vague minimalism that characterised formal guidelines governing the teaching of history reflected the limited nature of central control over education, and facilitated a

¹⁹ Doherty, 'National identity' in *English Historical Review*, pp 324-5.

²⁰ Seamus Deane (ed.), 'General Introduction' in *Field day anthology of Irish writing* (Derry, 1991), p. xx.

²¹ Doherty, 'National identity' in *English Historical Review*, p. 349.

populist conception of that history.²² He showed that so inadequate was teachers' professional training and so vulnerable were their terms of employment to managerial and local pressure, they became actively engaged in the promulgation of socially acceptable beliefs.²³

J. H. Plumb addressed the question of whether or not academic history, in dismantling received notions about the past, is essentially a destructive enterprise, capable of dislodging but incapable of replacing the largely mythical but socially functional 'past', and considered the antagonism between a past which enhanced social cohesion and a consciously revisionist history produced by professional historians.²⁴ The basis of Plumb's idea was the distinction he drew between 'the past' and 'history'. 'The past', argued Plumb, is either informally, and therefore improperly, remembered or deliberately misrepresented for an ulterior motive: 'The past is always a created ideology with a purpose, designed to control individuals, or motivate societies, or inspire classes'.²⁵ 'History', however, 'is the attempt to see things as they were, irrespective of what conflict this might create with what the wise ones of one's own society make of the past'.²⁶ Plumb was concerned that such history may be an inadequate replacement for the past in terms of social effectiveness. The scholarship of academic historians may invalidate traditional interpretations of the past. The problem is that the history that academics offer as a more 'true' alternative to the past, a history effectively of their own making, may not be as emotionally satisfying as the past. Plumb recognised that the past which man uses either to sustain himself or his societies was never a mere invention; it contained a great deal of what had actually happened. He acknowledged that truth may be a moral, a theological or even an aesthetic truth and not merely a factual one.²⁷ The past can dictate what a person should do or believe: history cannot do this.²⁸ The past is a stronger social force than history.

All societies have some consensus view of the past; one that shapes and is shaped by their collective consciousness, that both reflects and reinforces the value-systems which inform their behaviour and judgements. Michael Howard argued that if professional historians do not

²² Doherty, 'National identity, 1900-60', chapter 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, chapter 4.

²⁴ J. H. Plumb, *The death of the past* [originally published 1969] (new edition, New York, 2004).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 13-4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

provide this view, others less conscientious or less competent will.²⁹ Marc Ferro pointed out that self-image and the image people hold of others, reflects the history taught to children.³⁰ This history leaves indelible marks. Every society uses history to condition the minds of its citizens. This abuse of history is not restricted to any group or political tendency. All societies distort the history taught to each new generation. Control of the past means mastery of the present, legitimisation of dominion and justification of legal claims.³¹ The dominant societal powers, whether state, church, political party or private interest, are concerned to censor the vision of the past in order to inculcate their values with the goal of consolidating their position. What children and young people are taught in schools represents the consensus view of what a society considers important. The history that students are taught in school is what is considered important for them to know about the past. Thus, the history taught to school students is important for the present and the future. The manner in which parents school their children is culturally diagnostic and the system in which children are schooled not only reveals much about the attitudes and values of the parental generation, but helps to explain the later actions of the children's generation. Successive generations of Irish citizens passed through the school system in the years 1922-72. These generations were partly shaped by the education they received in those years.

This study will identify the history that policy makers considered important. It will examine how changes in the curriculum reflected changes in what was considered important. It will consider education in terms of the wider political and social context. The Irish political environment of 1922-72 produced educational policies that may explain the developments that came from them. Official state publications on history in the schools did not distinguish between state policy (that is rhetoric) and the implementation of directives by teachers in the classroom. However, Department of Education syllabi, as the most detailed expression of official attitudes to history, were indicative of authoritative opinion regarding significant elements of the nation's past, and as such, merit meticulous consideration. The following chapter (Chapter two) will study the politics and the policy of history teaching. It will explore state policy for the subject and will investigate social, cultural, economic and political factors that may have influenced state

²⁹ Michael Howard, *The lessons of history* (Oxford, 1991), p. 12.

³⁰ Marc Ferro, *The use and abuse of history, or, how the past is taught* (London, 1984).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

policy on history in the schools. Chapter three will focus on the experience of history in the schools. It will survey the shape that the history curriculum took and trace its evolution during the period 1922-72, through an analysis of syllabi, textbooks and examination papers. It will consider aspects of the student experience, investigated through autobiography.

CHAPTER TWO

THE POLITICS AND POLICY OF HISTORY TEACHING 1922-72

State policy

With the foundation of Saorstát Éireann in 1922 a new epoch began in the history of Irish education. Irish politicians replaced British politicians in control of the state apparatus. The basic institutions of government remained largely unaffected in terms of their structure. In the field of education, however, the curriculum underwent reform that was comprehensive and far-reaching in its intent. The revolution had involved distinct, though closely related, political and cultural elements. Many of the political leaders of the new state had played dynamic roles in the cultural revolution. The Gaelic League viewed the restoration of the Irish language as fundamental to the preservation and development of national identity, and was the driving force of the cultural revolution. The League disseminated the belief that the decline of the language was not the result of a natural process of decay but that the British had founded the primary schools in 1831 as a calculated and successful attack on the Irish language.¹ The contribution of the cultural movement to the securing of political independence was considerable and the leaders of the new state continued to support the aims of the cultural revolution. It has been suggested that, after the Anglo-Irish Treaty, 'Ireland was a nation whose government was still tainted by the question of legitimacy' and that 'insecurity was the overriding force in the cultural history after the first years of independence'.² In the period after independence when the

¹ See, for example, Douglas Hyde, *A literary history of Ireland from earliest times to the present day* [originally published 1899] (new edition, London, 1967), p. 630.

² Patricia Twomey Ryan, 'The church, education and the control of the state in Ireland' in *Éire-Ireland*, vol. 22, no. 3 (1987), p. 104; Margaret O'Callaghan, 'Language, nationality and cultural identity in the Irish Free State 1922-7' in *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 24, no. 94 (1984), p. 244.

revolution was consolidated, nationalists conducted the politics of national self-assertion and fostered nationalist ideology and culture.³

Having gained independence, the architects of the new state sought to make it Gaelic as well. The Sinn Féin constitution of 1917 stipulated that, in an independent Ireland, education would be made truly national by the compulsory teaching of the Irish language and Irish history.⁴ The system of education would be used to build an 'Irish Ireland'. In the light of the decline in the oral transmission of history, the issue of institutionalised instruction of Irish history had become a fundamental concern of Irish nationalists at the turn of the century.⁵ In the years leading up to 1922, particularly after Sinn Féin's electoral success in 1918, there was a growing demand that the schools should be used as the chief instrument in the revival of the Irish language and Gaelic culture. Nationalists became increasingly critical of what they considered to be the most serious defect in the education system, namely, the neglect of the language and culture. The Dáil Commission on Secondary Education sat from 24 September 1921 to 7 December 1922 when it presented its recommendations to the Free State minister for education, Eoin MacNeill. Its purpose, according to Frank Fahy of the Ministry for Education, was to determine how best education could be used to aid the revival of 'the ancient life of Ireland as a Gaelic state, Gaelic in language, and Gaelic and Christian in its ideals'.⁶ The report of the Commission recommended that Irish, history and geography should constitute the Gaelic core of the curriculum.⁷ The proposal to place Irish at the centre of the curriculum was a radical departure from the system in operation under the Intermediate Education Board. Equally radical was the proposal that geography and history should be compulsory and have an Irish orientation. The attempt to revive the Irish language through the education system was the single most important

³ Some of the works that discuss issues alluded to here, and throughout this section, include Comerford, *Inventing the nation*; Roy Foster, *The Irish story: telling tales and making it up in Ireland* (London, 2001); Joe Lee, *The modernisation of Irish society* (Dublin, 1973), pp 89-105; F. S. L. Lyons, *Culture and anarchy in Ireland* (Dublin, 1979); Conor Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland* (London, 1972).

⁴ The text of the 1917 constitution is reproduced in full in Dorothy Macardle, *The Irish Republic* (London, 1937), pp 951-2.

⁵ See Patrick Callan, 'Irish history in Irish national schools 1900-08' (unpublished M. A. thesis, University College, Dublin, 1976).

⁶ *Times Education Supplement*, 1 October 1921.

⁷ Dáil Commission on Secondary Education, *Report* (unpublished, mimeographed in Library of the Department of Education).

policy in shaping the education system of independent Ireland.⁸ The principles advocated by the Gaelic League effectively became state education policy in 1922.

Douglas Hyde (1860-1949) became the first professor of modern Irish at University College, Dublin (UCD), in 1909. In 1893 he had chaired the first meeting of the Gaelic League which had been convened by Eoin MacNeill. Hyde became the inaugural president, and served in that position until 1915. The secular, non-political organisation aimed at involving people of different religious and political loyalties in a common cultural effort. Its objective was the revival of the Irish language and the preservation of Irish literature, music and traditional culture. Under the direction of Hyde as president and Eoin MacNeill as secretary, the Gaelic League formulated and implemented an ambitious programme. By 1905 it had over 500 branches throughout the country. The branches organised Irish classes conducted by *timirí* (travelling teachers) and also lectures, concerts and Irish dances. From 1899 onwards the Gaelic League published *An Claidheamh Soluis*, an Irish-language weekly newspaper. It staged an annual cultural festival, the Oireachtas, and had Saint Patrick's Day designated a national holiday. It also succeeded in having Irish included in the curriculum for primary and secondary schools and in having it made compulsory for matriculation at the National University of Ireland.

While the Gaelic League was officially non-political and the membership included some unionists, the majority of members were nationalists - in the decades leading up to 1916 the majority would have been moderates who regarded Home Rule as the most viable objective. The membership also included advanced nationalists, including a number of the abettors of the 1916 Rising, among them signatories of the Proclamation of Poblacht na hÉireann, who were particularly influential within the organisation. When these radicals eventually gained control in 1915, prompting Hyde's resignation, the main contribution of the Gaelic League to the political revolution had already been made: over a generation the League had inspired a momentous cultural awakening in the nationalist population. The young nationalists of the 1916 generation were proud to be Irish and the inheritors of one of the oldest civilisations in Europe; they cherished their cultural traditions; many of them had become fluent Irish speakers; and, moreover, they were keenly aware of their national history - a history in which Ireland had been unjustly subjugated

⁸ See Adrian Kelly, *Compulsory Irish: language and education in Ireland 1870s-1970s* (Dublin, 2002).

for seven centuries. While many would have settled for Home Rule, a significant proportion believed Ireland was entitled to full national independence, an objective for which they were prepared to fight.

Patrick Pearse remains such an iconic figure in Ireland that his many legacies are a matter of frequent, sometimes provocative, debate. As one of the leaders of the Easter Rising in 1916, Pearse's name is indelibly linked with the gun in Irish politics, and there has been considerable, and perhaps often historically irrelevant, conjecture about his personal life. Pearse's greatest legacy, however, may well have been as an educator who decried what he called the 'murder machine' of the Irish national and intermediate school systems. Pearse was undoubtedly the foremost pre-independence pioneer of Irish-Ireland education. He fits Farren's profile of the ideologue of indigenous culture as an alternative to that disseminated by the colonial power. Pearse looked forward to the post-colonial phase when national identity would be fully restored. He argued that all of Ireland's problems originated in the education system. It was 'the most grotesque and horrible of the English inventions for the debasement of Ireland'.⁹ Pearse believed that the national consciousness was enshrined mainly in the national language.¹⁰ Before he converted to political rather than strictly cultural nationalism, Pearse's primary objective was the preservation of the Irish language:

when Ireland's language is established, her own distinctive culture is assured...all phases of a nation's life will most assuredly adjust themselves on national lines as best suited to the national character once that national character is safeguarded by its strongest bulwark.¹¹

By 1912, when he wrote *The murder machine*, Pearse had taken up the sword as well as the pen. It encapsulated his main educational ideas and introduced a new political dimension. He asserted that the education system was a vehicle of cultural imperialism. It contained no national material. As a result, Irish people were enslaved, and because the machine was so effective, they were not conscious of their cultural slavery.¹² To instil into the youth of Ireland, than, a love for the past of their country, and for their language and literature, was impossible, Pearse believed, in the context of the English oriented, exam dominated existing system. To counter this state of affairs, Pearse had founded his own school in 1908. A

⁹ Patrick Pearse, 'The murder machine' in *Collected works of Pádraic H. Pearse – political writings and speeches* (Dublin, 1924), p. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 40-1.

¹¹ *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 27 August 1904.

¹² Pearse, 'The murder machine' in *Collected works*, pp 8-9, 40.

leading member of the Gaelic League and editor of its weekly newspaper, *An Claidheamh Soluis*, for nearly six years, Pearse studied methods to encourage the preservation of Irish as a medium of everyday speech and the ways in which other countries, including Belgium, to where he travelled, incorporated more than one language into school curricula. The educational philosophy that he developed was child-centred and explicitly nationalist. In 1908, he put his ideas into practice at St. Enda's School, which would differ from Ireland's mainstream secondary schools in three key areas: it would be a bilingual academy; it would be under lay control; and it would instil a love of things Irish in its students rather than tailoring their learning to employment opportunities in the British empire. He aimed to inspire enthusiasm rather than to simply impart information, to foster a heroic spirit rather than to discipline. crucially, Elaine Sisson argued, Pearse's patriotic message was intertwined with the legends of boy-heroes, in particular the mythic hero Cuchulainn, whose image graced the walls of the school and whose influence was apparently so tangible that one student regarded him 'an "important if invisible member" of the staff'.¹³

The school was never a commercially successful enterprise, however, and it finally closed its doors in 1935. The impact of its message was apparent in 1916, however, when several students fought alongside Pearse in the Rising and when Pearse, along with his brother William, Con Colbert, and Thomas MacDonagh, all members of his faculty at St. Enda's, faced firing squads for their roles in the uprising. While he was not able to break entirely with the exam system in St. Enda's, Pearse at least implemented his own ideals as far as possible. His fundamental belief was that Ireland needed political independence and the restoration of promotion of knowledge of the national past in the schools in order to counter the effects of mental and cultural colonisation. Ideas similar to those of Pearse were invoked in the formation of education policy in independent Ireland.

Michael Tierney, who was appointed professor of Greek in 1923, and subsequently president of UCD in 1947, which position he held until 1964, also outlined his philosophy on schooling with a view to an independent Ireland. Like Pearse, he considered the British system of education as 'grotesque'.¹⁴ He agreed that it was designed to destroy separate Irish nationality and to make children disregard that they were Irish.¹⁵ Tierney

¹³ Elaine Sisson, *Pearse's patriots: St. Enda's and the cult of boyhood* (Cork, 2004), p. 80.

¹⁴ Michael Tierney, *Education in a free Ireland* (Dublin, date of publication between 1918 and 1922), p. 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

believed that the very purpose of a free Irish state would be to forge an Ireland through education that linked the Gaelic state of the past to what he envisaged as the Christian state of the future.¹⁶ The basis of all teaching would be the Irish language, history, music and art. As with Pearse, and his father-in-law Eoin MacNeill, Tierney believed the history and language of Ireland were closely connected.¹⁷

Eoin MacNeill, the first secretary of the Gaelic League and professor of ancient Irish History at UCD, was the minister for Education from August 1922 to November 1925. This was a decisive period in the determination of the direction of the new Irish education system. MacNeill declared that for the members of the government to abandon the attempt to revive Irish would be to abandon their own nation.¹⁸ He regarded the language as the distinctive lifeline and the principal thread of Irish nationality.¹⁹ The essential element in MacNeill's Irish-Ireland was the language. He believed that ignorance of Irish history was the chief cause of want of interest in the Irish language. He felt that to anyone who did not identify himself with Irish history, the learning of the language would be a mere philology.²⁰ In his academic work, MacNeill identified the basis of the Irish nation in the remote Gaelic past. He showed that the Irish nation was an ancient historical entity whose formation could be traced back to the fifth century: 'the Irish people stand singular and eminent ... from the fifth century forward, as the possessors of an intense national consciousness'.²¹ He outlined the continuity of Irish history from pre-Celtic to contemporary times and found the origin of Irish laws and institutions in the remote past.²² In this way, he connected ancient Ireland with modern Ireland as one constant and timeless nation, establishing the ancient historical roots of the new state. MacNeill stated that 'the business and main functions of the Department of Education in this country are to conserve and build up our nationality'.²³ Thus, MacNeill epitomised both the Gaelic ethos and the historical perspective of the founding fathers of the nascent state.²⁴

¹⁶ Ibid, pp 26, 98.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁸ *Times Education Supplement*, 30 October 1925.

¹⁹ *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 5 October 1907.

²⁰ Ibid., 28 October 1911.

²¹ Eoin MacNeill, *The phases of Irish history* (Dublin, 1919), p. 248.

²² Eoin MacNeill, *Early Irish laws and institutions* (Dublin, 1935).

²³ *Dáil Debates*, vol. 13, 11 November 1925, col. 187.

²⁴ MacNeill, as a devout Catholic, also epitomised the religious standpoint of Free State political leaders. See p. 15.

The first annual report of the Department of Education highlighted the fact that the central educational aim of the Free State was 'the strengthening of the national fibre by giving the language, music, history and tradition of Ireland their natural place in the life of Irish schools'.²⁵ Policy makers intended history to reflect a romantic but unhistorical ideal of Ireland's Gaelic past held by many Irish revolutionaries. Pearse, for example, idealised education in pagan and early Christian Ireland and argued that its character could be revived through an education of 'adequate inspiration'.²⁶ He believed that 'a heroic tale is more essentially a factor in education than a proposition in Euclid ... what Ireland wants beyond all...is a new birth of the heroic spirit'.²⁷

However, the conception of history and history teaching as a method of restoring and renewing the Gaelic past did not consider those whose past was not a Gaelic one. The emergence of a new consensus on Irish identity meant that those who did not subscribe to it, in political, cultural or historical terms, became outsiders in the state. Roy Foster's review of the cultural revival movement was highly critical: 'the emotions focused by cultural revivalism around the turn of the century were fundamentally sectarian and even racist'.²⁸ Brian Murphy questioned Foster's interpretation and confirmed the non-sectarian ideals of the Gaelic League.²⁹ For many unionists, nationalism and the cultural revival were inextricably linked with Catholicism. The Catholic Church was suspected of nurturing an extreme nationalism in its schools.³⁰ Echoing Canon Law, the Central Association of Catholic Clerical School Managers had asserted in 1921 that

We are confident that an Irish government...will always recognise and respect the principles which must regulate and govern Catholic education...the only satisfactory system of education for Catholics is one

²⁵ Department of Education, *Report 1923-24* (Dublin, 1924), p. 22.

²⁶ Pearse, 'The murder machine' in *Collected works*, pp 24-5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁸ Roy Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London, 1988), p. 453.

²⁹ Brian Murphy, 'Past events and present politics – Roy Foster's 'Modern Ireland'' in Daltún Ó Ceallaigh (ed.), *Reconsiderations of Irish history and culture* (Dublin, 1994), pp 80-4.

³⁰ For a review of the roots of diversity that had taken hold in Irish education before 1920, see Seán Farren, *The politics of Irish education 1920-65* (Belfast, 1995), chapter 1.

wherein Catholic children are taught in Catholic schools by Catholic teachers under Catholic control.³¹

In 1924, the orthodox *Catholic Bulletin* declared that 'The Irish nation is the Gaelic nation; its language and literature is the Gaelic language; its history is the history of the Gael. All other elements have no place ...'.³² When the state of Northern Ireland was set up, the main Protestant churches transferred their ownership of schools to the state. Irish history was dropped entirely from the curriculum of state schools.³³ The Catholic Church retained ownership of its schools. In the south, the Catholic Church played a dominant role in the management of education. The distinctions were less explicit than in the north but the dynamics of the system raised issues about denominational, non-denominational and secular perspectives on education. The majority of schools were *de facto* Catholic schools. The Catholic Church claimed the allegiance of 95 per cent of the Free State population. With the exception of Ernest Blythe, the first Free State cabinet consisted entirely of Catholics.³⁴ Some provision was made for the minority viewpoint in the Senate however.

Milne argued that the majority of Protestants in the Irish Free State had considered themselves Irish in imperial terms.³⁵ In contrast with southern Catholic nationalists, southern Protestant unionists felt deeply the pressure of political change. Many schools under Protestant management did not subscribe to the Gaelicising policies and the historical perspective of the new state. They had to bear the rigours of a state Gaelicisation policy, or else see their schools deprived of all public funding. Letters sent to the Taoiseach in 1944 by the Presbyteries of Monaghan, Letterkenny and Raphoe illustrate the attitude of Protestant schools to the use of Irish as a teaching medium.³⁶ The Presbyteries acknowledged the cultural value of Irish as a subject of study but argued that it was granted an undue proportion of the timetable and that the policy of using it as the chief medium of instruction was not educationally beneficial for children whose home language was English. The letters also recorded anxieties that the

³¹ *Irish Catholic Directory* (1922), pp 577-8.

³² *Catholic Bulletin*, vol. 14, no. 4 (1924), p. 269.

³³ Seán Farren, 'Nationalist-Catholic reaction to educational reform in Northern Ireland 1920-30' in *History of Education*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1986), p. 28.

³⁴ See E. Brian Titley, *Church, state, and the control of schooling in Ireland 1900-44* (Dublin, 1983), p. 90.

³⁵ Milne, *New approaches*, p. 6.

³⁶ National Archives of Ireland (N. A. I.), Department of the Taoiseach (D. T.), RA 98/44.

setting of exam papers for entry to teacher training colleges in Irish only would seriously imperil the supply of Presbyterian teachers.³⁷

The significance given to school history teaching by the new government was revealed in 1922 when it became a compulsory subject in primary schools. The programme followed from 1925 dealt exclusively with Irish history and changed little until the introduction of the new curriculum for primary schools in 1971.³⁸ In 1934, the Department of Education outlined the approach that it wanted primary school teachers to take to history:

In an Irish school in which history is properly taught, the pupils will learn that they are citizens of no mean country, that they belong to a race that has a noble tradition of heroism and persistent loyalty to ideals. In such a school no formal exhortation should be necessary to bring home to every pupil the worth of good faith, courage and endurance, and the strong grounds that they are for a belief that a race that has survived a millennium of grievous struggle and persecution must possess qualities that are a guarantee of a great future ... Irish history has been much distorted by those who wrote from the enemy's standpoint. Such writers had to attempt to justify conquest and expropriation.³⁹

The policy of Gaelicisation, then, was aimed mainly at the primary schools and only to a limited degree at secondary schools. This emphasis on the primary school was due to the realisation that it was more effective to begin orientation at the earliest suitable age, and to the fact that secondary schools were almost exclusively in private denominational hands. It was also the case that a relatively small proportion of students continued their education beyond primary school level.⁴⁰ In addition to these factors, secondary schools were much more independent of the Department of Education than were primary schools. Supervision of primary schools by a vast inspectorate was much more intense than was the case at secondary level.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ryan, *History teaching*, p. 165.

³⁹ Department of Education, *Notes for teachers: history* (Dublin, 1934), p. 3. For an expanded version of these *Notes for teachers*, see Appendix 111.

⁴⁰ Thomas Francis Holohan, 'History teaching in the Irish Free State 1922-35' in *History Ireland*, vol. 2, no. 4 (1994), p. 55.



Douglas Hyde, founder of the Gaelic League, pictured with his successor as President of the League, Professor Eoin MacNeill, c. 1928.



Patrick Pearse, c. 1914.



Poster advertising the Gaelic League's annual Seachtain na Gaeilge (Irish week), c.1915-16, contrasting a proud independent Ireland with a despondent, British-controlled Ireland.



Cuchulainn, whose image inspired Patrick Pearse's young patriots in St. Enda's.



A Gaelic League *Timire* (travelling teacher) holds an open air class in Ballingeary, Co. Cork, in 1905.