National Identity and the Study of Irish History

If each generation re-writes its own history, this should apply with equal force to the writing for children as to that for adults.¹

None of us would deny that the Spirit of Ireland has lived and will live; but we are by no means agreed as to which events and persons must be considered manifestations of that spirit. To be exact, whose history do we propose to teach? Should the history of Ireland include all the people born within its five provinces, or who dwell therein? Are the Gaelic speakers not more important than the others? If so, why omit the Gaels of Scotland? Does purity of race affect the question? Should we include Irish emigrants in America, and neglect the planters in Ireland? How long does it take to make a planter fit for nationalisation; five years or five generations? Should we include all who have willingly been called Irish, or confine our view to those who in some form or other have cherished the flame of political nationalism?²

That modern Irish historians have tended to concentrate on the structural rather than the curricular development of the Irish education system is a development as regrettable in consequence as it is true in fact. The primary explanation for this deficiency is all too obvious, in that the world of curricular development is seen as falling within the narrow professional competence of the educationalist, marginal to the interest even of the cultural historian. This is sadly true even with regard to the teaching of History itself, in spite of its undoubted influence on the formulation of Irish national identity. Though the subject has not been completely ignored, the original research in particular has been undertaken in a rather sporadic and uncoordinated manner, with the inevitable result that most of the work has passed largely unheeded.³ There is a certain irony, indeed, about the current state of affairs – the Irish historical profession, which has castigated educationalists for their failure to keep up with modern European standards, has itself been guilty of the sin of ignoring some of the better recent domestic work.

To put the matter another way, the received wisdom with regard to the teaching of History in Irish schools, the deficiencies of which have been an integral and staple element in the revisionist analysis, is itself one of the few subject areas untouched by the methodological rigours of

² J. M. Douglas, 'Irish History as a School Subject', *The School and College Yearbook* (1940–1), 63.
revisionism. The ongoing failure of the Department of Education to open its files to full public scrutiny is perhaps the prime explanation for the retarded nature of the debate, but I shall suggest here that the disregard also accommodates entrenched interests within the Irish historical profession itself. It enables revisionists to expose the manifest inadequacies of nationalist precepts, based on the useful but false assumption of an intellectually inanimate populace, whilst it simultaneously accommodates their erstwhile opponents by positing a view of the Irish people as pliant clay, sculpted by the forces of neo-colonialism, ultramontane Catholicism or whatever the particular intellectual vogue in question may be. Furthermore, it is convenient for the propagators of ‘new’ histories, conjuring up, as they do, appealing vistas of virgin territory waiting for intrepid frontiersmen to stake their career claim.

This article, which attempts to assess the development of Irish national identity as manifested in the teaching of History in primary and secondary schools in Ireland between 1900 and 1960, will, inter alia, seek to refute the claim that there has been within Ireland an ‘absence of a system of cultural consent that would effectively legitimise and secure the existing political arrangements’. On the contrary, it will argue that it is precisely because the popular intellectual realignments contingent upon the achievement of independence have so successfully consolidated the cultural legitimacy of the Irish state that dissenting voices within the academic community stand out so clearly. That is, the reason why poets and prisoners are so prominent in Ireland is not (contra Kearney) because their actions ‘serve to subvert the normal edifice of discourse’, but rather because their failures scintillate against the enveloping homogeneity of the state’s popular authority. This authority is attributable in no small measure to the particularist nature of history teaching, a pedagogy productive of an integral, symbiotic identity which was neither the bourgeois mediocrity decried for example by the Irish Statesman, nor the Hibernicized ‘Stalinism’ so necessary to certain contemporary social critiques. Rather, it is argued that the inculcation of the belief in the inherent spirituality of the Irish people, which constituted the dominant motif in school instruction, supplemented a more sophisticated popular historical consciousness than has usually been allowed. Whether one describes this instinct as genuinely ‘histori-

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cal' or merely the product of a sense of grievance,¹ the point to be emphasized here is that the purposefulness of Irish popular thought, as instanced by the teaching of History, defies the categories prescribed for it by intellectuals, and has produced a variegated cultural milieu in which the political substratum nestles comfortably.

It is thus no accident that, as Foster has noted, 'academic revisionism has coincided with popular revivalism';² in that the former's condescending formalism rendered it irrelevant to the contemporary concerns of a society which, contrary to myth, was more occupied with the exigencies of the present than the misadventures of the past. In effect, the twin hopes entertained by the historiographical pioneers of the 1930s, of placing History on the solid ground of hard evidence, and of using the conclusions drawn therefrom to ameliorate modern partialities, proved to be mutually incompatible.³ If it is true that 'insecurity was the overriding factor in the cultural history of the first years after independence',⁴ an attitude conditioned by the shattering events accompanying that event, then the instinctive reaction of professional Irish historians, in withdrawing into a revisionist laager and refusing to engage in a reflective discourse as to their new social function, boded ill for their purist ethic.⁵ With public opinion supportive of the idea that education in general, and school History in particular, should be directed towards the creation of a 'strong, reasonable and enthusiastic national feeling',⁶ professional historians, by setting themselves the task of exploding the myths that lay at the root of such sentiment, thereby rendered themselves unable to confront the mechanisms by which these myths had become established in the national psyche in the first instance.⁷ This is not to suggest that the history lesson was uniquely suited for, or solely devoted to, apologia on behalf of the various political, social and religious groups in the country. The whole educational process was perforce subjected to such pressures, particularly in the light of the dominant position enjoyed by the churches in the ownership and management of the schools. Further, one should not exaggerate the ability of the teachers, in terms of their limited professional training, consciously to manipulate the subject for the inculcation of social

3. One should acknowledge, however, that Moody in particular came to appreciate the shortcomings of the academic lingua franca, whence his determined efforts in the direction of populist media, most notably the Thomas Davis lecture series.
5. B. Bradshaw, 'Nationalism and Historical Scholarship in Modern Ireland', ibid. xxvi, 104 (1989), 330–11. Note also S. Deane's suggestion that the monographic *modus operandi* of the *Irish Historical Studies* school implicitly refuted the teleological spiritual 'meta-narrative' analysed here: 'Wherever Green is Read', in *Revising the Rising*, p. 96.
7. See also Fanning's observation that the historians of the *Irish Historical Studies* school 'were not temperamentally disposed to seize upon such subjects, say, as the role of physical force in the

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norms.¹ Some indeed sought to use it as means of healing the divisions within Irish society, to avoid reviving tragic memories and irrelevant discord.² Once the presentation attained a basic level of sophistication, however, the subject matter in general reflected rather than conflicted with the broader social perspective.³

The formal syllabuses governing the teaching of History in schools represented the most detailed expression of official attitudes towards the subject, and as such they merit particularly close attention. Of course, the actual implementation of the instructions in the classroom depended on several factors, most notably the attitude of the teacher, and consequently they are not in themselves evidence of what the pupils actually learned. They are, however, indicative of authoritative opinion regarding the significant elements of the nation’s past.⁴ The broad thrust of the argument here is that the guidelines (of which the Rules and Regulations of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland are studied in detail below) were characterized by a vague minimalism, reflecting the limited nature of central control over education, and were sufficiently broad as to permit a populist, and not to enforce an academic, conception of that history.⁵

At the outset it is necessary to recall the vitriolic personal abuse that the Commissioners responsible for framing curricular requirements prior to independence had experienced for their alleged British sympathies. As one school manager put it, ‘the National Commissioners are engaged in assimilating the Irish to the English system’.⁶ Three-quarters of the Board were Trinity men, ‘bringing with them the bias and anti-national spirit of that old bastion of ascendency’,⁷ believing ‘that Ireland is a begging province of England, and that England is our native land’.⁸ Far from trying to steer a course between a nationalist Scylla and unionist Charybdis,⁹ critics claimed that the National Commissioners in particular deliberately sought to wreck the ship of nationhood on

achievement of Irish independence as their close subject of research’, in Ireland in the Contemporary World, ed. J. Dooge (Dublin, 1986), p. 140.

⁵ For an examination of the syllabus at secondary level for the years after independence, see G. Doherty, 'National Identity and the Study of Irish History in Irish Schools, 1900–1960' (MA thesis, University College Galway, 1992), pp. 23–5.
⁶ Changes in the System of National Education from a Manager's Point of View (Dublin, 1902), para. 4.
⁷ Freeman's Journal, 3 July 1906.
⁸ 'Irish education', An Connachtach, October 1907, p. 10.
⁹ MacSamhráin, 'Ideological Conflict and Historical Interpretation', 230–1.

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the rocks of cultural assimilation. The Intermediate Board also came in for sharp criticism, particularly from Irish language enthusiasts, who heaped upon it 'the public condemnation and public chastisement which it so richly deserves'.1 Again much was made of the strong presence of Trinity men on the Board, men who (as Douglas Hyde claimed) shared 'the bigoted race-hatred' of the President of the College.2

Such criticisms extended beyond the personal shortcomings of the individual Commissioners to the policies they effected, particularly where History was concerned. The 'unnatural system of excluding subjects which so deeply, so vitally concern Ireland', of which History was the prime example, would, the Catholic Bulletin gravely intoned, seal 'the fate of Ireland as an Irish nation'.3 The Freeman's Journal bemoaned 'the systematic manner in which Irish history is ignored by the various examination Boards of this country'.4 Alice Stopford Green, the English-born nationalist historian, suggested that as a result of the relegation of History to a minor position within the English syllabus the young Irish child was being insensibly led to conclude that the nation's past was 'less important than the rules of English grammar'.5 The exclusion of History from the curriculum pursued in the teacher training colleges did not escape attention either. As a contributor to the Catholic Bulletin put it: 'The educational authorities were determined that, as regards instruction in matters closely connected with the welfare of this unfortunate country, the blind shall lead the blind.'6 The 'pretty conceit' of the exclusion of national history from the 'national' (that is, primary) school system was frequently remarked upon.7 Attempts have been made to mitigate this damning verdict, for example by suggesting that the reforms introduced in the 1899–1908 era were designed to be patriotic without being potentially subversive,8 but such a distinction overlooks the separatist logic underpinning the bulk of the criticism.

Some insisted on perceiving the Board as agents for the subversion rather than the consolidation of British power, the Provost of Trinity being one of them. The 1916 Rebellion gave him the opportunity to wax lyrical on the 'propaganda of hate to England on the part of school-masters living on the pay of the Imperial Government'.9 The National Commissioners themselves came out strongly against such an accusation, finding no evidence 'which would warrant the conclusion that

2. Ibid., 15 June 1901.
5. A. S. Green, The Old Irish World (Dublin, 1912), p. 43.

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seditious teaching in the national schools exists to any appreciable extent'. They also rejected the 'charge of spreading disloyalty and sedition and disseminating treason among the youth of Ireland' made by the Hardinge Commission.  

In general, however, attention focused on the Board's 'anti-national' nature, and on the manner of its 'thwarting the growth of a distinctive Irish character on traditional and historic lines'. While such a charge was made in the first instance against the machinations of the National Board, some claimed that the Intermediate Board sinned 'if possible, more grievously in the manner in which it ignores Irish history', in that, while it formally prescribed the subject for examination, the practice of omitting questions relating to Irish history from the paper itself encouraged teachers to ignore it, bearing in mind that their salaries were still determined by the pass rates of their pupils. In particular 'the history of free and independent Ireland' was thereby excluded, with nationalists drawing the obvious conclusions.

It is interesting to note the justification provided for the total exclusion of History from the curriculum of national schools before 1900. On the one hand there is the view that this policy represented 'an effort to assuage traditional prejudices', by keeping from the tender minds of children issues which drove adults to violence. Furthermore,

> to have ordained that the annals of Ireland were to be studied would have disrupted and killed that undenominational system of education as surely as if it were commanded that the tenets of Roman Catholicism, Episcopalianism or Presbyterianism should be exclusively taught in the class-rooms to which children of all denominations were admitted.

From a more cynical viewpoint, however, the Commissioners thereby denied unscrupulous teachers the chance deliberately to foment discontent. A rather uncharitable comment condemned the omission for producing children 'reared like foundling brats in a workhouse, in absolute ignorance of the story of their kith and kin, the suggestion being that their past is a story of crime and shame that had better not be uncovered'. What matters here is less the details on which the arguments differed, but their broad agreement that a knowledge of history could influence reactions to current situations. The idea was colourfully expressed in the following terms:

> A genuine knowledge of our motherland, such as may be obtained by a genuine and sympathetic study of native history, is an absolutely indispensable ingredient in every course of education. It is the very breast-milk of education; it is the liquid food that soonest becomes assimilated into blood; it

5. I. Magee, 'The Teaching of Irish History in Irish Schools'.
7. 'Editorial', Catholic Bulletin, ix, 3 (March 1920), 129.

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alone can impart the warmth of patriotic feeling, the enthusiasm for the motherland, without which the development of the national character on traditional lines is impossible. It supplies the spirit that aims naturally and instinctively at reproducing the best types of the race in character and aspirations after deeds of renown. A race trained up without a true fructifying knowledge of the country’s past is like the child reared in a ‘home’; its aspirations are sterilised or mis-directed, its love for motherland degenerates into something cold, formal and fruitless; it may understand the theory of patriotism, but true patriotism is not a theory, it is the spirit, the impulse of the child, directed, strengthened, and stimulated by hereditary instinct and ripened into action by the glow of parental affection ... The loss of the breast-milk of education cannot be made good by the most generous régime administered to the full-grown man.

It was against the backdrop of such opinions as these that History was first introduced into the national school curriculum in 1900, albeit under the subject heading of the English programme. Debate continues as to the significance of this innovation. The principal reason appears to lie in the fact that ‘history was too important a subject to be neglected on the curriculum’. The Commissioners were faced with conflicting pressures. On the one hand, public demand for the inclusion of History in some form in the curriculum was becoming ever more insistent. On the other, the style most often in demand was incompatible with the secular non-directional precepts of the Board. In such a situation, the inclusion of historical subjects in the English syllabus was an ingenious compromise. It spiked the guns of those who claimed that the Commissioners were afraid to expose Irish children to a knowledge of their country’s past, and by extension, the ancient nature of its distinct nationality. Equally, by virtue of the close supervision of the content of the textbooks involved, and by the use of the inspectorate to ensure that no material departures were made from these books, the Board sought to regulate and minimize the scope for analysis of that nationality. In effect, ‘the Commissioners yielded to public pressure to make the curriculum more responsive to the native Irish culture’ only because the logic of their own position made such an apparent capitulation acceptable. Given that the Board consistently refused to produce its own textbooks, however, it was, to a certain extent, at the mercy of the commercial printers, who were under pressure from the public to produce works reflecting its concerns. Not that the Commissioners felt they had anything to fear from particularist renderings of the nation’s history. They only baulked where such an approach broached the thorny issue of political nationalism.

It is interesting to examine the manner of the Commission’s submission to further pressure in granting History an independent position on

1. Dineen, Native History in National Schools, pp. 10–11.
the timetable in 1908. Following a deluge of resolutions demanding alterations in the teaching of Irish language and History in 1906, the Board undertook a review of the situation, with the result that History was granted a status distinct from English on the timetable. In the words of one modern-day expert, this action represented a 'serious attempt of the Commissioners to establish a History programme which would allow scope to the teacher at local level to evolve his own programme'. In short, the teachers now enjoyed greater freedom to present the material as they saw fit, and it is argued that they perforce used this latitude to bolster populist historical self-perceptions. The presentation of the material, of course, had to comply with the general maxims underlying the national school system, whose fundamental principle was 'to afford combined literary and moral and separate religious instruction, to children of all persuasions' with the guarantee that 'no attempt shall be made to interfere with the particular religious tenets of any description of Christian pupils'. Such a regulation was difficult to implement, given that the overwhelming majority of schools were arranged on strict denominational lines. It was also very difficult to observe its spirit where there was a lack of regular contact with members of different faiths. The danger was less that religious minorities would find their values subsumed in a burgeoning Catholic hegemony, than that their traditions would become isolated and petrified.

The rules affected more than the presentation of religion in the history class. The prohibition on the display of political symbols was rigorously enforced, for example, in the punishment of teachers sporting Sinn Féin badges. The definition of a 'political' symbol was a matter of some contention. Was, for example, the tricolour an eighteenth-century relic or a contemporary political emblem? The answer depended on the political convictions of those who enforced the code. The Board found itself in the invidious position of administering regulations perceived as biased against one section of the community. Politics was not merely a matter of emblems. Rule 124(a) was explicit in its refusal to sanction texts to which 'a reasonable objection might be entertained on religious or political grounds'. The supervision of textbooks and the increased efficiency of the inspectorate following its recent reorganization ensured that the Board exercised a measure of control over day-to-day instruction.

Such restrictions restricted a teacher's room for manoeuvre when treating divisive historical episodes. In this regard, however, it is interesting to note how little detail was laid down on the method for

1. A campaign instigated by the Gaelic League: Minutes of Proceedings... 15th January 1907, NLI, 1907 Minutes, p. 27.
2. P. Callan, 'Irish History in Irish national schools', 29.
3. Records of the Commissioners of National Education, National Archives, Dublin, ED9/2697J.
teaching the subject. Indeed, the 1908 programme included little else
apart from a ludicrously vague specification of the actual period to be
covered. Teachers were informed that 'suggestive schemes' of 'a definite
course of instruction' were to replace the exclusive reliance on texts,
although approved readers were to continue in use for fourth and higher
standards 'as supplementary to oral instruction'. The course, however,
amounted to no more than a general history of Ireland, concentrating on
'characteristic epochs' containing the 'life of one representative man',
with a touch of English history, and the choice of an intensive study of
one era, a study of local history, or a course in civics for those in sixth
standard and above. Such options were, however, available only to the
minority of pupils attending schools with a staff of two or more teach-
ers. For the rest, the choice was limited by the need to combine groups of
different abilities, and by the lack of a specialist knowledge of history on
the part of the teacher.

The regulations introduced in 1908 persisted, with minor alterations,
until the Board itself was dissolved and its responsibilities were taken
over by the Department of Education in the Irish Free State. The
responsibility for codifying the rules governing primary education in
general, and the history syllabus in particular, fell to the National
Programme Conference, a representative educational body, whose two
reports, in 1921 and 1926, laid the foundation for primary educational
policy up to and beyond the end of our period. The first gathering was
convened under the auspices of the Irish National Teachers' Organis-
ation, the second arranged by the Department. The impact of the new
syllabus is examined elsewhere, but it appears that too much attention
has been paid to the innovations thereby instigated,1 and too little given
to the striking persistence of many features pre-dating independence,
particularly in regard to the sheer range of material to be covered.

Now that we have examined some of the principal institutional influ-
ences on the study of history, it is desirable to discuss the impact of
important social influences thereon. In this respect it is worthwhile
considering here an instance of the controversies surrounding the nature
of the 'patriotism' as inculcated in the history lesson prior to indepen-
dence. It arose in October 1917, in connection with a complaint by a Mrs
Bourke against Miss Murray, the principal of the Ardclough national
school in county Kildare, who was alleged to have beaten Mrs Bourke's
children on account of the fact that their father was serving in the British
forces in France.2 In addition, Mrs Bourke informed the Commissioners
that the teacher 'instructs the children always to hate the British and tells
them when they grow up she hopes they will fight and die for an Irish

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2. Records of the Commissioners of National Education, National Archives, EDYs/27580. Letter
from Mrs Bourke to the Commissioners, C.O. 28469-17.

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Republic'. Amongst her other indiscretions, it was also suggested that she had forced children to sing seditious ballads, most notably 'The Soldier's Song'.

In the face of these allegations, the manager of the school sided with his teacher, although he was careful to avoid the impression of having nationalist sympathies. He maintained, contrary to Mrs Bourke's accusations, that there had been no instances of seditious teaching in the history class, which had focused mainly on the Norman period; that the charge of extreme cruelty was 'absolutely false'; and that the numbers attending the school had not fallen as a consequence of a loss of confidence in Miss Murray. With regard to Mrs Bourke herself, the manager merely referred to 'the celebrated tongue she has in the neighbourhood'. He claimed that the teacher was both efficient and popular, and that any songs that may have been sung in class were so widely known that 'no-one attaches any significance to them'. The matter was resolved relatively peacefully, although not without Mrs Bourke having threatened to instigate legal proceedings to force a full enquiry. Eventually the Commission came down in the teacher's favour, the only demand on Miss Murray being that she was required in future to submit all songs to be sung in class for prior approval.

The case, though comparatively minor, reveals important aspects of attitudes towards the treatment of patriotism and nationalism in the history class, as well as being an interesting case-study in teacher-parent, teacher-manager and school–Commission relations. It is possible to view the 'political' issue involved as merely the cover for an essentially personal argument, but the choice of the terms of the accusation is itself revealing. The admission that the songs had been sung in class, but that they were also being regularly sung outside the school walls is testament to the groundswell of popular support for the republican cause during these months in particular. What is of greater interest is that the Commissioners, in spite of their heightened sensitivity to the nationalist menace in the history lesson after the shock of the 1916 Rising, nevertheless reacted almost indifferently to this blatant breach of their regulations. It may be that the sea-change in public opinion was being felt in the corridors of the Board's Marlborough Street headquarters. It is tempting to distinguish a certain duality, if not downright hypocrisy, between the Commissioners' public stance, particularly in London, where they vehemently denied all suggestions that sedition was being accommodated in Irish classrooms, and their private reaction of uncertain hesitancy in Ireland itself, wherever such cases were uncovered.

1. Ibid.
2. Letter from Mrs Bourke to the Commissioners, C.O. 30339-17, undated.
3. Letter from the manager to the Commissioners, ibid., undated.
4. Minutes of the Proceedings ... 12 March 1918, NLI, 1918 Minutes.
The relationship between the fortunes of the Irish language and developments in Irish national identity, as manifested in the teaching of History, has hitherto been a rather neglected aspect of the social ramifications of the Irish linguistic transformation. Though some believed that Irish had ceased materially to affect society at large, many more stressed its ubiquity in the history class as a living distillation of the national past, and the symbolic status of the language as a totem of divisions within Irish society bestows upon it a significance for considerations of modern national identity that cannot be ignored. At a simple level it was claimed that a study of Irish history was a necessary precursor to a sympathy with the aspirations embodied in the language. History shifted the focus of attention from the humdrum activities of contemporary enthusiasts to the deeds of Gaelic-speaking figures of ancient renown. This idea was well expressed by the following contribution during one of the rather cursory annual debates on the education estimates:

Side by side with the restoration of the language you must also restore Irish culture and the distinctive characteristics of our people. We should cut out all this nonsensical talk and get down to the groundwork. There is more involved than the language. We must get our people to learn the history of our country and to understand it perfectly. There has been too much false history published in this country for years. Let us now try to learn all that is good in our history and destroy all that is bad because we have had a lot of bad in our history too.

The argument that the principal theme underlying Irish history was the struggle to maintain a distinct nationality, and that the surest guarantee of achieving this goal lay in preserving the language, was quite persuasive, but gradually foundered on the growing cynicism with regard to the actions of the revivalists. For those so inclined it was easy to believe that if the ‘national history be properly taught, if they [sic] children are taught to love everything connected with Ireland, they will come with readier minds and more eager hearts to study her language’. Unfortunately there was no hard proof that this was the case. Daniel Corkery (a noted academic and Irish-language activist) could postulate that ‘the tradition of the Irish people is to be understood and experienced with intimacy only in the Irish language’, but the flaw in his argument was seized upon by Senator Hayes who, in the course of a parliamentary debate on the restoration of the Irish language, exposed the discrepancy between Irish nationality on Corkery’s terms and political nationalism as its living expression.

All our modern nationalism is in English, and all our great modern national heroes who gave us what we call our nationalism today gave it to us in English – Grattan, Flood, Tone, Emmet, Moore, Davis, Mitchel, Mangan, the Fenians,

Parnell, Griffith and even Pearse. A great many more people know Pearse's speech at the grave of O'Donovan Rossa than anything which he wrote in Irish. Even the language of Sinn Féin and the Volunteers was English.\footnote{1}

It appeared that the only way to appreciate the importance of the Irish language was to study Irish history through the medium of English; Irish, therefore, was no longer a causative force in the making of that history. Such an approach reduced the language to the status of a mere 'linguistic curiosity'.\footnote{2} As Eoin MacNeill (founder member of the Gaelic League and first Minister for Education in the Irish Free State) put it, 'to anyone who has not a feeling for Irish history, or does not identify himself with Irish history, the learning of Irish is a mere philology'\footnote{3} – an outlook that was, needless to say, anathema to the revivalist mentality.

The views of the secretary of the Gaelic League, perhaps the most important of the Irish-language pressure-groups, outlined his conception of the matter thus:

If the Irish people had a knowledge of the history of their country they would not need these sordid arguments on behalf of their national language .... They would look back into the past, and say that when Ireland was the home of learning in Western Europe her language was Irish; they would know that Irish, as a language, was good enough for Finbarr and Columcille, for Brian and Hugh O'Donnell, for the women who defended Limerick's walls, and the men who fought at Fontenoy; and they would harken to the sad fact that that language, which had been theirs from the remotest antiquity, which had survived all the attacks of its enemies, all the changes and ravages of time, from the Danish invasions to the Penal days, was now almost on the verge of extinction; yes, even now, when in the opinion of many the streaks of dawn are about to appear on our hilltops; and they would say, 'Yes, this language is our one link between our storied past and a future of hope and prosperity; no matter how free we may be politically, without this language our nationhood would ever be a thing imperfect.'\footnote{4}

Though it had not been for the sake of the language that Columcille had embarked on his missionary work or Limerick had been defended, such historic associations invested the language with 'the feeling that it is the vehicle of a great treasure, that it is the vehicle of our past culture, that it represents the most precious thing in the past history of Ireland, of our traditions'.\footnote{5} To put it another way, 'Irish was the evidence for racial distinctiveness. Ireland had undergone mental and spiritual subjugation in learning English, a process which could be reversed only by “de-anglicising” Ireland, in particular by returning to the ancestral tongue.'\footnote{6}
Parents and teachers were warned that the failure to motivate pupils to restore the language would result in nothing less than the extinction of the Irish race.  

The possibility that the volatile mixture of Gaelic revivalism, particularist nationalism and partisan history might explode in the classrooms of Ireland in the early years of the century was not one which the Boards of Education could afford to take lightly. This danger explains the wide berth given to the language by the National Commissioners, the 1904 bilingual programme notwithstanding. Accordingly, somewhat to the chagrin of those who would have exploited indiscretions to restrict still further the scope of the instruction, few examples of blatantly seditious teaching were uncovered (though this apparent docility was in part due, as we have already seen, to the Commission's reluctance to deal harshly with such incidents, for fear of provoking a nationalist reaction). One of the few reported examples of teaching bordering on the subversive occurred in Cloghernagh national school in county Mayo. The case centred on a poor report given by the inspector, Mr Cussen, on the teacher, Mr P. Hughes, after a routine visit in early 1912. It was suggested that the teacher was deliberately neglecting 'large portions of the programme' and had become 'quite neglectful' of his duties in general. In particular the complaints focused on the teaching of History and Irish, the standards in which were said to be unacceptably poor. The dispute took on a personal dimension when it was revealed that Mr Hughes had been one of several local teachers who signed a petition demanding the replacement of Mr Cussen. It is clear that it was this action, rather than any professional shortcomings on his part, that Mr Hughes believed was behind the inspector's report. The manager of the school, Reverend M. Hughes (no apparent relation) sided with his teacher, testifying to the fact that 'his character as a teacher could not, in any respect, be questioned or assailed'. Mr Cussen's response was unaffected by these protestations. He claimed that his constructive criticisms had been merely met with 'public attacks on the inspectorate in general and myself in particular', attacks which he ascribed to Mr Hughes' belief that the inspectorate were unsympathetic to the position of the Irish language. The teacher's attack, he believed, was not spontaneous, but was part of 'a far-reaching intrigue'. He suggested that the main reason for the poor standard of the work was the excessive time devoted to the study of Irish, the results in which were, nonetheless, disappointing.

3. Letter from Mr Hughes to the manager, 23 May 1912, contained in letter from the manager to the Commissioners, L8402-12.
4. Letter from Revd Hughes to the Commissioners, 24 May 1912, ibid.
5. Letter from Mr Cussen to the Commissioners, 20 July 1912, ibid.
The Commissioners decided to support their inspector, requesting Revd Hughes to demand that the teacher prepare a revised programme which covered the requisite material in each subject, and refusing calls for a re-inspection on the basis that the grounds for the inspector’s decision had not changed. The manager persisted in his opposition, and furnished them with Mr Hughes’s refutation of Mr Cussen’s charges, wherein it was pointed out that Irish had only been introduced into the school at the instigation of the local inspector of Irish; as Mr Hughes pointedly asked, ‘whom shall I obey in the future?’ He felt his position ‘seriously threatened’ by Mr Cussen, ‘with no redress to be had’. The inspector’s reply was rather curt, dismissing Mr Hughes’s letter as ‘more in the nature of notes for a speech of the usual kind at a Gaelic League meeting than a document deserving serious attention’. He coupled this ridicule with the allegation that the manager and teacher at the school were in collusion to keep the standards of Irish depressed, so as to engineer an attack on the Board and to ‘furnish ample grounds to invite an invective from simple-minded enthusiasts like Dr Hyde’. The Commissioners took this opportunity to end the correspondence, on the basis that it was damaging to the pupils and to the efficient working of the school, a convenient if rather lame excuse.

As events transpired, the teaching of Irish (though not History) was soon dropped from the timetable altogether, on the recommendation of the teacher. The whole episode might appear to have but a limited significance for a consideration of the influence of the relationship between the teaching of History and the Irish language, and the broader issues of nationality, were it not for the fact that four years later Mr Hughes once more came to the attention of the Commissioners, this time on account of his Sinn Féin sympathies. The nature of this allegation served to sever the alignments established in the preceding dispute, with the manager now deserting Mr Hughes to join forces with the Board. It was one thing for a priest to associate with a teacher in defence of the Irish language against its enemies; it was clearly quite another to be identified, even at one remove, with a movement supporting violent revolution.

After independence the situation was different, the tone not apologetic but celebratory; but celebratory of what and of whom? From the point of view of language enthusiasts who supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, the identification of Republicanism with revivalism was at once unjustifiable and ridiculous. As Michael Tierney (sometime Professor in University College Dublin) suggested, the cause of the language had as much to do with ‘Chinese metaphysics’ as with ‘radical republicanism’,

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1. Letter from the Commissioners to Revd Hughes, 10 Aug. 1912, ibid.
2. Letter from Mr Hughes to the Commissioners, 29 May 1913, ibid.
3. Letter from Mr Cussen to the Commissioners, 30 June 1913, ibid.
4. Letter from the Commissioners to Revd Hughes, 15 Aug. 1913, ibid.

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with which it was 'to a great degree incompatible'. He accurately
predicted the growth of disquiet if revival policy was not divorced from
'false and short-sighted notions ... of patriotism', although in this
regard he failed to consider the culpability of his own father-in-law,
Eoin MacNeill, who was Minister of Education when the policy was
initiated. During the early years of the new state a cross-party consensus
emerged that a principal tenet of educational policy should be to foster
an awareness of the 'cultural traditions enshrined in the Irish language',
traditions which, it has been suggested, represented the main subject-
matter of historical study in the schools. The argument was articulated
by an enthusiastic supporter of revivalist policies in the Catholic Bulletin:
'In the language of a people is enshrined its entire outlook on life, its
ideas and ideals, its manner of thought – every element that makes it feel
and realise it is a people.'

The inconsistency of the position adopted by many revivalists was
pointed out by Deputy Frank MacDermot (the Oxford-educated, ex-
British officer, and noted critic of official policies in the language field),
who argued that it was a palpable fallacy 'to suggest that the Irish
language was the sole depository of Irish culture', as 'the greater part of
Irish culture was embodied in the English language'. Consequently it
was 'simply untrue' that the Irish language 'was necessary to the preser-
vation of their national self-consciousness and national independence'. Not only that, but the programme of the language revival was 'estranged
from and even opposed to the development of a true national culture'
because it was 'estranged from a conception of the nature of culture
itself'. By concentrating solely on one cultural tradition, or that part of
a cultural inheritance convenient for contemporary manipulation, the
Gaelgeoirí (the term used to describe the contemporary revivalists)
appeared to narrow rather than broaden children’s horizons. O’Callaghan has seen this conversion of 'a positive philosophy for the reju-
venation of a language into a defensive attitude of cultural
triumphalism' as a prime factor in the sterility of much Catholic
thought in the 1920s and 1930s. The Irish Times, reacting to de Valera's
claim that the language was the ‘vehicle of three thousand years of
history’, suggested that there was widespread public antipathy to the
very principle of revival, and it was merely ‘appeals to the romanticisa-
tion of false history’ that prevented this tide of resentment from flooding
the Gaelic breakwaters. Such a claim was exaggerated, but it attests to

2. Ibid.
802.
5. Irish Independent, 18 Feb. 1937.
the growing confidence in the anti-revivalist camp during the war years in Ireland.

In general, however, the most frequently heard voice was that which insisted on an unbreakable connection between the Irish language, a bridge to that Gaelic culture which alone could counter materialist anglicization, and Irish history. The former was seen as the symbol of the separate nationality which alone gave point and meaning to the latter. The restoration of the language was a necessary precondition for the triumphant consummation of national independence. As the Irish School Weekly put it, 'if the change-over from English to Irish when, if, and so far as, it comes, does nothing to change our thoughts or to strengthen our cultural integrity, it will not have been worth the effort it must have cost.' The potential loss attendant on the disappearance of the language did not therefore diminish with time. Such sensibilities were, indeed, accentuated by its incessant, demoralizing decline.

An interesting angle on Protestant attitudes to the language, and the attitude of Free State officialdom to their educational needs, is revealed in those papers of Richard Mulcahy which relate to his time as Minister of Education during the Inter-party government of 1948–51. During his period of office he received a delegation of senior representatives from the Church of Ireland on the matter of the teaching of the Irish language. A summary of the basic position of the Protestant churches was outlined in a letter prior to the meeting from the Association of Managers of Church of Ireland Schools in Dublin, in which they suggested that the time given to the teaching of Irish is out of all proportion to the time allotted for other subjects—in the Infant school. The whole process of learning is consequently retarded through all subsequent stages of the child’s school life. In 1934 the Government drew up a revised programme for National schools. The work set out in it for all subjects other than Irish had been so drastically lowered so as to be almost ridiculous.

The response of the Department of Education to such criticisms came in an undated departmental memorandum to Mulcahy, which also dealt with his highly publicized interview with Dr Hodges, the Church of

1. 'Language and Nationality', Irish School Weekly, xlii, 24 (15 June 1940), 470.
2. Given the aggregated nature of the available statistics it is not possible to say with any accuracy the number of schools prior to Independence which taught History through the medium of Irish, although the majority were to be found within the Irish-speaking areas of the country. After Independence, the statistics relating to Irish-language instruction in primary schools were compiled on a school-by-school, rather than subject, basis, but tend to indicate that History was taught through Irish in a majority of schools. In the school year 1948/9, for example, over 1,600 of the c. 2,000 schools which used both English and Irish taught one or more subjects through Irish, and a further 660 taught all subjects through a mixture of Irish and English. The forcible nature of the regulations regarding the use of Irish in the history class would suggest that it was one of the subjects where the instruction was most heavily biased in this direction. At secondary level also, compulsory use of the medium of Irish for History was in force in a large majority of schools for much of the period in question, although at both levels the number of 'all-Irish' schools declined markedly after the Second World War.

3. Memorandum from W. Nesbitt Harvey, Hon. Sec., and T. J. Johnston, Chairman, Dublin School Managers (Church of Ireland) Association to the Minister for Education, 15 June 1949, Mulcahy papers, P7/C/52, University College Dublin archives.
Ireland Bishop of Limerick, which had taken place a short time before. The hostile tone of the memorandum, and the suspicion with which Protestant complaints were viewed, is caught in the author’s ironic observation that ‘loyalty is not a term I would apply to any activities in regard to Irish of the majority of Protestant teachers’. Suggestions emanating from such quarters as to the inefficiency of the use of Irish as a medium of instruction were dismissed as being based on political rather than pedagogical grounds, reflecting the spite many Protestants still harboured towards the native administration. It was suggested that Dr Hodges was being disingenuous when he suggested a genuine educational basis for his opposition to the policy. Departmental officials were clearly convinced that the small Protestant community in the twenty-six counties harboured an irrational antipathy to the language, and that the attempt to dress up this animosity in the guise of educational concern was a mere pretence. Their aversion to the language was, in short, seen to be a function of their antagonism to an independent Irish state. The memorandum went on to make some other interesting points, in particular the necessity to avoid denominational discrimination in the revival: ‘It can’t be compulsion for the Catholics and freedom for Protestants.’ The position was summarized as follows:

The aim is to have all know Irish and to let the nationalising and assimilating influence of the language and all it opens up work on all. It is stupid and shortsighted of the Protestants to be trying to segregate themselves from their fellow countrymen in this matter. More and more language is coming to be regarded as the badge of nationality. The Protestants must decide whether they wish to be thought English or Irish. Up to the present they appear to prefer to be thought English and their senseless opposition to Irish will in the end discredit them in the eyes of other countries. They are definitely cutting off their noses to spite their faces.

Needless to say such views were not aired in public. Not only was it suggested that the use of Irish to teach history merely served to improve a child’s linguistic rather than historical understanding; others implied that teachers who used Irish did so solely for political purposes, invariably using the history lesson to spread republican propaganda in the classroom. As Mulcahy sardonically noted:

I know of houses to which children come home from the North side of the city [Dublin] and so far as history is concerned they are quite local and quite modern; they are able to say: ‘Se Sean T. O Cáil le do chuir na Sasanaigh amach as Éirinn.’ There is nothing to be complained about in the local or modern aspect of that history.

1. Dr Hodges’ memorandum – Comments hereon, ibid.
2. Ibid.
4. Translation: ‘It was Seán T. O’Kelly who put the English out of Ireland’, a slighting reference to the prominent Fianna Fáil Deputy who was installed as first President of the Republic of Ireland in 1949: Dáil Debates, vol. xlii, 6 Apr. 1933, col. 4295.
Such critics, however, found themselves in something of a cleft stick. They could not disparage the ostensible goal of bilingualism, and the formal advice tendered by the department represented a model of good sense. The only target left, the teachers and managers, played no part in initiating the policy. Censure of official action could, therefore, only be directed towards the hypocrisy of the cúpla focal\textsuperscript{1} mentality, rather than explicit objectives of policy. The teachers, however, were annoyed by departmental suggestions that the slow progress of the revival was due less to inherent difficulties than to a lack of the required professional skill on their part, an irritation illustrated by this refutation of such a rebuke (which had come in a Department of Education annual report):

> It is suggested that in the best schools one of the results of good history teaching is that the pupils apply themselves with greater diligence to the learning of Irish. This is a suggestion which we can hardly take seriously. The child never bothers about the reasons why he has to learn any particular subject, and he accepts the curriculum without question. There can be no doubt that one of the most important aims of history teaching is the inculcation of national self-respect, but this aim in so far as it concerns the language revival, and in so far as it can be grasped by children, can be adequately realised by any nationally-minded teacher, and is not the monopoly of the best schools or the best teachers.

As a final word with regard to criticisms of the use of Irish in the teaching of History, mention needs to be made of a report commissioned by the Irish National Teachers Organisation (the largest union of primary school teachers) on the general subject of the use of Irish as teaching medium in areas outside the Gaeltacht. The general thrust of the report was the rather staid argument that less educational benefit was to be derived from the use of Irish as compared to English, and this applied to the teaching of History as to every other subject. What was more interesting was the reception accorded to the report, which typified the response of language enthusiasts to dissatisfaction with their policies. While many Deputies felt that the report clearly demonstrated the continued failure of the Government in education, the Chief Inspectors were, unsurprisingly, extremely robust in their rejoinder. The report was dismissed as irrelevant, in that teachers who used Irish where their pupils were unfamiliar with the language as a teaching medium were held to be in breach of official guidelines. Indeed, History 'was probably the last subject that ought to be handled through the medium of Irish' for the very reasons highlighted in the report. The inspectors clearly felt, however, that the motivation behind it was a fundamental antipathy to the principle of any teaching in Irish, and rejected out of hand the implication that English was the more suitable

\textsuperscript{1} Literally, 'couple of words', but more generally a sarcastic reference to the tendency of politicians in particular to begin a speech using a few hackneyed phrases in Irish before necessarily relapsing into English.

\textsuperscript{2} 'Stair', \textit{Irish School Weekly}, vol. xxxix, 42 (16 Oct. 1937), 106.
medium at all levels. As a final shot across the bows of the Union, the
inspectors reiterated their opinion that it was the rather lackadaisical
approach of many teachers to acquiring a working knowledge of the
language that was the real stumbling block in the way of progress.¹

In general, politicians, like most members of Irish society, were
vaguely sympathetic to the notion of encouraging schools to use Irish.
Their motives and explanations for doing so were understandably di-
verse, ranging from abstractions about ‘doing their bit’ for the national
cause, to the more practical belief that it was in fact easier to study
History through Irish.² An underlying ambivalence remained, however,
as to whether the real aim of the exercise was to improve the child’s
historical appreciation or linguistic competence, an ambivalence indica-
tive of the broader confusion over the nation’s identity.³

That the dominant theme of history teaching in Ireland was the belief in
an inner spirituality of the Irish people, demonstrated by their abiding
fidelity to the twin ideals of Catholicism and political freedom, has been
repeatedly alluded to. It is the purpose of this concluding section to flesh
out the detail of this belief and to establish its social function.⁴ I wish to
suggest that this emphasis served two principal functions. Firstly, it was
a device by which the Irish people could reconcile themselves to their
contemporary failures in the fields of economic and social progress;
secondly, it represented a standard by which the measure of political
separation from Britain could be justified. That a sense of anti-climax
would follow the achievement of independence was inevitable; it was the
reaction such disappointment would provoke that was the crucial point
at issue. A stark choice confronted the Irish people in 1921, not merely
over the precise measure of political freedom they were prepared to
accept for the future, but in their new relationship with their own
history. Should they now make a conscious break with that past on the
basis that it had become irrelevant to the problems posed by indepen-
dence, or should they continue to look to it for the inspiration to guide
the fortunes of their new state? For the most part the answer lay in the
latter approach;⁵ with results that are still making themselves apparent.

The belief that the Irish people possessed an intuitive affinity for
cultural affairs assumed near-axiomatic status in the early decades of this
century, giving rise to a plethora of pseudo-historical explanations,
variably revolving around the purported durability of the influence of

¹ Chief Inspector’s Observations on INTO Report, Department of the Taoiseach, D/T 578012,
National Archives.
² Dáil Debates, vol. cx, 4 May 1948, col. 1140.
³ Ibid., vol. cx, 10 Apr. 1949, col. 906.
⁴ I would endorse Deane’s suggestion that this ‘notion of Irish unreality’ did indeed have an
additional political dimension, while not necessarily agreeing with all the conclusions drawn therefrom:
⁵ Note Kearney’s view that this development rendered the populace ‘contemporaries with the
“dead generations” of the past, transmuting the discontinuities of [their] empirical existence into the

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the Gaelic tradition in the modern Irish psyche. So pervasive was the idea that it was evident even among the pages of otherwise quite restrained periodicals: this from the *Irish Monthly*:

No other form of social organisation, one suspects, has continued to support so many people on small areas, in enjoyment of the truly good things of the earth – true wealth as distinct from money. The humble were not like the poor of urban societies, removed from sight and mind. They were members of the family circle. They sat at the family board in the big hall.¹

This communitarian perspective, with its rather quaint distinction between ‘poor’ and ‘humble’, was echoed in the work of Alice Stopford Green. In her words, ‘so long as any independent life survived, the scholar was the most honoured man in the community.’² In fact, ‘it was as honourable for an Irish chief to be a distinguished scholar as to be a renowned warrior.’³ So deeply ingrained was this respect for learning that ‘there was no part of Ireland, to its remotest mountains, where culture had not penetrated’.⁴ The signal importance of this critique, however, lay less with the extent of its dispersion, although a populist, almost democratic, basis was implied, but rather with its insistence that, despite the best efforts of the English, it had endured to the present day ‘to stir the people of Ireland with the remembrance of their common inheritance in all that shapes the thought and spiritual life of a people’.⁵ Such an analysis established an antithesis between the Irish and English collective personas; furthermore, it invested the former with a nobility anterior and superior to the latter. Such views had widespread currency amongst both cultural and political elites. Mulcahy, for example, in his speech to the inaugural meeting of the Council of Education, referred to Kenney’s *Sources of the Early History of Ireland*, and drew attention to ‘a rhythm in the nation’s history’ which ensured that ‘after every dark period of disruption there unfailingly followed a great spiritual and intellectual development which gathered the nation’s strength and ensured its survival’.⁶ Such a rhythm came from below, from the people, from the Gaelteacht, or whatever term was most appropriate during the particular period of history in question in connoting the essence of the Irish mentality.

A corollary to the idea that the Irish had historically manifested a spiritual dimension was the belief that the tendency persisted to the modern day, and had not, as some suggested, been extinguished in the Famine holocaust.⁷ It is unnecessary to consider too deeply the reasons

³. Ibid., p. 334.
⁴. Ibid., p. 336.
⁵. Ibid., p. 336.
for this claim, beyond observing that it provided a more substantial basis for claims to political independence and economic development than fickle public opinion. By erecting an ‘objective’ historical distinction between Ireland and the neighbouring island, divorced from the sentiments of the contemporary populations, advocates of this line of attack tapped into a rich vein of self-vindication exhaustively exploited by the Republicans of 1916 and post-1921 vintage. Indeed those ‘five glorious years’ were themselves held up for public edification as the most recent and glorious manifestation of the vital nature of that legacy. ‘It was’, readers of the Capuchin Annual were informed, ‘not a military movement, but the movement of a people whose power of progress and resistance had become spiritual’.

Claims were advanced that the Gaelic and Catholic traditions were in fact merely different facets of the same Irish quintessence, which made the nation not only geographically but culturally distinct. The epithet ‘Land of Saints and Scholars’ was a conjunction of more than euphonic import. It connoted that the one was a corollary of the other; religion betokened literary, artistic and cultural achievement, themselves inseparable from the Gaelic milieu. It was not merely that ‘the love and respect for learning already shown in the foundation of secular schools ... prepared the way for the rapid advance of letters which Christianity fostered’. Such a development was perceived as the nation’s sacred destiny, investing her future with almost metaphysical significance. Political independence was desirable not only in itself, but to enable the nation to realize its hallowed embassy. As MacSamhrain puts it:

Adoption of the revived Gaelic heritage as the cultural basis for Irish nationalism, already distinguished by a marked Catholic identity underlay a popular view of Irish history as a seven hundred year struggle for Faith and Fatherland, with the establishment of a (unitary) Gaelic, Catholic State as the end goal.

Religion was no mere solace to the destitute; it was a vibrant rejuvenative force, its redemptorist appeal willingly embraced by a people whose fetters were as much mental as physical or economic. As the Deputy Chief Inspector of national schools suggested in a lecture on the teaching of History, the deep root which religion had taken in the national mind ensured that in the late eighteenth century the historic Irish nation, far from being on the verge of extinction, was in fact at that very moment on the verge of breaking its chains of bondage, preparing to burst forward ‘pulsating with one throbbing heart, and speaking with one determined voice’. Mulcahy firmly endorsed religion as the formative influence on the Irish mentality. It was not enough to cover the events of 1913, 1914, 1916 or 1921: these were mere ‘manifestations of a strength that has its


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roots deeper than any mere political movement’, roots which were anchored in the people’s ‘individuality and spiritual strength’, itself a reflection of their religious instinct. He stated that such characteristics were to be found in their purest and most natural form in the Gaeltacht, areas populated by people ‘Biblical in their stature, in their Christian approach and in their Christian philosophy’.1

Emphasis in the history class on the religious drive of the Irish people attracted those concerned for the future of the nationalist tradition, in that it aligned that tradition with the historic experiences of the Catholic majority, both having been victims of English oppression. In addition, it bestowed on it an international status, deriving from the missionary and scholastic birthright that elevated Ireland above the parochialism of an outpost of western civilization, and installed her as a dominant force in the creation of that culture. As one contemporary commentator put it, ‘in the domain of social and religious action, Ireland has long been a world power.’2 Teachers were enjoined to make their pupils love Ireland, ‘for Ireland is a holy land .... Speak of Brendan and Enda, Columbanus and Columcille .... Point out the holy mountains, the blessed wells, the shrines where St Patrick prayed and Brigit knelt.’3 Religious observance thus not only provided an outlet for native spirituality; it gave it a form and institutional structure which channelled that instinct into a distinct national culture.

The nakedly teleological aspect of history teaching is well caught in the following extract, wherein evidence is furnished in support of the demand for political independence:

By long tradition of preserving resistance of aggressions on their national life; the possession of a distinctive culture and social order; by their corporate unity, acknowledged since the dawn of European civilisation; by the ample proof of political wisdom and comprehensive tolerance that they have always shown; by their spiritual and social development, and by their moral courage, maintained amid severest trials, the people of Ireland have established beyond question their possession of all the qualities and attributes of a free nation.4

It bears restating, however, that this concentration upon the continuity of national life was a direct appropriation from the work of respected academic historians. Curtis, for example, in his work on the impact of the Tudor monarchs in Ireland, ascribed the failure of the Gaelic chiefs to their inability to deal with the modern world of Henry and Elizabeth.5 Echoes of such thoughts are to be heard in this extract from a text in use in the schools:

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This Gaelic past is of intense interest not only because so many records and memorials of it exist, but because the Irish people today are in such vivid relation to their past. Like all invaded and suppressed peoples, they have been repeatedly informed that their past is wild, obscure and barbaric; they have been encouraged to forget it. But the past swings the future into being ... By an accident of political and economic suppression, the Irish people have been forced for centuries to turn all their energies into making a fight for survival. But, for centuries, like a river that has been dammed and forced out of its channel, the Irish nation has at last pushed through its unnatural obstacle, established its continuity and begun to flow in freedom.¹

The use of the river metaphor, with its connotations of elemental force and natural course, constrained history into a single channel, with the Gaelic, the religious, the spiritual, and other tributaries flowing into the sea of political independence. It is no surprise to find Corkery lucidly articulating such an analysis. Refuting the English perception of the Irish in the eighteenth century as a mob, he suggested that in fact they were the ‘residuary legatees of a civilisation that was more than a thousand years old’.²

The need for political nationalists to create a sense of separate identity need not be elaborated upon. In the Irish context it is suggested that all successful movements ‘depended on a sense of “communal solidarity” which involved elements of both revolutionary and parliamentary tendencies’, the status of their leaders being in proportion to their ability to embody this ambiguity.³ The ability to project a mystic sense of purpose was a powerful tool in the armoury of twentieth-century republicans, who felt themselves able to appropriate the most potent events and personalities of Ireland’s recent and ancient past.⁴ Most prominent amongst these were, of course, the rebels of 1916. Corkery may have endorsed Pearse’s view that Davis was the ‘first of modern Irishmen to make explicit the truth that nationality is a spirituality’,⁵ but it was to Pearse himself that most looked for the personification of that spirit. He was ‘the embodiment of an idea, swelling now to gigantic proportions, now to normal, in his travail. He was more than an orator: he was a poet and an inspiration’ who continued ‘the tradition of Cuchulain and the tradition of Emmet ... the two traditions upon which this nation lives, on whose combination it is being re-built’.⁶

⁴ ‘The Republic symbolised a millennial belief that a new age could be ushered in, erasing centuries of foreign penetration:’ J. Prager, Building Democracy in Ireland: Political Order and Cultural Integration in a Newly Independent Nation (Cambridge, 1986), p. 44.
glorification were revealed in the bitterness of the Civil War split, with both sides accusing the other of betraying the ideals of 1916. Its tone is well caught in this damning indictment of the perverted idealism of the Four Court Republican mentality:

'The people' cannot be trusted not to betray 'the nation' by accepting something less than the Republic for which it is pre-destined. In this atmosphere it is evident that the ordinary terms of politics have lost all meaning. It is the extreme deformity of a long-thwarted nationalism. For these mystics the nation has come to have a spiritual existence wholly independent of its secular life. The voice of the nation is not what it is, but what, in their inspired view, it ought to be.1

A revealing insight into Irish self-perception in these years is provided by attitudes towards Britain promoted in the history classes. Given the manifold political, economic and social links between the two countries it was inevitable that those who desired to establish a distinct Irish identity would deem these ties to be harmful to Irish interests, but the basis of the charge was revealing. The British characteristic most forcefully projected was an obsession with the material aspect of life, a convenient mirror-image to Ireland's other-worldliness:

If mere material progress, if wealth - 'the meanest of all titles to preference' said Mr Gladstone - if power - so often the very incarnation of hell - be the true standard of success, then the empire of the commercial asset may plume itself upon its renown. But if obedience to the dictates of conscience, if fidelity to faith and fatherland, if the preservation, amid suffering and persecution, of belief in the abiding principle that a man should hold fast to his own conception of truth and duty be the standard of success, then the Irishman can rise with pride from the perusal of the story, when his English master stands covered with infamy and shame.2

When writers spoke of 'this crude modern wave of neo-paganism and complacent deism, which should be abhorrent to the Irish mind'3, there was no doubting its place of origin. Others have pointed out the irony that the attempt by the British government after the Famine to integrate the shell-shocked Irish bourgeoisie into the ethos of the Empire merely produced a vibrant anti-imperialism which 'projected Ireland as a superior rural Gaelic communalistic civilisation exemplifying to a corrupt power-hungry world a higher synthesis of the spiritual and the ma-

1. 'Ireland at the Crossroads', The Round Table, xlvii (June 1922), 507-8. The reference is to the occupation of the Four Courts building in Dublin by hard-line republican forces opposed to the Anglo-Irish Treaty signed the previous December, which occupation was ended only by artillery bombardment by pro-Treaty forces - the first action of the Civil War of 1922-3.
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This proposition, that Ireland 'was made for a higher destiny than that of boarded-out work-house waif, based on the poverty which England created and maintains in Ireland', became more problematic after Independence, portrayed as the great panacea for Irish economic and political woes, was revealed as lacking such power.

The 'national historical belief that culture, poetry, literature and aesthetic appreciation were rich and complex in Ireland before the alien Saxon had debased the native Irish' switched the focus from the physical force which England had brought to bear in subjugating the Irish nation to the insidious harm done to the Irish mentality by the constant exposure to foreign ideas. Such an outlook, however, had unpalatable implications for the policy of Gaelicization. If the seven-hundred-year English occupation had left such an indelible stain on the Irish persona, it would be impossible ever to repair the damage. If, on the other hand, it was merely a unionist cabal who manifested Saxon traits, that malign tumour would have to be removed before it threatened the life of the body politic itself.

'A very great gulf separates them', said Alice Green, referring to the English, 'from a race like the Irish to whom the far past and the far future are part of the eternal present, the very condition of thought, the furniture without which the mind is bare.' As Prager has argued, 'the nineteenth century understanding and expression of the Gaelic-romantic cultural tradition articulated a primordial conception of Irishness in which British, American modernity became a symbol of what the Irish were not .... The Irish national community was conceived as its antithesis: rural, agricultural and Catholic.' The task, then, was to maintain that distance, to ensure that the gulf never narrowed sufficiently as to allow the English to once again pollute the Irish air. As Fennell has observed, there was the constant danger for cultural nationalists that the Irish image to the world 'might cease to have that distinctiveness from neighbouring nations which is proper to attain', and rather show Ireland merely 'as an extension of Britain'. On the one hand, there was the option of cultural isolationism, as a complement to economic self-sufficiency and political neutrality. To have pursued this road would, however, have betokened a fatal lack of confidence in the ability of Irish culture to survive in the modern world, the very point the revivalists were determined to prove. The alternative was to permit cultural inter-

2. 'Irish Education', An Connachtach, Oct. 1907, p. 10.
4. See A. Aughey, 'What is Living and What is Dead in the Ideal of 1916', in Revising the Rising, p. 73.
5. Green, The Old Irish World, pp. 1-2.
6. I. Prager, loc. cit.
change, with a due measure of protectionism for the domestic product, in the confidence that it would be sufficiently resilient to withstand assimilation. In practice a mixture of the two policies was pursued. The report of the Dáil Commission on Secondary Education, for example, stressed the need to concentrate on the preservation of what remained of Gaelic culture in the modern day, even at the expense of sustaining ignorance of foreign lands (evidenced by the laughably small number of students studying foreign languages), while at the same time acknowledging the fact that that culture itself was an amalgam of other civilisations.¹

Overall, one cannot help but be impressed both by the sheer variety and integrity of the arguments and interpretations brought to bear by those who, consciously or otherwise, sought to fix a historical spiritualistic self-image in the collective mind of the Irish school population. While the approach may have been open to refutation by 'scientific' historical analysis, it is significant that no professional historian was willing to take on the task of providing such a comprehensive critique. The 'chipping away' at the solid edifice of popular belief, which is all that the efforts of the founding fathers of the Irish Historical Studies school amounted to, did not, indeed could not, undermine its foundations. This article has not attempted to cover all the issues that arose from the study of History during the period in question.² Enough, however, has been said to indicate that the powerful nature of the self-image propagated via this study, that of an independent people possessed of an enduring spiritual ethic, was primarily a consequence of its coincidence with popular opinion. In this instance, then, 'the long Irish dialectic between conflict and conformity'³ was resolved in favour of the latter, with official policy being forced to row in behind popular demands. In the wider, and ongoing, debate as to whether a task of the Irish historian lies in 'pinpointing discontinuities' or in 'ironing out elisions'⁴, it would seem that, as far as popular history was concerned, the reclamation of the national past did not offer the luxury of such a choice: the impulse to social cohesion was too strong to facilitate a narrative of dissent.


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