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CULTURE SHOCK: HISTORY MATTERS IN IRELAND, not least because the past is so unsettled.

Large chunks of hidden history continue to emerge, as in *Behind the Walls*, Mary Raftery's brilliant and terrible excavation on RTÉ, this week and next, of the terrible story of Ireland's mental hospitals. The meaning of historical events is still up for grabs in the public realm. We are facing into a decade of centenaries, beginning next year with the anniversary of the Ulster Covenant and running right through to that of one of the most awkward of all events, the Civil War.

Public interest in history is huge. Historical books sell well. The 1901 and 1911 census forms are easily the most popular digital cultural resource in Ireland. TV shows like *Who Do You Think You Are?* get good audiences. More than in other western countries, historians (Roy Foster, Marianne Elliott, Diarmaid Ferriter and many others) are key public intellectuals, trusted to bring some kind of perspective to bear on current events.

So why on earth are we on the brink of destroying the teaching of history in our second-level schools? Recently, *The Irish Times* reported on changes to the Junior Cert curriculum being considered by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. At present, history is a basic part of the Junior Cert exam. The idea now is to reduce the exam to a maximum of eight subjects, of which only English, Irish, maths and science will be required.

Otherwise, subjects would be organised around eight "key areas": arts, language, mathematical thinking, moral and religious education, scientific approaches, social studies, technology and wellbeing.

Conspicuous by its absence from this list is history. Presumably, the idea is that history (and geography) will be stuck into the blender as one of the ingredients of "social studies". This would be one of the worst acts of intellectual vandalism that could be imagined in our current circumstances.

It wouldn't just affect the Junior Cert: if pupils don't have a good grasp of historical concepts at 15, they're not going to take the subject at Leaving Cert.

At present, the Junior Cert course is the one way we have of ensuring that everyone who is educated in Ireland gets a basic grounding in history. (The subject is not compulsory in the senior cycle.) It's actually a very good course. The sweep is broad, from ancient civilisations through medieval societies, the Renaissance, the age of exploration, the Reformation, the plantation, the American, French and Irish revolutions, social change and 20th-century politics. There's a reasonable chance that any kid who pays reasonable attention will, at 15, have a decent sense of the large-scale changes that have shaped his or her life.

What happens if you dismantle this basic structure and bundle history into some general package of "social sciences" or "humanities"? As it happens, we don't have to speculate: we can simply look across the water. Exactly this notion has been imposed on children in Britain. The result was spelled out recently by the English historian (and now Labour MP) Tristram Hunt.

Writing in the *Observer*, Hunt noted that “in most schools, the average 13-year-old is lucky to get one hour a week of history, making it difficult for even the most gifted classroom performer to develop a strong narrative arc. And when it is taught, history is too often batched together with other subjects into a vapid and generalised ‘humanities’ course which fails to do it justice. This state-sanctioned amnesia is becoming acute in some of our most deprived communities.”

Hunt pointed in particular to the way, in Britain, history has become the preserve of the well-to-do. Families who are already well-educated will want their children to study history, and will find a way to insist that they do. In working-class Knowsley, just outside Liverpool, 17 per cent of kids study history. In wealthy Richmond upon Thames, in suburban west London, the corresponding figure is 45 per cent. State-sponsored amnesia isn't for everyone. It's only for the masses.

There is surely no conspiracy here, but if you did want to further disenfranchise those who are already on the outside, making them historically illiterate would be a good plan. A sense of history is also a sense of possibility, of change, of community, of collective memory.

Movements of oppressed people – wage slaves, women, racial and national minorities – have always drawn on history for courage, inspiration, identity. Taking that away helps to keep people powerless, disconnected and steeped in the soporific belief that nothing ever changes.

An attack on historical literacy is also an attack on the idea of citizenship. We in Ireland know only too well that public historical narratives can become fossilised into tribal myths. But the answer to this problem is not less history but more. What happens when you cut people off from a sense of their own history isn't that they cease to have a relationship to the past. It's that their hunger for that relationship is fed with all kinds of crude and often dangerous nonsense. The current Junior Cert syllabus doesn't just teach kids historical facts. It gives them an idea of historical method, of the ways in which evidence is gathered and assessed. It provides some protection against the manipulation of emotions by distorted and selective histories.

Do we really feel confident enough in Ireland now to take that away? Are we really so sure that tribal conflict is over forever and that no one would ever dream of twisting history into a weapon of mass destruction? Do we really think there is nothing to be learned from the boom years, when we were told that the past was irrelevant because the era of boom and bust was over and the future would just be an endless extension of the present? It would be a lovely Irish irony, though, if we were to enter our decade of commemorations with the first generation of children not to have been given a basic sense of their history.

If the changes, as planned, come into place for those starting secondary school this time next year, those kids will be finished the Junior Cert just in time to have no idea what happened in 1916.

<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/weekend/2011/0910/1224303820962.html>