

A new Senior History Syllabus

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(The following is part of an editorial by Prof. Nicholas Canny which appeared in the spring *Newsletter of The Economic and Social History Society of Ireland*. Professor Canny began by arguing that despite the journalists and others who argue that the "revisionists" are destroying it, history in Ireland, both as an academic discipline and a popular read, appears to be in a healthy state,. He then continued:)

The fact that the points of criticism against the revisionists and against the Irish historical profession in general, can thus be refuted, should not blind us to the existence of problems confronting history as an academic discipline in Ireland. One of the more acute of these problems is the apparent lack of interest in what is happening to history in our schools. Increased pressure on school pupils to select subjects considered relevant for procuring employment or safe for point scoring for university places, means that history is being taken by fewer and fewer pupils for their final school examinations. The existence in Northern Ireland of the English A-level system means that relatively small numbers attend any given subject, but history in the schools in the Republic of Ireland where there is still a broadly based curriculum, similar to that in Scotland, is now chosen by fewer than 25 per cent of pupils who sit their Leaving Certificate examination. Closer scrutiny would reveal that history is selected by a smaller percentage of the high scoring honours pupils and also by a smaller percentage of those pupils from poorer backgrounds who persist in school at the end of the senior cycle. As a consequence, history as a subject studied at a higher level in our schools is rapidly becoming the domain of pupils from middle class backgrounds who aspire to university places in law or humanities.

This trend would be of no great consequence if we were assured that all pupils had the benefit of a satisfactory training in history in the lower forms. Here again, however, curriculum changes in the schools of the Republic of Ireland would indicate that this will not continue to be the case. 'The essential change being implemented is the absorption of history into a broadly based programme of environmental studies. This change may have much to recommend it but the experiment will succeed only where teachers, schools and pupils have access to sufficient resources to build up collections of visual aids and to engage in field trips that will combine to make the historical content of such programmes meaningful to the pupils. Such financial support is likely to become

available to in schools attended by middle-class pupils; for the rest, history is likely to become a meaningless bore.

While we can warn that this is likely to happen in the future, historians have an obligation to look critically at the prescribed courses on history being followed in Irish schools today. That currently prescribed for the Junior years in schools of the Republic of Ireland, seems to be educationally sound and that to be implemented in the *years* ahead might prove even better if it were adequately resourced by the state. The history course for the senior cycle does not appear to have been exposed to any recent detailed consideration at an official level, but I consider it to be in need of urgent review.

The currently prescribed curriculum permits teachers and pupils to choose between two courses; one, described as Renaissance Civilisation and treating the years from the late fifteenth to the early seventeenth century, and the second, described as Contemporary Civilisation and treating of the years 1868-1966. Besides these two courses which deal with European as well as Irish history, there is a distinct subject on Economic History which requires pupils to study developments in Ireland, Britain and continental Europe since shortly before the Industrial Revolution. The syllabus in Economic History seems highly commendable but it is largely irrelevant to present considerations because only some hundreds of pupils present for examination on this course and most of these would appear to be students of economics who present for Economic History in the belief that it is an easy option for them. The Renaissance Civilisation course is only marginally more relevant because it is selected by fewer than 15 per cent of the 25 per cent of Leaving Certificate pupils who opt for history. The history course for the senior cycle is thus essentially the Contemporary Civilisation course. My first concern with this, as with any set course, is its unchanging nature which must result in teachers becoming very weary of the same material which they must cover in successive years. My second and greater concern is that the course serves now as an introduction to Contemporary Politics than to contemporary Civilisation because, as far as I can judge from my examination of pupils who have followed the prescribed course, the emphasis in teaching is altogether on matters political and diplomatic (with some slight mention of cultural affairs) to the neglect of social and economic considerations. As a consequence, the course fails in what I believe to be the principal purpose of any history course which is to provide the pupils with some understanding of the functioning of a world which is significantly different from that in which they themselves live.

The course as currently prescribed could certainly be improved upon to meet this objective if social and economic matters were brought more into focus. It would be far better, however, to design a

completely new course for the senior cycle and in doing so people might well give consideration to the course of study prescribed for the Northern Ireland A-level history course. Instead of having a single chronological period which would be studied in depth. It might be possible to devise a list of six or eight historical topics or problems which would change from year to year and from which pupils and teachers could choose from three or four topics which they would study over the two years of the senior cycle. These topics would range over Ancient, Medieval, Modern and Contemporary history and they would always include two topics on Economic History, thus eliminating the need for a distinct Economic History syllabus. The options devised would always take account of anniversaries being commemorated, as for example an option of the occasion of the anniversaries of the American Revolution or the French Revolution or the 1798 insurrection. Topics identified would ideally have an Irish dimension and some topics would be essentially Irish in character but even these would require that Irish historical problems would be studied in the context of broader historical developments.

The merits of such a course of study would be variety for teachers and pupils; exposure of pupils to a range of societies rather than as at present, a background to contemporary affairs; and the use in the classroom of a selection of articles and special studies rather than and textbooks. Such a revised course would be seen as a natural development from the history studied by the junior classes and it would also result in pupils from the schools in the two Irelands following a roughly similar history course. A shake up such as is envisaged here may well encourage more pupils to select history as a subject for their final school examination and it would certainly result in a more historically aware cohort of school leavers who would have opinions of their own on how they want their history to be written.