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History 280—*The Troubles*

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The Path of Education in Northern Ireland

“History is not the same as the past. It is an interpretation of the past constructed from evidence.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

In 1775, a travel writer named Twiss described a visible contradiction he witnessed in Ireland; amidst the abject poverty of the country, he noticed a group of obviously poor young boys, sitting on a stone wall, scrawling industriously on bits of paper upon their knees. What to Twiss was a contradiction, even an irony, was to the Irish, expected. Education in Ireland was an esteemed tradition stretching back a thousand years to the days of early Christianity, when Irish children were gathered to the clergy for schooling, and the Irish monks themselves amazed their European counterparts with their knowledge.

Education in Ireland is still valued and today holds the enticing prospect of providing a path to peace in the much divided state of Northern Ireland. But how can it be harnessed to pull such a valuable load? What path has Irish education followed in the days since the monastic schools and how has it evolved? How has it influenced the Irish perceptions of nationhood and identity? In particular, can the traditions of the past be used to carve a new future for Northern Ireland and her children? Finally, are there lessons learned in the New World that can be of use to those in the Old?

The veneration of knowledge was already present in Ireland when Christianity arrived. Brehon judges were highly respected, and the ancient poets held the highest status in Celtic society. These bards were one-man encyclopedias of clan history, trailing genealogies and legends behind them. The oral tradition was strong, and the ability to string words well was greatly admired. It was this love of words that made the Irish such great scholars. With Christianity came new languages, and learning Latin was a game at which the Irish excelled. Learning itself seemed play to them, and their competitive nature presented itself in their educational endeavors, with each student seeking to out-learn the others.

Education in Ireland was administered by the Catholic clergy with little interference until the island drew the attention of the British crown in the 16th century. King Henry VIII passed ‘An act for the English order, habit and language’ in 1537 to help convert the wild Irish to the civilized way of the English. With the rise of Protestantism, being English meant being Protestant as well, and legislation from the Tudor, Stuart and Georgian eras reflected such. Protestant clergy were now to be responsible for education in Ireland, and the primary focus of parish, diocesan and royal schools was the conversion of Catholics to Protestantism. The results were not motivating: by the 1780s, the 361 parish schools (for the lower classes) had 11,000 pupils, the dioceses had 324, and the royal schools had 211—a tiny fraction of the population of four million.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Catholic schools, however, were doing smashingly! ‘Hedge’ schools had begun during Cromwell’s regime, as was noted in an English report from Ireland on 19 March 1655,

“severall popish schoolmasters doe reside in severall parts of the Counties of Meath

and Lowwth, and teach the Irish youth, training them up in superstition, idolatory

and the evill customs of this Nacion.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

When the Penal Laws were put in place at the turn of the 18th century, the first of the laws was a direct attack on education. Passed in 1695, ‘An act to restrain foreign education’ prohibited not only Catholic educations gained on the continent, but also any teaching in Ireland itself by those of the “popish religion”. Another law from 1709 was ‘An act for explaining and emending” the first, as discussed above. Evidently, Protestant schoolmasters had taken exception and had begun working with their Catholic counterparts, taking them in under the umbrellas of their own Protestant schools. The reaction to these attempts to force their children into Protestant schools, to train them up to be “loyal Protestant subjects”,[[4]](#footnote-4) was for the Catholics to go underground, and the hedge schools began thriving.

The success of the hedge schools was due to the sacrifice of entire communities. Catholic education became “a kind of guerilla war,”[[5]](#footnote-5)with teaching done carefully, out of sight, under the hedges in good weather and in homes, barns or sheds during bad. Hedgemasters risked fines, imprisonment, banishment and even death, and anyone caught helping faced the same. Education was of such value, though, that it was worth the risk. Parents sacrificed their meager earnings, paying what they could to support the hedge masters and provide books and supplies. Communities, too, worked for the education of their children: they built shelters, provided lodging for the hedgemaster—even kidnaping one if necessary! Two Dublin printers, Jones and Wogan, were aware of the parents’ poverty and cut costs to help afford the education of Irish children. Along with some clergymen, many of the remaining Gaelic poets stepped into the role of hedgemaster; though they were indistinguishable from the poor peasants they worked among, these were esteemed men of learning, from aristocratic lineages and their songs and poems reminded all that they were descended from kings of old. Patrick Pearse was correct when he wrote, “the hedge schoolmasters of the nineteenth century were the last repositories of a high tradition”.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The hedge schools themselves were sources of pride. Though often a mere hovel or ditch, it was a “one-room schoolhouse” where pupils (aged 5 to 24) were gifted with knowledge. The instruction was haphazard but creative, with individual instruction, games and challenges and resulted in a high-quality classical education. Classes were also held between six and eleven o’clock at night, if needed. Subjects taught included religion, history, reading (a *wide* variety of styles), arithmetic (the most important course taught), book-keeping, science, surveying, astronomy, and geography, English, Irish, Latin and Greek. The arts were not neglected, with music, song, dance and poetry that served to lift not only the students’ spirits, but those of the community, giving them the “capacity to rise above their miserable living conditions.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

The hedge schoolmaster thus earned the position he held in his community—lower only than the lord of the manor and the parson and priest. The hedgemaster further served the village as scribe, attorney, surveyor and self-appointed judge of morals—people feared being the object of the satire in his reprimanding verse. He held the Irish culture in reverence and helped preserve ancient manuscripts, and while both the hedge schools and their masters were disregarded by the Protestant establishment, the educations that resulted allowed students from all over Ireland to gain admittance to the Irish Colleges in Salamanca and Louvain, where entry was at university level.

Children in the hedge schools blossomed—and so did the number of the schools. In 1791, there were up to 549 hedge schools, and by 1807, there were 316 hedge schools in the Diocese of Cloyne and Ross alone. Averaging 6 schools per parish, this single diocese had a total of 21,892 pupils![[8]](#footnote-8) The link with the Catholic Church had survived the 1697 Banishment Act and the 1704 Registration Act, and those clergy who remained watched over the hedge schools in their domain. John Kent, in 1742, wrote a ‘Report on the state of the Irish mission’, in which he made the recommendation that Rome establish a fund to help pay for Catholic education in Ireland—a suggestion that was quickly acted upon. The hedgemaster taught the catechism and was held by Archbishops as being equally important as the parish priest.

The Protestants, meanwhile, had not given up trying to “save” the Catholics through education. The Blue Coat Hospital and the Hibernian School, along with the schools of Erasmus Smith and the ‘classical schools of private foundation,’[[9]](#footnote-9) were among the numerous attempts. In 1733, Charter schools began teaching Irish children in the English language and the “fundamental Principles of the true Religion.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Children who finished the following apprenticeship and married Protestant were then paid L5. The authorities even transplanted Catholic children far from home to remove them from the interfering influence of their parents—a practice which, unsurprisingly, led to deep resentment toward the English. Evaluators of the charter schools later found minimal attendance, with unhealthy, poorly fed, poorly dressed and poorly taught pupils.

A 1791 education commission proposed a non-denominational educational system, which fit in well with the teachings of the Enlightenment—especially the precept that all social classes became what education made them. Protestant and Catholics alike agreed on this principle, and authors like Paine and Rousseau were widely read. Hedgemasters in particular read and understood the writings of the Enlightenment, and many became involved in the resistance movements of the Whiteboys (1760-80), the Hearts of Steel and, especially, the Rightboys. Their involvement in these political organizations led to allegations of “traitorous’ teachings within the hedge schools.

It was the Act of Union (1800) which polarized the religious aspect of the Irish schools. All concessions to the Catholics after the 1798 rebellion ceased. Protestant societies (with government funding) began aggressively promoting free educations to those who would accept their teachings, which were often blatantly anti-Catholic. Only the Kildare Place Society offered education to the poor without digressing into their religious beliefs; they read the Bible daily, but did so without adding any commentary. ‘The Liberator’, Daniel O’Connell, harnessed the education of Catholic children to his Catholic-rights wagon, providing a vocal opposition in the religious power struggle over education. Led by O’Connell, Catholic nationalists fought in 1831 for a proportional share of Irish educational funds provided by the government.

Lord Edward Stanley, chief secretary of Ireland (1830-1833) laid the foundations for Ireland’s modern primary school system in 1881. He followed a plan (proposed by Thomas Spring-Rice, 1828) which established a ‘mixed’ board to oversee the needs of schools, which had joint “moral and literary” education but separate religious instruction. Well-funded and well-organized, this plan was “years ahead of Britain… and one of the first in the world of its type.”[[11]](#footnote-11) It was also an acknowledgement that the Tudor, Stuart and Georgian efforts to “rescue the Irish from being Irish”[[12]](#footnote-12) had failed. Hedge schools were still educating a majority of children in 1841, but by 1870 the national schools were the clear majority, with nearly 1 million pupils.[[13]](#footnote-13) When the ‘Intermediate Education Ireland Act’ (1878) passed, second level education was also free, and the national educational path was set.

The non-denominational nature of the schools, however, was not concrete. By the turn of the century, religious denominations were fighting for educational control. The first decade of the 1900s saw Irish education nearly dominated by the churches. When the chaotic politics of the 1910s-1920s divided the island into Nationalist and Unionist camps, it was also divided along Catholic and Protestant lines. In the South, where the population was much more obviously Nationalist and Catholic, the differences between the two did not seem to have as much impact. In the North, however, numerical differences between the Protestant Unionist majority and the Catholic Nationalist minority were much tighter, and the rancor between them was obvious. Nationalists could not believe they were to be partitioned, refused their longed-for independence and self-determination and, instead, made into the *literal* minority that they had always been treated as. For their part, Protestant Unionists were finally a majority, but their now-legitimate claim to act as such was *still* being challenged. Northern schools were equally polarized, reflecting the dominant beliefs of their populations.

Ironically, the situation was further complicated by questions of identity. It seemed it was no longer enough to be labeled Catholic or Protestant, Nationalist or Unionist. When the southern State defiantly declared itself a Republic, and set about re-claiming its ancient heritage, it defined itself as *Irish.* Northern Ireland, finally somewhat calm after the angst of partition, was thrown into turmoil once more—if the States to the south were a Republic, what claim did that imply regarding the northern counties? If the Republic was *Irish*, what were *they*? Issues of identity were at the heart of the conflict within Northern Ireland.

The issues of identity and belonging surfaced in both Protestant and Catholic schools in Northern Ireland. By the 1930s, Northern Ireland’s schools were almost completely segregated. Just as had likely occurred in the hedgerow schools, teachers stressed not only their religion, but their political views. Paul McGill, a Catholic schoolboy in Derry, reflected on this, writing, “When they weren’t beating you they were glorifying in the historic struggles of the Irish against the English oppressors.” He added that the only written materials he remembers receiving in primary school were “a few sheets of rebel songs” that they would sing in class.[[14]](#footnote-14) Michael Longley recalled a primary school where his Belfast teacher confronted another Protestant student who was newly arrived from Dublin. When asked “who owns Belfast?” the boy replied “Dublin” and received slaps in the face and “a crescendo of hatred”. The other students were “invited to correct the error, to put down the rebellion,” which they did. They were, Longley remembered, left feeling “frightened and exhilarated.”[[15]](#footnote-15) But Longley’s memories also reflect the internal conflict felt by many Protestants in Northern Ireland. There was no Irish music, no Irish literature (no Yeats or Joyce!) and no Irish history except where it couldn’t be avoided in British history. Nevertheless, “The boys made it an Ulster school, even if the authorities liked to pretend that it was a civilized annex of England.”

Attempts at change met with little success. The Education Act (1968) increased funding for the voluntary schools—which were mostly Catholic—but an attempt by the Minister of Education in 1974 to implement ‘shared education’ failed when the power-sharing government collapsed. What remained were ‘Controlled’ schools (Protestant), ‘Maintained’ schools (Catholic) and ‘Voluntary’ schools (which did not necessarily have a close church affiliation, but were usually completely Catholic or Protestant) which were directly controlled by the Department of Education of Northern Ireland (DENI). The only exceptions to the overwhelmingly segregated schools were a few of the secondary ‘Voluntary’ schools, where limited ‘mixing’ was present.

The year 1989 was a turning point. Passage of the Education Reform Order formalized two ideas for bringing the two sides together. Integrated schools were given full financial grants by the government, and ‘Education for Mutual Understanding and Cultural Heritage’ were made mandatory within the Northern Ireland educational curriculum for *all* schools. The objectives of both the integrated schools and the EMU/CH program met the conditions laid out in early research by Amir (1969), which included equal status contact (between kids), authority endorsed contact (by a teacher) in a favorable social climate (at school), with pleasant or rewarding contact (having fun), and both groups interacting to develop common goals (learning).[[16]](#footnote-16) They just did so in different ways.

Integrated education was a long in coming to Northern Ireland. Social analyses in the early 1970s questioned the impact of segregated education on the already divided population, and research was looking into interaction among the NI youth. In 1974, a group of parents joined together to form the All Children Together (ACT) movement. ACT’s initial purpose of reforming existing schools ran into opposition from all quarters. With the collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement’s power-sharing government, direct rule by Westminster, and the increasing violence, this was no time for an experiment in the state schools. The members of ACT, however, refused to give up, and in 1981, they opened their own school—Lagan College. The school had 28 pupils and two full-time teachers, and for three years it survived on parent contributions and donations from the U.K. and Europe. Its student population measured near 1,000 in the fall of 1998[[17]](#footnote-17) and there were 34 other integrated schools around Northern Ireland, under various ‘umbrella’ organizations; their 10,000 pupils represented only about 3% of the NI

school population, but they were growing. Today there are some 22,000 children in integrated schools.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Integrated schools obviously differ from the mainstream state schools, sometimes in unexpected ways. Integrated schools have more parental involvement, with teachers who tend to have more experience living outside of NI and appear to be more motivated to make a difference across the communities. The goal of bring children from different population segments together is being met without challenging any of their own community identities. Schools under the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), a major charitable organization that co-ordinates efforts for integrated education, require at least 40% of students be taken from both the Catholic and Protestant traditions, and are inclusive of children who come from cultures outside of the British Isles. The principles of integrated education under NICIE center on four core facets: equality, faith & values, parental involvement and social responsibility.[[19]](#footnote-19) Pressures on the integrated schools and their parents come mostly from leaders of the various religious denominations (not surprising), and sometimes from their own relatives (surprising).

The concept of Education for Mutual Understanding has its own history. Also begun in the 1970s, programmes for EMU were developed by the Schools Cultural Studies Project and Northern Ireland Council for Educational Development (NICED). The resulting EMU platform was tied to the common curriculum in 1989 by the Education Reform Order. Included within the platform are the following objectives: to teach children to respect themselves and others, to appreciate interdependence within society, to know what is shared and what is different in cultural traditions, and to see how conflict can be handled in non-violent ways. Each of these goals is also linked to facets of the ‘Cultural Heritage’ program. The planks of the CH platform are: the interaction, interdependence, continuity and change of both communities of Northern Ireland, as well as their shared and diverse and distinctive cultural features. Also included are international and trans-national influences that affect the state.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Each area of the educational curriculum, at every grade level, applies lessons that incorporate the goals of the EMU and the facets of the CH program. The ultimate goal is that students are exposed to these issues in as many ways and subjects as possible throughout their educational career, learning how to incorporate them into daily life, rather than taking ‘special classes’ that isolate the concepts. In religion, for example, texts introduce church buildings and religious ceremonies. Students study the way the architecture, beliefs and rituals have evolved over time, supplemented with ‘field trips’ to local churches and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, an historic village. Other activities have been incorporated to bring communities together—studying and protecting local coastal environments, composing and performing a joint musical creation or attending the Rockwell lectures at Queen’s College, Belfast.

‘Facing the Past, Shaping the Future’ is a web-based resource for teachers and schools designed to help facilitate their students’ investigation of the significant events of 1912-1922. Acknowledging that different interpretations of those events still influence identities, cultures and division within Northern Ireland, the webpage wants to encourage any centenary commemorations and/or celebrations to be uniting—not divisive—events. One of the major constructs of the site is that identity and memory are linked throughout history—that they are subjective (not objective) and highly selective; that they “are not things we think about, but things we think *with*. As such they have no existence beyond our politics…social relationships…histories. We must take responsibility for their uses and abuses…”[[21]](#footnote-21) The site cautions that commemorations have a variety of influential uses, and that marking an event is based on the *perception* of that event—which may or may not be the only perception.

As with the integrated schools, the EMU and CH program have their critics. Some say it is too vague, lacking precise descriptions of what is to be included. Commitment to the concept also varies from school to school: some marginalize it, while others treat it as an ‘add-on’. There is also some religious opposition, mainly by ultra-conservative Protestants who think it’s an effort to introduce false religion to their children.

There are important differences between integrated schools and the EMU/CH program. Unlike the integrated schools, which must start with a clean slate, the EMU/CH program can be implemented into existing schools with relative ease and low cost. They also do not require new structures or drastic changes in attitudes in the pupils, though their success is greatly dependent upon the commitment and attitudes of the teachers and staff—both of which are fully present in the integrated schools.

Education in Northern Ireland also lies outside of the school yard in community education. While teaching the children of NI that the child across the ‘street’ does not have horns is likely the most promising investment in the future, teaching a similar lesson throughout the communities is required for the here-and-now. Among the many initiatives is the government-funded ‘Community Relations programme’, in place since 1989. The basic premise of the program is that cross-community interaction facilitates understanding and tolerance between the differing political and cultural entities.

Separating the institutions responsible for housing, education, etc. in Northern Ireland did not effect peace, but was instead more divisive, perpetuating the conflict. This view is supported by the ‘Contact Hypothesis’, which states that segregation within a society fosters hostility, or at least discourages interaction by inhibiting communication. The fundamental problem is individual prejudice caused by ignorance of the other community.[[22]](#footnote-22) This hypothesis seems borne out by the fact that Catholic-Protestant neighbors get along remarkably well. They may modify their behavior and choose not discuss sensitive topics, but they coexist with friendship and cooperation.

The majority of the population of Northern Ireland does not, however, live side-by-side; for them, cross-community interaction is one major avenue to peaceful relations within the state. Projects for interaction can be big (county or city-wide) or small (a neighborhood). The Ulster Museum has hosted two thought-provoking exhibits by W.A. Maguire—one in 1990 focused on the Battle of the Boyne (1690) and another in 1998 that showcased the 1798 Rising. A cultural traditions program was established to support and use the arts, museums, and Irish language to garner respect for the rich heritage both communities share. Individuals and groups are trained to work in ‘bottom-up’ programs that reach the people in their own individual neighborhoods. Other programs aim at shared interests (sport, music, dancing, etc…) or educational pursuits, such as lectures on collective histories and seminars exploring historical myths and differing traditions.[[23]](#footnote-23) Sometimes, the ‘program’ is nothing more than getting people together to talk, and often the most effective activities find solutions “more by accident than design”.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The challenges Northern Ireland faces have parallels in North America, and possible solutions might be found there, too. Canada, like Northern Ireland, was colonized by Great Britain, and still maintains close political, religious and cultural ties with her ‘mother country’. Canada, too, has a largely indistinguishable population divided religiously and culturally. The Protestant portion of both countries has a history of “allegiance to England, defense of Protestant ascendancy, and unyielding opposition to any form of Catholic toleration.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Both the French Canadians and the Irish Catholics were considered “socially analogous, potentially insurgent minorities within the British Empire.” Today, both countries still have populations that are divided along religious and cultural line, but both are also dealing with an influx of immigrants from non-western European nations. Both nations are fighting racism and implementing policies of inclusion, focusing on multiculturalism. Both Canada and Northern Ireland have a history of street riots, which are now relatively rare. And, some Canadians resent the influence of their larger, southern neighbor[[26]](#footnote-26)-- very akin to the view some in Northern Ireland takes towards theirs. Neither country, unfortunately, has found an immediate fix to its problems.

The United States, though not similarly divided, may be able to help. Facing a tide of immigrants from the middle of the 19th century on, social organizations and the government—mainly through schools—sought to inculcate the newcomers with the values of the founding society. History lessons (stories and legends), music (patriotic songs) and symbolism (the flag, the Pledge) were added to national holidays with traditional activities. Assimilation was the goal; newcomers were welcome to keep the traditions they brought with them, but they were also expected to adopt those of their new home. Diversity existed, but it was under the American umbrella. If Northern Ireland (and Canada?) are able to find that common ground and develop a sense of tolerance that can help them “compartmentalize their cultural and political (and religious) affiliations”[[27]](#footnote-27) then they may succeed.

Northern Ireland is now on the cusp of a new future. Years of terrorism from both sides of the fence have resulted in a wide-spread intolerance for the use of violence. Today’s parents, having lived through childhoods threatened by terrorist actions, seem absolutely determined to prevent their own children from experiencing the same. Many who were parents during *The Troubles* are now in political and social positions where they can help protect their grandchildren’s generation. Paul McGill states, “If we want inclusion and equality, we will inevitably be forced…to get rid of selection”[[28]](#footnote-28)(a process that ‘selects’ those children with the highest grades at age 11 to go on to the better schools in preparation for university, while others—usually working class—are prepared to join the work force.) Educational issues like school patronage and streaming/selection are being addressed, but the issues of integration and cross-community interaction and education are vital. An Ipsos MORI poll in 2011 revealed that 91% in Northern Ireland believed integrated education was important in promoting a shared and better future in NI and in promoting respect and understanding; 89% felt it was important for peace and reconciliation.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The home, not the school, is “by far the most significant determinant of social attitudes”[[30]](#footnote-30) but research is showing that Northern Irish youth understand “how their historical perspectives and identities have been influenced and shaped by…their families and…communities.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Many are engaging in serious efforts to connect the past with the present, but find that understanding both sides is difficult; educated adults agree. Writing during *The* Troubles (1974), Michael Longley refers to the social situation in Northern Ireland as an “invisible apartheid”, resenting “the pathetic allegiance…and loyalty…which were the only political focus ‘my kind’ was offered.” Further, he hopes that “the vigorous, aggressive, sardonic and largely unexpressed spirit of the people…will look beyond the tawdry totems with which they have so been fobbed off. God help us if this does not happen. And, perhaps, God help us if it does.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

The people of Northern Ireland *are* looking past the past, but change will take time. In a world of instant gratification, the process of knitting together a people with a long history of being torn apart requires patience. The Roman Catholic Bishop Doyle of Kildare and Leighlin argued *against* religiously segregated Irish schools in 1826, saying “I do not know any measures which would prepare the way for a better feeling in Ireland than uniting children at an early age, and bringing them up in the same school, leading them to commune with one another and to form those little intimacies and friendships which often subsist through life.” Almost two centuries later, almost all of Northern Ireland agrees.

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