
**THE FORTRESS OF THE GOOD AND THE LIBERATION OF
TRADITION : A Review of Irish Education In The Late Twentieth
Century.**

Pádraig Hogan

Pádraig Hogan lectures in the Department of Education in St. Patrick's College, Maynooth.

*In the corner of a Dublin pub
This party opens — blub-a-blub —
Paddy Whiskey, Rum and Gin
Paddy Three sheets in the wind;
Paddy of the Celtic Mist,
Paddy Connemara West,
Chestertonian Paddy Frog
Croaking nightly in the bog.
All the Paddies having fun
Since Yeats handed in his gun.
Every man completely blind
To the truth about his mind.*

I High Seriousness: The Spirit of Mr Gradgrind.

THE lines above are the opening stanza of Kavanagh's poem 'The Paddiad'.¹ The poem carries the unclassical sub-title 'The Devil as a Patron of Irish Letters'. Now there are many reasons — mainly connected with the unwritten rules of scholarly decorum — why one does not begin an essay on education with such a rudely flippant piece of doggerel. There may be more compelling reasons however why one might venture to call into question the very wisdom, or virtuousness, which views such verse as flippant and which characteristically seeks to exclude it from the experience of pupils. I should like to open with the suggestion that these latter reasons are particularly worthy of our attention at the present time. This suggestion is prompted by the awareness that the prevailing virtuousness to which I am drawing attention is not something just recent, or something confined to one aspect of school work, such as

poetry. Rather, it is the pervasive character of educational virtuousness itself which I wish to place under scrutiny.

In essence, my suggestion is that a Platonic-style custodianship, or, if you like, a customary straitlacedness in matters cultural and spiritual, has been, and largely remains an enduring feature of Irish education. If I might add a further observation, it is that this customary custodianship tends to becloud the more pressing shortcomings which diminish the quality of work in schools and colleges at present.

Of course these are large claims and within the space of an essay such as this, one can only trace the historical evidence in brief outline. Such claims, moreover, may seem doubly strange when one acknowledges that the literature and discourse of education at present are everywhere pervaded with consideration of emergent needs and with phrases such as 'the challenge of change'. Yet, let us proceed with our historical sketch.

The rise of a puritanical pattern in Irish education can be associated with the eclipse of the Hedge School in the nineteenth century and its gradual replacement by the National School system (established in 1831) and the Intermediate system (statutorily established in 1878). Whereas most might readily grant that nineteenth-century schooling was generally austere in its routines and embodied a rather drab probity in its textbooks, the claim that a joyless piety still hangs upon Irish schools, and insinuates its dominion among pupils and teachers alike, seems a much more difficult case to sustain. In the first place, it can be argued with authority against this claim, that the mood of primary — or National School — education entered a different and brighter era following the introduction of the new curriculum of 1971. In his Foreword to the Teacher's Handbook for this curriculum, the Minister for Education at the time, Mr. Pádraig Faulkner, expressed the hope that the principles underlying the curriculum would inject 'a fresh energy and a new vitality' into the work of primary schools.² These principles, it should be recalled, sought, not to displace the teacher from the centre of the educational stage in favour of the pupil, as many critics had alleged; rather, they sought to place the needs and potentialities of the pupil at the centre of a perceptive planning and a resourceful action by the teacher. In other words a distinctly more professional autonomy than heretofore was being envisaged for the teacher.

That the implementation of the 1971 curriculum has fallen quite short of the sanguine hopes of Minister Faulkner is evident from the various research studies which have been carried out on this

question during the seventies and eighties³ and, most recently, from the 1985 discussion paper, *Primary Education*,⁴ issued by the Curriculum and Examinations Board. Although surprisingly bland in style, this last document recognizes some major shortcomings in the primary school system. In particular, it lists (i) the large numbers in most classrooms, (ii) the lack of in-service education for teachers, (iii) the paucity of school facilities, and (iv) the shortage of support services (e.g. psychological and remedial) as factors which continue to inhibit the implementation of the 1971 policy.

In addition, the influence exerted on the work in the final years of primary school by the competitive entrance examinations widely run by secondary schools, serves to undermine directly the principles on which the 1971 curriculum was based. Far from identifying and building upon the range of strengths and interests of each pupil through the perceptive action of the teacher, the effects of this competitive ritual leave most pupils, and parents, in little doubt as to what school is really about: namely that dutiful drill, or High Seriousness, which Mr Gradgrind and his ubiquitous associates knew it was about all along — but perhaps felt it less than delicate to say so when the air, and an occasional Minister, were full with talk of change.

II The 'Results' Mentality: A Dubious Legacy

If the High Seriousness just mentioned continues to manifest itself in (or, if you like, is unwilling to relinquish its hold on) the work of primary schools, it is not until we look at the more noteworthy features of post-primary education at present that we appreciate the true dimensions of this remarkably robust ideology. The programmes for secondary education in modern Ireland were initially designed in the nineteen twenties, following the transfer of power to a native government. Notwithstanding a number of revisions and additions to syllabi in the *Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools*⁵ in recent years, there has not yet been, since the twenties, a fundamental review of the purposes and effects of the post-primary school system, — a point painstakingly established by Professor D. G. Mulcahy in 1981 in his book *Curriculum and Policy in Irish Post-Primary Education*.⁶

From their inception, the context in which the secondary school programmes were to be pursued was essentially decided by the establishment of the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate

examinations in 1924. Despite a nationalist shift in curricular policy at this time, these examinations were themselves an extension of the concept of a nationwide competitive examination, first introduced into Ireland by the Intermediate Education Act of 1878. That Act also provided for a system of payment-by-results, whereby the amount of State funding made available to a school depended on the results of the school's pupils in the public examinations. Although the system of payment-by-results was discontinued after 1924, its enduring impact on schools, and on the public, was by then well established: good education, and by association, good teaching, became widely identified with the ability of schools to deliver those outcomes which the devices used in the design of the examinations were capable of measuring and rewarding.

As early as 1899 the report of the Palles Commission on Intermediate Education⁷ listed as some of the ills of the payment-by-results system: (i) restrictions on the scope of a good teacher, (ii) 'overpressure' on pupils, in the general drive to win results, fees and prizes, (iii) a neglect of weaker pupils, and (iv) unhealthy competition between pupils and between schools. Although some reforms were attempted in the wake of the Palles Commission's report, these proved ineffectual⁸. Thus it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the spirit of Mr Gradgrind was ever close in attendance during the formative stages and indeed the reconstruction stages of Irish post-primary education. In this latter connection it is noteworthy that the Vocational Education system, established in 1930, placed considerably less emphasis on the competitive aspects of examinations than did the secondary system, until the VEC system was itself admitted to the mainstream of post-primary education in the nineteen-sixties and thereafter permitted to provide courses for the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations.

The dubious educational practices engendered by the competitive 'results' mentality in post-primary education were eventually drawn once again to public attention in 1970 by the Madous/MacNamara report on the Leaving Certificate⁹, and again in 1975, by the report of the Committee on the Form and Function of the Intermediate Certificate (the ICE Report).¹⁰ During the remainder of the seventies, and into the eighties, the various reports of the Public Examinations Evaluation Project (PEEP)¹¹ published further findings on the practices and attitudes associated with the public examinations. The PEEP reports recommended an active role for teachers in devising curricula and in assessing their own pupils. It

may be the case that the climate of opinion which attended the public discussion of this body of reports contributed in time to the Ministerial decision of 1983 to establish a Curriculum and Examinations Board. In any event, the official response, or lack of response, to the substance of the ICE and PEEP reports left virtually untouched the very features of schooling which the reports selected for particular scrutiny and reappraisal.

The 'results' mentality and its associated style of teaching have, if anything, taken a deeper grip on post-primary education in the last two decades or so. This is due not only to official neglect of recommendations for policy changes, but, more importantly perhaps, to the unprecedented influence of the 'points' system for university admission on the climate of work in post-primary schools. The Leaving Certificate has become progressively eclipsed in its function as a leaving certificate and is increasingly viewed as a nationwide matriculation competition. The widely publicized and highly efficient role of the Central Applications Office in this event give to the Leaving Certificate examinations the character of a yearly national tournament, with a clearly understood — though undeclared — First Division, Second Division, and so on down to the very sizeable groups of 'also rans' and indeed 'non-starters'.

Where teachers fit into this scheme of things, from an official or Ministerial viewpoint, became clearly evident during the recent industrial dispute between the three main teachers' unions in the Republic and the government. Speaking on radio about the threatened boycott of examination work by post-primary teachers' unions, the Minister — quite ingenuously I imagine — described the preparation of pupils for the certificate examinations of the Department of Education as 'the major object' of the teachers' work.¹¹ The regrettable, if understandable, acquiescence of most parental interests — and not a few teachers — in this conception of education prompts a rather rhetorical question amidst all the current talk of change: how different a report would Palles and his commissioners, were they around, produce on post-primary education in Ireland in 1986 than that which they produced in 1899?

III Blind Spots Of High Seriousness

The ethic of High Seriousness is shared by the most diverse interest groups in education. The most distinguishing feature of this ethic is

the remarkable measure of consensus among widely different interests on how the educational enterprise, as an event of communication, is to be regarded and conducted. Education, in this ethic, is seen as an ever renewed battle for the minds and hearts of the young. In other words, it is seen as essentially an ideological enterprise, where competing cultural traditions seek to stamp an allegiance to their own preferred accomplishments and outlooks on the abilities and sensibilities of the young. This kind of battle, with its distinctive rhetoric and rituals, is well documented in the history of education internationally (e.g. conflicts between Church and State in France, 'progressives' and 'traditionalists' in America, 'liberals' and 'utilitarians' in Britain; interdenominational as well as Church-State conflicts in Ireland). Most recently in the Republic we have witnessed an intermittent divisiveness between school management interests and teacher unions on issues such as 'Catholic ethos' and the teaching of religion in schools.

Quite apart then from the ideological sources of its inspiration, High Seriousness sees education as a venture where the stakes are high; where victory for one's own lobby, be that technological, or literary, or religious, or whatever, means defeat, or at least a setback, for the cause identified with the opposition. The removal of the compulsory requirement for Irish in the Leaving Certificate in 1973, for instance, was viewed as a major setback by interests associated with *Gluaiseacht na Gaeilge*,¹³ and as an overdue victory by interests which saw education primarily in terms of a stimulus to economic and technological progress. To cite a more current example, the present anxieties in many official quarters about the eventual balance of power between the Department of Education and a soon-to-be-statutory Curriculum and Examinations Board betokens a contest of historic proportions in the near future. Insofar as this contest is carried out in a public arena, we shall probably see High Seriousness at its most solemn.

Let us proceed now from the pervasive character of High Seriousness to its more significant oversights. These oversights, or — as I would prefer to call them — the blind spots of High Seriousness, give rise to an unwarranted confinement, or institutionalization of the variety and vitality of cultural traditions. Of course discourse on the merits of the various voices of cultural heritage has rarely been lacking; indeed the agenda of High Seriousness is invariably replete with some version of this theme. Perhaps the main oversight in this connection however is the persistent failure to ask the basic

question: *What distinguishes experience which engages, challenges, and enriches the identity or self-understanding of the learner from experience which fails to do this?* For the viewpoint which sees education as any kind of 'transmission' of pre-packaged theories or verities, this question, if it arises at all, is not to the forefront. Indeed for this viewpoint the range of the teacher's information and the orthodoxy of the teacher's outlook may quite logically be the overriding considerations. That is to say, these might be seen as more important than the experienced quality of the teacher's presence.

The human inclination to build ramparts around the kinds of learning and outlook which one has come to value in a special way is, I imagine, more a feature of adult life than of childhood or adolescence. Having got 'set in our ways', as it were, we tend to build a fortress around us for the protection of these ways. In passing, it is worth noting that there is more than a clue here as to why Plato's *Republic* remains a classic for the most influential conception of education in the history of the West. Of course the advantage of a fortress is that it strategically accommodates concentrated attack on the enemy while, at the same time, its own defences are designed to withstand sustained attack from all sides. Life within a fortress may be deeply valued by its willing residents. Almost inevitably however, predictability and institutionalization remain two of its more prominent features.

Where any institutionalized conception of the Good Life — in the Arts, Sciences, Religion or whatever — seeks to use education as a vehicle to extend systematically its own domain, control of the vehicle itself may seem an obvious imperative. In this event the Fortress of the Good, which many schools are seen to represent, may more likely be regarded as confinement by large numbers of young people, who must endure its drill and routines. The fact that faithful endurance may be handsomely rewarded by the prizes which await those who acquit themselves most credibly at the end of the day may mask a lot about the quality of the moral experience which characteristically takes shape here. At bottom, however, such acclaimed rituals do little to dignify the dubiousness of that experience.

The ritual domestication of the emergent sensibilities of large numbers among the young by the ethic of High Seriousness is, however, only one side of the coin. Equally noteworthy is the associated disfigurement of tradition — or more precisely the educational potential of tradition — by a mediocre or impoverished

pedagogy: that is, a pedagogy characterized more by the anticipated shape of the examination papers than by any authentic attending to what the various voices of tradition sincerely seek to say to pupils and teachers alike. Insofar as cultural tradition in any of its educational voices (e.g. poetic, scientific, historical, religious, musical etc.) becomes a strategic device or indeed a strategem for examination purposes, it becomes something quite other than itself. Not only is the Fortress of the Good itself despoiled here, even under the unseeing eyes of the virtuous, but through such routines tradition loses that vitality and challenge, without which it typically becomes regarded as an oppressive, irrelevant burden in schools and colleges.

IV The Liberation of Tradition and the Enrichment of Sensibility.

What is it that distinguishes experience which is genuinely educational from that which is not? This is a fundamental question about what makes the work of schools and colleges purposeful, meaningful, and justifiable, in any particular setting. In an age of increasing unemployment, increasing technology, and increasing *ennui*, it is a question which takes on a practical urgency, quite distinct from all ideological considerations. By way of answer to this question let us consider the suggestion that genuine educational practice is concerned, before anything else, with the discovery or elicitation of a meaningful sense of identity among learners. In other words, the various voices of tradition (scientific, poetic, mathematical, religious, technological etc.) must make their address to the pupils in such a manner, or, — and this is crucial — in such an *idiom* that a genuine response is called forth and a sustained, meaningful interplay between pupils and the voice in question is got under way.

The quality of the teacher's *presence* is clearly of first importance here, and this is what the knowledge and insight, or professionalism, of the teacher is essentially about. Consider for instance the teacher who delights in the world of Gaelic literature and culture but who remains bewildered by a class of boisterous urban youngsters with a prejudice against Irish; or a theologically intense and morally fastidious teacher who is defeated by the palpable nonchalance or irreverence of her pupils. What can be said of the presence of such teachers? Yet the climate of High Seriousness which governs in a special way the appointment of teachers often mistakes such misfits for the more exemplary kind of teacher.

The self-understanding of the teacher in *all* its aspects must remain at the focus of our attention. An unyielding perception of the Good Life is likely to hamper or even shipwreck the teacher's efforts when these encounter the more prominent outlooks of modern youth. The teacher's self-understanding therefore needs to be informed not merely by a fluency in whatever voice, or voices, of tradition he or she brings to presence for the pupils. From the side of tradition itself, the teacher must move *flexibly* within this voice and preserve a commitment to its continual renewal. From the side of communication with pupils, moreover, the teacher's self-understanding needs to have thoroughly grasped that the best access to a pupil's abilities is through the pupil's *sensibilities*. The professional insight of the teacher, mentioned earlier, is chiefly concerned therefore with the range of possible ways for recasting the special vocabulary and mood of the subject being taught into a thought-worthy *idiom* capable of engaging the sensibilities of those to whom one's teaching is, in each instance, addressed.

Where this much-neglected accomplishment takes place the conditions become ripe for the venturing and questioning whereby potential becomes gradually realized into a sense of self-worth, or identity. In other words a disciplined discovery of one's own strengths, interests and inabilities becomes possible in the context of a challenging, but fraternal *milieu*. Such a *milieu* holds perhaps the best promise in the late twentieth century not only for cultivation of one's emergent specialisms, but also for what is properly called moral education. The lesson here for High Seriousness is that the *ethos* which arises between people sincerely dedicated (even obstinately dedicated) to the recovery of trust and humanity holds infinitely more promise than that which is imposed with the backing of institutionalized power.

Amidst the disputes about curriculum which frequently centre on the appropriateness of syllabi to a technological age, it is occasionally suggested that the question of *what* is studied by most is less important than *how* most study. Let us conclude by taking this suggestion in the light of the points about ethos and the teacher's self-understanding made in the previous paragraphs. We can thus say with conviction that the best education, including moral education, which can be experienced by any pupil, is that which seeks to identify and to cultivate in judicious measure the best range of the pupil's strengths and interests, and which thereby sets the emancipatory power of tradition to work in a challenging yet fraternal climate; one

which calls forth the true identity of each pupil. I have attempted, however sketchily, to outline what seem to me the most important issues to be tackled and the most fruitful avenues to be pursued in a late twentieth-century review of the course of education, particularly Irish education. What I have suggested has far-reaching, even daunting, implications for curricula, for examinations, for teacher education,¹⁴ and in-service education of teachers, and not least, for educational leadership. Yet to fail to seek the sources of promise, and to fall back instead on rationalizations, is to acquiesce in a situation about which virtually everyone, including the Highly Serious, complains, but in which all are accomplices. Not idly did the poet speak concerning the truth about our minds.

Footnotes

1. Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, London. Martin, Brian and O'Keeffe, 1972.
2. *Primary School Curriculum: Teacher's Handbook Part I*, Dublin: Government Publications Sales Office 1971. I have translated this short quotation from the Foreword in Irish by the Minister for Education.
3. These studies include the following:
 - (i) *Evaluation of the New Curriculum for Primary Schools*. Dublin: Conference of Convent Primary Schools, 1975.
 - (ii) *Primary School Curriculum: Curriculum Questionnaire Analysis*. Dublin: Irish National Teachers' Organization, 1976.
 - (iii) P. J. Fontes and T. Kelleghan, *The New Primary School Curriculum: Its Implication and Effects*. Dublin: Educational Research Centre, 1977.
 - (iv) Sr. Marian Walsh, *A Study of the Implementation of the 1971 Curriculum for Irish Primary Schools*. Unpublished M. Litt. thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 1980.
4. *Primary Education: A Curriculum and Examinations Board Discussion Paper*. Dublin: Curriculum and Examinations Board, 1985.
5. *Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools*. Published annually by Department of Education Dublin.
6. D. G. Mulcahy, *Curriculum and Policy in Irish Post-Primary Education*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1981.
7. *Report of the Commissioners on Intermediate Education (Palles) Final Report H. C. 1899 (c.9511) xxii, 629.*
8. For a fuller treatment of these issues see John Coolahan's *Irish Education: Its History and Structure*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration 1981, particularly chapter 2; and also T. J. McElligott's *Secondary Education in Ireland 1870-1921*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1981. A thoughtworthy review of both books appeared in the Summer 1982 issue of *Studies*, written by Paul Andrews, S.J.
9. G. Madous and J. MacNamara, *Public Examination: A Study of the Irish Leaving Certificate*, Dublin: Educational Research Centre, 1970.

10. Committee on the Form and Function of the Intermediate Certificate Examination. *Final Report (ICE)*. Dublin: Government Publications Sales Office, 1975.
11. The publication details on the PEEP reports are as follows:
 First Report: *Assessment in History*, J. Heywood, 1974.
 Second Report: *Assessment in Mathematics*, J. Heywood, 1976.
 Third Report: *PEEP: A Progress Report*, J. Heywood, S. McGuinness and D. Murphy, 1980.
 Fourth Report: *PEEP: The Final Report*, J. Heywood, S. McGuinness and D. Murphy, 1980.
 All reports are published by the School of Education, Trinity College, Dublin.
12. Interview on RTE Radio programme *This Week*, Sunday 13th April, 1986.
13. A literal translation of *Gluaiseacht na Gaeilge* would be: The Gaelic Movement.
14. The implications I have mentioned here, particularly those relating to teacher education, are pursued in a preliminary way in an essay I wrote in the Summer 1982 issue of *Studies*, entitled 'Teacher Education and Higher Learning'.

COUNTRY HOUSE: AN EXCAVATION

Sean Lysaght

*There is a dull resurrection of the dead,
 here under elms grown rooky, skeletal,
 where my spade cuts a peacetime trench
 to house a plastic pipe's brash gleam.
 Old shoes and jam-crocks resist the blade,
 rusted relics, pleadings from the past of those
 whose mortal wrecks were carted away
 down the gravelled passage, in a shroud of rain.*

*I found a dog's bones and his yellow head
 set in a posthumous grin. 'You're a stranger here',
 he said, old Cerberus of the haggard,
 standing guard over the archaeology
 of those we knew. And all I unearth
 are memorabilia of things unsaid
 or unachieved: a word of love,
 a visit to a hospital between trains.*

*Among these objects bespeaking loss
 I am a man of action as I toss
 my spent commodities among the leaves,
 their labels whole. But will the diggers know,
 I would enquire, when the sodden overcoat
 we wore comes free of briars,
 the sad conscience goading our intent,
 our obscure mournings, how well we meant?*