

An Overview of the Educational Ethos

Padraig Hogan

The Curricular pattern into which secondary school pupils were pressed was remarkable chiefly as an indication of modern Ireland's rejection of the twentieth century's dominant intellectual trends.

This provocative claim is made by D.H. Akenson in his *A Mirror to Kathleen's Face*,¹ a critical study of education in independent Ireland, published in 1975. The harshness of many of Akenson's judgements however (more of which will be examined later), together with a strident and often sniping tone in the book as a whole, have made his text something less than a definitive work on Irish education in the first four decades of independence. The shortcomings in Akenson's work, moreover, have had the result that those who came under criticism in the text (particularly the Roman Catholic Church, political leaders, the Dept. of Education, but also the Irish people as a whole) can, with some justification, dismiss the book's arguments as an attempt to pillory them rather than as a balanced historical disclosure of the real story.

Education in modern Ireland is so laden with controversy however, that an objective telling of the tale presents very considerable difficulties to the most circumspect of scholars, even if he or she succeeds in obtaining free access to all relevant firsthand sources. Cries of "bias" come readily to the lips of groups and individuals who fall under any kind of indictment by the historian and the writer who does not acknowledge this fact and examine its implications before taking up his pen, leaves himself unnecessarily open to the double charge that he has failed to declare his hand openly and is seeking instead to gain the status of scholarship for his own preferred viewpoint.

Must any balanced text on the history of Irish education (or any other controversial topic) therefore be so innocuous as to succeed in offending no one? Such a criterion would necessarily place expediency in a higher position than the truth and would call for a diplomatic deceitfulness which is the very negation of the goals of scholarship. A persistent commitment to the fullness of truth surpasses both flattery and vindictiveness but does not balk at making criticisms. Nor is it averse to using a little humour or irony, lest it be thought that laughter has no place in the mansions of

truth. The characteristic mark of this kind of scholarship however, is that in making its judgements it willingly places its own claim to truth at risk.

It is important therefore, in an essay such as this, where space precludes the detailed consideration of evidence which is possible in a full length book, to establish broadly at the outset whether or not the predominantly critical judgements which have been passed on the Irish Secondary education in recently published literature can be sustained. Apart from Akenson's *A Mirror to Kathleen's Face*, two other books which deal with our theme were published in 1981, namely D.G. Mulcahy's *Curriculum and Policy in Irish Post-Primary Education*² and John Coolahan's *Irish Education: Its History and Structure*³. Coolahan's is more an illuminating reference work and data source than a critique. Nevertheless, in its chapter on second-level education it contains many criticisms, both implied and explicit. For instance he points out that the withdrawal of the 1919 Education Bill, with its much needed reforms, as a result of a Catholic campaign left intermediate (i.e. secondary) education in Ireland in a chronic condition and that the first native government in its preoccupation with a truly "Gaelic" character for education in the new state did little to set matters aright:

It was understandable but regrettable that little generosity of attitude was shown to other Irish cultural traditions. There was little concern about structural or administrative reform in education, the social aspects of educational provision were neglected and education, as distinct from language, was not a priority feature of government policy.⁴

The developments of the following decades, which are carefully recorded and documented by Coolahan, show that not until the sixties did anything like a significant change in policy for Irish post-primary education take place. Even then, the aftermath of the major report *Investment in Education (1966)*⁵ left life in schools largely unaltered and this led to increasing pressures for curricular reform during the seventies. Here again Coolahan's conclusion is critical:

There has been a lack of a synthesising,

co-ordinating statement on overall curricular policy for second level, including the formal programmes offered, the pedagogy employed and the life-style of the schools,⁶

This theme of neglect by the controlling powers is the main focus of Mulcahy's critique. He charges that little attention has been given in official quarters to the task of identifying and evaluating the aims of post-primary education in Ireland, despite the fact that committees have been appointed for precisely this purpose (the Council of Education), or have inevitably come up against this question in the pursuit of their remit (Investment in Education team). Mulcahy concludes:

What did not emerge, and still has not, is a clear view of the overall purpose or aims of post-primary education and how the more specific purpose of serving the economic needs of the country are related to it.⁷

In support of his argument, Mulcahy undertakes a long and detailed analysis of aims in the *Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools*⁸ (published annually by the Dept. of Education), the *Report of the Council of Education* on the curriculum of the secondary school⁹ (1960), and *Memo V.40 of the Dept. of Education (1942)*¹⁰ dealing with the aims set down for schools operating under Vocational Education Committees.

That there was a perennial failure to pursue a satisfactory review of the purposes and actual achievements of post-primary schools is clearly borne out by Mulcahy, Coolahan and indeed by many others¹¹. For instance the *Rules and Programme* year after year, with minor changes in wording, merely indicate vague and minimum purposes for the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations: e.g. — the Leaving Certificate purpose is to prepare pupils "for immediate entry into open society or for proceeding to further education".¹² This vagueness is not clarified in the *Rules*, nor is there any reference to the purposes of secondary education itself. When, in the seventies, official inquiries were eventually undertaken into the public examinations at post-primary level, no action was taken on the reports submitted to the Department of Education on completion of the inquiries, namely the report on the Intermediate Certificate examination (I.C.E. Report 1975)¹³ and the four reports of the Public Examinations Evaluation Project (PEEP Reports' no. 1, 1974; No. 2, 1976; No. 3, 1977 and *Final Report* 1980).¹⁴ The amount of evaluation being undertaken by the post-primary inspectorate was also negligible, as visits by inspectors to post-

primary schools were few indeed. In the light of all of this, moreover, the officially authorised curriculum development projects during the seventies and the setting up of a curriculum unit in the Dept. of Education, rather than committed efforts at reform, now seem to invite comparison with the posturings of an artful dissembler, designed to keep at bay a mounting tide of dissatisfaction at what was widely seen as official inertia on secondary education.

The record of events, or perhaps non-events, over the decades suggests a picture of quite remarkable complacency among those charged with the conduct of secondary education, not so much with regard to the quantity of schooling available — which increased rapidly after 1967 when it became free to all — but rather with regard to the quality of the education provided; or in other words, what actually befell pupils as they experienced life in the schools. Simply to allege decades of bureaucratic indifference on the part of school and departmental authorities however, as many, including some teachers, are wont to do, would be unfair and quite misleading. Rather, it needs to be pointed out that it was the very commitment of these educational authorities which was largely responsible for that fact that no fundamental review of Irish secondary education took place in the decades following independence, nor indeed up to the present.¹⁵ The authorities in question are the state (not merely the Minister and officials at the Dept. of Education) and the various churches (but in a special way the Roman Catholic Hierarchy and religious orders involved in the schools).

Regarding the character of relations between these two familiar authorities, James Joyce once remarked sardonically in his poem "Gas from a Burner" — that Ireland was a place "where Christ and Caesar are hand and glove".¹⁶ That Joyce's judgement was largely correct was later borne out in J.H. Whyte's major study *Church and State in Modern Ireland 1923-1979* (1981).¹⁷ But from Whyte's work it becomes clear that this relationship possessed the complex character of a courtship. or indeed a liaison, rather than the character of an openly declared marriage.¹⁸ Moreover, the subordination of public policy to the will of the Catholic Hierarchy at crucial points in the history of the legislature is clearly revealed on examination of the State Papers 1948-51 released in December 1982, particularly the correspondence relating to the proposed "Mother and Child" legislation of 1951.¹⁹

It cannot be denied that both church and state had a sincere and sustained interest in educational matters. It must also be acknowledged however, that the outlook of these authorities remained

very largely paternalistic and doctrinaire, rather than democratic or responsive in character. The main features of this outlook, and particularly its Catholic flavour, are succinctly captured by Rev. J.D. King in his book *Religious Education in Ireland* (1970) where he states:

It is evident that Christian principles on the upbringing of children and their Christian education were basic to the formulation of Irish educational policy. Papal teaching as contained in Leo XIII's Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and Pius XI's *Divine Illius Magistri* (1929) gave positive direction to this policy and had a profound effect on it.²⁰

This pious and paternalistic ethos, which suffused in a particular way the educational discourse and practices of independent Ireland, ensured that the contents of school curricula and the arrangements for the management of schools remained undisturbed for a half-century or more. The deliberations of the Council of Education, composed of religious and lay members, on the curriculum of the secondary school reveal this ethos — as we shall see here and later — in quite a dramatic way. According to the Council the school was “of its very nature subsidiary and complementary to the family and the Church”.²¹ That such a questionable and even arbitrary definition of schooling could, as late as 1960, go unchallenged by any individual on the Council, might strike present day readers as surprising. Be that as it may, the feeling of the Council that secondary education was in safe hands, and needed little by way of scrutiny of its rationale, provides unmistakable evidence of the deferential or even acquiescent attitude of the Council members towards the stated views of church and state on educational matters. As Mulcahy points out:

For as long as the curriculum of a general education is “known”, the need for fundamental discussion of the aims of secondary education does not arise. Hence, perhaps, the eagerness with which the Council of Education shunned “meticulous analysis” or “abstract theorising” on fundamental issues in their discussion on the nature and aims of secondary education.²²

This apparently widespread acquiescence, the public reluctance to tackle anything calling for disciplined independent reflection, and the corresponding tendency to deliver thorny philosophical matters into the hands of anyone who proclaimed to be an authority on such matters; — these call for the most painstaking effort of thought if we are to gain anything like a satisfactory grasp of the

context in which the education policies of modern Ireland can be properly rendered coherent. For his part, Akenson has a ready explanation of the phenomenon. Viewing the context of social policy in terms of a submissive laity and a politically aggressive Catholic church, he states:

The church in Ireland has exercised more power than in any other advanced country in the twentieth century. Its power has been based both on practical realities, such as its great financial resources and social influence, and upon the church's control of various esoteric mysteries with which the Celt always has been preoccupied.²³

Many observers of public life in Ireland since the foundation of the Free State can, perhaps, find themselves in prompt agreement with Akenson's assessment. Nevertheless, whereas the evidence from first hand documentary sources certainly bears witness to an inordinate and continual influence by the Catholic Church in matters of public policy, the air of grand finality in Akenson's judgement is premature and more particularly, his summary dismissal of “the Celt”, in a manner almost reminiscent of a *Punch* cartoonist, is unwarranted in the work of any serious historian.²⁴ The sweeping impact of Akenson's judgement serves, unfortunately, to obscure the highly complex character of the quietism attributed to the Irish people. As suggested earlier it is precisely this quietism which calls for close scrutiny because, far from being something monolithic, it expressed itself in a variety of shades in modern Ireland and far from being a natural characteristic of the people, it was largely engendered by a remarkable kind of educational effort. This widespread effort was concentrated in a particular way in the Catholic secondary schools of the Free State and Republic. These schools viewed themselves as playing a most crucial role in the shaping of Irish manhood and womanhood, particularly for the more responsible and influential positions in society at large.

In the second part of this essay we shall try to illuminate the general ethos of the secondary schools of modern Ireland and examine the manner in which they affected the achievements, outlooks and experiences of the ever increasing numbers who attended them. During our investigation — which will necessarily be somewhat impressionistic, though also I hope broadly accurate — we should bear in mind the pervasive influences of that peculiar relationship of church and state which we have already considered, as these influences form a virtually unchanging cultural background for the greater part of our discussion. Un-

avoidably, our investigation must also examine that curious public reticence, or docility, which apparently accepted an educational *status quo* more characteristic of a patriarchy than a republic; a status quo moreover, which remained steadfast in most respects until the nineteen seventies.

II

Liberal Education or Censorial Austerity?

The viewpoint that formal education is essentially a grand crusade, or an unrelenting battle for the minds and hearts of the young, received perhaps its most profound and influential expression in Plato's *Republic*.²⁵ In this work, the young person, depending on his or her intellectual gifts, is depicted as having an imagination of gold, silver or bronze; the gold being potentially capable of reaching the most serene wisdom, but *all* imagination being susceptible to dangerously misleading or indeed corrupting influences (Plato mentions some of the more erotic literature of Homer and Hesiod in this connection). To safeguard the healthy growth of the imagination Plato emphasises the need for a judiciously chosen curriculum and underlines accordingly, a necessity to censor and supervise most austere what those who are undergoing education are allowed to see or hear. Scarcely less eloquent is Rousseau's impassioned plea in his *Emile*,²⁶ for a much more "natural" or less contrived curriculum than that recommended by Plato, if the young are to gain the insight and fulfilment which he sees as their birthright. Most Christian educational authorities, but perhaps Catholics in particular, would for their part tend to regard Rousseau as an enemy in the battle to be fought. The Catholic educational flag would in turn provoke the opposition of most of those whose educational views are inspired by Marxist principles. Indeed the list of associations and lobbies eager to promote a particular line of educational policy grows longer with the march of time and represents an ever increasing variety of ideologies. What all the groupings seem to share however, whatever their conflicts in outlook, is the Platonic conception of education as an ongoing battle to gain control of the formal education of the young, or to put it in more colloquial terms: a struggle to get one's own coterie firmly entrenched in the driving seat and to lay down from that position of strength what will be taught to the young and who will do the teaching.

A brief look at Ireland's educational history in the last century shows that the main protagonists in the battle at the formative stage of the country's educational structures were the three leading churches, namely Catholic, Anglican and Presbyterian. So difficult did co-operation between these churches prove, so pronounced was

their enmity on educational matters, that denominational schooling, largely funded by the state, became the firmly established pattern long before the advent of Irish independence. The partitioning of the country at independence moreover, removed the overwhelming number of Presbyterian and a large number of Anglican schools into a different administration (and a soon to be revised educational structure), thus making Catholic schooling, both at primary and secondary level, the predominant pattern of formal education in the twenty-six counties.

It is appropriate for us to focus our attention directly on bringing to light the general characteristics of this predominant pattern of schooling, particularly as exhibited by the country's secondary schools. The 1924 Intermediate Education (Amendment) Act made provision for the Leaving Certificate and Intermediate Certificate examinations and effectively imposed a uniform curriculum on all secondary schools. Schools were also free to draw up their own curricula subject to Departmental approval, but the influence exerted by the public examinations meant that this option was not a realistic one for schools. From 1926 all secondary teachers had to undergo a test in oral Irish. Irish became a compulsory subject in the Intermediate Certificate from 1927-28 and in the Leaving Certificate from 1934. Many Protestants regarded the new statutory requirements for Irish with uneasiness, feeling that the educational traditions of their own denominational schools were receiving scant respect from the new government.²⁷ The Natural sciences — Physics, Chemistry, Biology — received a low priority in the secondary school curriculum, a status which was not to alter significantly until the nineteen sixties, whereas Latin was widely taught in virtually all secondary schools up to that time. Technical subjects such as Metalwork, Woodwork and Technical Drawing were taught in hardly any secondary schools. The same was largely true of art.

The initial picture that emerges here is one of a Grammar School, or literary type of curriculum somewhat reminiscent of the English Public Schools, except that the Irish language enjoyed a privileged position among the requirements that those following this curriculum had to meet. But since one of the distinguishing marks of Grammar School education was that it was thought to produce "liberally educated", articulate and intellectually vigorous individuals, the question now arises: how can this be reconciled with the compliant disposition widespread among the Irish people which we mentioned in previous pages? A full-scale answer to this question might well cast doubt on many of the unquestioned merits of

Grammar School education. What concerns us more directly in the limited space of this essay however is the peculiar character of the Irish version of the Grammar School curriculum. A closer examination reveals that the initial picture that emerged above of a Grammar School curriculum might be quite misleading. That "liberal education" was rarely or ever an agreed priority in the country's secondary schools is evident from another of the Council of Education's more noteworthy remarks, which describes, in approving terms, the character of these schools:

The dominant purpose of their existence is the inculcation of religious ideals and values. This central influence, which gives unity and harmony to all the subjects of the curriculum, is outside the purview of the State which supervises the secular subjects only. It is only just that we should emphasise the paramount educative value of this historic religious purpose in the schools, and realise the advantages our people have compared with others in modern times.²⁸

Indeed the Catholic Hierarchy were anxious to ensure that anything resembling a "liberal" or general education in Irish post-primary schools should receive, as far as possible, a distinctly Catholic stamp. Their intervention in the deliberations on the 1930 Vocational Education Act illustrates quite explicitly the extent of their concern on this matter. The bishops secured from the Minister for Education a promise that the schools to be set up under the act (schools under local and predominantly lay control) would not offer a full range of post-primary subjects, but would concentrate rather on technical, or "vocational" subjects.²⁹ Schools under the management of Vocational Education Committees were thus later precluded — until the mid sixties when policy was changed, from developing into full-scale, post-primary schools. In consequence they came to be regarded as second-class schools, the label "Tech" largely signifying a place where the less intelligent were sent to "do something useful with their hands". It must be stated however, that this "inferior" status was quite unwarranted by the achievements of V.E.C. schools both at post-primary level and in adult education. In any case the restrictions placed upon them remove V.E.C. schools from our compass for the greater part of this essay.

The activities of the Catholic authorities in securing official acceptance of the view that secondary education was essentially an ecclesiastical matter, echo strongly the more controversial features of Plato's grand design. For instance, most of

the important pronouncements on education by religious bodies were couched in the crusading tones evident in the extracts of the *Council of Education Report* quoted above. Noteworthy also are the persistent vigilance over an all but steadfast curriculum and the erection of ramparts against influences considered unwelcome, including V.E.C. involvement in general education. This Platonic austerity is more palpable however when we turn to consider the schools from the inside, as it were, or in other words, to reflect on the quality of the educational experience undergone by successive generations of pupils.

For the most part Irish secondary schools have been notably industrious places. In recent years, where this industry is largely dictated by competition for points to qualify for entry to university faculties, pupils have tended to impose a regimen so strenuous on themselves that it causes concern to many teachers. On the other hand, in the less competitive days prior to the introduction of free secondary education in 1967, the regimen was largely imposed by a more demanding kind of school authority and was chiefly inspired by the Catholic world-outlook which we have considered. But either way, in terms of examination performance, the secondary schools have produced impressive results. The message was annually announced in the schools, and indeed absorbed by the majority of pupils, that an Intermediate or Leaving Certificate with less than six honours was also less than something to be proud of. Demanding though they may have been on their pupils, most religious teachers were also demanding on themselves, making many sacrifices, including contributions from their salaries, in pursuit of their schools' overall purposes. The more distinguished of secondary school pupils who for financial or other reasons did not proceed to higher education, often found attractive career paths in public service and commercial occupations and may, even yet, outnumber graduates in positions of leadership and influence in Irish society.

As may be anticipated from our earlier discussion however, this impressive picture of life in schools also has a darker side. This unattractive dimension of Irish secondary schools has not as yet been studied at length and it cannot be given a comprehensive treatment here. Yet its affects on Irish social attitudes and indeed on the self-understanding of very large numbers of Irish people (both in public life and in private life) should not be underestimated and call here for some elucidation, however curtailed that elucidation must be. The vast majority of Irish secondary schools were — and a majority still are, segregated; girls' schools being run by religious orders of nuns and boys'

schools being run by diocesan clergy or by religious orders of priests and brothers. Very few who attended these schools will fail to recall the perennial emphasis on sexual morality, worthy almost of the more sedulous disciples of a Jansenist ethical code. That this attitude was evident in the Catholic Church as a whole in modern Ireland cannot be denied, but its detailed inculcation is awakening adolescents during school retreats and regular spiritual addresses is particularly noteworthy, and, if one may add, particularly memorable. Whereas the apologetics (and later catechetics) of the Religion class might frequently be a tiresome endurance, considerable amusement could be secured if the religion teacher (or any other teacher for that matter) could be distracted and "got going about sex" by means of an adroitly placed question from an "ignoramus" in the class. The more unfortunate effects of the segregationist ethic can be witnessed however in the "He-man" stereotype to which boys were to aspire, through the ever present spectre of corporal punishment and the Spartan rigour of obligatory games, regardless of one's inclinations in matters recreational. From the female side this stereotyping is evident in the stress placed upon being demure and "ladylike", and on keeping ever alert for that perennial danger to a girl's virtue: "men's urges". In boarding schools, the censorship of mail intensified the forbiddenness of contact between the sexes, thus serving mainly to underline the fascinating, but non-personal, mystique which each sex came to possess for the other.

The pronounced atmosphere of austerity with regard to moral probity had a marked influence also in the curriculum which most pupils followed. Although many enlightened teachers, religious and lay, enlivened their classes with stories, experiences and books which they themselves found deeply enriching, most pupils nevertheless endured a punitive routine of Shakespeare and Milton, calculus and chemical formula, battles and treaties, climatic conditions and chief industries, Virgil and Cicero, or endless grammatical rules in Irish, French or whatever. For the more adventurous, light relief, or perhaps more sustained diversion from this saturnine agenda was provided by a brisk underground trade in war comics, paperback thrillers and not a few salacious novels. The delights which such transgressions held forth for the more daring had to be weighed against the risks however, and the risks were often serious. Detection of a comic usually brought a swift beating, detection of a novel a penetrating interrogation on top of this, but to have a "juicy" novel found in one's possession had the added consequence of sustained surveillance by the

school staff as a whole and in many cases meant an irreversible expulsion. The following lines from Seamus Heaney's poem "The Ministry of Fear" evoke the manner in which the guilty and those contemplating transgressions could quickly be brought to comply:

On my first day, the leather strap
Went epileptic in the Big Study,
Its echoes plashing over our bowed heads,
But I still wrote home that a boarder's life,
Was not so bad, shying as usual.³⁰

When taken together, the curriculum, the code of discipline and the style of pedagogy in most of modern Ireland's secondary schools signify a resolute censorship of the imagination by the educational authorities. Perhaps this is what Akenson seeks to underline in the passage quoted at the start where he speaks of modern Ireland's rejection of the twentieth century's dominant intellectual trends. The argument has a more compelling force however when the historian's systematic assembly of evidence concerning educational policy loses some of the air of didactic finality, even if the evidence itself might seem to support such finality. The picture is revealed in fuller dimensions moreover when the historian's account is complemented by an attempt to unveil some of the character of life in the schools, as experienced from the inside.

III

On the Anatomy of Acquiescence

Remaining with life inside the schools then, let us examine further this censorship together with some of its consequences. Censorship, if it is to be effective, requires more than a company of officials to implement it. Its real success depends just as much on the secret agent, the periodic informer, or self-appointed watchdog. (One does not have to go to totalitarian countries for evidence of this point. The experience of Irish public libraries with the fanaticism of some of their members after the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act tells an intriguing tale of its own). The more politically literate a community, whether of pupils or citizens in general, the more controversial the issue of censorship is likely to be. Where this literacy is largely absent however, as it was in Irish schools and society until recently, it cannot be denied that a deeply satisfying sense of righteousness and of belonging to the fold can attend the activity of the zealot in bringing possible offences to the attention of the authorities. It is equally true that to the more independently minded, particularly

those who are sensitive about personal rights, this kind of behaviour can be intensely infuriating, its apparent inanity often defying comprehension. But it is precisely this seeming mindlessness which calls for explanation rather than dismissal. The "sense of belonging" referred to above is of importance in this connection, since it is central to our attempt to probe the nature of acquiescence. The censorial code in secondary schools, with regard to what pupils might read, express, think, or do, generally provided strict and simply understood models of behaviour; models with which it was intellectually simple, if humanly demanding, to identify. Conversely, any coherent dissenting attitude to the code required an effort of intellect and of will which proved a heavy burden, particularly if one wished to live with some degree of equanimity within the social context of the school. Not surprisingly then, the official code had many benefits to offer. In return for a voluntary submission of thought and will to the restrictions and requirements of school orthodoxy the benefits included the praise of teachers, the likelihood of being favourably regarded by prefects, or more simply, the feeling of being part of the "general run of things". The longer that one became inured in this approved everyday routine, the less painful it became, the more infrequent one's transgressions were likely to be and the less likely were these to be viewed from above as the defiant behaviour of a scoundrel.

We see here the emergence of a kind of "religion-of-the-crowd" where "to be" is "to be like the rest", and to let slip away that potential for self-understanding which is singularly one's own potential. This is a very natural but widely overlooked phenomenon, even by scholars. Of the minority of thinkers who have addresses themselves to this question one of these, Martin Heidegger, describes it as "everydayness" (*Alltaglichkeit*) and illustrates its consequences as follows:

Thus the particular Dasein (human being) in its everydayness is disburdened by the "they". Not only that; by thus disburdening it of its being, the "they" accommodates Dasein if Dasein has any tendency to take things easily and make them easy. And because the "they" constantly accommodates the particular Dasein by disburdening it of its Being, the "they" retains and enhances its stubborn dominion.³¹

Heidegger's argument here is attempting merely to describe a pervasive sidetracking or arrest in the development of understanding which invariably occurs widely in everyday life in any culture. Accordingly, the arguments' rather formal style is designed to avoid the more provocative tone of

Socrates or the polemic style of Kierkegaard, both of whom were centrally concerned with a similar theme. But what of the efforts of schools to provide for their pupils some enlightening or critical perspectives on the "assimilation to the rest" just described? If we take our analysis of "everydayness" and consider it in the context of the cultural atmosphere of most secondary schools, the intellectual anaemia of Irish secondary education is revealed more closely. What most pupils experienced as the unchanging drabness of the curriculum, the military routine of classroom and sportsfield, the prohibition of newspapers (in the case of most boarding schools) together with a well-intended but myopic domestication of the imagination; of all of these conspired with a sweeping force to dictate the flavour of the adolescent years of masses of Irish pupils.

Whatever may be said about the impressive results of schools in terms of examinations, the manner in which pupils became "well-adjusted", as it were, to the prevailing orthodoxy in behaviour and outlook indicates nothing as much as a cultural mediocrity, or "averageness" (*Durchschnittlichkeit*) to use Heidegger's phrase, in the educational life of schools. Beyond using words like "remarkable" or "very considerable", it would be impossible to measure the extent to which the spontaneous and intermittent stirrings of what might have become a cultivated literary, artistic, scientific or indeed spiritual sensibility, were sidetracked, sedated, or even disfigured. That some in church quarters were aware, albeit from an evangelical standpoint, that aridity was besetting secondary schools can be seen from an article in *The Furrow* in 1964 by Gerard McConnell. He wrote:

Each year our Irish secondary schools are releasing ten thousand young adult Christians to the nation. What a transforming effect these school-leavers would have in our community if it could be truly said of most of them that they were ardent young Christians, afire with the love of Christ, determined to dedicate their working lives to His service, and to the services of their brothers in our Christian society.³²

It would be inaccurate however to suggest that all secondary schools were characterised by the complementary features of authoritarianism and submissive mediocrity which we have been considering. Even in those schools which were authoritarian moreover, not all pupils followed the path of "averageness". Firstly there were those on whom the religious ethos, or aspects of it, made a profound impression and who displayed little of the "God-fearing" expediency of the majority. Many

of these entered religious life after school, some to reproduce in time the doctrinaire, custodial mentality which governed their own schooling, but some also to raise an increasingly questioning voice about the nature and effects of twentieth century Irish Catholicism. It is also worth noting at this point that the more unquestioningly devout among the lay products of these schools could in no accurate sense be described as quietist. Few are unfamiliar with the vociferous tone characteristic of the pronouncements of various "catholic action" groups on matters of social policy. Even in itself, this should give pause to any who would regard acquiescence as a monolithic phenomenon, or in the same class as docility.

Secondly, at the other extreme from the devout were those pupils who might best be described as habitual dissenters. It cannot be said that these rebellious spirits comprised a large or a homogeneous section of secondary school pupils. In most schools however, their numbers, however small, signified the continual presence of a pronounced, if largely disorganised countercurrent to the prevailing orthodoxy. At a public level this countercurrent manifested itself in periodic efforts to "add life" to the drabness of class, in habitual neglect of homework, in the production of doggerel and graffiti quite unflattering to teachers and to "good-living" fellow pupils, in relentless and often quite exotic tales about experiences with the opposite sex and in many other forms of behaviour disapproved of or forbidden by school authorities. At a private level, this countercurrent was quite another, and indeed less daredevil a matter. The tag of "having a record" not only meant that dissenters were subject to increased surveillance and often hostility from teachers as a whole, it also meant that the affection of important adults (apart perhaps from parents) was dramatically withheld during the turbulent years of adolescence. Thus, in a crucial sense, the cost of independence in attitude was a high one. The loneliness of the rebel who was constitutionally unable to "knuckle under" a curriculum and a pedagogical ethos designed to tame, or alternatively to exclude him, was unlikely to gain a sympathetic understanding among a teaching force which had, for the most part, little grasp of the nature of individual differences. The ranks of the scoundrels moreover included some of the more intellectually adventurous among pupils. The large-scale failure of secondary education to meet the challenge provided by these pupils rarely enough, one suspects, killed imagination. More probably it occasioned in many of the pupils an imaginative development comparable more to the wild sproutings of a jungle than to the fecund richness of a well-tended garden.

We have considered here some of the features of the religious ethos of Irish secondary schools, but what of the *Gaelic* ethos intended for the schools from the foundation of the Free State? In addition to the obligatory status of Irish as a subject for the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations, financial inducements were offered to secondary schools to use Irish as the medium of teaching and as the official language of the school. From the mid thirties to the mid fifties roughly half of all secondary schools availed of these inducements. During the sixties and seventies however this number dwindled dramatically to just over 4 percent of schools in 1978/79, containing about 3 percent of an increased second level population of almost 200,000.³³ Whether these inducements did much to foster a favourable attitude towards Irish language and literature — as distinct from examination success in Irish — is questionable. For most pupils the language was in no sense a vernacular and its associations with the austerity of the school authority and the folklore of examination failure unfortunately made it doubly distasteful to great numbers. It is also doubtful if the official "Gaelic ethos" was ever more than a lukewarm feature of the life in all but a minority of secondary schools. Of this untypical minority, some schools run by Religious orders of Brothers are particularly noteworthy. In any case, so controversial did the issue of "compulsory Irish" become that it was discontinued by Ministerial order in 1973.

Perhaps it would be timely to break off at this point our elucidation of the ethos of Irish secondary schooling and to review in a shorter concluding section some of the most recent trends from a standpoint in thought which is dramatically removed from the more prevalent educational ideologies, both historical and contemporary.

IV

An Apprenticeship for Conversation with Tradition

Although the idea now meets with increasing disenchantment, it is still customary to view formal education, with Plato, as a grand transforming panacea for the ills of humanity. The experience of Irish secondary education which we have just been considering gives one boldness enough to venture the theory that the more potent the prescription envisaged for the educational enterprise, the more likely the enterprise is to founder, or to find a vague, self-steering route of its own. It is very difficult for those with a predominantly partisan disposition to understand the wisdom of Martin Buber's remark on the education of character:

But as soon as my pupils notice that I want to educate their characters I am resisted precisely by those who show most signs of genuine independent character: they will not let themselves be educated, or rather, they do not like the idea that somebody wants to educate them.³⁴

To suggest such a principle as the keynote of educational policy — not merely of the practice of the individual teacher — is perhaps to invite alarm for one's mental balance among the more experienced of the worldly-wise and powerful. The partisan needs the language of crusades and news of fresh battles to be fought, for nowhere, as in the repeated trouncing of the enemy does his sense of mission find fulfillment. That educational discourse has had, historically, a predominantly ideological, or divisive tone can scarcely be denied. That such a tone is singularly inappropriate to any properly disciplined thinking on education is less evident and to many, perhaps, is a surprising, or even an in pertinent suggestion. To clear our argument from any charge of arbitrariness therefore, let us return briefly to Plato and examine how adequate the "crusading" conception (which received a decisive character in Plato's writings) is to Plato's own deeper insights.

In Plato's famous story of the "prisoners" born and reared in a cave, one escaped prisoner, who has experienced the riches of a world illuminated by daylight, attempts, on his return to his fellow cave-dwellers, to move them towards an appreciation of the fruits of his travels. His efforts prove futile however. The ceaseless wranglings of the cave dwellers, illuminated occasionally by a flicker from the cave fire, have for them a formal importance which makes any indulgence of the traveller and his tales a foolishness unworthy of their attentions. When the returned prisoner continues to importune with fraternal appeals that the real issue is elsewhere, he is turned upon by all sides, whose cherished illusions he has persisted in challenging and whose rhetorical contests he has all but subverted. He pays for his indiscretion with his life. This tale of the returned prisoner is a thinly-veiled reference to the fate of Socrates at the hands of the more politically influential in Athenian society. Indeed Plato's grand educational design in the *Republic* was very largely an attempt to rid society of the corrupting influences which led to Socrates' death penalty and to make of society a place where a Socrates would enjoy the respect and honour of all. But here we must pause to reflect on a crucial question: — could Socrates himself, or anybody with a Socratic disposition, submit to the remarkable restrictions on literature, on marriage, on freedom of

expression and on civil liberties more generally, proposed by Plato? The sincerity of Plato's reforming zeal produced an acclaimed classic in educational literature. It is profoundly ironic however that Plato's archetypal masterpiece emphasised so thoroughly the conception of education as a crusading campaign of the good that it unwittingly eclipsed what was most central in the life and work of Socrates. This eclipsed legacy suggests a very different conception of the educational enterprise than the one which displaced it and thence remained paramount in the history of education to our own time. The Socratic suggestion runs along the following lines: there is a form of human intercourse that consciously abjures the lure of dogmatic certainty, particularly that of one's own opinions, and thereby unfolds itself not as a crusade for one or other orthodoxy but rather as a continual questioning and disclosure of ourselves and our world; a form of intercourse moreover, released for a freedom and range of enquiry which only a disciplined apprenticeship in self-knowledge makes possible.

The non-combatant tone here might make many who belong to the "crusading" school of thought wince in disbelief, for surely to renounce one's commitment to the rightness of one's cause is tantamount to renouncing the tradition that one holds dear and which one's forefathers cherished in previous generations. Evidence of this largely understandable reluctance to modify one's standpoint is abundant in the disputes which have periodically marked the history of education (including secondary education) in Ireland. Nor have the changes of the later sixties and the seventies seen a real decline in partisanship. Witness for instance the acrimonious wranglings between the various interest groups for control of the new community schools introduced during the seventies, which were to be the model for future provision of secondary education in Ireland. Witness also the unwillingness of schools in a number of Irish towns to share resources with each other in line with the community school principle. Witness thirdly the arrival of strident new pressure groups on the educational scene, economic and commercial interests being particularly noteworthy in this respect, but university entrance policy representing perhaps the most quietly insistent ideology of all; namely the identification of various levels of scoring ability in the Leaving Certificate with suitability for university education in the various faculties. (The tradition in question here is known as The Preservation of Academic Standards).

The import of the Socratic conception is overlooked however, unless care is taken to understand the educational significance of tradition itself. To

be dominated by a particular tradition and to conceive of education in the light of this domination (which might not of course be experienced as domination) is to lack a standpoint from which one can appreciate the variety of different traditions which makes up tradition itself in the widest sense. Without such a standpoint it is not possible to converse with tradition in such a way that one's understanding of the world, of one's fellow humans and that in virtue of which both man and world *are*, becomes continually deepened and enriched. Thus the word "dialogue", which is often used to describe the work of Socrates, is misunderstood if it is merely thought of as a commitment to continual verbal interchange between individuals. More accurately, and much more profoundly, the word refers to a disposition, difficult to attain, where the conversation of one with another, of teacher with pupil, can attune itself to and respond in a worthy and critical manner to the call made upon it by tradition in its various manifestations. This is not to deny that one might still have a preference for one or other of the traditions encountered in this process. But it is to argue that an unyielding attachment of oneself to one tradition, and to view the rest in the light of this, undermines at once the whole enterprise and may well transform its benefits into defects.

The spirit of partisanship and animosity has been strong indeed in Ireland: not only between north and south, between Catholic and Protestant, but also between the main political parties, between employers and unions, between city and country and not least between teachers and pupils. Some of the more unfortunate effects of the partisan spirit, particularly when in a position of authority, have been considered. In the light of this history, is it still an impertinence to suggest in relation to secondary education that one's adolescent years might most fruitfully be spent in the apprenticeship described in this essay? The disposition engendered in the pupil by such an apprenticeship is fraternal in the best sense, inasmuch as an awareness of oneself as a life-long student is a continual reminder of one's indebtedness to others. Such a disposition moreover, is the very negation of "averageness".

NOTES

1. D.H. Akenson, *A Mirror to Kathleen's Face*. Montreal, McGill Queens Univ. Press 1975.
2. John Coolahan, *Irish Education: its History and Structure*; Dublin, Institute of Public Administration 1981.
3. D.G. Mulcahy, Curriculum and Policy in Irish Post-primary Education. Dublin, Institute of Public Administration 1981.
4. Coolahan, *Irish Education*. p. 74.
5. Investment in Education. Dublin, Stationery Office, 1965.
6. Coolahan, *Irish Education*, p. 205.
7. Mulcahy, *Curriculum and Policy*. p. 51.
8. *Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools*. Dublin, Stationery Office, published annually.
9. Report of the Council of Education: the curriculum of the secondary school. Dublin, Stationery Office 1960.
10. Memo V. 40. Dept. of Education, Technical Branch. Mulcahy gives 1942 as the approximate date of publication of this document.
11. See for instance *Tuairim* pamphlet no. 9 (no date) and *Compass*, journal of the Irish Association for Curriculum Development.
12. *Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools*.
13. Committee on the form and function of the Intermediate Certificate Examination, Final Report (I.C.E.) Dublin, Stationery Office 1975.
14. The full titles of these reports are as follows: First report: *Assessment in History (1974)* J. Heywood. Second report: *Assessment in Mathematics (1976)* J. Heywood. Third report: *PEEP: a progress report (1977)* J. Heywood, S. McGuinness and D. Murphy. Fourth report: *PEEP: the final report (1980)* J. Heywood, S. McGuinness and D. Murphy. All published by the School of Education Trinity College Dublin.
15. In January 1983, the Minister for Education Mrs. G. Hussey, announced her intention to establish an independent Curriculum and Examinations Board on a statutory basis. How comprehensive a change in educational policy is envisaged remains to be seen from the provisions of the act which will establish the statutory Board.
16. James Joyce, "Gas from a burner" in *Poems* Pennyeach. London, Faber 1982. p. 42.
17. J.H. Whyte, *Church and State in Modern Ireland 1923-1979*. Dublin, Gill & MacMillan 1981.

Notes continued on page 213

- Souls in Jung's Psychology* New York, 1950.
15. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Jonathan Cape, New York, 1960, p. 216.
 16. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, Faber, London, 1939, pp. 184-189.
 17. Cf my articles: 'James Joyce, Priest and Poet' *The Crane Bag* 6:1, 1982 and 'The Mind' of James Joyce' *The Irish Mind* ed. Richard Kearney, Wolfhound Press, Dublin 1984.
 18. Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, OUP, 1959, p1..

Notes continued from page 50

18. Although the 1937 Constitution of Ireland granted "special position" to the Catholic Church, was never followed up by anything as formal as a to regulate the conduct of church-state relations.
19. For reports, editorial comment on Church-state relations and extracts from the State Papers see *The Irish Press* and *The Irish Times* of 21 December 1982.
20. J.D. King O.S.A. *Religious Education in Ireland*. Dublin, Fallons 1970. p. 17.
21. Report of Council of Education. p. 88
22. Mulcahy, *Curriculum and Policy*, p. 60.
23. Akenson, *A Mirror to Kathleen's Face*. p. 93.
24. Akenson's remarks are based on an observation of Sean O'Faolain's, in his character study *The Irish*, (Penguin). The complex nature of O'Faolain's argument is lost however in the flippancy of Akenson's tone.
25. Plato, *The Republic*, translated by Desmond Lee. Penguin 1974.
26. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, translated by Barbara Foxley. London, Dent 1974.
27. Coolahan, *Irish Education*. p. 76.
28. Report of Council of Education. p. 80.
29. Coolahan, *Irish Education*. pp. 97-98, and also letter of J M. O'Sullivan, Minister for Education to Dr. Keane, Bishop of Limerick 31 October 1930.
30. Seamus Heaney, "The Ministry of Fear" in *North*. Faber 1975, p. 64. Although this poem is written about a Catholic boy's school in Northern Ireland there is little reason to believe it was untypical of similar schools in the Republic.
31. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford, Blackwell 1973. p. 165.
32. Gerald McConnell, "Religion in Secondary Schools" in *The Furrow*, Sept. 1964. p. 575.
33. Coolahan, *Irish Education*. pp. 224-225.
34. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith. Fontana 1974. p. 133.