

IRISH CULTURAL ACTIVITIES  
CULTURAL AND EDUCATION PAPER

IRISH CULTURAL ACTIVITIES - LONDON

The Problem of Racism

1 Irish children should not drift into a maudling sentimental view of Ireland. Neither should children of Irish parents reject their own identity because of racism and racialist practices in schools and in the wider community. Positive steps should be taken by the host community and ethnic minorities alike to work towards a fairer society that practices as well as preaches equality regardless of race or creed.

Historical Origins in General

2 The Empire and Colonies have gone, but unfortunately there remains much of the Ethno-centric culture of imperialism that gave rise to the flagrant violations of human rights in the Colonies and the suppression of other cultures held to be inferior to that of Western European Culture from the 17th century on. (This is hardly the occasion to discuss post-reformation changes in thinking which allowed the traffic in human lives, known as the slave trade, to service the labour needs of the colonies which, in turn, supplied the growing demands of the era of the industrial revolution and its aftermath.)

Ireland in Particular

3 In Ireland we experienced that suppression of the Irish identity as far back as the 16th/17th centuries when Ireland was conquered by Britain. The sad and tragic history of Anglo-Irish relations that followed is known to most who have studied that history, a history of plunder and exploitation of the land and its inhabitants, the decimation of a language and culture and the imposition - backed by force of an alien language and culture.

Settlers Separate Identities and Cultural Loyalties

4 Ireland was not the only nation to be violated in this way by the Colonialists but whilst other colonies have achieved some measure of freedom and territorial integrity Ireland remains divided - divided geographically but also divided in a more sinister way by separate identities with separate and different loyalties - Irish Nationalist and Catholic along the Irish tradition and the settlers, Protestant, Loyalist, following the English tradition. It is sinister because these separate identities are nurtured and maintained and feed the feuds and rivalries that have littered the streets of Northern Ireland with the maimed and dead and opened a window on this Northern part of Ireland to reveal the legacy of British interference in Irish affairs.

Institutional Racism

This British view of Ireland reflects centuries of attitudes that justified the British presence in the colonies. It poses Britain in the role of a superior power imposing a solution on a very complex situation. Britain is frequently portrayed as the aggrieved party, patient and tolerant suffering insult and

injury by bomb and bullet in an attempt to exert its benign influence on an ungrateful and unwilling population. British Government after Government have treated the initiatives of Dail Eireann with disdain on the basis that Westminster knows best and the myth of the benevolent dictatorship is perpetuated. According to this view the problem is Ireland and not Britain's continued interference in Irish affairs.

This is the backdrop against which we must examine the needs - cultural/educational needs of the Irish in Britain.

### Culture and Education

Firstly, we must look at the idea of culture and attempt some sort of definition. We must also look at the role of education in relation to cultural transmission and generation.

#### Culture:

"That complex whole which includes Knowledge, Belief, Art, Morals, Law, Custom and other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society"

E.B. Taylor (Anthropological D)

One frequently hears the word culture used in the context of Irish culture and I find it worrying to say the least that so many people have such a narrow view of the Irish Cultural Heritage. For some people it would seem that Irish Culture is synonymous with elements of Traditional Irish Folk Culture.

Culture is a much broader concept.

Culture is Transmitted - it constitutes a heritage; it is learned - not a manifestation of man's genetic constitution; it is shared - is a product of and determinant of systems of social human interaction.

Culture is a dynamic field a medium supporting thought through which individual human minds interact with one another in communication. Common Culture is the basis for co-operation between people - we must have a common understanding of the way people think, feel and act. General behaviour, attitudes and values are not taught by any formal training, these are intimately bound up with life in the society and become unconsciously adopted by those fully partaking in the social life.

Cecil Sharp writing about the Folk Culture of the Southern Appalachians said:

"The reason why, though unlettered, these people have acquired so much of the essentials of culture is partly to be attributed ..... to the fact that they have all entered at birth into the full enjoyment of their racial inheritance."

Given our complex society such experiences would be too fragmentary to transmit our cultural heritage which includes the arts and sciences, etc., so we need formal education - an education which whilst catering for the most sophisticated areas of our cultural heritage must also make its contribution to the language, wisdom, manners and graces of life of the various sub-groups in society.

Thus the social life of the classroom must be understood in relation to the social life outside the school and to the needs of the individuals who take part in both.

Culture is passed by the use of symbols especially those systems of symbols called language.

Language and culture are inextricably interwoven (of 'Translations')

The infant learns the language and meanings in the family circle.

At school the teacher conveys experiences which build on the teacher's command of language and the understandings current in his society.

If the children make what the teacher has to offer their own, the teacher's job is done. If they reject it, if there is no universe of discourse between the children and the teacher all sorts of problems arise. Education, the transmission of culture does not take place, at worst the children will become frustrated and begin to resent the teacher in the beginning and then the school and then will begin to re-appraise the whole society of which the education system is part.

The curriculum is a selection of culture which must be seen in relation to the social life of the classroom of which it is the medium and to the background of the culture of our society as a whole. The school must be affected by the 'Curriculum' outside school, by the children's general social experiences and by the media of mass communication. The school curriculum must generate a culture which reflects the lives and thoughts of the pupils.

When we look at the multi-racial society in which we live we can see that the diversity of cultures and languages of minorities is not reflected in the curriculum except in tokenist ways (by and large).

When we look at the many reports commissioned before and after recent social upheavals such as was experienced in Brixton, Toxteth and dare I say it in the streets of Derry and Belfast we are looking at a society that is awakening to the reality and problems caused by racism.

These troubles are amongst other things a reaction to and rejection of the attitude that British white English language culture is superior to the culture of ethnic minorities many of which long pre-date Western European Culture.

It is this refusal to recognise and respect cultural identity and language in our multi-racial society coupled with the presentation of an ethno-centric culture medium with which minorities cannot identify that causes a rejection of the teacher and the school and locates psychological anxieties that sooner or later will burst into some form of violence because it creates crises of identity for minority groups.

Historically it was necessary to denigrate the Irish as treacherous, stupid intractable in order to justify the British occupation of Ireland whilst at the same time covering over the massive exploitation of Ireland in economic terms.

The Irish experience in many respects parallels and mirrors British Colonial Policy in Africa, the Caribbean, India, etc. The justification for imposing British Culture and rule in these places was the belief in the superiority of Christian beliefs and the civilisation of Western European Culture.

An African saying sums it up: "when they (the British) first came they had the bible we had our land. We now have the bible and they have our land"

Racism is ingrained in British institutions since the time of the slave trade. This 'superiority' mentality is only all too evident where colonial settlers dispossessed the native population.

Racism is blatantly practised in Northern Ireland to this day where justice and civil rights have so long been denied the indigenous population.

It is evident in Anglo Irish relations where repeatedly British Governments refuse to take the Government of Ireland proposals for a solution to this interminable Irish problem into serious consideration.

It is evident in the media.

Mass communication creates mass culture.

The words, symbols, and images given to us by the mass communicators are not good tools of discourse and thought because they overdetermine our reactions.

They prejudice us. The techniques of entertainment have side effects namely stereotyped crude culture which constrains people's thinking. In this way the stereotype of the Irish man is perpetuated we presume for political purposes.

Ireland is still in caricature and stereotype.

We note the reluctance of those owning the media and artists working for them to take responsibility for the influences they undoubtedly exert. It is evident in the way the media treat Irish affairs. The Irish joke, etc.. Punch is still alive and well - Ireland is still in caricature and stereotype.

It is evident in the way children of Irish parents feel that it is best to deny or refuse to acknowledge Irish origins because they know little of those origins Irish History and Heritage except what comes through the media.

It is evident in innumerable subtle ways in social life where Irish born prefer to keep a low profile especially during high points and crises in Angle-Irish relations.

It is evident in the attempt to disenfranchise the Irish.

It is evident in the PTA.

It is evident in Northern Ireland where once again British superiority in weapons, maintains this monstrous state of affairs with amongst other paraphernalia of war, the Plastic Bullet.

Institutionalised racism in Britain percolates right down to the grass-roots where even teachers will say of an Irish teacher in a classroom - 'you are not Irish really?'. (They are hoping as it were!) - 'You are not like the others! who are the others? Stereotypes! Yes stereotypes dating back to the stereotypical of the slave trade outside Ireland and the croppies within Ireland. It suits the propaganda machine to perpetuate this image of the Irish in the absence of any real initiative in N. Ireland and it is this stereotype that many children in British schools identify as Irish.

Stereotypes are created to justify the treatment of subject races everywhere not least in Ireland and whilst the Northern Province of Ireland is maintained in its present status the need to perpetuate this stereotype of the Irish persists. The idea persists that the Irish are incompetent, incapable, unwilling to deal with their own affairs. Witness the flow from the ~~Commonwealth~~<sup>land</sup> they will say! And why did the Irish flee their lands we might ask! We know the answer except that it is not presented in history text books as we see it but as the colonialist sees it - insofar that ~~is as~~ it is dealt with at all.

Apart from recent attempts to raise an Irish voice in the multi-culture/multi-ethnic education debate there is no history of the Irish dimension in this current issue.

This whole subject has been almost exclusively discussed in terms of colour - ie racism as it affects Afro-Asian and Caribbean culture.

We wish to broaden this debate to include racism and prejudice as it affects the Irish who are after all the largest ethnic minority in Britain.

Nothing could reinforce the value of the Irish cultural heritage more than to have the language taught in the schools. By giving a place to the Irish language and I repeat that culture and language are inseparable in the curriculum, one enormously enhances the respectability of Irish cultural heritage.

Cultural heritage is essential to Irish identity and it is for that reason that the Irish language should be introduced into the school curriculum. I am not suggesting that everyone should be made to learn Irish, but that it should be acknowledged, that the facilities for teaching it should be there, that other children should respect the native culture of Ireland and the language in particular which is such a distinctive rich and ancient language.

More and more Irish people are looking to their own roots and heritage. There is a demand for Irish studies which includes the language, literature, music, etc. and of course Irish literature is bound up with the language. Irish literary works in the Irish language cannot be translated or will ~~be~~<sup>in</sup> translation become something very different. Literature and language lie at the heart of cultural reciprocity.

### Conclusions

The recommendations of so many Government commissioned reports concerning multi-ethnic education, Bullock, Rampton, Swann, Scarman do not just apply to the Black community as if racism affected them only, it applies to the Irish in Britain also.

✓ The need for open debate on the multi-racial character of our society, the need to reappraise attitudes towards ethnic minorities, the need to provide in-service training for staff (schools) the need to create a curriculum that reflects the cultural identities and languages of minority groups, these needs have as much impact for the Irish in Britain as for other ethnic groups.

Nor should our society feel threatened by the diversity of cultures in the land. If treated with equality and respect this ferment of cultures can only have an enriching effect.

Thus cultural pluralism will rehabilitate white and non-white guest communities and create a medium for inter-ethnic communication and respect.

In schools a primary and most important change must be the self-examination of teachers own attitudes to ethnic minorities. Prejudice is evident not only in the context of what is said but in omitting what should be said.

This is clear for example in the way that the History of Ireland is dealt with or not dealt with.

All children should be taught about how Britain benefitted economically and culturally from her 'association' with Ireland.

Irish History and heritage should not be dealt with a tokenist way in topics for example and must not be confined to centres of high Irish population density. It is as important for children in non-Catholic schools as in Catholic schools to be aware of the cultural identity of the Irish.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Education needs in schools In-service courses for teachers on Irish Studies.

Teacher Training Colleges - Irish Studies option

Third level courses on " " "

Where are the links between academic institutions in Ireland and their counterpart in Britain? Not only do we not have links but qualifications from certain constituent colleges of the National University of Ireland are not recognised in Britain. Why?

Where is the cultural exchange at this level?

Where are the great 'summit' accord recommendations about reciprocity in this area?

It is good to note that many colleges of further education and some polytechnics are featuring courses on Irish Studies largely as a result of the enlightened initiatives of people like <sup>from</sup> ~~Don~~ Gibbons, once begun it is heartening to see the great surge of interest not only from the Irish community in search of roots but from a much wider cross-section of the community eager to reappraise their outlook on Ireland and Irish Heritage. Here we must applaud the efforts of the Poly of North London, in making provision for a 3rd level course in Irish Studies. Sadly the course cannot take place until money is available to fund it.

We would like to see the development and co-ordination of these courses throughout London by the ILEA as development education for students interested in Ireland and Irish heritage.

Language courses should be provided for by the LE Authorities when requested, because language and culture are inseparable.

Music song and dance should be provided for under the provisions of multi-cultural education.

Work needs to be commissioned in this area to develop materials for schools.

We would like to see a Radio/TV programme featuring Traditional music, song and dance which would link up with Traditional music, song and dance of other ethnic groups, including the English folk song and dance tradition.

These separate traditions never meet except in an accidental way and a great opportunity for racial interaction is lost.

Such TV and Radio programmes would be an effective counter-balance to the Irish joke and Irish stereotypes.

(1) Courses/degrees on Irish Studies available as in-service training for teachers and for students in general, interested in Ireland.

(2) Resources (a) Parent Resource Centre - Irish Cultural Centre  
(b) Material resources, e.g., books films, etc.

These materials need to be created in many cases. So work should be commissioned to research and develop books and packs for educational use.

- (c) Lib/Archive
  - (d) Teachers' Centres and Schools should have books and materials available on Irish History and heritage
- (3) Staff
- (a) Material resources officers
  - (b) Advisers for schools

These facilities should be provided in parallel with existing and proposed facilities for other ethnic minorities

(4) Irish cultural centres

The immediate results of these measures would be to reinstate the dignity of the individual with positive and advantageous results in levels of academic attainment for children of Irish parents and give them confidence to take their place in this society.

The long term result would be the improvement in relations between the peoples of our two islands and the real hope of finding common ground and a culture medium acceptable to the separate identities in Northern Ireland.