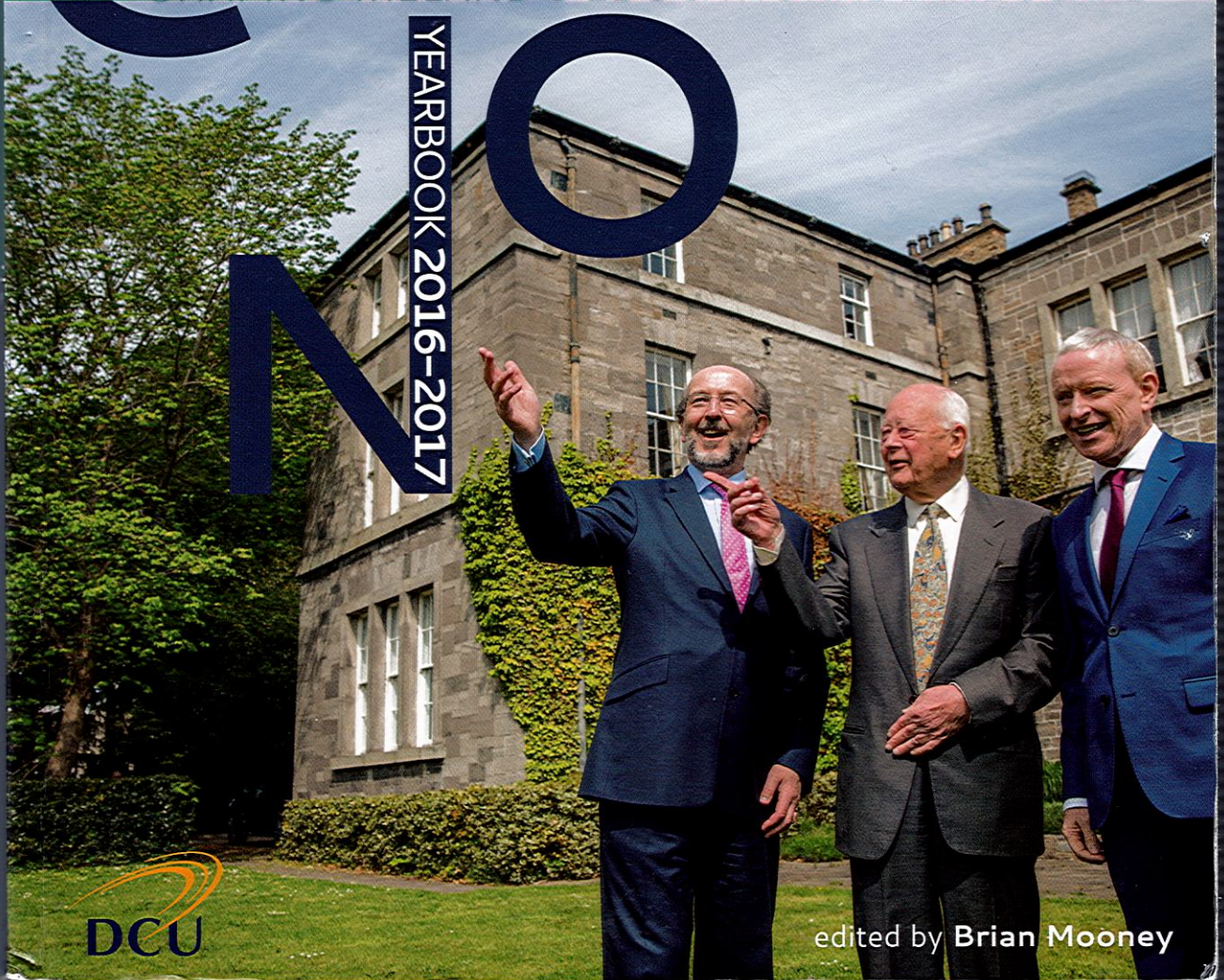EDUCATION

EDUCATION MATTERS

SHAPING IRELAND'S EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

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History and Identity in the Irish primary school classroom in 2016

Why and how we teach history in primary schools: is the subject's potential contribution to citizenship education being fully realised?

Multiculturalism, interculturalism and migration experiences in classrooms are being explored and debated by many educationalists and from a wide variety of perspectives (e.g. Igoa 1995, Dolan 2014). In last year's edition of *Education Matters Yearbook*, Dr Fionnuala Waldron of DCU wrote: "The centenary offers us a once-in-a-generation opportunity to think about why and how we teach history in primary schools and whether its potential contribution to citizenship education is being fully realised" (Waldron 2015). The focus of her article was on the Centenary Programme for Education but her comments are also germane to a wider consideration of the Irish primary school history curriculum as a whole.

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Concept of ethnic identity

Examining the primary school history curriculum from the perspective of an Irish medievalist, it quickly becomes apparent that the concept of ethnic identity is key to a number of its provisions. Within the strand entitled 'Early people and ancient societies', for example, the individual units include nine named 'peoples' in addition to Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Celts and Vikings. (The introductory webpage on the NCCA Curriculum Online website identifies this strand as 'Early people and ancient stories' but the subsequent webpages concur with the printed editions in using the word 'societies'.)

While unlikely to have been controversial when originally formatted, the question which arises now from a twenty-first century perspective is how to define the groups identified as a "people" in a way that is meaningful for students: are they to be seen as communities linked by language, by material or other culture, or by a shared genetic inheritance? Pupils in the classroom are expected to become familiar with the following aspects (among others) of such peoples: origins, homelands, homes of people, food and cooking clothes, cultural or artistic achievements, myths and stories and faith and beliefs.

Again, it is thought-provoking to try and pin down in a clear pedagogic framework how these "peoples"

Dr Swift discusses the tension between Irish identity/culture and multiculturalism in the history curriculum in primary schools and poses important questions about how we define 'Irishness'.

British archaeologists have been arguing since the early 1990s that there is no evidence for a Celtic invasion of these islands and indeed there is no evidence for a Celtic 'people' at all.

If we continue to stress our ancient heritage as a key component in our communal identity, how does that impact on a child whose parents may have settled in Ireland in recent years?

mesh and overlap with modern nation states. The problems involved can be invoked by the simple exercise of asking a student to define the characteristics of the American or Australian "peoples". In the curriculum, these are linked solely to population groups in situ when white migrants arrived such as Native Americans or Maori but most children would probably be accustomed, from their prior experience, to considering the term American or Australian to also include people descended from nineteenth or twentieth-century migrants and energetic adventurers from around the globe. Trying to limit one's teaching of American or Australian culture solely to what might be called First Nation populations seems hardly acceptable and indeed counter-productive.

Similarly, for the earlier 'peoples', professional medievalists are increasingly accustomed to considering groups such as "Vikings" or "Romans" as the product of amalgamations of different communities, encompassing much local variation but to date this discourse has largely remained within professional journals and monographs and has not made an impact on primary school textbooks which still tend to refer to these various 'peoples' as being distinguished by a single uniform style of housing, belief system, origin and homeland.

The Celts
For the founding fathers of the Irish state in 1916 and their predecessors who helped to form their cultural awareness, the original "people" who populated this island were the Celts. Writers such as PJ Joyce, Professor at the Marlborough Street Training College from 1874 and author of one of the major monographs on the subject, wrote:

"The ancient Irish were a branch of the continental Celts: and they brought with them the language, mythology and customs of their original home, all of which, however, became modified in the course of ages after the separation. But the main characteristics were maintained, and a comparison of the native accounts of the ancient Irish people with the classical writers' descriptions of the Continental Celts shows close resemblances in many important particulars" (1913, 24).

This formulation continues to be influential. Reading the Teachers Guidelines provided for Celts, for example, one finds:

"it is an important principle of the curriculum that, at each level, children should experience material from a range of historical periods and in local, national and international contexts. It should also be remembered that the strands are not completely separate sections... work on the Celts might include material from local, national and international contexts and from the strands *Local studies and Life, society, work and culture in the past*" (p.16).

Or again

"The coming of the Normans and the plantations of the 16th and 17th centuries introduced new settlers to the country just as the earlier Celtic, Viking and other migrations had done" (p.22).

However the teaching of such topics at third level is far more controversial today. British archaeologists, in particular, have been arguing since the early 1990s that there is no evidence for a Celtic invasion of these islands and indeed there is no evidence for a Celtic 'people' at all. At least one influential writer to this effect published his views as a direct response to the creation of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly in 1998 (James 1999) and the influence of modern politics in developing this approach has been debated (Megaw & Megaw 1996) but it is proving increasingly influential in Irish archaeological circles and wider afield. For example, Fintan O'Toole's conversion to this Celto-sceptic vision is visible not only in his own writings for the *Irish Times* but in the almost complete omission of Celts and Iron Age materials from the online teaching resources developed by the extremely successful collaboration between himself, the National Museum and the Royal Irish Academy which produced *A History of Ireland in 100 objects* (2013).

Such cultural developments create a disconnect with nineteenth and twentieth-century authors for whom a Celtic 'people' was the key influence in creating Irishness. To quote Joyce again:

"The institutions, arts and customs of ancient Ireland, with few exceptions, grew up from within, almost wholly unaffected by external influence... The first foreigners to appear as invaders were the Danes who began their raids about the beginning of the ninth century. Though they harassed the country for about two centuries, and established themselves in many parts of it, especially on the coasts, they never brought it under subjection: and they effected no changes of any consequence in the customs or modes of life of the people. Next came the Anglo-Normans... but though this was a much more serious invasion than that of the Danes, and though these newcomers continued to make settlements in various parts of the country, the Irish people still adhered everywhere to their native customs" (1913, 1).

Again, given the stress laid on the Irish language as a key determinant of Irish identity by Ministers for Education after 1916 (McManus 2014), Joyce's views have continued to be influential and the notion of Celts, Celtic art and Celtic customs as the formative factor in early Irish society continues to be widely taught.

How can we define 'Irish'?

For teachers working in multicultural classrooms in 2016, however, any formulation of an Irish identity which is inherently dependent on ancient roots poses a number of questions. What messages are we giving children through our teaching of the Celts? Can we, against the backdrop of British Celto-scepticism, continue to refer to an early populating of this island simply as an example of successful and very early migration? If we continue to stress our ancient heritage as a key component in our communal identity, how does that impact on a child whose parents may have settled in Ireland in recent years? Are we implicitly creating the impression that while newcomers may be welcome, they can never be "Irish" in the same way as, say, a child who uses an Irish language surname, even when that surname might be Mac Gearailt or Ó hUiginn, denoting a Norman or Viking heritage?

> It seems clear that we will continue to feel the need for something which marks us out as a single identifiable community, united by a shared citizenship and tradition.

Such names, after all, have as much to do with family history post the Famine as they do with perceived ethnic origins. My own grandfather, as a Waterford man seeking a job in the new state's civil service in the 1920s, adopted the medievally attested Mayo surname of Ó Uadaigh as a translation for what he perceived as a rather too Anglo-Saxon Swift although this can be seen as a negation, not just of our own family background, but of Waterford's important history as a Viking city and international port. So how should we now interpret the traditional elements which go to make up our sense of shared Irish nationality and which are embodied in our current history curriculum as we look forward to the next century of our state's evolution? How much should we simply discard as the unnecessary remnants of an older nineteenth- or twentieth-century nationalism and irrelevant to our contemporary society?

Need for a national identity

And yet, in a world marked by globalisation and an increasing dependence on digital resources which often stem from the wider Anglophone world rather than from within this island, it seems clear that we will continue to feel the need for something which marks us out as a single identifiable community, united by a shared citizenship and tradition. When reading the various Proclamations written by Irish pupils over the last year, it was striking how often the phrases Irish history and Irish heritage appear and how enthusiastically such references are phrased. The proclamation of St Joseph's school, Drumcollogher, Co. Limerick for example reads:

"As a nation we need to rediscover our love for our native culture. We thank the past generations who have preserved our language, music, dance, sports, stories, traditions and heritage. We declare our resolve to keep our unique Irish culture alive and thriving for future generations to enjoy. Through our many great sporting and cultural organisations we can foster a love and appreciation of our culture and traditions and share them with the global community."

'Irish' and inclusive

The challenge which our children have posed us is how should we as educationalists help to create such a shared "Irish" identity as well as a historical narrative of our past that includes us all.

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