

World history has a vital role to play in UK schooling



LES WALTON
COLUMNIST



► What kind of history do youngsters in the 21st Century need to know?

A CRITICAL question today is how we go about choosing what history to teach in our schools.

Whilst battles rage about structures and systems, too often we forget about the importance of what is taught in our schools. Napoleon Bonaparte said 'History is the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon.'

There are serious questions about what sort of history should be passed on to the English of the second decade of the 21st Century. Irish history, the bit of history I studied as a student, was not an agreed part of the English syllabus for most of my career.

At Easter 1966 I sailed to Ireland with around a dozen students. Our arrival coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising in Northern Ireland. We were not sure of our welcome particularly against the backdrop of the Ludlows No. 1 Irish hit 'the sea, oh the sea Long may it stay between England and me.'

We were led by our history tutor Tom Corfe, a Cambridge graduate whose enthusiasm for history continued right up to the end of his life. One of his claims to fame was that he won the Brain of Britain competition. His many books included 'The Phoenix Park Murders', published a couple of years after our visit.

Around 200,000 onlookers and 600 Rising veterans, watched the military parade which commemorated the taking of the Post Office on O'Connell Street in 1916. The armed rebellion, which started on Easter Monday 1916 ended in surrender a week later. About 500 people, including 40 children, died during the Rising. More than 100 British soldiers lost their lives.

President Eamonn De Valera and Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Sean Lemass, addressed a large crowd and took the salute in a military march past.

In 1966 I never really considered the theme of the events as simply celebrating the past. Looking to the future was also important. Sean Lemass even announced that the future descendants of the Rising leaders were the students enrolling in the technical colleges. To me he

was more concerned about shaping contemporary Ireland than living in the past.

A month before we arrived in Dublin, on the morning of March 9, the IRA had blown up Nelson's Column on O'Connell Street. The Dublin City Council had ordered the demolition of the remainder a fortnight later, so none of it was left standing when we arrived.

The explosion accentuated the fear that the IRA would add violence to the celebrations. Violent incidents were, in fact, few and the week of celebrations passed off peacefully.

During our time in Dublin we visited Kilmainham prison. We were taken to the Stonebreaker's Yard where 14 leaders of the Easter Rising were shot. James Connolly, who had been wounded, had to be tied to a chair to support him during his execution. The execution of 16 of the leaders mobilised large swathes of the Irish population behind the campaign for independence from Britain.

Later, as I was examining the bullet holes, still visible on the General Post Office columns, a group of nuns realised I was English. They then suggested we should pray for forgiveness for what the British had done during the Rising. Without doubt we felt anxious about the reaction of people when they discovered we were English. On the other hand, when people found we were studying Irish history they were keen to talk to us and congratulate us for our selection of study.

A couple of months later I was appointed as a history teacher to my first school. The irony was I could not teach Irish history. It was not on the curriculum.

For many years afterwards, as the troubles in Ireland began to develop and people found out about my area of study, I was asked 'what was the

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solution to the Irish situation?' For many years my opening sentence was 'It's complicated'. In 1992 I was invited to Northern Ireland to advise the Lisburn Safer Towns Organisation on how schools can better develop their links with communities.

There had been 88 conflict-related deaths during that year. When I visited the local schools, brilliant headteachers were apologetic about the violence taking place in Belfast and wanted to demonstrate that their schools were doing a good job. When I entered the schools they were havens of calm and learning. When I asked what the solution was to the situation. The answer was - 'it's complicated'.

In 2013 I was asked to facilitate a conference in Sarajevo, ten years after the Third Balkan War. The conference involved delegates from what we would have once called the Eastern Block. There were delegates from Russia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia as well as Russia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan.

One night a Bosnian delegate showed me the bullet holes in the walls of a church in Sarajevo - very similar to the bullet holes in Dublin. When I asked about the causes of the Third Balkan War, his answer was, 'It's complicated'.

History tells us that things are complex. It is the job of history teachers to help learners to understand the complexities of the past, use evidence-based arguments, develop empathy for the position of others and recognise bias in writing and reporting. Simplistic solutions to complex problems rarely work.

I believe there is certainly a case for casting the curriculum more widely than English history, both in order to reflect England's greater diversity today than in the past and because history does not exist purely within a national context.

Studying our own national and local heritage is important, but to not understand the complexities of the history and heritage of other societies is positively dangerous.

■ Les Walton CBE is chair of the Northern Education Trust.