

Some Thoughts on Local History in Schools Post-NIC

By the end of the 1980s and just before the introduction of the National and Northern Ireland Curricula, Local History had gained a reasonable foothold in both primary and post-primary schools.

In post-primary schools it was part of GCSE coursework and many schools began such studies in Forms 1-3 in preparation for the GCSE study. Its format within GCSE owed much to the Schools Council History Around Us Project in that it included a site visit and the critical analysis of sources.

In primary schools the uptake was more patchy. The History Guidelines recommended it and many teachers used it as their main vehicle for the study of history within a curriculum, justifiably, dominated by language and number work. There was also the opportunity in such an approach to carry out a local study that included geography and other subjects within the primary curriculum.

Then along came the NIC. Early publications on the CCTs suggested that Cultural Heritage and EMU were to be important planks in the NIC. Clearly local history could have an important part to play here. Museums, Universities, Training Colleges, etc. were quick to produce resources – see the bibliography *Local History Books of Use to Teachers and Pupils in Schools* – e.g. The Settlers in Ireland Series and Living in 1900 series from Stranmillis College. The Cultural Traditions Group produced directories and so on.

However, the history programmes of study which finally appeared did have some local history in them but not as strongly as they had been before NIC. In post-primary schools local history was relegated to Key Stage 3 and, I think but I'm not sure, was optional. No longer was it a compulsory part of GCSE. In primary schools, whilst the opportunity was there for those who wanted it, many teachers felt they just did not have the time to deliver a local history study. Instead they felt that they had to concentrate on the core elements of the curriculum.

Perhaps one of the main reasons why Local History waned was because of the fact that the preparation of a local history study usually requires a great deal of work searching for and preparing sources. Before NIC, Teachers' Centres and Area Boards were often instrumental in bringing together interested groups of teachers in an area to produce a study that a number of schools could use. With the coming of NIC such groups were more concerned with core elements in the curriculum and Area Boards, charged with supporting NIC, became less interested in local history. In short, only real enthusiasts were likely to persevere with local history in the primary school. Furthermore inspectors were less likely to insist that local studies be done.

I have little hard evidence for the last two paragraphs - they are merely my opinions - not statements of fact. More research is required here. The next few paragraphs are also my opinions.

I think that the development of resources by the training colleges became a substitute for genuine local study. However it was possible for teachers to take these books and look for local examples – and why not - when time was precious. Furthermore, the development of educational programmes in museums such as the Ulster-American Folk Park, Ulster History

Park and The Ulster Folk and Transport Museum added a new dimension to studies of life in the past. Many teachers would have seen a visit to one of these museums as an alternative to a local study. Clearly teachers who combined such a visit with a genuine study of the children's locality provided a fuller experience for their pupils but, I suspect, such teachers were in the minority.

Interestingly, since 1990 Local History, Family History and Genealogy have grown in popularity amongst members of the general public. Arguably the emphasis in PRONI has now shifted to Family History. Many books, pamphlets and articles have been produced on many aspects of local and family history. The Ulster Federation of Local Studies with its journal *Ulster Local Studies* has played a major role in this development.

Academically local history is still a Cinderella subject. Interestingly, a strong school of Local History is developing at NUI Maynooth led by Raymond Gillespie. Local history students of the M.A. course at Maynooth are publishing books and pamphlets in a series called - Maynooth Studies in Irish Local History. Gillespie, with Myrtle Hill, has edited an important book, *Doing Irish: Pursuit and Practice* which offers a rationale for the study of Irish Local History. See also the latest books on sources that have been produced during the 1990s.

Clearly these are just some initial thoughts on Local History Post-NIC. The bibliography should help to show the literature that has been produced not only before the NIC but also the more important works on sources, rationale and practice published more recently.

What will happen with the review of the NIC? Does Local History have a major role to play in Education for Citizenship? Will Citizenship fare better in the new NIC than Cultural Heritage did in the initial NIC? In short, what is the future for Local History in the Post-Review NIC?

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See bibliography - **Local History Books of Use to Teachers and Pupils in Schools** [separate PDF file]