

## **A History of Irish Education.**

Ireland's long tradition of education is reflected in the country's cultural heritage. The bardic schools of pre-Christian Ireland helped to preserve and transmit the history of its earliest inhabitants. This system of learning, secular and oral in nature, involved the memorization of tales and myths and was central in the education of poets (file) and judges (brehons). The great monastic schools such as Clonard and Clonmacnois, which provided the first organized learning based on literacy in Ireland from the fifth century onwards, served as a sanctuary of learning during Europe's Dark Ages and won for Ireland her ancient title of *Insula Sanctorum et Doctorum*, the "Island of Saints and Scholars."

The Reformation ended the monastic system (the monasteries were closed) denying most Catholics access to education. Wealthier Catholics began travelling abroad to Irish colleges, which had been established on the continent. In 1592, \*Trinity College was founded in Dublin to further the growth of Protestantism and English culture in Ireland. Under the \*Penal Laws (1695-1709), the Catholic Church was forbidden from having any role in education. In reaction, a system of \*hedge schools (in open fields or in primitive buildings) developed. Teachers financed by the local population taught a mixture of spelling, reading, arithmetic and religion. During this time, Protestant evangelical groups such as the Baptist Society began establishing schools in an attempt to convert the Catholic population.

The Catholic \*Relief Acts at the end of the eighteenth century allowed the widespread establishment of schools in towns and cities by religious orders such as the \*Christian Brothers. The Kildare Place Society, set up in 1811, provided non-

denominational education and within 20 years had over 137,000 pupils attending its associated schools. In 1831, the government established the National Board of Education to organize a system of state sponsored national primary schools, one of the first of its kind in Europe. The Board had the power to cover the cost of building schools, provide schoolbooks and contribute to teachers' salaries. Catholic and Protestant students were to be educated together for every subject with the exception of religious instruction. Despite these efforts, integration failed and by the late 1860s, most national schools were denominational in nature. The Intermediate Education Act of 1878 introduced a common curriculum and examination system and established a Board of Commissioners to oversee the secondary schools system.

Three "Queen's Colleges" were established in 1845 in Belfast, Cork and Galway in an attempt to undermine the demand for the repeal of the \*Act of Union. These colleges were to be non-religious with no theology faculties. They, however, failed to attract any support from the Catholic population and were labeled "godless" by the Catholic hierarchy who in 1854 established the Catholic University in Dublin. In 1879, the British, in a fresh attempt to solve the university question, dissolved the "Queen's Colleges" and established in their place the Royal University. The Irish Universities Act, 1908, created two separate universities: the National University of Ireland (N.U.I) and Queen's University. (The colleges in Galway, Cork and Dublin became part of the National University and the College in Belfast became Queen's University.) Trinity College remained independent of these changes.

At present, there are four universities in the Republic of Ireland: The N.U.I. (with its constituent universities and colleges—

N.U.I Dublin, N.U.I Cork, N.U.I Galway, N.U.I Maynooth, The Royal College of Surgeons, and the National College of Art and Design); The University of Dublin (\*Trinity College); The University of Limerick; and Dublin City University. Northern Ireland has two universities: Queens University at Belfast and the University of Ulster with campuses in Belfast, Derry, Jordanstown and Coleraine.

In 2000, the total number of students within the three sectors of education in the Irish Republic was approximately 933,444. The Department of Education and Science is responsible for the administration of primary, post primary and special education and directs state and European subsidies for universities and third level colleges. State spending in education in 2000 totaled more than £2.5 billion. Nearly 50% of secondary school graduates advance to college and university level.

Education in Northern Ireland is administered centrally by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland and locally by five Education boards. In 2000, 348,999 students were attending Primary and Secondary education. While the law guarantees that every school is open to all pupils regardless of religious denomination, most Catholics attend schools owned by the Church and financed by public funds, while Protestant children attend State schools. Integrated state schools also exist but they only account for a small percentage of enrolled students. At least 44.3 per cent of students transfer from secondary level to higher education, the highest rate in the United Kingdom.

P Egan

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