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A History of Ireland's School Inspectorate, 1831-2008.

John Coolahan (with Patrick F. O'Donovan)

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(Review by Áine Hyland for Oideas - November 09)

This book is a veritable tour de force – a history of the Irish school inspectorate (primary, intermediate/secondary and technical/vocational) over a period of 175 years – both before and after Independence. No history of Irish education on this scale has previously been attempted – and only John Coolahan could have carried it off so successfully. While a reader might expect a book of over 300 pages to be dense and impenetrable, this is not at all the case. It is an eminently readable and very well structured book. As is appropriate to the way the education system was administered until relatively recently, and in particular the way the inspectorate was organised, the three branches of the inspectorate are treated in separate chapters throughout most of the book. With a different author, this could have resulted in a sense of fragmentation and discontinuity. But Coolahan's easy familiarity with the history of Irish education results in a book in which cross-referencing comes naturally and where links are provided where necessary. It is only in the recent two decades that an integrated inspectorate has finally emerged and the transition is well dealt with in Chapter 16. The more recent re-structuring of the inspectorate is documented in Chapter 17.

There is a wealth of new material throughout the book – the result of original and previously unidentified primary sources analysed by a historian who knows the Irish education scene inside out. This is as true of the chapters relating to the nineteenth century as it is of more recent years – and applies equally to all three branches of the inspectorate. There are parts of the book where the reader would love to engage with a fuller and more detailed treatment of some new material – but this was not possible – given that the book already runs to over 300 pages. Many parts of the book are like a taster menu – the reader goes away wishing for more. In most cases full referencing is provided so that the reader can delve deeper and research the situation in greater detail if he/she so wishes.

Chapters 3, 4 and 8 on the primary school inspectorate, contain a great deal of exciting material, indicating the role played by the inspectorate at times of significant educational change. In chapter 3, the role of the inspectorate in the introduction and implementation of the Payments by Results scheme is charted and discussed and in Chapter 4, the issues associated with the introduction of the Revised Programme of 1900 are analysed. The tensions between Resident Commissioner Starkie (who drafted the Revised Programme of 1900 without reference to the inspectorate) and his Chief Inspectors, which led to the suspension of both chief inspectors - Edmund Downing and Alfred Purser - in 1900 are referred to in this chapter and the implications of the loss of trust between the so-called office staff and the inspectorate was to haunt the system for decades to come. The challenge to the inspectorate in coping with the radical curricular changes introduced by the

New Free State government in 1922 is explored in Chapter 8 and the inspectorate was again marginalised – this time by a political agenda intent on using the education system to achieve nationalist linguistic and cultural objectives. However, within a short few years, the primary inspectorate itself was thoroughly imbued with a nationalist spirit and was arguably the most zealous group within the Irish public service to pursue the revivalist ideals.

Relationships between the inspectors and teachers were somewhat strained for much of the early years of independence. A quotation from the 1947 INTO Plan for Education summarises this well:

On the inspector's side there is only too often a traditional lack of sympathy, so that even the best teachers dread the inspector's visit.... Under the present system, we regret to say, the inspector gives practically no help to the teacher, and the majority of teachers have never got as much as one really helpful suggestion from any inspector. The formal reports are vague, stereotyped and unreal, and though the need for improvement is often alleged the diagnosis is rarely accompanied by a prescription.

By the 1960s, however, the situation had improved, and the primary inspectors were acknowledged leaders within the Irish education system. Chapter 12 documents the role played by the inspectorate in modernising and reforming primary education – its curriculum and structure. The first draft of a White Paper on Education which was prepared by the primary inspectors in the late 1960s led to the introduction of the so-called New Curriculum of 1971 – a radically reformed child-centred curriculum which stood the country well for almost 30 years and the philosophy of which still underpins the primary curriculum. While some of the other recommendations of the 1960s White Paper were to languish for some years, the Paper sowed the seeds for a number of subsequent developments in Irish education – including the development of educational facilities and support for children with special needs and for travellers; the introduction of Boards of Management in the mid 1970s, and ultimately, the diversification of the system with the introduction of Gaelscoileanna and multi-denominational schools. During this period the inspectorate was fortunate to have among its ranks some outstanding visionaries and educators and their role in providing leadership in a changing educational world is recognised in Chapter 12.

The pro-active role of the primary inspectorate and of the vocational/technical inspectors is well documented and contrasts with the more passive role of the secondary inspectorate. The secondary inspectorate is the youngest of the three branches, dating back to the early years of the twentieth century. For most of its existence, it concentrated primarily on the Public Examinations – preparing the examination papers, administering them and correcting or monitoring the marking of the scripts. The secondary inspectors do not appear to have had as strong an influence on policy issues as their primary and vocational counterparts, although there were some periods in the late 1960s and early 1970s when they played an important role in the development and re-structuring of second level education. Their relatively limited influence on policy and administration issues was referred

to by John Harris, adviser to Minister Gemma Hussey in the 1980s and he also pointed to a regrettable gulf which sometimes existed between the inspectorate and the administrative staff. While the inspectorate generally might not have been given as much of a voice in educational reform as they might have deserved or wished for, chapters 12 and 14 show that where individual inspectors showed vision and leadership, they succeeded in influencing and effecting change.

Chapters 10, 14 and 15, on the technical/vocational inspectorate and on the psychological service, are particularly valuable – little has been written to date about these branches. The first technical inspectors were appointed shortly after the passing of the 1900 Technical Instruction Act and all the initial appointees were Englishmen – in contrast to the national school inspectorate where the successful candidates were almost invariably Irish. The role of the technical inspectorate was more varied than that of their secondary/intermediate colleagues, with one inspector reporting in 1908 that his work for the year included “inspection duty, test examinations, visits of inquiry, office work, correspondence, and occasional visits as judge at county shows”. Other duties of the technical inspectorate included such roles as advisors on the design of science laboratories, of new programmes, and reporting on developments in technical instruction.

The chapters relating to the period from 1960 onwards draw on some hitherto unavailable primary sources and throw new light on aspects of educational development in the last twenty years. There is much new material for the initiated and a whole new history for the uninitiated in these chapters. There is an element of a “whistle-stop tour” about these chapters, but the wide-ranging nature of this book precluded a fuller engagement with some of the material. Fortunately however, another recent publication will satisfy some of the reader’s curiosity about some issues which are only briefly alluded to in Coolahan’s history. John Walsh’s book *“The Politics of Expansion: the transformation of educational policy in the Republic of Ireland, 1957-1972”*, published in 2009 by Manchester University Press, analyses the 15 year period in question in considerable depth and provides further insights on some of the issues hinted at in Coolahan’s book. For example, Walsh documents the setting up in 1958 by Minister for Education Jack Lynch of a review of the system of inspection of national school teachers. This review led to the removal in 1959 of the Merit Mark system whereby teachers had been marked for each subject on a scale of marks ranging from Very Satisfactory to Non-Satisfactory. The correspondence between the Minister and the Catholic Bishops about this issue, some of which is reproduced in Walsh’s book, serves as a reminder of the powerful role of the Catholic Church in Irish education throughout the twentieth century.

The author adverts in the later chapters of the book to a lack of debate, discussion or action arising from some key documents which provide the underpinning of this book. He may, however, have underestimated the difficulty faced by some external commentators or researchers in accessing contemporary documents relating to education throughout the

twentieth century. The Department of Education is not noted for its alacrity in transferring its records to the National Archive so that in relation to some key documents or background papers it was not easy to access them, even after the 30 year moratorium period had passed. It was not until the Freedom of Information Act in 1998 that the Department openly released much of the contemporary material which had policy implications. The reluctance of the Department to make available relevant internal material – even to committees and advisory groups set up by government such as the Investment in Education team in the 1960s, the Curriculum and Examinaton Board in the 1980s, or the Educational Disadvantage Committee (2002-2005) has often constrained educational researchers . At various times throughout the twentieth century, relevant background materials were either refused to researchers or advisory groups, citing the Official Secrets Act, or selectively drip-fed. Perhaps this reflected a sense of resentment on the part of the officialdom, including the inspectorate, to perceived intrusion by outsiders on their role? .

The Appendix includes a list, in alphabetical order, of every inspector ever employed in the primary, secondary, vocational and psychological branch. This list of almost 900 inspectors is indicative of the delving and digging carried out by the author when carrying out this study. It is interesting to note that slightly less than 20% of all inspectors were women – and it is not unreasonable to speculate that most of these women are relatively recent appointments. As in other branches of public administration, one notes the shortage of women in senior positions in the inspectorate throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. This is partially explained by the marriage bar which was not lifted for civil servants (including the inspectorate) until 1973. However, there will be no such excuse in the 21st century – when we expect to see women inspectors playing an equal role with their male colleagues in running the educational system. Who knows, Ireland may even have a female Chief Inspector within the next few decades?

This History of Ireland's School Inspectorate documents the major role played by the inspectorate in the development of Irish education over a period of 175 years. It pays tribute to and recognises the significant contribution made by many individual inspectors and it is great to see their contribution to Irish education recorded for posterity. We owe a debt of gratitude (yet again) to the author, John Coolahan, for the comprehensive coverage and masterly analysis of an aspect of Irish education which has been previously neglected.