

# Leaving Certificate History and Tipperary Studies

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A piece of recent anecdotal evidence indicates the distance between the theoretical importance of local studies as indicated in Department of Education & Science (DES) documents and the actual engagement with local history in our schools. A history teacher in a South Tipperary town was heard to say that her Leaving Cert. students could not possibly do a local study because there were no sources available. When it was explained that apart from any other material, an annual journal exclusively devoted to the history of the county had been published for the past twenty years (at least 4,000 pages of material), the teacher appeared unaware and certainly had never looked at an issue, much less purchased one for herself or her school library.

Readers will probably be surprised to learn that most schools in Tipperary do not subscribe to this journal, notwithstanding the curriculum imperative to use local material. The publication of *Finding Tipperary* by the County Library calls attention to the richness of sources available, casting light on all aspects of the county's history and heritage.<sup>1</sup> The writers of this article, one from North, the other from South Tipperary, who between them have over sixty years experience teaching history and many years writing it, are not unaware of the irony that some of their colleagues at whom this article is aimed, will not read it because they will be unaware of it. However, it is hoped that with the opening of a new Tipperary Studies Library, centrally located in the county, in Thurles; the publication of *Finding Tipperary* and now this article aimed specifically at Leaving Cert. history teachers and their students, the situation will improve.

In 2006 a new Leaving Certificate history syllabus was examined for the first time. One-fifth of the marks are available for a 'research study' which is now compulsory and which is completed and submitted in essay form some months before the summer examination. According to the syllabus:

The subject chosen is to be of historical significance. A wide range of possibilities is envisaged, including local history and historiographical studies. The subject chosen should not be obscure or trivial. It should be based on information that may be readily authenticated. Looking at the official guidelines about the research study, one might think that there had been a loss of nerve on the part of those creating this new syllabus. All the points made about the research study's value to the student would have been best served by some kind of a local study in which use of at least one primary source was likely. Instead of students having to learn about genuine historical sources touching on places, events and people shaping their own identity, they are allowed the possibility, not so much of 'Raiders of the Lost Ark' as 'Raiders of the Suspect Source.com'.

While figures are not available about the uptake of local topics in the 2006 examination, Padraic Harvey of the State Examinations Commission has noted that most candidates chose mainstream topics from national or international history but that local studies were invariably at Higher Level and generally of excellent quality. Leaving Certificate students study a range of topics in modern history, including pre-Famine Ireland, the Famine, O'Connell, Fenians, Elections, Landlords and Tenants, Home Rule, Churches, Republicanism, the GAA, Gaelic League, War of Independence, Civil War, Building the New State, the Emergency, Emigration, Protectionism to Free Trade. Many more could be added to this list but the point is that it seems odd (to put the matter no stronger) that these topics are studied with little or no reference to their own county. As Kevin McCarthy of the history inspectorate notes: 'Tipperary has been a central cog in much of what has happened in modern Irish history, from the Young Irelanders and Plan of Campaign through to the War of Independence and beyond.'<sup>2</sup>

There are two practical reasons why students should consider local topics for their research study. Firstly, examiners would surely be relieved if there was a rest from students picking over the remains of the Nazis or Michael Collins and instead looked at Blueshirt activity or the impact of the IRA in their own region. It is not likely that examiners will read anything that is new to them in mainstream topics (if they do, they should not). However, a well researched essay on Blueshirt activity in North Tipperary or the IRA in Thurles in 1920 is very likely to enlighten the examiner. Secondly, students are likely to get greater satisfaction from researching and writing a local topic because of their closer identity with the people and places involved. This can only promote 'active citizenship' which is an essential part of the revised history syllabus.

As *Finding Tipperary* makes clear, any student researching a Tipperary topic should visit the Thurles research library, not least because this is part of the process (research) towards getting a product (essay) and on writing it up, marks will be awarded. Before beginning a Tipperary based research project or more precisely when giving the matter early thoughts, a student's first step should be to look at *Finding Tipperary*, a reference work that will allow the student do exactly that, find *his* or *her* Tipperary. Every school in the county will of course have a copy.

While not essential, the library should be contacted beforehand to confirm opening hours and the availability of microfilm readers. Thurles has a comprehensive collection of Tipperary newspapers and no matter what the topic is in modern history, newspapers will be a valuable source so long as the student has specific dates. Thurles also has copies of the witness statements from individuals all over the county who took part in the War of Independence. These were taken decades ago and are fascinating accounts of IRA activities in all parts of the county. As a source these statements, balanced against contemporary newspaper or other accounts of episodes or incidents in the war, provide ideal research material.

The history syllabus with respect to 'Later Modern Ireland' (taken by most students) is divided into six broad topics. What follows is an illustrative sample of the kinds of research projects Tipperary students could undertake. While numerous sources could be given with regard to each project, this sample confines itself to three, all available in Thurles and with respect to more popular and recent items, available much more widely.

## Topic One: Ireland and the Union, 1815-1870

### \* *O'Connell and the Repeal Campaign: 'Monster' Meetings*

Such a meeting took place in Cashel on 23 May 1843 with the Rock as historic backdrop. Alternatively, students from North Tipperary could choose the 'monster' meeting held on Grange Hill outside Nenagh two days after the Cashel meeting.

The following sources would be useful. Any of the many biographies of O'Connell; newspaper coverage of the meetings, both nationalist and unionist; the relevant volume of the O'Connell Correspondence.

In such a study the student could look at the following issues: why those particular locations, did they have practical and historical significance? What role did O'Connell play? How was his objective demonstrated in his keynote speech? Who were the other speakers? What role did the clergy play? What numbers attended and where did they come from? Was the meeting reported differently in the nationalist (*Tipperary Free Press*) and unionist press (*Tipperary Constitution/Nenagh Guardian*)? Did folklore about the meetings survive and how does it accord with contemporary reports?

### \* *An aspect of the Famine in any one of the Poor Law Unions in Tipperary*

The student should decide on a very narrow focus. Simply telling the story of the Famine in an area is too diffuse. For example, the student could look at how one of the relief efforts such as local fund-raising, work schemes or outdoor relief worked. Other aspects of the topic might include the pre-Famine workhouse or disease and death in the Union during the Famine.

Tipperary Studies has a huge range of material including records of the PLUs. A secondary source about the Famine in the district in question (between them the writers of this article have written about most of the PLUs in the county); a look at a volume of PLU minutes of meetings over a period of a few weeks; some information from one of the eight volumes of parliamentary papers on the Famine.

### \* *The Cormack Brothers: Memory & Reputation*

Executed in 1858 for an agrarian murder and reinterred in their native place in 1910, the student could look at how and why they have been remembered. This topic rather than just retelling the story of the event is the best option.

Sources include N. Murphy, *Guilty or Innocent? The Cormack Brothers – trial, execution and exhumation* (Relay, Nenagh, 1997); evidence from the 1930s Folklore Collection, gathered by primary schoolchildren and material from schools in the area probably refers to the case; File TL/A/7 containing newscuttings and much else.

## Topic Two: Movements for Political and Social Reform, 1870-1914

### \* *The GAA in Tipperary and the threat from the IRB.*

This would be an interesting way of looking at the early years of the Association where the focus is not on club histories, much less match results but on the battle for control of the organization. It is an obvious Tipperary topic and advantage can be taken of the large amount of published material available.

Sources include M. de Búrca's various books; S Ó Riain, *Maurice Davin First President of the GAA* (Dublin, n.d.); W.F. Mandle, *The GAA & Irish Nationalist Politics 1884-1924* (Dublin, 1987); local press reports of key Thurles meetings.

*\*Landlords and their Tenants*

This is a topic offering the student a wide choice in a county at the heart of the land struggle. As with all research projects, the focus should be narrow. 'The Land War in Tipperary' is not an option, whereas 'Ballycohey and the 1870 Land Act' is.

The wide range of parish histories, especially the three volumes about Moyne-Templetuohy and the volume on Monsea & Killodiernan, have information on this topic. Parish history (if it is available) for the part of the county in which the student is interested, is the best starting place. The local press will have extensive coverage of episodes and incidents from boycotting and evictions to murders. The county's most famous contribution to the Land War, the building of New Tipperary, has plenty of sources. *Tipperary Historical Journal* and *Boherlahan-Dualla Historical Journal* have published a great deal of material about landlords and tenants.

*\* The Irish Volunteers in a particular town or district in Tipperary*

Most places had units of Volunteers by early 1914. A student could explore what happened between the unit being established, the split over the Great War, reaction to 1916 and the impact of the conscription crisis or indeed just one of these topics.

The local press reported Volunteer activities, especially arrests for drilling; Bureau of Military History witness statements contain first-hand information; there is a good deal of secondary material on the Volunteers in the county, not least in *Tipperary Historical Journal*.

**Topic Three: The Pursuit of sovereignty and the impact of partition, 1912-1949**

Events in the county between 1918 and 1923 offer students tremendous scope for research. What follows is no more than an indication of that scope.

*\* Dan Breen and changing versions of Soloheadbeg*

Every history student in the country studying Topic Three will deal with the ambush at Soloheadbeg. For students from the county, it is an obvious research area. Students should do more than just tell the story of what happened. The research project suggested here might appeal to more enthusiastic history students.

Over his long lifetime, Dan Breen one of the chief participants gave varying accounts of this seminal event with marked changes of emphasis. *My Fight for Irish Freedom*, Breen's first-hand account was published in 1924 and is still in print. Ghosted by Kitty O'Doherty, it gives the most popular view of the episode. Breen's witness statements to the Military History Bureau are available in *Tipperary Studies*, Thurles. Here he states that the purpose of the ambush was to kill the two policemen. There is also an interview with Breen from 1967 in *THJ* (1998). Apart from these three Breen sources, Soloheadbeg is described and discussed in many other books and articles. The episode received extensive newspaper coverage.

*\*Some aspect of the War of Independence related to a specific part of the county, such as an ambush or a look at reaction to the Blacks and Tans in a particular town*

Over twenty years *THJ* has published a great deal of material, much of it first-hand. Also, of Thurles interest is the evidence of the chair of the UDC to an American commission gathering information about conditions on the ground in Ireland. This could be supplemented by newspaper accounts and witness statements from Thurles IRA.

In the Nenagh area, the Modreeny Ambush of 2 June 1921 would make an interesting topic, particularly if placed in the wider context of military and political activity in the country at large. Sources include the Gaynor Memoirs and an article by the late Canon E.J. Whyte in *Cloughjordan Heritage 4* (1996).

#### *\* 1918 General Election*

In two of the four Tipperary constituencies (Tipperary South & Tipperary East), the 1918 general election was contested. The local press gave wide coverage. The *Nationalist Centenary Supplement* has interesting material. Taking one of these constituencies, a student could find out about the candidates, look at the issues as reported in speeches, identify who supported whom and explain the outcome.

### **Other Research Areas**

With increasing emphasis on women's history, there are many avenues of exploration with respect to the lives of women in Tipperary. The relevant section in *Finding Tipperary* points in a variety of directions. An obvious topic is the Women's Land League in the county. A student could look at the situation in a number of towns, mainly using the local press, together with a general source like Anna Parnell's *The Tale of a Great Sham*. With names of leading ladies identified, something of their background might be gleaned from the 1901 Census.

Remarkable individuals like Anna Doyle Wheeler or Aleen Cust could be the focus of biographical studies; not the details of their lives but what they had to overcome. A student with a liking for Jane Austen would appreciate the diary of Dorothea Herbert and could use the diary as a primary source for insights to female expectations, courtship, family, community.

For all students there are advantages about researching an individual life, so long as more than a potted biography emerges. Michael Doheny, Charles Kickham, John O'Leary, John Sadleir, Bracken father and or son, William Butler – all very well known Tipperary people who left their imprint and regarding whom there are plenty of sources. William Butler: Victorian soldier and Home Rule supporter, was involved in the founding of the Mounties in Canada, was on hand to assault the Ashanti culture in West Africa, put down nationalism in Egypt, tried to save Gordon in Khartoum and got into trouble in South Africa – enough adventures for a host of topics. Sources are plentiful and include an autobiography and two biographies.

### **Conclusion**

The research topic element of the Leaving Certificate history course is intended to allow students a taste of the pleasure of the subject, not learning information from a text book, as important as this is but actually engaging in research, however limited, however guided,

however narrowly focused. It seems beyond argument that Tipperary history students should have the option of choosing a Tipperary topic for their research project but this will hardly happen without input from their teachers, who may not be from the county or who may have little knowledge or interest in the history close to home. To again quote Kevin McCarthy: 'Working with local history can help students to see the relevance of national events to their own places and to their own lives.' A student should pick a research topic that interests him or her. The purpose of this article is simply to point out what the history of the county has to offer in the hope that history teachers will present it to their students as an option.

#### References

<sup>1</sup>D.G. Marnane & M. Guinan Darmody, *Finding Tipperary: a Guide to the Resources of the Tipperary Studies Department, Tipperary County Library, Thurles, County Tipperary* (Thurles, 2006).

<sup>2</sup>Our thanks to Kevin McCarthy (a Waterford man and co-author of a history of Cappoquin) for his help.