**Ár dTír Féin: What Every Irish Person Should Know?[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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I recently found in our attic some well-used primary school textbooks from the 1950s. Among them was Ó Duirinne’s *Tír na hÉireann: Leabhar ar Ṫir-eolas ár dTíre féin (The Country of Ireland: A Book on the Geography* *of our own Country).* Its first sentence asks the reader to look at a map of Europe where you see two islands beyond the mainland. The smallest and furthest out is Ireland - “*ár dtír féin*”(p. 5). It states that there is no land that would get in the way of ships going back and forth to America across the busiest trade route in the world (sic). The key phrase is “*ár dtír féin*”. This school book in Irish was part of a remarkable project of nation-building with its strong self-images and national pride. Following the disastrous Economic War of the 1930s and the World War of the 1940s it was time to build “*ár dtír féin*”.

While some were learning about Ireland (including the route to America!) others were not really learning a great deal in this bi-lingual world of 1950s catholic national schools. A view of Ireland as an independent confident nation with its own language and culture was in contrast to the economic reality of many others. From this era we inherited high levels of emigration, unemployment and low levels of literacy.

During the following decades a great deal of educational energy was expended supporting economic development including free education, the innovative Institutes of Technology sector and high levels of third level participation. It came as a shock to the system when the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) produced empirical evidence of low literacy levels (Morgan, et al., 1997). There were 500,000 people unable to read the instructions on a box of Asprin.

Literacy is still a priority on courses in further education (FE) and is an important piece of the learning landscape as Ireland continues to plot its development as an economy. It is widely taken for granted in discussions about literacy that it involves an ability to read and write a range of typical and functional texts.

Literacy in adult education has a broader definition. It is understood as the ability to engage in contextualized debates and read in ways that are more than functional and focussed on the requirements of a job. Reading may involve understanding the way society is structured and organized. This reading involves being able to understand that behind “common sense” ways of seeing the world there are more critical and layered meanings. The ability to ask questions, especially about how power is exercised, is an example of what is called reading the world (thinking of Paulo Freire here). One can read or understand global warming in a way that might lead one to think of actions that one might take as an individual, as a community or as a society. This is a form of literacy.

This kind of literacy is not just a matter of decoding the string of letters in a word or the meanings of words in a sentence. It is a matter of decoding context. It is about the matrix of things referred to in a text and things implied by it. For example take this sentence about the Land League: “it was a struggle for farming land in 19th century Ireland and was about security of tenure and fixed rents”. Literacy is more than the ability to read or understand this set of facts and more than knowing about Michael Davitt. It is also the ability to extrapolate and contextualise the nature of land ownership then and now. Why are rents on property so high today? What are the consequences of this? If banks and government and landlords are at the centre of power why are so many homeless today? Are 19th century evictions connected (or not) to current homelessness?

Many other questions about who we are today might be explored. Travellers, disability, inequality, democracy, a republic, Brexit, climate change could be studied. Literacy of this kind might be described as a form of “social infrastructure” that needs to be at the front of all education and given a priority in public policy and all publically funded education and training.

We could ask, following a current debate in the United States (Liu, 2019), what does every Irish person need to know? As yet, we have no idea what knowledge or literacies are required to be an Irish citizen. What knowledge is necessary in order to have the appropriate “social infrastructure” required for a healthy, thriving, egalitarian society? Why build an economy and not a nation?

How many people could quote any part of the Easter Proclamation of 1916? It says:

We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland…

The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all of the children of the nation equally….

We have no idea in Ireland what literacy is required in order to lift us above an economy to become a Republic, a democracy, a society that works as hard for human rights and worker’s rights and freedom as it does for the economy. Who we are and who we will be is a task that requires, as it always did, literate and critical citizens. We will not Google our way to this.

At least the school textbooks of the 1950 had a version of Irish identity. We hardly noticed its hidden curriculum and we can be critical of that too. The current (not so) hidden curriculum is to draw a line around knowledge and literacies that are functional and useful for an economy, and in its focus on training, it ignores education. In the context of lifelong learning and a national jobs strategy it might be a really worthwhile goal to include broader social learning goals. As a result a competitive economy may be a healthy, fulfilling and equal society and it may indeed contribute to becoming “*ár dtír féin*” – our own country!

Liu, E. (July 3, 2015). What every American should know. *The Atlantic*. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/what-every-american-should-know/397334/>

Morgan, M., Hickey, B., & Kellaghan, T. (1997). *Report to the Minister for Education on the International Adult Literacy Survey: Results for Ireland*. Drumcondra, Dublin: St. Patrick’s College.

Ó Duirinne, S. (n.d.). *Tír na hÉireann: Leabhar ar dṪir-eolas ár dTíre féin* Edited by An Seaḃac (The Hawk). Dublin: Cóṁluċt Oideachais na hÉireann.

1. In A. Lajoie, G. Irvine & S. Cohen (Eds.).  Ensuring Good Future Jobs: A collection of essays (pp. 56-59). Dublin: Think-tank for Action on Social Change and Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)