

## **GEOGRAPHY TEXTBOOKS IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND, 1973-1993**

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the content of primary school geography textbooks in the Republic of Ireland for the period 1973 to 1993. The impact which the new primary school curriculum had on the content of texts is assessed and the manner in which the revised guidelines of the mid-1980s were mediated by textbooks is evaluated. In general, the authors of geography texts rose to the challenges which resulted from the qualitative and quantitative changes that occurred in geography as a subject. They demonstrated that geography is primarily concerned with the relationship between people and their environment and openly and consistently stated that their main function is to assist in the inculcation of caring attitudes towards the environment.

The impact of the new primary school curriculum was arguably more pronounced on geography than it was on many other subjects. Prior to its introduction, geography had become associated primarily with the learning by rote (in Irish) of the names of rivers, mountains, industries, towns, and cities of Ireland. Texts emphasized the recall of facts and figures. The opening comment in the curriculum handbook in the module on geography which stated that 'Geography is mainly concerned with the relationship between people and the environment in which they live' (Ireland. Department of Education, 1971, p.133) represented a dramatic departure from this approach. The value of investigation and observation as a source of geographical knowledge was stressed, and it was stated that discovery methods should play a prominent role in geographical activities.

However, in a revealing comment which is often neglected by the critics of the methodology advocated by the primary school curriculum, it is argued that 'over-reliance on the discovery method alone may limit drastically the over-all result' (Ireland. Department of Education, 1971, p.134). The attitude in the curriculum handbook to textbooks was that they were intended as a supplement to the work of the teacher, but that over-dependence on them would 'stultify a

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teacher's whole approach to geographical activity' (p 297) Six topics are suggested for third and fourth standards the weather, animals, crops, products, map interpretation, a study of the pupils' home county, an introduction to a study of Ireland, and an introduction to other lands (pp 143-144) The six topics recommended for fifth and sixth classes are the weather, local geography, Ireland, Great Britain, Europe, the World, the globe, and power, fuel and transport (pp 159-160) In certain respects, it can be argued that the guidance with regard to curricular content that is contained in the curriculum handbook is minimal, but this may be ascribed to a desire to allow teachers as much freedom as possible in the choice of content

#### TEXTBOOKS IN THE 1970s

All of the texts which were published after the introduction of the new primary school curriculum bear testimony to its influence to a certain extent, but there are disparities in the level of adherence to its recommendations For example, *Exploring Geography 1* places the entire emphasis on the geography of Ireland and contains a combination of themes and sample studies set in the different regions of the country (Hall, 1975) *Unfolding Geography 1* concentrates on the child's immediate environment, examines the changes which occur during the four seasons, and introduces geographical concepts such as maps, the weather, and the causes of rainfall (Hurley, 1973) *Enjoying Geography 1* abandons the regional approach to the geography of Ireland, makes the work activities an integral aspect of each chapter and not an after-thought, and emphasizes the belief that geography is about people (Dillon, 1973) While *Enjoying Geography 1* contains a small amount of material relating to the physical and political geography of Ireland, the predominant theme is the relationship between people and the environment in which they live The various activities which are suggested, such as finding directions and making weather charts and maps, are used to highlight this fact As an example of the emphasis on learning by doing, the chapter entitled 'My County' does not contain any narrative Rather, pupils are asked to collect photographs for a scrapbook and to find out for themselves the answers to questions relating to the names of towns, rivers, mountains, factories, the crops which are grown in the county, and the animals which farmers in the county rear When the perspective broadens from Ireland to elsewhere, other countries are referred to as 'our neighbours' and each section is introduced with headings such as 'A Visit to Norway,' 'A Visit to the Amazon,' 'A Visit to Japan' 'A Visit to Germany,' 'A Visit to Australia,' and 'A Visit to Canada' which emphasize the concept of visiting friends in each country

In *Exploring Geography 1* (Hall, 1975), *Enjoying Geography 2* (Dillon, 1974), *Primary Geography 2* (McGillicuddy, 1978), and *Primary Geography 3* (McGillicuddy, 1979), considerable space is devoted to farming as an industry and to the quality of life in the countryside. While the texts of previous eras tended to portray idealized, romanticized descriptions of life on the farm, in the case of the four new texts, the verdict on farming as a way of life is somewhat less fulsome. In a series of chapters which deal with life on various types of farm, some of McGillicuddy's youthful characters have no doubts about their love of farming. However, one boy, while he likes living in the country, is not too enamoured of 'the long hours that have to be worked each day, seven days a week, in all types of weather' (McGillicuddy, 1979, p.60).

The texts do not ascribe the same level of prominence in terms of chapters to living in towns or cities as they do to farming and the countryside, but they do display less signs of the ruralism which was in evidence in texts of previous eras. Dillon (1974) asks pupils to compare the advantages and disadvantages of living on a farm with the advantages and disadvantages of living in a town and suggests that they should think about means of overcoming some of the disadvantages. The texts still display a tendency, however, to think in terms of the growth of towns as either a problem or as something that had been achieved at the expense of rural areas, giving the impression that people were forced out of the countryside. This is illustrated by McGillicuddy (1979) when he examines the impact which migration has had on rural areas, and he expresses satisfaction that this trend had been reversed in recent years as a result of the increased use of cars, the building of factories in small towns, the increased prices for farm produce as a result of EEC entry, the provision of houses in rural villages by various organizations, and the 'less desirable effects of urban growth such as higher crime rates' (pp.199-120). It is arguable that comparable prominence should be ascribed to the positive aspects of living in towns such as proximity to neighbours, sporting facilities, schools, hospitals, and shops, and that consideration be given to the fact that, in many cases, people make a conscious decision with regard to where they wish to live.

The thematic approach of the books for middle grades with an emphasis on learning by doing is not continued to the same extent in texts for the senior grades. To some extent, there is a tendency to revert to the stereotypical treatment of the old texts. In certain respects, the error of history texts may have been replicated by undertaking too much and by apparently forgetting that geography was a compulsory subject for a further three years in post-primary school. In *Primary Geography 4*, the amount of narrative increased appreciably, and out of a total of 26 chapters, 13 were devoted to aspects of European geography,

three related to North America, two to South America, two were concerned with Africa, two with life in Australia, while one described life in Asia and another described life in the USSR (McGillicuddy, 1981) In *Enjoying Geography 3*, there are chapters devoted to aspects of the geography of each continent with Europe being allocated the greatest proportion of chapters and there are also individual chapters which deal with aspects of climatic geography and topics such as the formation of oil and coal, earthquakes and volcanoes, communication, the distribution of population, and world problems such as the incidence of hunger, disease, and war (Dillon, 1975) This level of content appears to represent a return to the encyclopaedism of previous eras and to be motivated by a possible fear that if pupils do not encounter the geography of every continent while they are in primary school, they may never learn it

The transient nature of some of the subject matter with which geography is concerned is demonstrated by the speed with which information becomes obsolete For example, the one chapter in *Primary Geography 2* which discusses life in a factory is devoted to the chipboard factory in Scarriff County Clare, and the question which is posed at the end of the chapter is the sadly prophetic 'What might happen if the factory closed down?' (McGillicuddy, 1978, p 39) It is clear that geography texts must undergo revisions at frequent intervals if they are to remain up-to-date

Generally, however, the texts of the 1970s achieved much of what they set out to do They emphasized that geography was concerned with the relationship between people and their environment and they reduced appreciably the litanies of facts with which students of previous eras had to contend However, there appeared to have been a perception that a reduction in the amount of knowledge in the texts constituted a weakness, and in 1977, *Focus on Geography* was published (Burns, 1977) In the introduction to this series, it is stated that 'a body of essential knowledge is presented to the student in a meaningful and interesting manner' and that the exercises at the end of each chapter were a 'blend of memory work, expressions of opinions and further research' (Burns, 1986, p 5) This represents a shift in emphasis from the 'child-centred' geography texts of the early 1970s and it is made clear from the outset that the pupil will be learning (as distinct from finding out) many things about Ireland

#### TEXTBOOKS IN THE 1980s

In the mid-1980s, developments which occurred in geography as a subject lent urgency to the task of producing new texts because many of the issues on which geography had focused attention such as development education, the

causes of famine, conservation of the environment, and urban redevelopment became sources of much more widespread concern. In addition to the growth of geography as a subject in qualitative as well as quantitative terms, there were also numerous curriculum developments with regard to the teaching of it. The Department of Education published guidelines for geography texts in which it suggested that it was necessary for authors to be aware of the need to cater for mixed-ability teaching and to ensure that the readability levels of the texts related adequately to the needs of the pupils for whom they were intended. The guidelines reiterated the value of enquiry-based methods, the central position of the school locality, and placed much emphasis on the necessity for authors to be aware of the part that geography played in bridging the gap between the natural sciences and the humanities (Ireland. Department of Education, 1986, p.3).

In the first of the *Worldwise* (Hourihan & Ó Loingsigh, 1988) and *Four Corners* texts (Ó Baoill & Ó Maolagáin, 1989), there is a striking similarity between the methodology adopted and that of history texts. Topics are examined thematically, plentiful use is made of colour photographs and other illustrative material, and discovery-based learning is encouraged by giving pupils the opportunity to respond to cuttings from newspapers and extracts of reports from other media. There are differences between the two series in terms of readability, with the amount of narrative and the level of demand in the senior texts in the *Worldwise* series being greater than the level in *Four Corners*; these factors have been addressed in the revised edition of *Worldwise 3* published in 1993.

The flexibility which the Department of Education allowed with regard to choice of content means that there are some differences between the two series with regard to the topics which they have chosen, but a comparison between the tables of contents of the two series will demonstrate that these are not great. Both texts for third class place an emphasis on the local environment, the seasons, services to the home, transport, and milk, but *Four Corners 1* also includes a small amount of national geography and there is a description of a trip to France (Ó Baoill & Ó Maolagáin, 1989). In the final chapter of *Worldwise 1*, the concepts of the interdependence of nations is introduced by referring to the goods that we buy and sell (Hourihane & Ó Loingsigh, 1988).

The texts for fourth class are mainly concerned with broadening the focus from the local environment to the geography of Ireland, and there are references to particular products that are produced in Japan, the United States of America, India, Asia, and Brazil (Hernon, 1989; Hourihane & Ó Loingsigh, 1989a). The texts for fifth class examine aspects of the geography of Ireland in detail and there is an introduction to the geography of Europe and of Great Britain. The texts for sixth class are concerned with a broad spectrum of themes such as

Pollution, Communications, the Forests and the World, Changing Patterns of Industry, the Children of the World, Getting the Balance Right, and the World Family. Unlike texts in English and history, where the inculcation of values if addressed at all, was approached in an oblique fashion, the authors of the geography texts articulated unequivocal positions on the functions of the texts with regard to the values and attitudes that they hoped to foster in pupils. This is illustrated by Hernon's comments in the Introduction to *Four Corners 4*:

The Four Corners series of textbooks aim at being a geography of understanding in which pupils gain a sound appreciation of the interaction of people with their environment. A caring attitude to living things and an appreciation of the beauty of nature is also encouraged whenever possible (Hernon, 1991, p 4)

Hourihane and Ó Loingsigh (1991) were equally explicit in propounding the philosophy and value position which underpinned *Worldwise*. They outlined a list of 13 attitudes which they hoped that the texts would inculcate, and they stated that they wished to ensure that pupils would develop 'the ability to formulate well-balanced and coherent attitudes and values'

With such an overt position being adopted at the outset with regard to the inculcation of values, an expectation is created that the opinions expressed on environmental issues will be forthright and that there will be a level of certainty with regard to the adoption of positions. For example, the message with regard to nuclear power is clear-cut as far as Hernon (1991) is concerned:

Nuclear power stations provide large amounts of energy, but waste materials from these plants provide a very dangerous pollutant called radiation. Scientists believe that even small amounts of radiation cause cancer and are harmful to health in many other ways. A large amount of radiation, when released into the atmosphere, causes terrible destruction to people and the environment (pp 51-2)

Hourihane and Ó Loingsigh (1989b) share this perspective and do not engage in any philosophical jousting with regard to the concept of the lesser or greater evil when they refer to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as 'a dreadful example of the awful and senseless energy of nuclear weapons' (p 29)

The threat which pollution poses to the environment pervades each one of the texts, and this can be illustrated by the consistency with which the message on pollution is articulated. In *Four Corners 1*, there is an acknowledgement of the usefulness of cars, trucks, vans, and other vehicles, but there is also equivocation:

They can cause problems. Fumes or smoke from vehicles pollute the air. This means they make it dirty. Our environment, or the world around us, is polluted by them (O Baoill & O Maolagáin, 1989, p 71)



In *Worldwise 2*, the message is reiterated with regard to the marine environment when it is asserted that 'we owe it to coming generations to hand on to them a clean and unpolluted marine environment' (Hourihane & Ó Maolagáin, 1989a, p.82) and in *Worldwise 3*, the comment is made that 'if we pollute them [the seas] to such an extent that life cannot survive in them, future generations will blame us for our carelessness' (Hourihane & Ó Loingsigh, 1989b, p.85). A similar judgment is applied to this generation's responsibilities with regard to endangered species.

It seems a shame. It has taken all these millions of years for the animals of our world to evolve (develop). Some people, without even thinking, can destroy them.... The future of many animals depends especially on the way they are treated by people.... It would be terribly sad if any creatures like these disappeared forever from our world. (Hourihane & Ó Loingsigh, 1989a, pp.140-42)

In addition to these comments with regard to the measures which should be taken to conserve fish stocks, to avoid pollution and to preserve endangered species, there is also an unequivocal message to the developed countries that until they put their own houses in order, they have no moral right to lecture other countries with regard to the environment.

Developed countries should not lecture developing countries like Brazil about how they should treat the environment. Instead, they should lead by example and offer terms of trade which are fair. People in Amazonia must be helped, with financial aid if necessary, to realise that our world is one vast environment. Its future belongs to us all. (Hourihane & Ó Loingsigh, 1990, p.59)

The themes of collective responsibility for the environment and of the transient nature of each generation pervade the geography texts, and there is an insistence that since each generation does not own the environment, it is not entitled to destroy it.

Like all great cities, Dublin lives by day and night. It has a long history which includes some happenings of great pride and others of deep sorrow. Like all of the world we live in, we should treat this great old city with respect and dignity. We are the world's custodians, not its owners. (Hourihane & Ó Loingsigh, 1989b, p.61)

The reference to Dublin as a 'great city' demonstrates a much more positive interpretation of the relationship between urban and rural Ireland than was evident in the geography texts of previous eras, and there is an emphasis on the interdependence of rural and urban Ireland. Farmers depend on the consumer to buy their produce (Hourihane & Ó Loingsigh, 1989b), and 'urban dwellers

depend very much on those who live in the countryside because it is here that most of our food is produced' (Hourihane & O Loingsigh, 1990, p 36) The cities and towns are presented as possessing facilities and services which everybody can share, and similarly, the countryside is portrayed as a beautiful resource for city people to enjoy

The level of importance which is ascribed to environmental issues has already been demonstrated, but prominent coverage is also given to the preservation of the cultural heritage In *Worldwise 3*, it is argued that a balance must be achieved between the impulse for modernization and the preservation of the traditions of a country, and that some of the developments in Spain are examples of modernization that have been to the detriment of the older parts of the country (Hourihane & Ó Loingsigh, 1989b) These sentiments are reiterated in a chapter that describes the scenery and the population of the Gaeltacht The cultural value of the Irish language is clearly recognized with the emphatic statement that it 'expresses thoughts and ideas that have been important to the Irish people down through the centuries' (Hourihane & O Loingsigh, 1989b p 95) and there is an expression of satisfaction that many of the traditions of times past such as story telling, Irish music and singing 'are not a thing of the past' (Hourihane & O Loingsigh, 1989b, p 95)

The use of a thematic approach means that less prominence is devoted to political geography as traditionally defined but topics in political geography, such as the counties of Ireland and the concept of international borders, are addressed in a more imaginative fashion than was the case in texts of previous eras In *Worldwise 2*, the concept of pride in one's native county is first discussed, then there are references to different accents, local newspapers, and local songs which make each county special for its inhabitants and a brief history is given of the manner in which the counties evolved as entities There is an account of the work of a county council in one of the less heralded counties (Laois) The county registration letters for motor vehicles, the county crests, and a political map of Ireland are outlined, and pupils are asked to locate a certain amount of information for themselves (Hourihane & Ó Loingsigh 1989a) The approach of *Four Corners* to this topic also emphasizes giving pupils the opportunity to find out information for themselves In the chapter in *Worldwise 4* in which international boundaries are discussed, the sentiments expressed leave very little room for doubt with regard to the authors' own attitudes to the system of government which prevailed in Eastern Europe prior to the events of 1989

The Iron Curtain divided people from each other and became a boundary within minds as well as being a physical division It remained so until 1989 when, because of the foresight and inspiration of President Mikhail



Gorbachev, the people of Eastern European countries broke free.... It was one of the most marvellous examples of how the human spirit cannot be enslaved by tyrants and can eventually overcome very many obstacles to freedom. (Hourihane & Ó Loingsigh, 1990, p.155)

This quotation shows the consistency and openness with which value positions were articulated throughout this particular series. This approach is arguably preferable to the method where there is a pretence of neutrality and attempts are made to inculcate values covertly. It has been suggested by Hourihane (in a personal communication) that it would be unacceptable for a professional geographer to have done otherwise in view of the value-based nature of geography which has been evident over the past decade or so.

#### CONCLUSION

In the teachers' guide to the *Worldwise* series, geography has been somewhat wryly defined as being what geographers do, and it is argued that the subject has consistently demonstrated an ability to identify areas in which it can make a contribution to society (Hourihane & Ó Loingsigh, 1991, p.8). Many of the topics in which geographers had specific expertise also became matters of world-wide concern during the 1980s, a fact that contributed greatly to the enhanced status of geography as a subject. As a result, geography in the Irish primary school is almost unrecognizable in content, scope, and methodology from the traditional perception of it as a subject that required pupils to learn by rote the names of rivers, mountains, towns, and cities. The involvement of professional geographers in the writing of geography textbooks has meant that the authors are proactive as distinct from simply adhering to the various sets of guidelines which have been produced by the Department of Education during the past 20 years. This was borne out by the close correlation between the content and methodological approach of *Worldwise* and the subsequent recommendations of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum (1990). For example, *Worldwise 3 and 4* contain chapters in which aspects of the geology of Ireland are examined, while the Review Body recommended that 'appropriate attention should be given to basic geological information as a component of physical geography' (p.57).

This involvement of professional geographers and the altered perspective on geography as a subject have demonstrated that geography today is indeed concerned primarily with the relationship between people and their environment. Furthermore, the scale of environmental concern ranges from the local through the national to the global. A variety of environments is examined and clearly not

all enjoy the same access to wealth and privilege. This logically brings with it questions of equity, justice, and responsibilities. Such concerns and their treatment in texts for primary school children indicate the value-based nature of geography. The authors of the new textbooks have endorsed this approach by consistently and openly stating that their main function is to assist in the inculcation of caring attitudes and values towards an environment, of which each generation is simply the guardian.

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