A LOOK AT IRISH EDUCATION

Of course the utterly wrong way in which to begin an essaie on such a strait-jacketed subject as "education" is with an apologia. But with Hibernian determination to start from the back end, let me begin -- with an apologia.

I went to Ireland in 1962 -- not for the first time -- hoping to earn my living in a profession I had chosen here in New York: teaching at the secondary level. I spent a year studying for the Higher Diploma in Education at University College Dublin. As part of the course I taught five English classes a week at a girls' day school conducted by religious. Since about 120 students took the same course, I met and spoke with many potential secondary teachers. Later, during my probationary year, I taught English and Latin in a girls' school for both day students and boarders, also conducted by an order of nuns. And then I spent six months (until January, 1965) in a day school, co-ed, under lay auspices, in the West.

Since my return, queries have been many; the questions range from the precise to the nebulous, from the merely curious to the disarmingly anxious; some were surprisingly naive: Aren't the schools good? or (from Irish-born Yanks mainly) Aren't they better than the American ones?

So allow me to take a few pages to structure an answer, with a nod in the direction of the statistics-oriented, for my opinions are based mainly on experience and observation, on hearsay and conversation, and that web of opinion may be more meaningful than a set of numbers.

Organization

The former Minister for Education, Dr. P. J. Hillery, has been quoted as saying," ...I am beginning to think that there is something seriously wrong with a system of which the public defenders could, if asked to stand up and be counted, be done so by a pre-kindergarten child." A brief overview of the physical framework of the educational system might help to put the problems to which Dr. Hillery refers obliquely in focus.

The British genius for organization had provided for three different educational streams. To these were added a board of commissioners to handle endowed schools and one to deal with reformatory and industrial schools. When the Provisional Government took over in 1922, it was necessary for the stability of operations to maintain many of the already existing offices: the five educational areas were retained. Primary, secondary and endowed schools were placed under the Minister of Education, the reformatory and industrial schools under Local Government, the technical schools under Agriculture. Two years later the Free State's Department of Education was established and all five (as well as some cultural institutions) came under its jurisdiction. Eventually the endowed schools became or were combined with private ones: the industrial (the inglorious adolescent poorhouses) became unnecessary.

The responsibilities of the present Department of Education, then, are administered in three areas, each with its own offices in Dublin, emphasizing the autonomy each exercises. They were brought under the Board's control to facilitate continuity: one cannot suddenly abolish a system which has evolved, merely to answer periodic needs -- but systems can be "streamlined." The three had little in common, really, except that they received part of their financing (by direct means or indirect) from the Government, and that none had Government-appointed staff or Government-administered curricula.

Changes in the inherited primary system between 1922 and 1926 were minimal, and involved only those essential for a new national government. In the curriculum, the number of subjects was limited and emphasis was placed on the language, history and geography of Ireland. Infant classes were to be taught through the medium of Irish. Management of the school was to be continued on a local basis.