

Michael Davies

reflection questions & episode transcript

In a typical year, Corrymeela’s meeting rooms — and dining and welcome areas — are filled with people discussing matters of politics, history and religion that have separated them. During this time of Covid, we are providing you with a transcript of each podcast episode, along with some discussion questions, to aid your consideration of the themes which emerge. You may wish to discuss these questions with friends, family, a group you establish on zoom, or use them for your own writing and consideration.

In group discussions at Corrymeela, we seek to locate political and religious points of view within the story of the person speaking. If you’re gathering as a group, consider how to create a sense of connectedness within the group. It might help to choose one of the [Very Short Story Questions](#). As with any group process, if you are talking about this episode with others, make sure to check that people feel safe enough, that the time is right for them, and make it easy for anyone who wishes to keep their considerations to themselves, or for anyone who doesn’t wish to join such a conversation.

1. Michael Davies points out that ‘history is constructed, and it’s often constructed for a purpose’. What history did you learn in your schooling? What history didn’t you learn in your schooling? What do you imagine were some of the purposes behind the historical narratives you were taught?
2. Michael Davies talks about the ‘magic’ that can happen when a person finds themselves convinced by each of two opposing political/historical points of view. Have you experienced this? Or sought it out? What has it been like to seek other points of view when considering the histories of Britishness, Irishness or other national identities?
3. Michael Davies highlights the fact that the focus of religious education tends to be on the practice of faith rather than on its historical/political/cultural contexts. How much opportunity have you had to study religion through these lenses? What might the benefits and disadvantages be of considering religion in this way?

You can [find out more about Parallel Histories on their website: parallelhistories.org.uk](http://parallelhistories.org.uk)

The Corrymeela Podcast. Interview with Michael Davies. Transcript.

Welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast. My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama. In the first year of Brexit, and a century after the partition of Ireland, I'm in conversation with special guests, exploring contemporary Irishness and Britishness through the lenses of history, politics, art and theology.

My guest this week is Michael Davies, a lifelong educator with a love of history, and in particular, the way it's taught to young people.

Michael's the founder of Parallel Histories, and he tells me about the lack of resources on Irish history in British curricula, and the nature of history itself as a tool of national myth:

"History is constructed, and it's often constructed for a purpose; with a particular view in mind, a particular message to get across, a particular moral authority to establish, you know, or a sense of victimhood..."

"They knew absolutely nothing. They always came in with an almost blank slate when it came to Irish history..."

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Hello, my name is Pádraig Ó Tuama, and you're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. With me today is Michael Davies, the founder of Parallel Histories, which aims to educate young people and teachers in tackling contentious history through competing narratives. Michael, thanks very much for joining us.

Michael Davies:

It's very nice to be here.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Just as we start, where are you talking to us from Michael?

Michael Davies:

I'm in Edinburgh, just on the edge of New Town. And if you occasionally get a rumble in the background it's because there's a new tram extension being built past my flat.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Lovely. I've been on that tram many times- it's a fantastic service. Have you lived in Edinburgh a long time?

Michael Davies:

No, I lived in the northwest of the UK for nearly 20 years when I was teaching. And I've lived in Ireland for a bit. I've lived in the United States for a bit... I'm sort of really- no long term fixed abode.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Michael, you've had a varied career taking in public relations and management consultancy. But it was your years as a teacher, really, that seemed to lead you to set up Parallel Histories. How did that come about?

Michael Davies:

What I'd realised as a teacher was that when I took school trips to Dublin and Belfast, and the students got to meet with people who had so embraced their own historical narrative that they were prepared to commit horrible acts and bear the consequences, that this had an enormous impact on the students in seeing history when it was actually being lived. I mean it wasn't a very positive version of history being lived. But it was showing them just how important history was to a sense of identity. And, you know, it sounds a little bit like I'm looking at the problem through a microscope, like you know- what would be a useful teaching resource here? But it was a bit more than that; it had a profound effect on these students in terms of how they viewed their own identity as well. So I kind of thought: wow, this is, this is a really potent experience.

And then I did a trip to Israel and the West Bank, which was sort of like going to Northern Ireland, except cubed. You know, their heads were absolutely reeling after Yad Vashem and then talking to Israelis about the security problems; then going to the other side and playing football in a refugee camp etc. with the Palestinians there. It was a real... It was like taking their heads off and shaking- shaking their heads around, and then putting them back on again. And they came back really changed and I thought: wow, you know, how could I...? I can't replicate this experience for everybody. But how could I put some of this magic into a bottle and make it available for everybody? And that was the beginning of Parallel Histories.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And what is that magic? Is it kind of seeing the impact of the way you think politically? Or like, what- how would you define what that magic is that you're trying to give across through Parallel Histories?

Michael Davies:

I think it's... I'm going to say it in a sort of fairly bland way and then I'm going to explain why you know, the way that you do it can be a bit magical. So the fairly bland way to explain it is that you teach people that there are two sides. There are two sides to conflict. You also teach them that- and I'm going to quote here an Israeli Professor called Hillel Cohen, who once said to me: 'there are only two types of people in the world. There are the people who realise that history is constructed by men...' (or women, you know) '...and then there are the people who don't'. He said that those are the two types. So you also realise that history is constructed. And it's often constructed for a purpose; with a particular view in mind, a particular message to get across, a particular moral authority to establish, you know, or a sense of victimhood: you realise that. So those are the sort of- those are the pedagogical outcomes.

But the magic comes when you expose somebody to one narrative- they buy into one narrative. They believe one narrative, they're sort of convinced by that, they think that they have all the arguments, and then you take them to the other side. And they see all the other arguments, and the other evidence that's been put together and they think: 'but I used to think that the side that I was learning about was totally right. But now I'm embracing this side. And I can see

that they have perfectly good arguments and evidence too. Wow! What should I believe?’ And that's where the magic comes in.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I was curious as to whether some of this is rooted in your own story. You know- I read that you had witnessed the aftermath of the burning of Bombay Street in Belfast in 1969, when you were a child yourself. And you've said that this has been formative... What did you see? And, you know, did it have an effect on you? And how do you think that that effect has worked itself out in your own life?

Michael Davies:

My father was a Welsh Baptist. My mother was an Irish Catholic. And we moved to Northern Ireland- I was born in England...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

An interspecies marriage!

Michael Davies:

D’you know, it's funny: in England in the ‘60s, I don't think... I mean, OK, English people have always been pretty unaware of what's going on in Ireland. And even if they're occasionally made aware, they forget very fast as well. I mean, look at what we've just had with Brexit. But in the ‘60s, I think English people were very unaware of what was happening in Northern Ireland. So when my parents moved us there, they had no idea that it would be such a problem having a mixed marriage. And of course, the first problem that they got was schooling. It was difficult for me to go to the Catholic school - local Catholic school - because I was English. And it was difficult for me to go to the local Protestant school because I was a Catholic. And that experience, I think, made me a bit suspicious of identity, you know, of labels; made me suspicious of labels even as an early child because this was explained to me.

I have a couple of memories. One was when my dad- he had a funny idea of what a Sunday afternoon drive should look like. But he took us - myself, my twin sister, my older sister - he took us to see the aftermath of that night's rioting (so this would have been a Sunday- a Sunday late morning). And we were living in Lisburn, and we drove up- I don't think the new motorway had been opened yet. So anyway, so we drove up into West Belfast, and I remember we sort of got out of the car and we walked to the end of Bombay street and I watched this- I think it was a coal lorry, you know, an old flatbed coal lorry, was outside a terraced house and the family were just removing their possessions and just putting them on the back of the lorry. And I said, I asked my dad: why, you know, what are they doing? And he said: well, I think they want to move out of the area because it's been, you know, it's been dangerous. And he could see- you could see the bricks on the road and the broken windows and things and, and there were some of the houses had been- they were sort of blackened around the windows, etc. And that, yes, that was... I watched these kids sort of loading their possessions just pretty willy-nilly onto the back of this lorry. And it was something I've never forgotten.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I can imagine that that would stay with you for a long time. And it's so interesting that the work of your life - a) as an educator and b) as somebody that looks at histories through parallel narratives - there does seem to be a kind of-

certainly a conversation between the child you and then the adult you. Did you stay in Lisburn for a long time, or how many more years did your family stay there?

Michael Davies:

We were there for four years. And we moved back to the UK in 1970, I think very much [because of] the pressure from my mother; my mother was born in County Wicklow and she was brought up you know- she's an Irish Catholic, who like many Irish Catholics in the '50s ended up emigrating to the UK for work, etc. So she felt a lot more comfortable living in the UK - or living in England - married to her Protestant husband than she did living in Northern Ireland, where life was always... I guess it was always a negotiation.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Coming back to Parallel Histories, you know, you've looked at the history curriculum in Northern Ireland and the way that it's taught, and you've made some observations about what Catholic schools choose to study, and what state schools - ostensibly Protestant schools - choose to study. What did you find in your observations?

Michael Davies:

So, Northern Ireland has a different history curriculum at GCSE from other parts of the UK. And there is a compulsory section on Northern Irish history. And when you study that, you're allowed as a school to choose between whether or not you study the first half of the 20th century of Northern Irish history, or basically the second half of the 20th century. And guess what? Catholic schools - 90% of Catholic schools - choose to study the module which deals with the second half of the 20th century, which starts I think in 1963 or 4 or something. And so for them what they're studying is ... characterised in terms of civil rights. It's '68, it's what's happening with Martin Luther King, etc. and this is a story of a Catholic minority - who've been oppressed - campaigning and asserting their rights for simple things like 'one man one vote'. And, yes, the story changes, it goes violent; but in the end, peace is achieved, and their rights are won. So it's a story which if you're, if you're a Catholic - I'm not saying there aren't uncomfortable moments in it - but if you're a Catholic, it's a broadly- it's a good story to tell.

Most of the Protestant schools... The phenomena isn't quite so extreme in that there are more Protestant schools teaching the later period, but the majority of the Protestant schools - over 65% of the non-selective, the non-grammar schools in the non-Catholic sector - they deal with the first half. And the first half, of course, allows you to present yourself in terms of what was done in the First World War. And in particular, Ulster's role in the Second World War: you know the Blitz, the Belfast Blitz; the role that the province played in confronting the greatest evil of our time- Nazi Germany etc. There's an implicit comparison with what was happening in the South, where DeValera was the only head of a European state to go and sign the condolences book in the German Embassy on the death of Hitler. So if you're Protestant, and you feel strongly Protestant and proud of a Protestant identity, then that first half of the 20th century is much more comfortable for you to study. And that's what we discovered.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

So it sounds in a certain way that you're hoping that people can study history that makes them uncomfortable, when it comes to some of the identities that they're carrying. And obviously, as you were saying, identity is problematic - because of course, it's not singular - but even with some of the ones we have, they're fluid, they're not fixed, either.

Michael Davies:

What struck me about this study- and by the way, this study was conducted as a kind of school project. So I got together two sets of sixth forms in two different schools in England, who were- and the sixth formers were interested; I think it was schools were shut at the time, they were interested in the project. And so they simply trawled through every website - every school website in Northern Ireland - and collected the data. And then I checked it with some overall aggregated data from the CCEA- the examinations body. And it all checked out, and then I told *The Guardian* about it and I wrote up an article about it. Anyway, so none of this is secret. And what was extraordinary to me is that nobody, nobody pointed it out before. There was one buried reference I found in some academic literature, which said something mild, like: 'anecdotal evidence suggests that there may be a disposition amongst Catholic schools to study the later period'. But you know, 'but nobody knows'. And so I think part of the negative reaction that we got when we published the research was a kind of anger from the educational establishment at having these sort of outsiders come in and point out something that everybody kind of knew, but didn't want to acknowledge.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I suppose something that I find really interesting in this... Like, when I look at the history curriculum in Germany, for instance, Germany these days is at an enviable stage when it comes to its history curriculum, and the discomfiting experiences that people are put through by looking at their- Germany's recent history. I do know it took time to get there, it wasn't like this curriculum was put in quickly; there was a number of generations really before such a demanding and sometimes fairly brutal self examination could come through through a history project. And certainly here, you know, Corrymeela has had a long history of collaborating with Facing History and Ourselves. And I think of organisations like community relations in schools and the Spirit of Enniskillen and - you know - [the] Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and Department of Education and teachers everywhere who are doing this kind of subtle work working within their schools doing fascinating and challenging things. What do you think is some of the resistance in the public narrative about the way we do history to some of the subtleties that are already happening, through various teachers and departments and organisations already, here? Why do you think people are so resistant to be public about: this is what we're going to do - this is what we're *doing* - and this is what we need to continue to do.

Michael Davies:

Well, there's a structural problem, which is the way that education is organised in Northern Ireland. It's organised along religious lines. I also then think there is a political problem in that the- I'm pointing out the blindingly obvious here...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah, no, please- thank you!

Michael Davies:

And you know, that the politics are organised on sectarian lines - not completely - but, you know- it's different in Northern Ireland. And at the same time, when you point that out to people, they get very cross, still. It's almost as though the peace process has sort of, you know, entered this kind of stasis. It's not going anywhere, it's just more like a sharing out of spoils, and everybody's stuck. And what we - in our very small way - came in was [we] had a, you know, good old stir of the pot, and encountered the resistance from an educational establishment who very much sort of took the attitude: don't come in here and create trouble. Whereas what we were trying to do was say - well hold up a mirror, in a way - and say: look, maybe your concerns in 2007, you know, when basically, religion gets written out of the

history curriculum in Northern Ireland (I'm exaggerating a bit, but not that much)... So maybe your concerns in 2007 were legitimate then, but this is 2020. There've been two complete generations of school children through secondary school since then, and maybe now is the time to reconsider it. Maybe now, you know, 20 years on or so there's- we've had relative peace, and maybe this younger generation of students are now more able and willing to face up to the history of their identity.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I can hear you saying that there's: a) relative increased safety and b) a need for relative increased urgency to pay attention to stuff that can be examined without so much threat.

Michael Davies:

I think so. I mean, look, I don't live in Northern Ireland, and I- it's not for me to tell Northern Irish people what to do. But I would suggest that... Put it this way: when I've talked to the older generation- people in their mid-40s and older. To me, they have a very different attitude about facing up to the sectarian nature of the conflict than the younger people, or the people I talked to in their early 20s. It's very different. The people I talked to in their early 20s are saying: yeah, let's call a spade a spade. I mean, the most commonly used GCSE History book in Northern Ireland almost completely papers over the fact that the dispute in Northern Ireland is sectarian. The word 'Protestant' does not appear in the index. Everything is couched in terms of politics and nothing couched in terms of sectarian identity. And yet, if anything, if anything we've learned over the last five/six/ten years [it's] that actually identity politics trumps everything else. You know, identity politics is really important. And we need to face up to the role that history plays in underlining, defining and propagating identity.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I'm curious about history education across the water in England, Scotland and Wales. A person I know from England who did History A Levels and then a degree in History, kind of summed up their experience of History for A Levels as 'Tudors and the Nazis'. I'm curious if you think that that's accurate. And then I think one of the things that we've seen - certainly in the last number of years - has been what seems to be a relative lack of any information at all on behalf of people who've gone through History in England about the impact of Britain on the island of Ireland. Do you think that's accurate? And do you think that that's had [an] impact in terms of the way the last ten years have spanned out, as you think about Brexit?

Michael Davies:

Yes, I do. In the school that I taught at, we deliberately picked the Anglo-Irish relationship to teach at A Level, and that went from 1770 through to 1922. What struck me when I was teaching this to bright, interested students - age 16 or so, I mean they picked A Level History - was that they knew absolutely nothing. And this is 2000-2018. They always came in with an almost blank slate when it came to Irish history. And I was teaching in Lancaster, which is where the Birmingham bombers were framed. The court was in the Lancaster Castle. They were taken off the ferry - off the Heysham ferry - which is, you know, three miles down the road. When I used to- I used to walk into school, and I'd go down a little alley next to the railway. And there was a bit of graffiti that says: 'Don't let the hunger strikers starve to death shoot them instead'. Which always struck me as being interesting. So I think it's from the time that the- well, there's a strong military presence in Lancaster - or there used to be - there was some barracks there, etc. And there's a

couple of Lancaster Regiments. So I think, you know, that was back from the '80s. And the graffiti was still there. So there was sort of- it had meant something back in the past, but it didn't mean anything now...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And what do you think the impact of, perhaps a lack of knowledge about some even broad historical facts about Britain and Ireland, and Britain's involvement in Ireland; what do you think the impact of that has been on the general populace when it comes to the last ten years, and matters to do with voting on Brexit and the impact of that in Ireland?

Michael Davies:

Well, I forget who it was who said it, but it's much quoted that if, you know, 'if you don't know your history you are condemned to repeat it'. And the Brexit vote was (partly) because Britain had forgotten already about the Good Friday Agreement and the promises it had made about the border. Partly that; I think also - I hope I'm not being unfair to British voters - but as well as unknowing there was maybe also uncaring as well, in that there's this sense: why on earth would we let this small problem- why let the tail wag the dog?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Do you think that that's a broader question too regarding imperial history in terms of people in Britain, and their knowledge of imperial history? And I suppose particularly I'm thinking, white people in Britain; I think lots of people who've come from the Commonwealth would know certain parts of imperial history from their own family's narrative, but for people whose families have been in Britain for a very long time- do you think that there is an importance in learning about imperial history in terms of Britain's place in the world and the shape of the world since the 1600s?

Michael Davies:

Yes, I do- you have to understand where you come from; you have to understand it's part of what being- part of what a British identity is and, and also part of what a post-imperial identity is. You know, is it Dean Acheson: 'Lost an empire and they don't have a role yet'. So I think Britain is still confused about what being- Britons are confused about what being British means. It still gets conflated with English. I think it was one of the first- it was Disraeli - you know, Conservative Prime Minister - he rarely talked about the British Empire; he used to talk about the English Empire. And it was - in the same tradition - Margaret Thatcher said she was a proud *English* nationalist; and there still is, you know- I can't help but thinking of Brexit as being a project based on English nationalism. And not being able to analyse and dissect what British identity means has caused this confusion.

I'd have a more general response to your question about- should people study their past? Which is: absolutely yes. You know, it always struck- you made that interesting point about Germany, who [have] been so emancipated by their defeat, in a way - by their complete defeat in 1945 - [that] it allowed them eventually to really face what had happened. And because of that process, they've become [in] many ways a society which is very admirable. And if you compare that say with Austria... I remember crossing the border from Germany to Austria, going to Vienna, and they had a big display along the top of the government building. I think- I can't remember what they were trying to commemorate. But I remember what it said, it said: 'Austria, the first victim of the Nazis'. You know, like, who were they... who are they kidding? you know, no wonder, if that's what they still are telling themselves in school - that they were the victims of the Nazis rather than actually being rather encouraging of Anschluss - then they're always going to be labouring under the burden of not actually having faced up honestly to the past. All states - particularly new states - have a vested

interest in burnishing up a national myth, you know, a foundation myth, which they keep burnished and very very special and untouched. And then after about 50 years/40 years/50 years, historians come in and start to sort of poke holes in it, and you get, you know, you get some revisionism. And that's a sign of a society becoming more mature, and able to, to accept that not everything was- not everything was all roses in the past.

Corrymeela is Ireland's oldest peace and reconciliation organisation. Working with thousands of people a year, Corrymeela supports groups to deepen inclusion, peace and belonging.

This is the tenth of twelve episodes of The Corrymeela Podcast. We've been delighted to bring these conversations to you, from our kitchen table to yours, in this important year.

If you had three or four minutes to give us some feedback, we would be so grateful. We'd love to know how you're finding these podcasts; if you're making use of the transcript or discussion suggestions, and what questions the podcasts are raising for you. So we have a feedback form. Find it - as well as the transcript and discussion questions for this episode - on corrymeela.org/podcast. You can also find it linked through the show notes in your podcast app.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast, and I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama. With me today is the founder of Parallel Histories, one of the organisations offering new models in how we teach history, in particular where there are conflicting narratives. Michael Davies, you speak about Parallel Histories' methodology, aiming to set out two conflicting narratives to a particular point of view in history. But I mean history - as you'd know far better than I as a history teacher - history is often much more than just two competing narratives. How do you compete when there's three or four or five or twenty different points on a particular period of time?

Michael Davies:

Well, we, I'm going to sort of slightly sidestep it and say we- if it's too complicated, we tend not to address it. Because what we're really interested in doing is creating teaching material which will show people that there are two sides. When you get multiple sides- and look, in reality, there are always multiple sides. And so as soon as you say: look, there are two sides, I know that that's a glossing over, but one has to simplify in order to teach. And you hope that after you've achieved what you wanted to do in terms of teaching people how to think, that they'll actually go back to the history and realise that: look, in the end history's just a matter of individuals and individual actions, etc. But we have to aggregate them in a way in order to make sense of them.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I know you're a great believer in harnessing the power of digital learning as well. Could you tell us a bit about that- the way that you use digital learning?

Michael Davies:

So the importance of the technology, the video technology, is it's interactive, and of course is a video, and all the evidence shows that students learn - like to learn - from video. So we put both narratives as three minute talks. So it could be something like the First Intifada; so there'll be [an] Israeli version of the First Intifada described (a three

minute history); there will be all sorts of sources embedded in that interactive video, and you can stop on the sources, and you can study them or you can simply whip through them. And the same on the Palestinian side, so you basically have this teaching package which is- it works on a mobile telephone, so you can actually do it on the bus on the way in to school. And you can either spend three minutes on it, or if you're feeling a bit more studious and you have a bit more time, you could spend half an hour on it; because behind each of the embedded sources there are further links so you can really just use it as a sort of a springboard or as a pathway into much of your own research on the web. So that's how I think interactive video can really be used to help teaching.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I love that you're able to do it on the bus on the way into school! Or, d'you know, maybe during the small break halfway between your mornings, to try to get your homework done before you go into class.

Michael Davies:

Well, it certainly increases the number of students who will have done the homework!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

There speaks the experience of a teacher!

Michael Davies:

Well, and you know what, the fact that the homework is easy to do is brilliant. I mean, it doesn't have- just because things are difficult doesn't make them better. And there's so much emphasis on written work in schools, and then in the rest of life there's so little emphasis on writing. You know the whole thing is topsy-turvy; we need much more emphasis on the spoken word.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You know, you've written about teachers being afraid to teach contentious history in case of accusations of bias. How does your method protect and encourage teachers? And how do you go about trying to find ways to do this in the classroom- support teachers?

Michael Davies:

Yeah, well, it's a big pressure on teachers. I mentioned earlier on that I'd taken a school trip to Israel and Palestine. And it was a fantastic school trip, as I mentioned- the students came back hugely enriched. But when I wrote it up as an article in *The Guardian*, within 24 hours there were something like 270 comments underneath it. None of them really- I mean a few were neutral, but most of them were condemnatory. I had people ringing the school asking to- leaving messages for the headmaster saying that I was unfit to teach. The opprobrium was enormous. And it suddenly struck me: wow! gosh, you know, if I didn't have a supportive headteacher and governing body, this could have been a real, you know, career breaker. So why would any young - I was an older experienced teacher - why would any young teacher ever want to touch any of this stuff when it only looks like it's an absolute can of worms?

So I thought: OK, so I know how valuable it is. So how do we do this and take the teacher out of the firing line? And the way to do it is to allow each side to tell their own history, in their own words; give each side equal weight and then put the teacher in the middle as the presenter. So the teacher doesn't become the umpire of the truth. They don't become

the person who answers the question: 'So what really happened, Sir; what really happened, Miss?' They'll say: no no- you have to look at the Israeli narrative of this event, you have to look at the Palestinian narrative; you have to look at all the evidence, you have to weigh the evidence- critically evaluate it. And then you have to come to your own view. And then we'll finish the exercise off with a debate, and then we'll get them to debate on both sides, so they'll end up arguing both sides. So they really understand- they have a good sense of what both narratives are, and their own view on what actually happened.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I know that you've looked at the Act[s] of Union between Scotland and England in 1707. That seems like an important (but perhaps unlikely) topic. And coming back to questions that you were talking about in terms of British identity, English identity, Scottish identity... What's been your experience of exploring that in schools in Britain?

Michael Davies:

Well, what's interesting on that... We've only had this one out for four or five months. And the reason we wanted to get it done was because I felt after Brexit - and I think a lot of history teachers felt like this - that we had done so little to prepare previous generations of students for this vote; they had no, you know, the lack of understanding of Britain's role in Europe... I think that led to people being more easily swayed by hyper-partisan information. And so I thought, you know, well, before the- there will be an 'indyref2' at some stage. So before indyref2 happens, let's get this stuff into school. So even if, even if we're educating students who will be too young to vote, at least they'll feel involved in the political process, rather than in the case of Brexit, where stuff was done... Their future was changed and they didn't really feel that they had any participation in it; it was something that's kind of happened to them. If we involve them in learning about the history of the Union and the two different narratives there (there's a pro-union narrative, which makes the case that Scotland does really benefit and will continue to benefit from the union. And there's a nationalist narrative, which argues the corollary), they'll be in a much better place to [be] making their own decision.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

It does seem to me like, one of the projects that you've got is looking around the world for ways within which there's a single narrative put across and finding ways to produce resources. I know you've produced resources looking at the sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims: a distinction and a dynamic that often isn't very well understood at all - if even at all - many people may just tend to see a homogeneous Muslim bloc. How has that helped folks in schools across England and Scotland where this has been rolled out?

Michael Davies:

We've actually had less traction with that. And the reason is that Islam is taught- it's not taught historically, it's taught through Religious Studies. And Religious Studies tends not to look at- well, for obvious reasons it tends to look at the practise of faith today, and compares different aspects of faith. And then in general, it's taught by good people who promote interfaith understanding. But it doesn't tend to be taught from a historical perspective in terms of looking at how this conflict was created; and the different strands of religion, economics, geopolitics, that all got wound together in order to create this Sunni and Shia divide. So, because Sunni and Shia conflict is not anywhere on the British history curriculum, and because it's actually not a way of thinking about religion that you'll find within Religious Studies (and I hope I'm not underselling them here, but that's just been my personal experience); it's actually not been a programme that has been as popular as we felt it should have been.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I mean, it seems to me that one of the hopes of your approach toward history both through *Parallel Histories*, as well as your own experience for many years as a teacher of history, one of your hopes has something to do with civic education; that knowing more about history produces people who can engage - or informs people who can engage - in the democratic process of voting, or engaging with the news in new ways. It's not just about passing exams really, it's about being aware of who you are in the world.

Michael Davies:

You're absolutely right. I think there are some skills which are really important to learn in today's fragmented media, where there's a distrust of experts. So teaching young people... The days are really gone when you could teach them what to think, and thank goodness for that. So you, you really have to teach them *how* to think. And you have to teach them that not all evidence is equal, you know, some evidence carries more weight than others; you have to give them the tools to understand that; you have to give them the tools to be sceptical about where information comes from. And you also have to spend much more time I think than we do in traditional education in preparing them to argue their case, so that they actually feel that they have a voice, a literal voice; they can look at evidence, they can make arguments, they can listen to other people's arguments; they can recognise that to be disagreed with is not to be disrespected. It's all part of making them, you know, good citizens in what we hope will be a healthy and pluralistic democracy.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Do you have any stories from the classroom to kind of tell us about that, or to bring us into a classroom where they were engaging with the materials in a way that you're able to see something happening there?

Michael Davies:

I've got so many... I'll tell you one story, which is one year we took a whole year group, and over eight weeks, we taught half of them a Palestinian narrative of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, and the other half the Israeli narrative. And at the end of it, we surveyed them on some questions. Now, they all knew that they were only getting one half, we didn't disguise that, you know, they knew that. So they were kind of prepared for that. And at the end of it, the survey that we gave them- remember, there's one particular question, which was: 'Should the British government be praised or blamed for the Balfour Declaration?' (which gave Jews the right to settle in Palestine after the First World War). And the results were really stark. Those who studied the Palestinian narrative said - the vast majority said - Britain should be blamed- it wasn't fair. And those who'd studied the Israeli narrative: they said the opposite. Now, as teachers, we weren't surprised that this was the result. What surprised us was how surprised the students were, because they thought that, you know, they knew that they'd only been getting a partial narrative; they knew that they'd been being fed either the Israeli or the Palestinian narrative; they had kind of assumed that - knowing that - they would have shielded themselves from this, and that they would have been able to counter the biases of the information that they'd been receiving, but they weren't. And here was the evidence. So that for them was a really profound wake-up about the necessity of being very careful that they weren't receiving their information and news in a way that was simply reinforcing existing prejudices.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Where do you see Parallel Histories going next- what other topics are you looking to study?

Michael Davies:

Well we're working on our history of Northern Ireland at the moment, and we've got a couple of programmes done on that and some lesson plans, and we're piloting that- both in the UK and in the Republic of Ireland at the moment. And once we've got it into a shape that we're really happy with, we'll be pushing that into Northern Irish schools- we'll be finding willing Northern Irish schools in order to pilot it. So that's good. I think after that the conflict that seems to get most traction in the UK when we talk to UK schools is Kashmir, or really it's the partition of India- it's the contested histories of the partition of India.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Michael Davies, thank you so much for coming on The Corrymeela Podcast.

Michael Davies:

Thank you very much. It's been fun talking to you.

Our guest this week was Michael Davies of Parallel Histories. Be sure to listen right to the end when he reveals a time he was denounced as a traitor to his country.

If you had three or four minutes to give us some feedback, we would be so grateful. This has been our first year making a podcast, and we know that if we're to do a second season, it'll be made all the better based on your feedback. So we'd love a few minutes of your time on the form. Find it - as well as the transcript and questions for this episode - on corrymeela.org/podcast or linked through the show notes in your podcast app.

Thanks very much for listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama, and I'll be back with another episode next week.

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Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Can you tell us about a time when you felt foreign?

Michael Davies:

Yes, I've got a very specific example of this. My father was a- he'd been a very keen Boy Scout, and when we moved to Northern Ireland, he enrolled me in the Wolf Cubs. And I remember waiting outside the church hall to get in, when a boy walked up to me and punched me in the stomach and called me an English pig. Of course, I never told anybody, you know, it was that classic thing; I stopped going, I stopped going to the Wolf Cubs. And my father would say: 'why,

why?’ and I’d never tell him; it’s that thing about, you know- you feel embarrassed that you’ve been bullied. And the charming head of - it was a Presbyterian Boy Scout Wolf Cub Troop - he actually came round to the house, because I was the little Catholic boy who was joining this Presbyterian troop, and they were very pleased to have me, and this delightful man who ran the Wolf Cubs, he came around to try to find out why I wouldn’t come and persuade me to come back. But I wouldn’t go, and I never said anything.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Michael, has anyone ever said to you that you were disloyal to your cultural identity?

Michael Davies:

Yes, I was once asked by a pupil why I hated my country so much.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

What did you say?

Michael Davies:

Well, it was in response to a lesson I’d been teaching about the relative insignificance of Britain’s military effort in defeating the Nazis, in comparison with the USSR. And I, you know, I’d made the point that nine tenths of the Wehrmacht are engaged with the Soviets on the Eastern Front for four years. And he took that as a lack of patriotism. I don’t think my response at the time - I was so shocked by it - I don’t think my response at the time was particularly coherent and I probably just bumbled something like: I don’t, I don’t hate my country or something like that.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

What would you say now?

Michael Davies:

I would say to him that to love your country is a wonderful thing, because we would all want to live in a country that we love. What could be nicer, what could be sweeter? But that’s not the same as an unthinking patriotism where we refuse to face up to the realities of the past. That doesn’t help anybody. And of course, you know as Johnson said: ‘patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel’, which doesn’t mean that patriots are scoundrels, it just means that there are always people around who are ready and willing to exploit people’s sense of their- of their love of country. And we can see that in spades at the moment all around the world.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Was that Boris Johnson or Dr. Johnson?!

Transcription by FanFán Ltd.