

“CURRENT ISSUES”
NATE Conference, Brighton, 6th April 1993

Like many of you, I have travelled a long way today. I set off from Dundee at seven o’ clock this morning; I was there because the British Film Institute, for which I work, is holding a five-day residential course there on media education, in collaboration with the Scottish Film Council. It’s an event that we couldn’t hold now in England. When I tell you that the Scottish Regions are subsidising most of the participants at £400 a head, and that they’re doing this because they recognise media education as an important and well integrated area of the Scottish curriculum, you’ll recognise another of the marked and inexplicable differences between education in Scotland, and that in England and Wales, and you might want, as I do, to reflect upon what “national” might mean in the “National Curriculum”.

Travelling the length of Britain, as I have just done, at the mercy of trains and buses and planes, is an interesting way of seeing and hearing and reflecting upon ideas about the nation and its heritage: ideas which are so easily and so cynically invoked by politicians and by corporate sponsors, but which in reality are lived, and negotiated, and created daily by us as citizens; through struggles and contradictions, certainly, but also through our memories, our histories and our cultures, in all their diversity.

So what did my journey today tell me about this nation and this heritage? Here are a few glimpses.

Dundee, where I started from, is a city that in the 1950s had the largest Bengali population of any city in Britain thanks to its exploitation of the Calcutta jute trade. Approaching Edinburgh, I crossed that amazing creation of Victorian engineering, the Forth Bridge, opened by the Prince of Wales just over 100 years ago, and the source of one of our most enduringly re-usable jokes, as in for example, “constructing the National Curriculum is a bit like painting the Forth Bridge”. From the plane I recognised the strange oxbow shape of Barrow in Furness [actually Walney Island], which I remembered not so much for shipbuilding as for Nella Last, the Barrow housewife who wrote her own gentle and honest account of life in the Home Front during the Second World War, which ends in 1945 as she wonders what it will be like to have a Labour Government.

In between these glimpses of vanished industries and echoes of collective memory I was listening, thanks to the Sony Corporation of Japan, to what I am sure constitutes an exemplary European text: the work of a German immigrant who sought British sponsorship and transformed a Judeo-Christian narrative into a work that powerfully evokes the optimism and certainties of the imperialist expansion which created those jute and steel and shipbuilding industries, but which I nevertheless find immensely moving: Handel’s *Messiah*. At the same time, I opened my paper and found *Oslobodenje*, the independent newspaper of Sarajevo, printed simultaneously today by 30 newspapers worldwide and a salutary reminder that Bosnia’s story today is

also another episode in that European imperialist history, and in particular a continuation of the war, a different story from Nella Last's: temporarily checked by Tito and now resuming its grisly and inexorable narrative.

These continuities, these ironies, these skeins of narrative, force themselves upon us now in ways that couldn't have been imagined 50 years ago. The electronic recording and transmission of texts and images, the accessibility and portability of electronic equipment, the speed of travel: all these have created a world very different from that in which I grew up. The way these changes have entered public debate follows the predictable pattern of most response to technological and social change, in which anxiety, nostalgia and resistance predominate. But we ought by now to be recognising that at the same time as new media overload us with information, swamp us with entertainment and shove us into market niches, they also present us with the most extraordinary and unprecedented potential for discovering each other, for sharing our stories, for democratising our culture.

The issue, then, that I invite you to consider today is the responsibility of ensuring that the transformation of our national culture by the media is a positive one: that the democratising and creative potential of the media are realised. This forces two questions on us today: what are the government doing about this responsibility, and what are you going to do about it?

To take the Government first: also in today's *Independent* I read this confused, contradictory and aimlessly unimaginative article by John Patten [then Secretary of State for Education] in which he outlines his ambition to put education back literally fifty years: to the time before all the changes I have been describing were even imagined. He has the temerity to propose a direction other than that taken in the 1944 Education Act, a direction which moves towards the eradication of equality of opportunity and public accountability within education: towards the installation of a kind of education supermarket with a minimal obligatory curriculum functioning as the checkout.

I urge you not to address these proposals in isolation. They are of a piece with what the Government is – or rather is not – doing about our national film industry, and what it would like to do to our broadcasting system. The same principles prevail: the fragmentation of our culture, the car boot sale of our heritage, and the shameless abandonment of the principles of public service. The media are there only to be exploited in the interests of power: their potential for contributing to the continuation of our cultural heritage is to be abandoned in favour of market niches, sound bites and photo opportunities.

If a minimalist curriculum is now to be installed, we should be looking at the Draft Statutory Order for English as a portent of what it may entail. This pusillanimous and shoddy document privileges decontextualised skills of accuracy and recall over conceptual understanding, creative production and critical analysis. What it does to media education is not substantially different from what it does to literature, except that media are to be completely marginalised. Media education is to be removed from its toe hold in reading and placed within the Programmes of Study for Speaking and Listening, as a

requirement to listen to television (not to watch it!) and to radio in order to improve skills of accurate recall. This alteration was not prefigured in the National Curriculum Council recommendations for revision, and indeed the present requirements are there as a result of deliberate and explicit Government policy.

So what are you, as English teachers, to do? In Alastair MacIntyre's important book *After Virtue*, he draws a parallel in his closing paragraph, between our own times and those of the destruction of the Roman Empire. He describes the kind of moral and cultural choices that confront people in such desperate times, and he notes one difference: the barbarians are not now waiting at the frontier, but have been governing us for some time. I would suggest that you cannot negotiate with barbarians. The Draft Order for English is not a negotiable document, by English teachers or by media teachers.

On the other hand, to reduce the National Curriculum to essentials might not be a bad idea in principle. The obvious way of doing it would not be to reduce each subject to a meaningless checklist, but to abolish subjects altogether, and through a proper process of reflection and dialogue, work towards a faculty-based curriculum in which the essential principles of knowledge, understanding and skills are outlines and the professional expertise of teachers in working towards these principles, can be recognised.

In that kind of structure, the question of how to teach and sustain our national culture, in all its differences as well as its unities, could receive proper attention and its continuing change and development would be assured. In such a curriculum, narrative would have a central place, as the means by which we share experience, explore our past, test moral choices, live with differences. There is a sense, a level at which stories transcend media: they are transferred and transformed from one medium to another, and the ability to read and tell them in many media must be valued and nurtured. English teachers can't go on separating print from other media. We have to find, and assert, on our own account, the kind of cultural education that makes sense now and will make sense in 20 years' time.

In practical terms, this means two things. Firstly, pressing for a postponement of the English revision, in order that it can be undertaken in the proper way at the proper time. Secondly, it means taking the initiative in the "core curriculum" debate that is about to be launched upon us, and starting to think about what a truly "national" curriculum might look like.