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Scottish Studies - no place for playing time added on at Bannockburn

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The Scottish Government is to introduce "Scottish Studies" as a new compulsory course in schools , described in the SNP manifesto as a "distinct strand of learning on Scotland and incorporating Scottish History, Scottish Literature, the Scots and Gaelic Languages, wider Scottish culture and Scottish current affairs."

Education Secretary Mike Russell adds that "Scottish horticulture or Scottish Cookery could even be looked at", risking the potential for the soundbite - "Cloutie Dumplings on the Curriculum".

Questions galore are already being asked about this proposed new course which will begin in primary schools and continue throughout secondary schooling with an externally marked exam.

If Scottish Studies is compulsory doesn't that mean less time for pupils to study traditional exam subjects, on which their future career opportunities depend so much?

What's the point of this new subject , if it's already covered elsewhere across a range of subjects?

Where are the teachers to come from, given that the Scottish Government did away with 3,000 teaching posts in its first four years in office?

Others are concerned that the subject is to be compulsory, and not an option, raising fears of a political agenda behind its introduction.

Some fear the possibility of "Scottish Studies" being another "National Conversation" , the Scottish Government consultation with the alias of the "Nationalist Conversation".

Let's be gracious at its outset and accept without equivocation that the intention of the course is to promote a wider understanding of Scottish literature, history and culture for the educational benefit of Scottish pupils.

Let's look firstly the "wider Scottish culture" feature of Scottish Studies that would include science and mathematics in Scotland.

Scottish science and mathematics are not to be portrayed as exceptional.

The work of the famous 19th. century Scottish physicist and mathematician James Clerk Maxwell may

have been described by Albert Einstein as the "most profound and the most fruitful that physics has experienced since the time of Isaac Newton", and there are certainly other famous Scottish scientists and inventors.

However, Scottish Studies should make the case that the same can be said for many other countries where the remarkable achievements of their scientific sons and daughters can engender a quiet patriotism.

The work of scientists in modern-day Scottish institutions, and Scottish scientists in similar institutions abroad is international in its outlook, and its most important method of explanation, mathematics, also has no national identity or boundaries.

Scottish pupils should and do learn of the work of their country's writers, poets, and artists, and of how they have depicted life in our communities and beyond.

Good literature and art lifts its reader or viewer up above his or her immediate location and time to present a broader perspective of their country and of the world, of shared experiences and common goals.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing Scottish Studies in fostering a distinct Scottish culture is the resident Americanisation of Scottish, and indeed English, as well as European popular culture.

This is a particular problem because those studying Scottish Studies, the pupils, are the most enthusiastic consumers of US cultural imperialism, which has stormed the commanding heights of millions of living rooms and bedrooms across Scotland through television screens, DVD players, and music downloads.

Why do Scottish pop singers sing with American accents?

Why do they sing about Tennessee rather than about Dundee, Chicago rather than about Glasgow?

Will the teaching of Scottish Studies be intended to address the pervasive influence of American popular culture upon Scotland and the rest of the world?

The study of History is probably the subject of greatest contention.

How does understanding Scotland's past help us understand present-day Scotland?

How does judging past events and beliefs in their own contemporary setting and the changes that they created help prepare young Scots for the society they will live in?

Tom Johnston was the legendary Secretary of State for Scotland in Churchill's wartime Cabinet .

His political career included 5 years as Labour MP for Dundee in the 1920s.

Before then he wrote two famous books, "A History of the Working Classes in Scotland" and "Our Scots Noble Families"

This is most definitely not the Scotland of Walter Scott's novels such as "Tales of A Grandfather".

Right from its relentless introduction, Tom Johnston's "Our Scots Noble Families" never lets up thereafter :

"Show the people that our Old Nobility is not noble, that its lands are stolen lands - stolen either by force or fraud; show people that the title-deeds are rapine, murder, massacre, cheating, or court harlotry; dissolve the halo of divinity that surrounds the hereditary title; let the people clearly understand that our present House of Lords is composed largely of descendants of successful pirates and rogues; do these things and you shatter the Romance that keeps the nation numb and spellbound while privilege picks its pockets."

Johnston dismisses the sanctified image of Robert the Bruce in one sentence.

"The Bruce, a Norman, convinced our forefathers that his fight against the English was for Scottish freedom; and lo, when the invading hosts were driven back, the Bruce handed our common fields to his fellow Normans."

What place in Scottish Studies' perspective on Scottish history will Johnston's work have? or will it be dismissed as being too radical or as propaganda?

There's a TV series on Scottish history waiting to be made of Johnston's work and it should be on everyone's booklist.

If there is to be one common theme running through Scottish Studies' treatment of Scottish history, then perhaps Kenny MacAskill has provided us with it.

Almost 10 years ago, the present Justice Secretary wrote an article in the "Sunday Times" telling some traditionalists in the SNP that it was time to move on from its annual Bannockburn rally :

"Bannockburn's position in the psyche of the party and the people must change. We must advance — both as a party and as a nation — and stop defining ourselves in terms of a victory over the English....

"What is it about the Scots that makes us hark back to a romanticised idea of that and other battles? Other nations have important junctures in their history but do not act as we do. Few go back 700 years in their celebration. While this may be testimony to the fact that we are an ancient nation, what does it say about us as a modern country...

"For too many people history commences with Bannockburn and ends with the Union in 1707, both events defined by our relationship with England. "

Something other than a military history of Scotland is called for; something other than a history of royal

aggression; something other than the identification of "Scotland" with the territorial ambitions of its vain, warrior kings of small status.

That might go some way to quell the unease of the sceptics.

Links :

Tom Johnston

Extract from "Our Noble Scots Families"

Introduction

<http://www.caledonia.org.uk/land/tjohnsto.htm>

Extract from " A History of the Working Classes in Scotland"

The Reiving of the Common Lands

http://www.scottishcommons.org/docs/commonweal_4.pdf

Marlyn Glen website

<http://www.marlynglen.org.uk>