

## Past Perspectives

### Catering for the Young (1959)

*Rev. Peter Birch*

#### Editorial Introduction

Peter Birch was born in County Kilkenny a century ago, in September 1911. He studied at St Kieran's College, Kilkenny, and St Patrick's College, Maynooth. After his ordination in 1937 he taught in both of these institutions: firstly English in St Kieran's and subsequently catechetics in Maynooth, where he also became Professor of Education (in 1953). In 1964 he was appointed Bishop of Ossory. Within months of his appointment he began setting up Kilkenny Social Services, the first organisation of its kind in Ireland.

Below is the text of his address to the Annual Conference of the St John Bosco Society in March 1959<sup>1</sup>. This was at the end of a decade in which Ireland had faced crippling levels of unemployment and emigration, and only months after the crucial government decision to open up the Irish economy to foreign capital investment, a defining moment in the modernisation of Irish society. Emigration and the experience of young Irish people abroad are among the key themes of the address. In this and in a number of other respects it touches on issues that continue to concern those working with young people today: the uses and abuses of emerging media and technology and the need for youth services to be able to compete with these; the importance of relating to young people on their own terms and not treating them in a condescending manner; the futility of expecting greater social awareness and engagement among young people if adults continue to display 'obvious political cynicism'. While some of the assumptions, observations and language of the address make it clear how much has changed in the intervening years – in Irish society, in the role and position of religious institutions, and in work with young people – the emphasis on the need to build and sustain positive intergenerational relationships at a time of great and unpredictable change continues to be relevant.

#### Maurice Devlin

I spoke to a teacher recently, an Irishman living and working in England, one who is very sympathetic towards Ireland. He was very worried about some young Irish people in his area. He is not by any means one of the type who exaggerate the faults of the Irish there, for he is wise and experienced enough to make allowance for the effects of new surroundings and a new way of life on our people who go abroad to live. Indeed there are enough difficulties already facing Irishmen abroad without adding to them

by painting a completely false picture of the failure of some of them. Many of these emigrants are a credit to the training they have been given. But not all, of course. The particular ones this man was worried about arrive in England while still of school-going age. As he described those young people, they are often retiring and rather frightened; they are uncommunicative and appear to be suspicious. They are slow to make friends and eventually they seem to pick up with the less desirable among their street companions. They adopt the dress and manners, the argot and accent of their associates, and soon begin to express positive contempt for their origins, and shrug off appeals to religious sentiment. Shortly after, they are staying away from school and from church, which is comparatively easy for newcomers to do. Very soon they are in trouble with the police: for all their bravado they have not the experience to stay out of the reach of the law.

Why should this tendency manifest itself in some of our young people? Why must they reject what they have, in favour of the worst in what they find? Part of the explanation, no doubt, is in the strange bewildering environment which clouds their judgment before they become accustomed to it. But there must be more than that. There must be some defect which causes the strange actions of these young ones who go so far wrong. If that is so, the defect was there before they left home, and must be latently present in those who stay at home. The new environment does no more than let it blossom. It is not exclusive to emigrants, and indeed the actions of some who have never been abroad are only too similar on occasions. Apparently there is some sort of inability to adapt themselves to new conditions. This may be due to a defect of character or of training. Those who deal with the young must make up their minds which it is, and take the appropriate steps to correct it.

Part of the explanation is almost certainly to be found further back, in some of the natural tendencies of youth. Every young person is conscious of certain needs and conflicts in himself. First of all he wants to integrate himself in society. When a boy goes to a boarding school or to a factory or to a club, he feels the need to be like his companions so that he will be readily accepted by them. He is conspicuous outside the group and feels uncomfortable therefore. Similarly, when he goes abroad, it is natural that he will wish to adapt himself, at least externally, as soon as possible to his new surroundings. The Irish boy abroad does not want to be a "Paddy" or a "Mick" indefinitely, and so he tries to hide his native marks. The same process takes place for the same reasons when young people move from country to town, from artisan to suburban area. Being different is taken as a sign of inferiority, particularly when the society they enter is more complicated than the one they leave. Failure to adapt and to be at home with its conventions is a slur. It needs a strong personality to resist the unfair stigma.

This sense of inferiority plays heavily on another need of the young and magnifies it. There is a stage when every young person wants to show his independence. He thinks that he should let people see that he does not care about them. If the new arrival has no other means of doing so, he makes parade of his independence by an uneasy aggressiveness against a society which has shown little overt readiness to accept him and his marks of different origin. Just because he is not sure of himself, he reacts against the rules of the new society he has entered. He is to this extent anti-social, but as yet he is not a criminal and should not be treated as one. His need of companions

takes him further, and he tends to ally himself with youths who are similarly ill-disposed. Often his extreme views may make him a leader of the gang, but a leader who is at the same time their tool. The result is the aggressive destructive group, with the Irish or Italian or Polish names high in its lists, or the clique in school or club formed around the boor. The newcomer, the Paddy, the country boy, the boy with the broad accent can now show his resentment of the world he has moved into. Even more so, the position he has taken makes him show his resentment of the world he has left, and cast off all it stood for.

One of the first needs of young people is to have something to be proud of. Obviously their own ability is the best for this purpose. But abilities are not always obvious. They must be searched for sometimes, brought to light and then developed and trained, and this is an important task facing all who have any part in the direction of youth. *Every young person has some natural skill or ability* of which he could be proud. Everyone has the right, I think, to be assisted in putting that to the use which will make him a profitable member of society and make his social acceptance easier. I do not say that he can expect to have this done completely for him. Effort on his own part must be expected. But the finding of the ability and the making of the effort are often the crucial difficulties. The effort, particularly, requires confidence, and confidence is something which the present-day world makes very unlikely. To give the young confidence is therefore essential.

In catering for young people we often make the mistake of thinking that what they need to keep them happy and content is recreation. They need recreation, of course, but they are eager for a more satisfying form of it than we sometimes imagine. At least it is certain that they will resent it later on if more satisfying material is not given them. We could take example from those business people who have invested money in catering for young people's needs. Publishers of cheap books, such as "Pelicans" do not ignore the more demanding needs. The fact that they are able to stay in business shows that there is a desire for reading of a serious nature and much of the demand for it comes from the young. Not every kind of reading matter will appeal to them and pay however. It must have certain characteristics. If we examine the books that are aimed at the young we shall see what some of these qualities are. The matter is presented in a definite, dogmatic, assertive style. It is sure of itself. It flatters subtly, precisely because it is not easy reading always but it is rewarding because it is so informative. TV shows, films and radio attract audiences too by presenting information in an attractive manner. There is a lesson here.

It is the business of these people to know what the young want; and they recognise that above all else people, young and old, want to be well-informed. They therefore assume that young persons ought to be well-informed, and they put themselves forward as the ones who can provide the information *without making a fuss about it*. Advertising takes the same line. Modern advertising makes a parade of giving information for the benefit of those to whom they would sell. Perhaps it may be true that there are greater facilities available abroad for getting information like this and this may help to cause contempt for the old way of life when young people leave it.

Those like us, who cater for youth in non-commercial circles, may find their first difficulty here. Our intention to form and direct the young is sometimes too obvious. We let our young people see that we want them to go in a certain way and we neglect to consult their inclinations. There is not sufficient finesse about our efforts. *We do not*

*appear to trust the young.* We drive or steer them. We give intellectual materials which they can use, it is true, but as well as that we claim the right to stand over them and say how they are to use them. The other technique is more effective because it is more in keeping with the needs of youth. It gives them general information as something they will need, something that may be useful to them. This technique is often just as interested in putting over a point of view as we are, but it does it more subtly, perhaps even a shade dishonestly at times. Facts are presented, but these facts have been selected with care so that the conclusions desired become inevitable. The important point is that though the conclusions are arranged for the young by the choice of facts, the young people appear to draw the conclusions themselves. This flatters and wins them. They want urgently to use their own minds. Here they appear to be doing so. The pressure on their thinking is not therefore obvious. Those who are not given the same opportunities look on themselves as repressed and deprived, and once again they tend to react violently against an invasion of their minds.

The same lesson can be learned from certain radio and TV features. All these present programmes which flatter by their direct appeal to young people's interests. They present details of life with great vividness. The way of life presented is not normally the humdrum life which most people know. It is certainly not the way of life many of their companions know but the young people fail to realise this. This makes them conscious of their own lack of sophistication and they tend to rebel. Or the programmes discuss problems which, even though they are remote, still have interesting implications. They are treated in an intimate personal manner. The discussions give the young person a comforting feeling of sympathy and the impression that some of his own problems are understood. He is anxious to hear about problems which he regards as grown-up, about conditions of life and social problems at home and abroad. All this is intoxicating for him. The young man who comes from an environment where the problems are less glamorous is inclined to despise what was given him there and to shed it all as soon as he can.

The problem of providing accurately gauged and blended intellectual amenities for the young is a delicate one and one that demands careful consideration. "What is the use of mass media in presenting religion and any other serious subject if they are constantly run at an intellectual level which is not that of the masses?" asks an educational magazine in a recent article. It goes on to explain "If one comes down too far there is no raising of minds at all. But if one stays too high the minds of millions are simply not touched." Part of our problem lies there.

The presentation of the information which we are assuming to be necessary needs expert guidance in manner as well as in content. There is no doubt that the young need the information. They need it particularly if they are to be saved from a sense of inferiority. The mass media are providing it successfully as we saw. What we offer must be offered in a manner which suits the young and one feature of this is that it must always be available for them so that they can draw on it when they happen to be in the mood. Very often this will mean that there will be waste, because young people are largely unpredictable: they are interested and indifferent by turns. If we want to prevent the waste from becoming excessive, all we can do is to try and control their moods and bring them to the state of mind when they will be ready to accept what we have to offer.

It is often complained that the young take little interest in *their own self-improvement*. We are inclined to be despondent when we see the courses which are available, or the libraries, concerts and lectures which are neglected by the young. The reason for the neglect may possibly be, however, that these are not suited to the requirements of the young, because they are arranged by adults exclusively, who consider their own wishes, not the needs of those catered for. We find fault too with the lack of ambition and the listlessness of the present day and we go on to contrast such indifference with the spirit which animated the youth of a generation or two ago, our own generations. In all this we may be acting unfairly for many reasons, but for one in particular. If the young were better then, which is more than doubtful, it could be that the conditions were more favourable. Facilities for self-improvement are not really availed of unless there is a spirit of education all round. There must be a proper atmosphere if education and self-improvement are to thrive.

About 15 years ago a new education system was introduced in England. Its purpose was to provide free secondary school for all, and in this way to prevent the waste of talent which was assumed to take place where parents could not afford to pay for further education. It is an interesting social experiment. Since the passing of the Act much investigation has been done and a careful check has been kept on the results. One discovery has been disappointing. It has been found that children coming from poorer homes do not qualify for the higher forms of education in anything like the same proportions as those coming from richer homes. The explanations put forward are relevant to our discussion.

It could appear that social status has an effect on intelligence, that, in plain language, poor children are likely to be stupid as well, in the average. This point has been made; it must, however, be regarded as doubtful. There is no room for doubt, however, in maintaining that intelligence will be prevented from developing in an atmosphere where it is not prized. Therefore it is wasteful to provide intellectual amenities if the environment where they are offered is not favourable to them. Consequently it is essential to provide the proper environment if educational facilities are to be of full value. It is asking too much to expect young people to appreciate the value of self-improvement if those around them show that they are indifferent to it. It is asking the impossible to expect them to go further and strive and struggle for it, if all whom they know regard it as a waste of time, and this is frequently the case among those in the lower income groups. The history of our own country and of Scotland shows that the opposite is also true. Even when opportunities for advancement were most meagre, they were often put to surprisingly good use because the idea was generally accepted that one should try. If then we want our young people to be anxious to improve, to use what is available, we must tackle the problem at a very wide level and not confine our efforts to them alone.

If it is true that our young people fail to take full advantage of the opportunities offered them, the reason may be found not in the young people themselves, but in the environment. And the environment is, normally, other people. In the same way the alleged indifference to national endeavour may be, to some extent at least, due to the obvious political cynicism to be found among adults. It is part of the task of those catering for youth to provide the proper atmosphere where idealism and honest endeavour will be respected, where selfishness and the desire for a good time will be

rejected. Even if the country's educational requirements were fully provided for, as they should be, they would be no guarantee of success. There would still be a big task to be done. Facilities will not give maximum results unless the young are shown how to appreciate them. And the young will not learn to appreciate them unless their elders and their companions do so, and show by their lives that they do so.

Providers of mass education are very conscious of this truth. Popular media of instruction such as the magazines, films, and lectures I have spoken of, do more than provide information on miscellaneous subjects: they help to provide an atmosphere as well. The diverse and often superficial courses given under the name of general or adult education are frequently dismissed as useless. This is purblind criticism. Far from being useless, they fulfil a most valuable function. Even if we grant that their content is often slight and formless, and that a lecturer must be almost a public entertainer, they do build up a respect for learning nevertheless, and they do help to foster the idea that a well-informed mind is a valuable possession. As far as the young are concerned they are provided with topics of discussion and the vocabulary in which to discuss them. This contributes much to the self-confidence of youth. On the other side they make it clear that a person who lacks them has nothing to be proud of. He is deficient, and is therefore at a disadvantage. It is of great importance, therefore, that this atmosphere of respect for self-improvement be provided where possible. And in view of the mobility of population at the present day, the young must be given an interest in topics that are wider than local in their appeal. Some of the defects of our young emigrants may be due to their lack of information on general topics that will be of interest to them when they move to new surroundings.

A large part of the creation of that atmosphere consists in taking the young into our confidence and showing them that they have an important part to play not merely in the future but here and now. We must show them too that without any pretence, we think they are important. We need their contribution, and so we will fit them to make that contribution worthwhile. To do so we must give them what they need and give it to them as a right of theirs. If we can convince them of their own value we shall have done much for they will react to it. In this connection there have been some interesting social experiments in Ireland in the last generation or so to illustrate what can be hoped for when the proper approach is made to youth. They will repay a few moments' study.

Take our modern foreign missionary effort. It can be said with truth that our people as a whole, young and old, are now genuinely interested in the Irish missions to pagan countries. They make great personal sacrifices to show that interest. Many of them devote their lives to these foreign missions as laity or religious. They are helped and supported by the subscriptions, the prayers and the goodwill of people at home, who have little, if any, superfluous wealth to give away. It was not always so. It was not so indeed up to the time of the first World War. Looking at it from a purely natural standpoint, the source of the present interest is the careful nurturing of the pride and idealism of the young and the technique of concentrating great attention on their encouragement.

The essence of this technique is to show the young people how they can contribute even by being interested. In order to do this it gives them the means of being interested. It takes even the youngest child into its confidence. It explains the work,

the successes and the failures. It provides special interest for them of a personal practical kind. It employs modern methods in its approach such as human interest stories, photographs, personal letters of an intensely human kind, and so on. These methods suit the young and similarly suitable methods are used in the appeal to adolescents.

This technique was pioneered by the Maynooth Mission to China when general interest in pagan missions was low, and it was thought by many to be a sign of failure to be interested in them. It was so successful that it has been copied by others even outside the country. In a generation it has succeeded in removing scores of very real prejudices against the foreign missions, and has made the whole nation mission-minded. It has little resources but it has much psychology and so it is prepared to spend some of its meagre resources in this way. It is very valuable spending. The missions do not have to complain of the cynicism or the indifference or the ignorance of the young. They do not need to. Apart from its great religious significance, the movement begun by the Columban Fathers is a rich example of educational achievement of the highest order.

We can take another example of a comparable educational experiment, and in doing so we must try to keep away from controversy. The intensive movement to restore the Irish language has been going on about the same length of time as the foreign mission drive. For most of that time it, too, has concentrated on the young, and has been able to call on the schools and the not inconsiderable resources of state support. It has made progress certainly. The ordinary child knows Irish leaving school. Still, I think, all will admit that it has not succeeded in overcoming prejudices and self-interest. The reason, I believe, is that it has not provided the proper atmosphere outside the school, where the success achieved in the school could survive and prosper. There is little real appeal to the idealism of the young. The language is quite often just a school subject, and the end of school subjects is an emancipation which all children wish for. Lack of interest in Irish becomes, in a twisted sort of way, a sign of emancipation from childhood. The result is that the present-day child gets no real encouragement from its elders, on many of whom much effort was spent a few years ago.

These two examples may help to illustrate what is needed for our youth if they are to be saved from the disinherited feeling which would describe the state of mind of those I spoke of in the beginning. *Recreation is undoubtedly important for them, but serious interests must be mixed in with it, both at school and outside.* The young must be shown that they are important and that their mere interest is of value to adults. A good deal of care must be taken of their education. But their education cannot be confined to school or school hours. If they are Irish, then they should have genuine Irish achievements to be proud of, and they must learn that it is they who make achievements. To concentrate too much on providing amusement for them is a waste of time and is bad psychology. The young themselves resent this for it appears to assume that they are immature and unworthy of serious consideration.

Facilities then must be provided them for self-improvement. These must be such as they can be proud of. Commercial standards have improved so much that it is often useless to try to compete with them in the same field. Use must be made then of the commercial products, and the films, books and so on, which the young people use

should be taken advantage of. They should be shown how to use them and get more and more out of them. If we want to serve them, we must show them that they can enjoy these and at the same time be superior to them by reason of their ability to criticise and improve them. And they should be able to do this without having to run to us with every little difficulty. One of the troubles of the moment is that young people are not accustomed to using all their minds. They are too much at the mercy of what goes on around them and what passes for thinking is often quite irrational and emotional. Only sympathetic training will get them over this.

### Note

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1. *Catering for the Young* was first published in leaflet form by Comhairle le Leas Óige, with whose kind permission it is reproduced here.