

# A Design for Life: A consideration of the learning legacy of P.H. Pearse's *The Murder Machine*

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## **Abstract**

*In the centenary of the death of Patrick Henry Pearse – one of the leaders of Ireland's 1916 Rebellion – it is interesting to reflect on the relevance of his writing for contemporary approaches to lifelong and lifewide learning. Pearse's essay 'The Murder Machine' was forged within the tradition of progressive education movements in the early 20th century rooted in a social pedagogy that focused on the value of holistic education. He proposed that the purpose of formative educational experiences should prepare students in learning for life. Pearse, through his educational manifesto, highlighted dissonances between instrumentalism and holism in the state education of his day. His resounding argument that a just society is not just an economy reminds present-day educators and policy makers of the continuing relevance of this manifesto in its centenary year.*

**Keywords:** History of education; progressive education; holistic education; lifelong learning

This year's annual teacher conventions met amidst debates regarding a two-tiered pay scale for teachers in Irish education. Newly qualified teachers argue that they are disadvantaged as new entrants to the profession as a consequence of the government's fiscal rectitude to contain the effects of global financial crisis. Dr Marian McCarthy, Director of the Centre for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning at University College Cork, recalled Patrick Henry Pearse in her keynote address entitled 'A Teacher Affects Eternity' at the annual convention of the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) meeting in 2016 (McCarthy, 2016). McCarthy rhetorically invoked Pearse's essay entitled 'The Murder Machine' when asking how Irish society should appropriately value education. A century ago, Pearse similarly conjectured whilst critiquing

the value of education as a system based on payment by results. Alternatively, Pearse placed value on teachers fostering learning as a lifelong journey. Today, there is crucial requirement to foster learning as lifelong and lifewide from the outset of schooling precisely because of the complexity of global society.

In this article I will focus on Pearse's polemical essay 'The Murder Machine' as a manifesto that espouses the ideal of education as a lifelong and lifewide experience. Patrick Henry Pearse (1879-1916), also known by the gaelicised form of his name Pádraic or Pádraig Pearse, was an Irish teacher, barrister, poet, writer, nationalist and political activist who was one of the leaders of a rebellion during Easter Week in April 1916 against British sovereignty in Ireland. Following his execution in May 1916, Pearse came to be regarded by Irish nationalists as the embodiment of the rebellion. Pearse wrote 'The Murder Machine' as a progressive education manifesto. The decade before the First World War (1914-18) was the period, *par excellence*, of the manifesto across Europe in which futures were radically re-imagined (Danchev, 2011). Here, I invite readers to become reacquainted with themes integral to Pearse's philosophical enquiries: identity, holism, and learning as performance. His polemic argued that a just society is not just an economy that still makes his essay relevant since its initial printing a century ago.

'The Murder Machine, Pearse's most complete statement of educational philosophy, was published posthumously as a pamphlet after his execution in 1916. An early version of the essay had first appeared in the *Irish Review* in February 1913. The following year, a revision was published as 'An Ideal in Education' in the *Irish Review* in June 1914. The remainder of the pamphlet published in 1916 was composed of notes from a lecture Pearse had presented at the Dublin Mansion House in December 1912 (Pearse, 1924, p. 30). The pamphlet comprised a series of ongoing reflections on how progressive education could be applied to an Irish context. Pearse, writing in the Gaelic League's newspaper *An Claidheamh Soluis*, between 1903 and 1909, repeatedly emphasised the need for educational reform to secure the intellectual and political independence of Ireland. Rhetorically, Pearse denoted the British education in Ireland, in his day, as a "murder machine" in the sense that its rationale was to service the administration of the British Empire (Pearse, 1924, p. 3; Kiberd and Matthews, 2015, p. 225). His essay highlighted dissonances between the instrumentalism of British imperial education in Ireland and the holism of a new educational philosophy in a self-governing Ireland.

As so often during the Gaelic Revival (1891-1922), the principles discovered in the past were principles advocated for an imaginary future (Pearse, 1924, pp. 26-28). A key to enable an understanding of Patrick H. Pearse's educational philosophy was his exploration of the values of both national and personal identity formation. Pearse believed that the identity of a nation was reflected through its language. His visit to Belgium in 1904 was inspirational; there Pearse saw bilingual education in action in the schools of Flanders. Pearse, through the pages of *An Claidheamh Soluis*, between 1905 and 1907, explored the potential for a bilingual system in Ireland (Pearse, 1924, p. 41). For Pearse, language was central to national identity as he justified in 'The Murder Machine' by means of his perception of language as the self-expression of the national consciousness. The words and phrases of a language are always to some extent revelations of the mind of the race that has shaped its language. To the native Irish the teacher was *aite*, 'fosterer', the pupil was *dalta*, 'foster-child', the system was *aiteachas*, 'fosterage', words which we still retain as *oide*, *dalta* and *oideachas* (Pearse, 1924, p. 21).

The key to cultural authenticity for Pearse resided not only in a nation's language, but also by fostering a secure sense of identity for the individual learner. Patrick H. Pearse envisaged educational reform as rooted in promoting the education of the whole person as opposed to validating an externally imposed regulated educational system. Pearse, in 'The Murder Machine', expounded the fosterage metaphor to articulate his vision of holistic education. He acknowledged that the modern school was a state-controlled institution designed to produce workers for the state, and was in the same category with a dockyard or any other state-controlled institution that produced articles necessary to the progress, well being, and defence of the state. In this respect Pearse stressed parallels between education and manufacturing in the comparisons used to describe 'efficiency', 'cheapness' and the 'up-to-dateness' in the educational system (Pearse, 1924, p. 22). For Pearse, fosterage implied a foster-father or foster-mother, in essence, personhood at the heart of the educational experience, rather than an impersonal code of regulations intended to promote conformity rather than individuality as aspired to by holistic education (Pearse, 1924, p.26; Kiberd and Matthews, 2015, p. 226; McCarthy, 2016).

Internationalisation deeply influenced Pearse's thinking in the field of educational policy. He had visited Belgium in 1904 and during 1914 he visited the United States of America to raise much needed funds for his school St. Enda's established as a school for boys at Cullenswood House in Ranelagh in 1908, but moved to the Hermitage in Rathfarnham, nestled in the foothills of the

Dublin mountains, in 1910. The Hermitage is the site of the Pearse Museum <http://pearsemuseum.ie>. The school, intended to embody Pearse's educational theories with its child-centred curriculum, was in step with progressive education in Europe and the United States. Pearse had come into contact with Welsh, Belgian and other international proponents of the New Education Movement who all argued that the needs of individual children should be central to teaching and opposed the restrictions imposed by the examination-based state school system. The essence of the New Education Movement was rooted in a social pedagogy that advocated holistic educational experiences as proposed by Enlightenment philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827). The education at St Enda's was as much progressive as it was nationalistic, in parallel with innovations by educators like Dora and Bertrand Russell in England, John Dewey in America or Maria Montessori in Italy (Pearse, 1924, p. 29; Kiberd and Matthews, 2015, pp. 227-228).

Patrick Pearse's awareness of European developments in education can be seen through his promotion of learning through experience. The popularity of public pageants and dramas based on historical themes was a pan-European phenomenon before the First World War. In 1913 a public performance by the 'St Enda players' was praised in the pages of the Gaelic League newspaper for its revival of the national consciousness (Augusteijn, 2010; McCarthy, 2016). Pearse employed drama and role-play as a means to impress upon his pupils heroic values from Ireland's mythological past, values he hoped could be revived. Broadly, a legacy of 'The Murder Machine' is its conception of education as lifewide that holds the promise for a more holistic form of education in which people combine and integrate their learning (both formal and informal), their personal or professional development and their achievements.

In her Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) address, Marian McCarthy, a pioneer of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) movement in Irish third-level education, reminds us that a hundred years on, Patrick H. Pearse's words have an ironic and chilling reality with the demise of the Celtic Tiger, the brunt of the global economic crash in 2008, fiscal rectitude and austerity. These pressures speak of the debasement of education, rather than to the holistic expression of education as a lifelong journey of self-empowerment (McCarthy, 2016). As an educationalist, Pearse should be historically situated within a European context. Most of his educational philosophy was either directly inspired or borrowed from outside an Irish and British context. His

ideas on educational were modern and utopian in aspiration. Patrick Pearse's educational philosophy, as outlined in 'The Murder Machine', reminds educators and policy makers that a nation's richness lies in fostering the creativity of its citizens and that a just society is not simply an economy.

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