

Preparing for A105: historical evidence

From Book 2 *Tradition and Dissent*, Chapter 5 Ireland: the invention of tradition, pp. 163-5

5.3 Irish nationalisms

One of the most important aspects of studying history is the need to respect the evidence of the past. We cannot know the past directly because we cannot experience it in person, but we can use the remnants of the past – archaeological remains, the relics of material culture, written documents and, for more recent periods, film, TV and electronic media – as evidence for the events, developments and beliefs of the past. To use this material we need to come to it with open but informed minds. We have questions we want to ask of it, but we cannot require that it prove a case. We also need to understand the circumstances that created it and the preconceptions of its creators.

One of the most important aspects of studying history is the need to respect the evidence of the past. We cannot know the past directly because we cannot experience it in person, but we can use the remnants of the past – archaeological remains, the relics of material culture, written documents and, for more recent periods, film, TV and electronic media – as evidence for the events, developments and beliefs of the past. To use this material we need to come to it with open but informed minds. We have questions we want to ask of it, but we cannot require that it prove a case. We also need to understand the circumstances that created it and the preconceptions of its creators.

[In approaching a historical source one might start] by answering the following questions:

1. Who wrote it?
2. Who was the intended audience?
3. When was it written?

Now consider:

4. what type of document is it (public, private, official, published, etc.)?
5. What was its historical context?
6. What comments can you make on specific points in the text?