Eames-Bradley archive refusal dismays academics - The Irish Times - Wed, Mar 04, 2009

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FRANK MILLAR, London Editor

ACADEMICS AT Boston College have expressed disappointment that the Eames-Bradley Consultative Group discounted a proposal for an oral and video archive for victims and survivors of the Northern Ireland Troubles.

The archive would have been modelled on the renowned Shoah archive recording the testimonies of witnesses to the Holocaust.

The idea was originally floated in the autumn of 2004 by former White House special envoy Mitchell Reiss as a way of ensuring that all those affected by the Troubles would have the opportunity to have their stories recorded and saved. It would be in recognition “that for many, it is difficult to build a shared future without coming to terms with the past”.

After consulting Mr Reiss about how they might advance his proposal, Prof Thomas Hachey, executive director of the Centre for Irish Programs at Boston College, wrote to Lord Robin Eames and Denis Bradley detailing the plan, to be conducted in partnership with the Linenhall Library in Belfast.

Prof Hachey has spoken of his disappointment at the receipt of only “a generic response”.

He urged Lord Eames and Mr Bradley to think again lest the opportunity to ever obtain such a unique and potentially valuable resource was permanently lost.

While he did not envisage the proposed Northern Ireland archive being on the same scale as the Shoah Visual History Foundation originally funded by Steven Spielberg, Prof Hachey advised that a Northern Ireland victims archive could achieve the same goals. These aims were:
- To enable individuals, free of external pressure, to record the stories of their experiences so that they cannot be forgotten;
- To provide a measure of consolation and psychological healing by offering affected individuals the opportunity to tell their stories;
- To provide a unique learning tool for others on the human consequences of hatred and violence.

Prof Hachey told The Irish Times he was surprised and disappointed that “there appeared little interest” in the offer to undertake this initiative, not least given Boston College’s reputation for professional and non-partisan conduct. Prof Hachey expected a positive response, because Boston College had already completed an oral history among former paramilitary veterans from the IRA and the UVF who proved amenable to having their perspectives and experiences recorded for posterity.

Prof Hachey stressed he was less concerned about a role for Boston College than with the possibility that "the consultative group may very well have lost an opportunity to help redress the very human need people have to vent their own sentiments about personal loss, or cost, for a tribunal that would incorporate such commentary within a permanent record available to all at a time mutually agreed upon".

The professor of history continued: “It really does not matter whether or not Boston College and the Linenhall Library directs a programme for recording interviews of the many people from all sectarian, political and avocational . . . groups who have been victims of various trauma . . . What . . . is essential is that this opportunity not be lost before the passage of time results in too few survivors.”

According to Prof Hachey: “That would not only preclude these individuals from having the opportunity to vent about, and expound upon, their own experiences, it would also deny posterity access to an archive that would be enormously helpful to future understanding of the phenomenon of victimology.”

Approved by the appropriate government office, he concluded, "a project of this kind . . . could very well represent the consultative group’s most invaluable legacy".

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