



AN GHAEILGE

Why it is so important!

(Based on a lecture delivered by Seán Ó Brádaigh at an Education Seminar in Dundalk on February 20, 2000)

An Ghaeilge – teanga na nGael, teanga na hÉireann. The Irish language is the most central aspect of our identity as Irish people. It is the most indispensable element of our cultural inheritance. All languages

and all cultures are important, just as the diversity of plants or variety of animals are important in the physical world. They are part of the wealth of human inheritance and should not be lightly discarded.

Modern Irish is the direct descendant of one of the most ancient languages in Europe – Old Irish. It is a Celtic language, closely related to Scots Gàidhlig and Manx Gaelg, and also related to Welsh, Cornish and Breton. Irish has been spoken in Ireland since at least 300 BC.

The earliest written literature in Europe was Classical Greek, eg Homer's Iliad (8th Century BC). The second was in Latin, eg Virgil's Aeneid (1st Century BC). Scholars agree that the third oldest written literature in Western Europe was in the Irish language. We have written records of Irish lyric poetry from 700 AD. The oral literature is older still.

IRELAND POSSESSES:

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The eminent English scholar, NK Chadwick has written that Ireland possesses in the Irish language: ***'a greater wealth of carefully preserved oral tradition from the earliest period of our era than any other people in Europe north of the Alps. For this reason the foundation of her early history from traditional materials is of general interest far beyond her political and geographical area, and second only to that of the ancient Greek and Roman world.'***

Irish was once one of the most important languages in Europe and in its day was spoken all the way from Cork and Kerry to the north of Scotland and in the Isle of Man. Poets and bards could travel through all three countries and listen to and enjoy one another's compositions.

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Irish scholars and clerics brought learning and literature, even in Latin, to many parts of the Continent. The German word for a bell, *glocke*, comes from the Irish *clog*. The Irish missionary monks brought that word with them to the Continent a long time ago.

The Brehon Laws (*Dlíthe na mBreithiún*) were an elaborate native system of law governing most aspects of life and human relations – land, property, marriage etc. Irish scholars had codified the grammar of the language by the 12th Century. The Gaeil were indeed a cultured and progressive people.

The Anglo-Norman invasion which began in 1169 was the beginning of the 800 years of conquest and resistance which is not over yet. As the English conquest reached farther and farther into the country, English rule was established and the English language was introduced and over the centuries it became the dominant language. Laws like the Statutes of Kilkenny (1367) were passed to promote the process of anglicisation, by suppressing and replacing Irish speech and customs.

The English poet Edmund Spenser (1552-1599), who acquired large estates of land in Co Cork by plantation wrote:

‘It hath always been the use of the conqueror to despise the language of the conquered and to force him by all means necessary to learn his. The speech being Irish the heart must needs be Irish. The speech being English . . .’

As power passed from the native Irish to the imperial power of England the Irish language and Irish culture generally were weakened and the English language took hold. By 1600 it had become the language of power, law, administration, commerce and education. Nevertheless, most of the common people continued to speak Irish.

The first ever journal in the Irish language – *Bolg an tSolair* – was published by the first generation of Republicans in Belfast (1795) by the *Northern Star* – the Republican organ of the time.



1800 – Irish speaking regions in Ireland (below) coloured black

When the old Gaelic schools were suppressed or died out because there were no longer Irish chiefs to support them, some Irish people managed to get education in the hedge schools:

***'Crouching 'neath the sheltering hedge,
Or stretched on mountain fern,
The master and his pupils met,
Feloniously to learn.'***

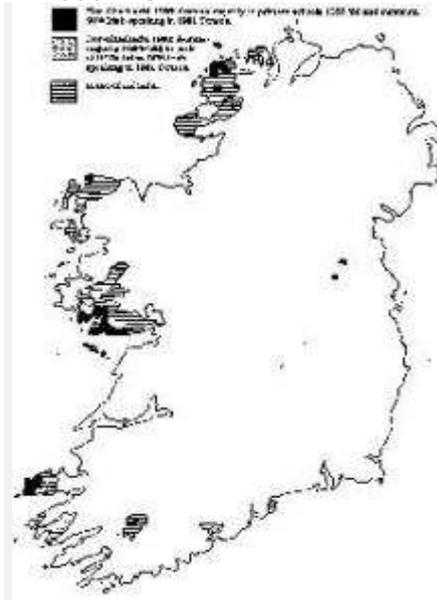


1851

The government in London established the national school system in 1831. Although Irish was the home tongue of almost half the children of Ireland at that time, no Irish was allowed in those schools

and no Irish history was taught. They were not ‘national’ schools at all – they were instruments of anglicisation. The pupils had to learn and repeat this verse:

***‘I thank the goodness and the grace
which on my youth have smiled
and made me in these Christian days
A happy English child.’***



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The bata scóir was tied around many children’s necks and a notch put in it each time he/she spoke Irish. Certain punishment would follow.

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Daniel O’Connell, although himself a native Irish speaker, thought the language was a burden or encumbrance and advised people to change to English. Thomas Davis, the Young Ireland leader, on the other hand, said Irish was the badge of our nationality and should never be lost. But he was in no way narrow-minded. His policy was broad and generous. ‘From whatever stock they have sprung, Celtic, Norman or Saxon,’ he wrote, ‘if men loved and served the country, they were Irish’.

The Great Famine dealt another blow to the Irish language, as it hit hardest, by hunger, disease, death and emigration in Irish-speaking counties like Co. Mayo. People came to associate Irish with poverty and to perceive English as essential for progress. Ireland lacked good leaders.

The Gaelic revival began in earnest with the founding of the Gaelic Athletic Association in 1884 and Conradh na Gaeilge (Gaelic League) in 1893. Pádraic Mac Piarais defined the national objective as an

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Ireland 'not free merely but Gaelic as well; not Gaelic merely, but free as well' when he spoke at the grave of the Fenian, O'Donovan Rossa, in 1915. He pioneered modern education and schooling through Irish and studied bilingual education in Belgium.

The language movement became so strong that it successfully campaigned to have Irish made an essential subject for entry to the colleges of the new National University of Ireland (1908). Many of the County Councils backed the campaign and the new provision took effect in 1913.

During the 1916-21 phase of the national struggle, the Gaelic revival movement was very strong. The business of the first meeting of Dáil Éireann on 21 January, 1919 was conducted entirely in Irish, apart from the reading of important declarations in English and French.

When the Free State was established in the 26 Counties in 1922 a positive Irish language programme was introduced into the schools and Irish was promoted in the public service. Since about 1970 this effort has been gradually abandoned. This is why parents in some areas have organised the Gaelscoileanna, where the children are educated through Irish. This movement is making great strides all over Ireland. The attitude of the two states can be summed up as hostility in the Six Counties and hypocrisy in the 26 Counties. Irish is rarely spoken in Leinster House.

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The last native speaker of Manx Gaelic, Ned Maddrell, died in 1974 at the age of 97. Since then the language enthusiasts have been using tape recordings of the last of the native speakers in classes and schools to try to teach the sounds of the language. We have not yet reached that forlorn situation in Ireland, but since 1950 the last native speakers have died in several Irish counties – Tipperary, Sligo, Roscommon, Cavan, Tyrone, Louth, Antrim. As the Gaeltacht contracts under the pressure of English, the richness of the Irish idiom is disappearing.

The 800 years of invasion and occupation have left us with a prevalent slave mentality, the mind that sees things English as superior. Take the example of the names which have been given to housing estates here in recent years. We have 'Westminster Downs' and 'Windermere Close,' 'Tudor Lawn' and so on. Townlands which had native names for centuries now have estates and roads with names plucked from the heart of England.

This is because the developers buy some of the better class English newspapers and study the property pages. They select fancy English names. The more 'fashionable' these are the higher the price they can expect for the houses they build. That tells us a lot about both the builders and, possibly, their customers – for them, English is better.

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Among some of the Unionists we have to deal with a lot of ignorance and roguery. At the time of the Ulster Plantation (1609) the native Irish were Irish-speaking. Many of the Scots Presbyterian settlers spoke Scots Gàidhlig. The Lowland Scots spoke Lallans (a dialect of English from which we get Ullans) and the English settlers spoke English.

Sammy Wilson (DUP) says Irish is a 'Leprechaun language' and that hurling in Co Antrim is an 'alien game'. This is ignorance of course.

When John Taylor (UUP) says the Unionists are not Irish, but 'British', do not play Irish games, sing Irish songs or speak Irish, he is indulging in a piece of roguery. Most of the placenames of Ulster are of Irish origin – Ard Mhacha, anglicised Armagh, etc. The tunes the Orange bands play are Irish traditional tunes – Rosc Catha na Mumhan and the Boyne Water have the same traditional air.

John McCague may have proclaimed that he was a staunch loyalist, but he could not ignore the fact that his own surname is Irish – Mac Thaidhg in fact, the son of a Teigue! But would he believe it?

We must not forget that some of the great Irish scholars were Protestants, whether Loyalist, Nationalist or Republican in their time. Charlotte Brooke (1740-1793) from Co Cavan collected Irish poetry and published it in her Reliques of Irish Poetry. Douglas Hyde from Co Roscommon, another Protestant, founded Conradh na Gaeilge and was its first Uachtarán. He called on the Irish people to 'de-anglicise' themselves.

The Irish language belongs to all the people of Ireland, and it has the potential to unite them. Those who claim it is divisive do not understand what is involved. Presbyterian ministers preached in Irish in many parts of Ulster throughout the 19th Century and up to the beginning of the 20th Century, because their congregations were Irish speaking. When Queen Victoria visited Belfast the shipyard workers displayed a banner reading 'Céad Míle Fáilte'. We are all Irish on this island. 'Divide and Conquer' was ever an imperialist ploy.

It is generally accepted that the greatest Irish prose writer of the 20th Century was Máirtín Ó Cadhain (1905-1970) from An Spidéal, Co na Gaillimhe. He was a prominent and active Republican in the 1930s and 1940s. He was interned in the Curragh Camp during WWII where he taught his rich Irish to many of his comrades. He later became Professor of Modern Irish in Trinity College, Dublin. He was always a campaigner, agitator and pamphleteer for the language.

When Máirtín Ó Cadhain died in 1970 the mantle of the greatest writer of Irish prose fell on the shoulders of Diarmaid Ó Súilleabháin (1932-1985), a native of Béara, Co Chorcaí, who was a teacher in Guaire, Co Loch Garman.

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Diarmaid was also an active Republican and he served a term in Mountjoy jail in the 1970s. Another famous Republican writer, in Irish and English was Breandán Ó Beacháin (Brendan Behan) who served terms in jail in England and in Ireland in the 1940s.

‘Dá gcaillfí an Ghaeilge do chaillfí Éire’, wrote Pádraic Mac Piarais. ‘If Irish died or was lost, Ireland herself would die also.’ The case for an independent Ireland is based on the historic claim of the Irish nation. We have our own distinct identity and nationality as a people. The core of that identity is our own language, the most Irish thing we possess. We must promote and strengthen Irish. Otherwise, the English language will dominate our thinking and in time we shall become indistinguishable from the English people or the Americans, or become a mid-Atlantic mixture of both. The historic Irish nation with its own identity would be no more.

Beatha teanga a labhairt. For a language to live, people must speak it. It is not sufficient to speak about it. Republicans should make themselves proficient in Irish. It is not that difficult. Bilingualism is the norm for much of the human race, including many who can neither read nor write.

Modern research in Europe, Canada and elsewhere shows, (1) that children between the ages of three and eight can pick up two languages as easily as one, when placed in the right environment and given suitable encouragement; and (2) being bilingual from an early age helps develop mental agility, alertness and communication skills, as well as making it easier for the child to learn other languages later on.

When Irish people travel abroad they are often mistaken for English because they are speaking English among themselves. The Welsh do better than that, as we hear on the streets when they come to Dublin for rugby matches.

Organisations like the GAA, Conradh na Gaeilge, Glór na nGael, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, all help to maintain an Irish identity and should be supported. Republicans, true Republicans should give the lead – learn Irish, speak Irish, put Irish on the posters, leaflets, etc. It is all part of undoing the conquest and building a free nation for our children. We have a certain view of pseudo-Republicans. Let us not ourselves be hypocrites as far as Irish is concerned. Saor agus Gaelach!