

## **God and the Tongue: Protestant Proselytism in Irish**

In Northern Ireland the Irish language has the power to enrage and enthrall. It is regarded by many as a symbol of Catholicism, Nationalism and Republicanism, yet seen by others as a harmless expression of a cherished culture. There is little common ground: for most Unionists/Protestants, Irish is rarely viewed in a positive light. The Protestant people, however, do have an often-overlooked relationship with Irish that has benefited the language itself. Some argue that Irish – a minority language on Europe's fringe – would be in a far less healthy state today had it not been for their interest.

I am researching the attitudes of young Protestants in contemporary Northern Ireland towards Irish, through questionnaires and focus groups, but in this paper I examine proselytism in Irish by the two main Protestant churches, to see what the past can teach us.

Before turning back the clock, let us look briefly at the present. Ideally, the Protestants of the Shankill (a loyalist 'heartland' in west Belfast) would have no difficulty accepting Irish, as the name of their area is, in fact, Irish (McKay, 1999: 130). Such acceptance, however, does not exist in any general way. Why is this so?

Mac Póilin (1990: 1) sets the scene, referring to the question of cultural identity as one of the 'fundamental divisions of our society':

Catholic nationalists speak easily of 'our language', whether they speak Irish or not, while most of the Protestant and unionist community regard that language as alien, even when they have obviously Gaelic surnames... 'Irish' involves both a cultural and political context, so that unionists often find themselves choking on the political package that goes with the word.

## Spreading the Word: Proselytism through Irish

In Plantation Ireland we see Protestant engagement with Irish at many levels but examination reveals an arcane struggle for the hearts and minds of Catholics in which language was part of the new evangelical battleground as the old Gaelic order crumbled. I argue – reluctantly – that through these early engagements we see a possible Republican counter to the contemporary charge by Unionists that they (Republicans) unashamedly use the language as a cultural weapon in that the early conversionists had no abashment when it came to deploying Irish in a strikingly similar way, albeit in a different sort of ‘war’.

Ó Glaisne, a Co. Cork Methodist who wrote the first biography of the Rev Ian Paisley – in Irish – observes (1981: 34):

Christians of varying shades have, alas, acted very strangely in the name of their religion and love. In Ireland, Protestantism has too often been used as a weapon to suppress, to exploit and to exclude rather than something to comfort and enlighten.

The ‘traffic’ between Planters and the Catholics who lived amongst them was, Ó Glaisne suggests (ibid), ‘greater than might be inferred from school histories’. There were two elements to the Plantation, in that some of the incomers were English and others Scots. Many came from western Scotland, which ‘was still largely Gaelic speaking in the seventeenth century’ (Mac Póilin, 1990: 1). Quinn takes up the point (1994: 30):

In the 18th century Galloway was Gaelic speaking. McSkimmin says they spoke some sort of queer Gaelic in the Scotch quarter in Carrickfergus until about 1800, and the local Irish-speaking people could not understand it.

Ó Snodaigh (1995: 30) believes that the Gaelic-speaking contingent of the Scottish Presbyterians who came to Ulster in the seventeenth century possibly formed the majority, and opines that the ‘queer Gaelic’ speakers of Carrickfergus who caused their

Irish neighbours so much difficulty were probably speaking a language closer to Scots Gaelic. The extent to which incomers and natives mingled is often ignored, for English speakers found themselves in minority situations and consequently learned Irish. Inter-group marriage took place and many Gaels converted (Mac Póilin, 1990: 2).

### The Church of Ireland and Irish

Church of Ireland evangelism in Irish has probably not been explored as fully as that of the Presbyterians but offers valuable insights into the collision between Gaelic Ireland and the new Protestant order. Debate on the use of Irish within the Established Church was 'long and sometimes sharp' (Ó Snodaigh, 1995: 35) and it seems that enthusiasm for using Irish for Protestant instruction waxed and waned during the seventeenth century.

As far back as 1570, Queen Elizabeth sponsored a Gaelic typeface to enable the printing of religious material in Irish, but Barnard (1993: 245) notes a tardiness in systematic evangelising in Irish and contrasts this with the haste with which Protestants proselytised in Welsh. 'Irish, in contrast, was despised as the barbarous language of a backward people: at once the source and conduit of error'. Such ambivalence characterized the Established Church's attitude. On occasion, it was prepared to make compromises allowing use of Irish, yet 'hoped it would ultimately die out' (ibid: 247).

The seventeenth century was a turbulent time, with the 1641 rebellion and the Williamite War deepening suspicions. The Church appears never to have achieved a meaningful consensus on promulgation of the faith through Irish and we should note that some of those who favoured such an approach did so with the codicil that, by doing so, the Irish language would eventually be eradicated and the native population convinced of the virtues of English. John Richardson, for example, a cleric at Belturbet in County Cavan in the early eighteenth century, wanted to win over Catholics by teaching them in their own tongue. However:

He reassured his critics that this concession need not last long, because the Irish, once converted to Protestantism, would forsake their distinctive customs, including their language. Accordingly, he could predict, 'in time the Irish language may be utterly abolished'. (Barnard, 1993: 254)

Such examples show that the Church of Ireland's Irish language ministrations were weakly and poorly focused. Saving souls might have been the mission but saving the Irish language was anathema to most and even feared as a potentially unpleasant by-product of evangelism in the demotic.

From a more sympathetic perspective, figures such as William Bedell (1571-1642), a reforming provost of Trinity College in Dublin and, later, bishop of Kilmore, wanted clerical graduates to be able to minister in Irish. While at Kilmore, he oversaw the translation of the Old Testament into Irish (it was published after his death), 'seeking to redefine the objectives of the Church from an exclusive mission to the English and Scots colonists to the creation of an indigenous Protestantism' (Ford: 41). He did, however, engender hostility amongst his fellow Protestants, 'largely a product of his implicit rejection of the essentially Anglicizing assumptions of the Protestant Reformation in Ireland' (ibid)

Or what about Patrick Dunkin (Prebender of Dunsfort in County Down in 1640), who lambasted - in Irish - the 'Roundhead thugs' who forced him to flee to the Isle of Man, destroyed St. Patrick's faith and invented a 'religion without authority' (Mac Póilin, 1990: 2). He excoriated his tormentors in the style of a Gaelic lament. This was not lip-service to Irish - this was personal.

However, the balance sheet shows that Prayer Books and catechisms were printed, to little real effect. Ultimately, 'The Church of Ireland collectively lost interest in evangelising in Irish', says Barnard (1993: 260), who suggests that the failure of the Church's Gaelic lobby may be proof that institutional inertia and theological determinism were too strong and that the lasting interest in the language 'if not dismissed as more

eccentric than important, speaks rather of a relaxed antiquarianism than of evangelical zeal' (ibid: 265).

### The Presbyterian Church and Irish

Since many Planters were Scots Presbyterians who spoke Gaelic, the Church had an advantage, in that, by preaching to its own transplanted flock in Ireland, the language had an intrinsic value beyond that of missionary outreach. Despite the differences between the sister languages of Scots Gaelic and Irish, the Presbyterians had a foothold in Ireland that created a linguistic bridge between them and the Catholic population. In a pamphlet of 1712, one J. Maguire says:

I met many of the inhabitants, especially in the baronies of Glenarm, Dunluce and Killconway, who could not speak the English tongue; and asking them in Irish what religion they professed, they answered they were Presbyterians, upon which I asked them further, how they could understand their minister preaching; to that they answered, he always preached in Irish. (Mac Poilín, 2)

Blaney (1996: 17) says that the pool of Irish-speaking Presbyterians was swelled by Catholic converts, their Celtic names disguised by anglicisation. The 'O' - a Celtic marker - was frequently dropped but 'Mac' remained, and remains, exceptionally common. He says it is clear that there were Presbyterian congregations where Irish/Gaelic was the majority language, although information survives only for North Antrim, Dundalk, and Rademon.

The Church, therefore, needed preachers for its own congregations but also turned to missionary activity. Synod minutes of the early eighteenth century indicate great enthusiasm for the task and a significant number of Irish-speaking ministers. Those whose Irish was not up to scratch for preaching were exhorted to improve their command of the language. After 1720, however, the Synod's energies were consumed by the Non-

Subscription controversy and ‘it was to take more than a century before the Presbyterian Church, as a body, once more gave special account to the Irish language’ (ibid: 27).

Fitzsimons (1949: 257) argues that the Church’s Irish Catechism aimed to proselytise and anglicise. He interprets extracts from the *Church Catechism in Irish* (1722) as indicating that ‘the nature and motives of the proselytizing campaigns...were intended in reality, not for the propagation of religion, but as a means of completing the conquest of the Irish nation’. Instruction to the Irish natives in their own language reappeared as part of Presbyterian missionary policy at the 1833 Synod of Ulster (Fitzsimons, 1949: 258), which took steps to make it incumbent on clerical students to do at least some study in Irish.

Schools, providing education through Irish, were a key part in this new outreach and flourished: a figure of around 300 is indicated in the years 1844-46, before a decline that coincided with the Great Famine. An interesting footnote to the work of the Home Mission schools is the war of words in the Glens of Antrim which began when a local priest attempted to discredit its efforts by alleging that numbers and activity were fabricated. The poisonous exchanges in the so-called Glens Bible War are well covered by Blaney (1996: 110-118) and throw light on tensions in areas where the Catholic Church resented proselytising Protestants who used Irish – a language it had done little to encourage or preserve before that point.

Ultimately, such attempts at conversion met with little success. MacDonagh (1983: 109) says ‘...the drive to proselytise among the Irish-speaking peasantry did not long survive the Great Famine...partly because of scandals and widespread relapses among the converted, and partly because of the dwindling of British financial support’, while McCoy and Scott (2000: 4) put it this way:

Despite some successes, a movement which changed the cultural scene in Scotland was dissipated in Ireland amid political and sectarian strife. In the nineteenth century the Catholic Church perceived the Irish language to be an impediment to the temporal

advancement of its congregation; the hostility of the church to the language rendered Protestant proselytism in Irish a futile endeavour.

Rodgers (1991), indeed, describes the Presbyterian mission to Irish Roman Catholics in the nineteenth century as a 'vision unrealized'.

### The 'other' engagement

To suggest that Protestant clerics were only interested in converting Catholics would be erroneous as many had a no-strings-attached interest in the language – sometimes for its intrinsic worth, sometimes for academic reasons. This tradition represents a strong strand in the Protestant linguistic engagement and endured for centuries. Many prominent figures were churchmen, but their love for Irish was not based on the conversion imperative.

Let us consider the Rev Moses Neilson (1739-1823), a Presbyterian minister who established an academy at Rademon in County Down. Magee (p 64) says the school won a reputation not just for the quality of the tuition but for its liberality, adding: '... in addition to the sons of his own congregation, Moses Nelson prepared young men intended for the Catholic priesthood in Latin, Greek, English, French and many other subjects.' Indeed, one of his students, Fr Luke Walsh, later the priest in north Antrim who sparked the Home Mission controversy, wrote of his warmth for Neilson, 'a man of as great moral worth and sterling integrity as Ireland could boast of...' (1844: 146).

One of Neilson's seven sons, William (1774-1821), became a highly significant figure in the nineteenth century Protestant engagement with Irish and shared his father's values. After training for the ministry in Glasgow, he became minister of Dundalk's Presbyterian congregation in 1799 – his facility in Irish apparently securing his appointment – and soon started a school similar to his father's, again catering for all religions (Magee: 72). Subjects included Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Irish. A formidable academic, he compiled an English grammar as a youth, as well as a textbook on Greek. His *Introduction to the*

*Irish language*, published in 1808, is, however, the work for which he is best remembered. Says Seery (1991: 7):

It was creditably printed for P. Wogan, 15 Lower Ormond Quay, Dublin, and dedicated to the Lord Lieutenant, Philip Earl of Hardwicke. Written by a Presbyterian, dedicated to an Anglican and published by a Roman Catholic, its 112 subscribers embraced all creeds and classes...

The *Introduction* is an important repository of Co. Down Irish, now extinct. It contains the first folktale ever printed in the language, as well as dialogues in the speech of the people, with an English translation. Neilson became Professor of Irish, Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Oriental Languages at Belfast Academical Institution in 1818 and died in April 1821.

A member of the Belfast Literary Society and the Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge, he was also 'associated with the 1819 revival of the Harp Society for blind harpists in Belfast' (Seery: 9). This is significant for, by the nineteenth century, Belfast was blossoming culturally and 'seems to have been full of talented people busily reshaping the politics, science, industry and culture of their time' (Mac Póilin, 1990: 2). This is the next major phase in the Protestant engagement with Irish and a very positive one but falls, alas, outside this paper's scope, but one example nonetheless merits mention.

Robert Shipboy MacAdam (1808-1895) was perhaps the most significant Protestant figure in the broader Irish language movement in nineteenth century Belfast. Indeed, MacAdam is honoured today in the name of the well-known Irish language centre, Cultúrlann MacAdam-Ó Fiaich, on the Falls Road in West Belfast, yet his legacy is little-known outside Irish language circles and certainly not among Protestants in general. MacAdam, an industrialist whose foundry at one time employed more than 250 workers, spoke 14 languages and was involved in many of the city's learned societies. His primary passions, however, were the language, music and archaeology of Ireland. Like other



Protestants of his time, he was fascinated by Irish, collecting manuscripts, folktales and proverbs, even ‘employing scribes from all over Ireland’, people who were famous in their own right. Says Mac Póilin (1990:4):

MacAdam’s achievements have never been properly recognised. He was the prime mover in introducing a question on knowledge of Irish in the 1851 census. In 1852 he organised a major exhibition for the British Association for the Advancement of Science, to ‘...enable strangers from other countries to judge for themselves the nature and extent of our ancient civilisation.’ ... he founded *The Ulster Journal of Archaeology*... he compiled a large English/Irish dictionary... in 1849 he prepared – in Irish – mottoes to welcome Queen Victoria on a visit to the city...[]

### The ‘other’ Churches

Much has been made of Catholic ‘disinterest’ in Irish and the Catholic Church’s involvement in the language was ‘comparatively slight until late in the nineteenth century’ (MacDonagh, 1983: 107). It has even been described as one of the most effective anglicising influences in Ireland, in some cases actively discouraging the use of Irish. Politically, Daniel O’Connell’s exhortations to his followers to learn English are frequently cited and Ó Fiaich (1969: 109) flags up an intriguing contradiction.

The contrast between the attitude of O’Connell and that of Davis [the Young Irelander] towards Irish – O’Connell, of Gaelic and Catholic stock, with a fluent knowledge of the language, seeking to promote English, and Davis, of Anglo-Irish and Protestant stock, with only a smattering of the language, calling for the spread of Irish – has been looked on as one of the great paradoxes of nineteenth-century Irish history. ‘Most orders...failed...to publish in Gaelic, which they sneered at as the demotic of a plebeian, unruly and degenerate society’ (Barnard, 1993: 271). But times changed and Catholic clergy – post-emancipation – became the leaders of a new and powerful political force (Andrews, 2000: 47). Protestants began to withdraw from the Irish language scene as the Home Rule stormclouds gathered and many feared becoming involved in the political

struggle (Ó Neill, 1966: 66), while the foundation of the Gaelic League in 1893 saw the coalescence of Catholic values with a confident Nationalism which wholeheartedly embraced the language.

As a brief diversion, I would like to mention the Society of Friends – or Quakers – as true ‘Friends of the Gael’. I recently discovered that in 1678 a lady called Katherine Norton gave a sermon in Lurgan in Irish (Chapman, 1997). As I am from Lurgan, this is of particular interest. A fascinating lady, she was born in Coleraine, moved to Barbados, was won over to the Quaker faith by its founder George Fox and returned to spread the word (Malcolm, 2004: 4). During the Famine, the Society provided relief to the destitute but, unlike other Churches, made no attempt to win converts. Joan Johnson’s account of Quaker Famine Relief in Letterfrack tells movingly of how James and Mary Ellis gave up their comfortable English life to support the poor of Connemara.

### Rapprochement?

In the end, the two main Protestant Churches’ attempts to win the hearts of Ireland’s Catholics were a limited success. Many did indeed make the leap of faith but most rejected the – sometimes incentivised – overtures and clung fast to the mass rock. An interesting diversion is the ‘sort-of’ accommodation which the Protestants and Catholics of Co. Donegal were able to make. For many years divided by faith, they were nonetheless united in language.

Far from the political centres of Belfast and Dublin, Protestants still had a ‘real life’ engagement with the Irish language, something noted by the celebrated Co. Donegal writer Séamus Ó Grianna, who offers an interesting insight into attitudes during his youth at the turn of the nineteenth/twentieth centuries in his autobiographical short-story collection *Nuair a Bhí Mé Óg* (repr. 1979). In *Albanaigh An Phointe* (Protestants of the Point) he looks at his neighbours in the Rosses area of west Donegal:

Is dóiche gur iaróibh na hAlban a bhí sa chéad dream a tháinig. Ach sa tír s’againne anois is ionann Albanach agus Protastúnach, is cuma cén tír arb as é. Agus is ionann Gael agus Caitliceach... Tá na hAlbanaigh ar an Phointe le trí chéad bliain. D’fhoghlaim siad an Ghaeilge ar an Phointe. Agus ní labhradh siad ach í go dtí cupla scór bliain ó shin...Ní raibh mioscais ar bith riamh eadar na Gaeil is na hAlbanaigh fá ghnoithe creidimh san áit s’againne. Ach bhíodh siad amuigh ar a chéile ó am go ham de thairbhe polaitíochta. (ibid:143)

It is probable that the first group which came were from Scotland. But in our area now Scot and Protestant mean the same thing, whatever country he’s from. And Gael and Catholic are the same... The Scots have been on the Point for 300 years. They learned Irish on the Point. And they spoke nothing but it (Irish) until around 40 years ago... There was never any disagreement between the Gaels and the Scots about religious matters in our area. But they used to fall out now and again because of politics. [my translation]

Ó Grianna mentions that the way the ‘Scots’ spoke Irish had been a source of gentle amusement for the ‘Gaels’ but, in general, paints a picture of an area where people lived and traded in harmony most of the time. Tensions only rose during periods of political or military activity overseas; during the Crimean War, for example (ibid:144). Interestingly, Ó Grianna claims that the Point Protestants were in favour of Home Rule, having been swayed to the cause by ‘a minister from Ballybofey’, who convinced them that self-determination would be to their benefit (ibid:145). It may be significant that Isaac Butt, founder of the Home Rule movement, was the son of a Church of Ireland clergyman from the Glenfin area close to Ballybofey (Loughlin, 1999:65). Disharmony in the Rosses – and an amusing dispute over siring rights to a highly-prized bull – did resurface during the Boer War (Ó Grianna, 1979:148), when the ‘Scots’ sided with England and the ‘Gaels’ with the Boers.

### Re-engagement

‘Protestants don’t like and don’t speak Irish!’ That’s the common perception today, but the valuable work conducted by McCoy (2000, 2005), for example, illustrates that some Protestants are prepared to engage with Irish on their own terms. The battle of the faiths may be over (indeed, in an increasingly secular Ireland, priests and ministers no longer hold the exalted position they once did), but a few Protestants have discovered that the language can offer something that is not necessarily at odds with their sense of Britishness. Proselytism is no longer the issue. And even the ‘issue’ of identity is up for debate.

As one informant stated (McCoy and Ní Bhaoill, 2005:40):

It would be nice to see Protestants accepting that we’re part of this country. We’ve lived here all our lives, and our families date back centuries. Like, this language is as much ours, as much a part of our identity, as it is of somebody of a different religion. This language was here before any of this conflict between Protestant and Catholic. I think that’s something that would do an awful lot for the advance of this country and the advance of community relations...

A recent article in the Methodist Newsletter (June, 2005: 15) provides us with a delightful insight into a new multi-cultural Ireland, where issues of faith and language are no longer loaded with politics and proselytism. To mark the opening of a new extension to Killarney Methodist Church in May, the service included presentations by the Sunday school and the African Ladies’ Choir, as well as a scripture reading in Irish. The Killarney Methodist congregation was founded in 1810 by Irish-speaking preachers. Thirty years, ago, however, the last members emigrated and no congregation remained, with services only being held for summer visitors with the help of Cork Methodists. But in the late 1990s the building was renovated and lay pastors appointed:

Since then, the congregation has grown as new members have joined – local people, newcomers from other countries and asylum-seekers. The congregation has benefited from people of different cultures and church backgrounds.

The story of the Killarney Methodists is one of encouragement, offering hope that ‘people of different cultures and church backgrounds’ can live and worship together. In this context, the Irish language, as illustrated in the report above, still has its place – but respected in its own right, not used as a tool for conversion.

### Conclusion

Before I draw my own conclusion, Barnard offers a telling observation:

If, in the end, those eager to use Irish made little impact on the Protestant mission, they fostered enquiries into Gaelic, which, though often partisan and fanciful, nevertheless excited greater curiosity about Ireland’s antiquities and indigenous culture (1993: 244).

It is tempting to look at Church of Ireland proselytism in Irish as an unsuccessful, half-hearted socio-religious experiment but to see the Presbyterian engagement with the language as natural and organic, culminating in the revival, when interest in Gaelic moved beyond the purely spiritual dimension. Despite Fitzsimons’ reservations, I believe that the Presbyterian Church had a natural, people-centred affinity with the Irish language and this helps explain why so many of its members dominated the Belfast Gaelic revival of the nineteenth century.

Essentially, our understanding of the early Protestant engagement with Irish has been lost. Only by understanding our history can we understand our present and the story of Protestant proselytism illuminates current attitudes. There were indeed clerics who loved the language for itself but, equally, there were others who regarded it as a temporary inconvenience, something to be tolerated until the weakly-flickering flame of Gaeldom finally expired. At the very least, however, proselytising Protestants – whatever their reasons – kept the language on the Irish agenda, something the Catholic Church appears not to have done until the eleventh hour.

Today, in our altogether more secular society, we have to learn that, if our ancient Gaelic flame is to be rekindled, we all have our part to play, regardless of religion.

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