Aodán Mac Póilin

Our tangled speech

essays on language and culture

People are rarely neutral about the Irish language. In Northern Ireland it is a topic which usually creates more heat than light. While attitudes have softened somewhat over the years, polarised views about the language are remarkably persistent. Historic and contemporary efforts to maintain the language have had varied success, but the key goal of creating new sustainable language communities, where inter-generational language transmission is the norm, has yet to be achieved. Building such communities requires the support and engagement of central and local government, broadcasters, educators and a wide range of other interest groups. It requires a shift in attitudes, appropriate language policies, an in-depth examination of our past and a willingness to learn from it.

This book seeks to address some of these issues. It provides a comprehensive overview of the Irish language revival north and south, examining its successes and failures. It gives a fascinating account of historical attitudes towards the Gael and examines the complexities of linguistic and cultural identity.

Aodán Mac Póilin, Director of the ULTACH Trust, a cross-community Irish language organisation based in Belfast, was uniquely well-positioned to answer these and many more related questions. He provides a comprehensive, insightful and thought-provoking survey of the challenging complexities of culture and language in Northern Ireland. These essays, written between 1990 and 2011, are well-argued, witty and refreshingly honest. This sometimes controversial but always compelling collection will illuminate and stimulate debate. It will appeal to the language activist, academic and general reader alike.

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essays on language and culture

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Contents

INTRODUCTION vii
Taig talk xviii
Our tangled speech:
Languages in Northern Ireland 8
'Something of a cultural war':
Linguistic politics in Northern Ireland 22
What about Ullans?:
Ulster Scots and the Irish language 42
Language maintenance, language revival 80
'Spiritual Beyond the Ways of Men':
Images of the Gael 98
Plus ça change:
The Irish language and politics 126
The Protestant Gaelic Tradition 144
The Irish language in Belfast until 1900 158
Irish in Belfast, 1892–1960 186
Belfast in 20th-Century literature in Irish 214
The Pobal Feirste Neo-Gaeltacht:
Lessons to learn? 240
Irish language television in Northern Ireland 266
The BBC and the Irish language 286
Irish and other origins of surnames 300
ENDNOTES 311
INDEX 328

Introduction

When I think of Aodán Mac Póilin, two images come immediately to mind. The first is when we first met, back in the mid-sixties, on the steps of Belfast Central Library in Royal Avenue.

I was one of a number hanging out on those steps. Aodán was not the kind of bloke who 'hung out', though. He was dressed in the iconic tweed jacket by which he was known throughout the highways and byways of this and every other country he graced. Slightly aloof maybe, or shy, he seemed just that little bit older but assuredly much wiser than the rest of us. As our paths crossed again a few years later at what was then called the New University of Ulster, it was obvious that Aodán was merely keeping an eye on our mischief. We became very close friends.

Which brings to mind my other enduring image of Aodán – head tilted upwards, eyes closed, singing to his heart's content, and the adoration of his assembled audience, a song of many verses, interpreted with his characteristically artful flourish. It was his very own *sean-nós*. And this is what made him so special. Aodán was a singular man. There is no other version available. He was, and will always remain, a one-off. As a passionate nationalist, he brought those who may have been hostile, or uncertain, or simply ignorant, into contact with the living soul of the Irish language and culture. When it came to verifying or musing upon the meaning of the name of a townland, a street, a river or a surname, Aodán was the 'go-to' man. The etymology of our landscape was at his fingertips as well as his powerful but discreet ability to convey the availability, value and pertinence of Gaelic culture to all our identities. This secular belief lay at the core of Aodán's one-man Enlightenment. He lit up all he met with his wit, passion, decency and

civic goodwill. His nationalism was pragmatic, open-ended and inclusive. It was born of a wise and people-centred understanding of his own place and the very many different hopes, aspirations and indeed prejudices of *all* the people.

There was a steeliness too, and those who blocked him – out of irrational sectarianism, partisan power-play or bureaucratic complacency – felt not the lash of his tongue but the chastening realisation that they were wrong and needed to take a good hard look at themselves. It was the moral force of his good nature that carried the day. In an interview for the Northern Visions archive, Aodán, in typically modest fashion, remarked: 'I was very good at writing letters to the government'. Indeed, he was. But there was much more substance to him than this typically self-effacing comment allows. Since his passing in December 2016 many have spoken of Aodan's courage and integrity, his strategic vision and his pioneering approach to cross-community engagement, his expertise across a wide range of interests and his great facility to share that knowledge in interesting and entertaining ways. These skills underpinned his work as Director of the Ultach Trust, a small organisation that had a disproportionately large influence.

Much of Ultach's work was driven by Aodán's strategic vision. He understood that for a small organisation, progress was dependent on leverage and persuasion, that it required flexibility, innovation, dedication and at times a great deal of courage. He also recognised that it required analysis and creativity in equal measure, and an ability to marshal persuasive arguments, build trust, seize opportunities, and forge alliances.

In the mid-1970s, he and his partner, Áine Andrews, decided to build a house in the Shaw's Road Gaeltacht in West Belfast. They committed to raise their family as Irish-speakers and were very involved in the establishment of the first Irish-medium school and preschool there. Aodán was the Chair of Bunscoil Phobal Feirste, the founding Irish-medium primary school. There were numerous meetings about the school and related matters and at one point, Aodán had decided that it might be taking over his life, so he skipped one of the monthly meetings. On his return, he found that in his absence he had been made letter-writer-in-chief. He spent over ten years writing to the relevant authorities to try and secure funding for the school. It was a slow and

frustrating business, as a hard-hitting section of a letter to the then Permanent Secretary of the Department of Education reveals:

> A chara,
>
> The boorishness and incompetence of the Department of Education at Principal Officer level continues to sadden but not surprise us.
>
> On 1st of Nov 1982 we received a letter containing the mandatory three excuses for refusing maintained status. As with all your other three-pronged excuses, one point had a certain superficial plausibility, one was undiluted nonsense, and the last had some validity, although we do not necessarily agree with it.

As Director of the Ultach Trust, he laid much of the groundwork for cross-community engagement in the early 1990s. His first publication for the Trust was a pamphlet outlining the history of Protestant involvement in the language (see Chapter 8 of this volume). He also understood the need to meet with groups on the ground, to provide accurate and accessible information and, importantly, the space for people to engage with the language on their own terms. Support for cross-community projects in the early 1990s included the funding of a range of ground-breaking Irish language classes: the Ulster People's College, Glencairn Community Association, Shankill Women's Centre, Greenway Women's Centre, Downtown Women's Centre, the YMCA and the Linen Hall Library. His work also brought him to prisons, community centres and Orange halls.

Aodán was a passionate and formidable advocate for the Irish language. In this he sought to build alliances, to work with and influence relevant statutory and non-statutory organisations to promote the language. Under his leadership, the Trust campaigned widely to improve infrastructural state support for the language in the education system and the arts. During its first decade, the Trust invested almost half its funding in support of Irish-medium schools and preschools, amounting to almost three-quarters of a million pounds. Two years of Ultach funding, in partnership with the Arts Council, for the Falls Road Cultúrlann Mac Adam Ó Fiaich in the early 1990s has enabled the organisation to access significant core funding ever since.

The Trust campaigned in other areas and, as is widely recognised, it played a crucial role in Irish language broadcasting. A 13-year campaign initiated by Ultach's 1990 *Report on the Provision of Irish Language Television in Northern Ireland* helped secure a fund of £3,000,000 per annum for Irish language productions. Aodán's prescience led to early lobbying for the cross-border inclusion of TG4, along with RTÉ 1 and 2, on fledgling NTL cable services which were being introduced in the early 1990s. He argued for better terrestrial access to TG4 through boosting transmitter signals, while also understanding that a case had to be made for TG4's position on the digital spectrum to future-proof access to the channel. Later, he made the case to the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure to run a television training course which would provide a trained workforce for a future Irish language broadcasting sector. By-products of the establishment of the Irish Language Broadcast Fund were the injection of an additional £3 million per annum into the local economy and an additional half million per annum of BBC expenditure on Irish language programming. The latter was largely a result of Aodán's many interventions on the issue of public service provision by the BBC.

Aodán represented the Ultach Trust on many different cultural institutions. Between 1990 and 1997, Ultach provided administrative support to the Northern Ireland Subcommittee of the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages and campaigned for UK recognition of the Charter, as well as holding membership in both the UK and Irish Committees. Many of the provisions for Irish in the Good Friday Agreement are based on the wording of the Charter, which was eventually ratified by the UK in 2002. Other committee work and membership included the Cultural Traditions Group, the Community Relations Council, the Seamus Heaney Centre, the Broadcasting Council for Northern Ireland and other cross-Border initiatives of one kind or another.

Aodán's remarkable scholarship should not be overlooked. He wrote and lectured extensively on cultural and linguistic politics, language planning, education, broadcasting, literature and the arts, and was much in demand as a speaker. He edited *Styles of Belonging: The Cultural*

Identities of Ulster (1992) and The *Irish Language in Northern Ireland* (1997) and co-edited *Ruined Pages, New Selected Poems of Padraic Fiacc* (1994/revised ed. 2012) and the bilingual short-story collection *Bás in Éirinn* (2012); he was Irish language editor of *Krino: The Review* (1986–96), and a member of the editorial panel of *An Leabhar Mór – The Great Book of Gaelic* (2002), a collection of the best of ancient and contemporary Gaelic poetry in Ireland and Scotland. Aodán was also a highly accomplished translator of Irish language literature; in particular, the poetry of leading Irish language poets. Among his final essays were 'Ghost of Metrical Procedures: Translations from the Irish' for the *Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry* (2012) and a powerful, authoritative reading of Aogán Ó Rathaille for *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets* (2017).

The cultural and historical links between Ireland and Scotland – that 'parallel universe', as one of his good Scottish friends called it – were one of his passions. He had been a founding member of Iomairt Cholmcille, the Columba Initiative, an organisation which promotes and builds on links between Gaelic Scotland and Ireland. It set the standards for Scottish and Irish Gaelic collaborations. With the Colmcille organisation he brought *The Leabhar Mór – The Great Book of Gaelic* exhibition to the Ulster Museum.

Aodán by his own admission was an Irish language fanatic, dressing the part in his famous tweed jackets, but for him Ulster Scots was also a part of his heritage. In the kind of Belfast speech he grew up with, he hirpled and hirstled and sprachled and cowped into seughs. He redd up the house and hepped up against the cold. A bad smell was a stoich and a worse smell was a hogo. People who weren't liked could be grulshy, gaukey or gormless, or were geeks, gaums, gaunches, gits, glumphs, glipes, gorbs, gomerils, glunters, girns, gabs, and those were only the words beginning with g.

He had plans to produce a bilingual folklore reader and had already produced a booklet on the tales associated with the Dundrum Bay area of County Down. In describing the 'Death of Fergus Mac Léide', king of Ulster, he noted that 'This is a burlesque, Rabelaisian, and sometimes indecent later version of the earlier story of Fergus and the sea-monster

of Dundrum Bay. The name Fergus means "manly vigour", which may explain some of the passages.' It was important to Aodán that these stories were available to the current generation in all their salty richness, and that new translations would redress in some way the widespread neutering of these tales during the Victorian and the language revival periods, when the church held sway over such matters.

Aodán described himself as a cultural ecologist – someone who believed that the death of every language and culture is a loss to the world. He talked about Irish being the linguistic and cultural equivalent of one small to medium-sized tropical rainforest. He would say that it was not just any old rainforest; it was our rainforest, our unique responsibility, and that if Irish did not survive in Ireland, it would be lost to the world.

Matthew Arnold once wrote that the Celts have difficulty in accepting the despotism of fact. Aodán always took that as a compliment. He was happy to be labelled as an unreasonable eccentric who refused to yield to the tyranny of fact. Those faced with a despotic fact had two choices: give in, or simply imagine a new and better actuality, and then will it into being. He belonged to that willed reality, and often said that it was one of the few things in his life that had given him complete and unambivalent satisfaction. That satisfaction was very much rooted in the fact that with his partner Áine, he was part of a unique urban Gaeltacht in West Belfast, where his daughter Aoife still lives and has passed the language on to the next generation. He was immensely proud that that willed reality was living on when similar experiments in other Irish cities had sadly failed.

Aodán's great love of all kinds of literature, including all the poetry we had spent half a century reading and talking about, reminds us that he was an inspired teacher too and made the exchanging of knowledge, in whatever setting he found himself, something to be enjoyed, not endured.

He was selfless and committed, As Mark Adair, Head of Corporate and Community Affairs, BBC Northern Ireland, remarked:

> Aodán was someone of great integrity, insight and fun. He made the world a better place in so many different ways. Knowing him was a privilege, a pleasure and an education. And his passing leaves us without one of life's enhancers. Aodán has been a hero of mine since I first met him ... His example will remain one to follow and admire.

His close family and wide circle of friends and colleagues lost a loving and guiding light. Our culture lost one of its indomitable spirits. Aodán's legacy will live on and will retain the self-same magical value for all who were lucky enough to know him.

Our tangled speech, this remarkable collection of essays by Aodán Mac Póilin, reminds us what a great loss his passing in 2016 is for all who believe in cultural inclusivity. At a time when some are willing to seek confrontation in cultural matters and to use literary and cultural traditions as simply a form of political struggle, Aodán, as these scholarly essays abundantly reveal, sought to find pathways to a real and complex understanding of the different traditions which make up our cultural life.

Subtle, alert, witty and bearing his scholarship and learning lightly, Aodán's essays (written between 1990 and 2011) make it absolutely clear that 'the survival of the Irish language into the future is among the most critical cultural issues facing Irish society'. Ever the realist, he is also clear on one key and unavoidable challenge: 'the alienation of a large section of the people in the north-east of the island from the language'.

Indeed, *Our tangled speech* can also be read as a kind of social pathology of Northern Irish society and its relationship with the rest of the island of Ireland as well as with the rest of the UK; a place where, he says, 'taking offence is something of an inter-communal competitive sport' and 'Languages encompass much more than their words'. Aodán knows what he's talking about when he reflects upon 'our society' and 'in particular its unhealthy obsession with exclusive ownership of anything that is of value'.

He dedicated his life to an alternative view: 'to imagine that society in Northern Ireland could learn to embrace linguistic diversity without reductive political baggage', while simultaneously knowing what he was up against locally, nationally and in the wider diplomatic battles for the

survival of Irish within the British state. 'Political agendas at their best tend to cramp cultural debate; at their worst they become nothing more than a battle-ground for ideological tub-thumping.'

Confronting the difficulties surrounding the inherent value of Irish as both language and culture, his essays are written out of long and hard experience, as activist and as writer, as a passionate nationalist and as a well-read European. But, as he states here, he never lost sight of the goal: 'I am firmly committed to the common heritage approach'.

The struggle for the language's survival is examined in these benchmark essays alongside the recurring conflict between nationalism and unionism, and the contradictory – at times ludicrous – caricatures that both ideologies, and their respective religious inputs of Protestantism and Catholicism, produced within the geographical realities of language change and exchange over many centuries. History like language is ever changing, and the cross-fertilisation which Aodán charts within Belfast, for instance, deserves to be a set text in every secondary school across the North.

He is aware of 'Just how difficult it is to create new viable language communities in the context of a largely monoglot society which speaks one of the world's dominant tongues', but he is also keenly conscious of how his own contemporaries are 'embracing of an ersatz "British" cultural identity' without really thinking about what they are doing or considering, without any loss of face, the options.

The reason for this blustering and often unattractive identification with some of the worst features of Britishness rather than the best is (in Aodán's words) partly because 'there is often an association, or perceived association, between the language movement and resistance to the [northern] state, and, for many people, their initial engagement with the language was sparked by an oppositional impulse'. It is a lasting perception that is methodically examined in *Our Tangled Speech*.

But so is the historical reality which underpins the tragic bass-note at the core of this defining work. One cannot but be moved by some of the details revealing the fate of the language: 'In the fifty years between 1841 and 1891, the number of Irish-speakers in Ireland declined from

close to three million to three quarters of a million'. And in his subtle probing of the demographic backgrounds of Irish-speakers in 19th-century and pre-Partition Ireland, he reaches an almost apocalyptic vision.

In '1820, Christopher Anderson estimated that there were nearly 93,000 Irish-speakers in County Down, more than 56,000 in Antrim, a similar number in Armagh, and approaching 28,000 in Derry. Tyrone has a massive 141,000.' How this history has been shockingly erased for so long from the educational and cultural institutions of what needs to be a mature civic democracy is touched upon elsewhere in these essays. One possible start is with Aodán's statement: 'The identification of Irish with a political ideology is a fairly recent invention: the language movement did not become overtly politicised until the twentieth century'.

The occasions of this identification, the highs and lows of the language 'movement' in Northern Ireland and its mirror image in the development of Ulster Scots, and the various strands of the unionist myth-kitty find a sympathetic, if at time ironical, turn of phrase in Aodán's humane treatment of the narcissism of small differences.

There are several memorable moments included here awaiting fictional or theatrical representation, such as Douglas Hyde's visit to Belfast around 1912 or the circumstances surrounding Éamon de Valera's visit later on in the 20th century, not to mention some of the figures who feature in Aodán's wonderful accounts, including Flann O'Brien's uncle and the shenanigans that characterised the local cultural scene and its intra-dialect squabbles from the 18th century onwards. But this book is not exclusively about Northern Ireland. It is itself a representative volume showing how language and culture wars interact in one westerly part of Europe and how this example is critically important to our understanding of how language and culture will survive into the future: *all* our futures. Aodán does not shun the developments of language and culture into unexpected forms; he welcomes these. As a translator of distinction himself, his sense of language as a poetic and physical resource like song and story-telling was always finely tuned and artful.

Discussing the poetry of Belfast poet Gearóid Mac Lochlainn, he clearly endorses the development of a new, deeply modern 'street argot',

not unlike the earlier shifts he charts in work on the 20th-century prose and poetry of Máirtín Ó Cadhain and Seán Ó Ríordáin:

> when the Belfast Irish-speaking community was founded in the 1960s, there emerged, for the first time, a generation of urban native speakers whose first priority was communication; not grammar, not accuracy, not vocabulary, not nativist idiom. They developed, in fact, a creole, simplified grammar, restricted register, code-switching, interlinguistic interference, a series of created and accidental neologisms.

Aodán notes how 'commenting with both affection and self-irony on the Babu Irish of the Jailtacht' brings a different kind of energy into the language. But for all that, it is important in conclusion to state clearly and emphatically that *Our Tangled Speech* transcends the site-specific rootedness of the issues discussed here. Aodán Mac Póilin brought to his engagement in and understanding of these issues a wide and well-stocked intellectual understanding of other languages and literatures. He was certainly one of the best-read individuals I knew. His foremost critical – and emotional – ties were, however, to his native city, and these are signposted in one very simple sentence: 'The oldest stratum of Gaelic Belfast survives in the palimpsest of its place names'. Aodán Mac Póilin was a precious custodian of all the various parts of this magnificent speech.

GERALD DAWE

DÚN LAOGHAIRE, 2018

Taig talk

In the year before his passing, Aodán had begun to prepare an introduction for this collection of essays, which we include here. It begins with extracts from a small study of Protestant attitudes to the language, which was conducted in Derry in 1994.

The initial quote illustrates the robust negative attitudes expressed by participants at that time and serves to point up the distance travelled by many in the intervening years. As Aodán notes, most of the essays in this collection wrestle with the thorny issue of how to value, maintain and promote a minority language, which is our shared heritage, in what remains a contested cultural space.

Taig talk

The following extract is from a small-scale survey on Protestant attitudes to the Irish language carried out in 1994 on behalf of Naíscoil na Rinne, an Irish language group based in Derry. The interviewee, 'Mark', was a 19-year-old unemployed Belfast man.

Question: Have you, or any member of your family learned the Irish language?
Mark: No.
Question: Would you ever consider learning it?
Mark: No.
Question: Why not?
Mark: Because it's Taig[1] talk, that's why.
Question: Why did you say that?
Mark: Because only Taigs talk it, that's why.
Question: Given the current peace situation, could you ever see a time when it could be used in the unionist community?
Mark: No way, it's for the Taigs and not us.

The interviewer presented Mark with a list of 36 words, ranging from the affirmative to the hostile, asking him to pick the five he thought were most appropriate to describe the Irish language. Mark picked out 'anger', 'Catholic', 'republican', 'dead', 'sectarian'. The interview continued:

Question: Why did you give those responses to that question?
Mark: Because that's what I feel about it, and that's what you asked me to tell you.
Question: You also said that you hated anyone using it. Why?
Mark: Because they're all in the IRA and I'm a loyalist, and that's the story.

Question. Would you be suspicious of anyone using it?
Mark: Yes.
Question: What images do you have of those using it?
Mark: They're all Taigs.

There is a short note at the bottom of the page: 'Interview duration – 11 minutes. It was abandoned after the interviewer received a lot of vitriolic abuse from the respondent'.[2]

Such a level of hostility to a fragile language that had been spoken on the island of Ireland for at least two and a half thousand years is disappointing, but in Northern Ireland in the 1990s, was not so very unusual. Indigenous minority languages can be contentious enough anywhere in the world. Speakers of dominant languages, particularly monolingual speakers, respond to them in a range of ways. On the negative end of the scale, responses can range from fear, loathing and contempt to mild dislike, impatience and bewilderment. Indifference, when it is not a disguised form of hostility, may be simply a matter of unawareness. The positive end of the scale can drift by tiny incremental steps from curiosity, through unfocused benevolence, towards a high level of either genuine or tokenistic support. Societies reflect this range of views: in some jurisdictions, languages are actively suppressed, marginalised or ignored; in others they receive a greater or lesser degree of state assistance.

The issue of whether or not an indigenous minority language is worth maintaining is not confined to the parish pump politics of a tiny society of one and a half million people. It is, in fact, an issue of global importance. The future of most of the 6,000 or more languages in the world today is insecure; at current rates of attrition, at least 90% of them will have disappeared or be on the point of disappearing by the end of this century.

The Celtic languages of the archipelago referred to as the British Isles, Great Britain and Ireland, or, by the ultra-circumspect, 'these islands' were once, at a time when they were vibrant and not in the least bit fragile, subject to enormous hostility from a centralising state.

A couple of 17th-century examples from Scotland may stand as representative for all. In December 1616, the Scottish Privy Council passed an Act to ensure that: 'the Irische language, whilk is one of the cheif and principall causes of the continewance of barbarite and incivilitie amongis the inhabitantis of the Ilis and Heylandis, may be abolishit and removeit'.[3] And in a wonderfully revealing phrase, an Act of 1695 had provisions for 'rooting out the Irish language, and other pious uses'.[4] The word 'Irish', however it is spelt, may surprise the reader, but most sources in English and Scots referred to Scottish Gaelic as 'Irish' until towards the end of the 18th century. Irish and Scottish Gaelic are closely related and there is an interesting debate – for those who find such issues interesting – about whether they are separate languages or variants of each other. The term in the above quotations, however, was used not as a pedantic exercise in fine-tuned linguistic distinction, but with derogatory intent. Calling their language 'Irish' implied that the Gaelic-speaking Highlanders, selflessly – indeed self-destructively – loyal, at least to the Stuart line, were in their hearts as disloyal as the Irish.

That was then. Today Irish is the first official language of the Republic of Ireland: a not unmixed blessing, but preferable to its former status. In Great Britain Welsh is supported by comprehensive legislation and significant funding, and support for Scottish Gaelic has advanced considerably since the 1980s. The social and political environment in which they now exist is – generally speaking – at the benevolent end of the spectrum, and there is a vaguely apprehended consensus within Great Britain and in the Republic of Ireland that these survival languages are good things, worthy of support.

There is no such consensus in Northern Ireland. As the interview with Mark shows, there is an intense antipathy to the Irish language among some sections of the unionist population. While the scale of the survey was tiny, the transcripts of the interviews – with random members of the population – convey better than the cold statistics of a major survey the human face of that antipathy. Non-natives may need some background information to interpret why something that most civilised people would see as an innocuous bit of cultural heritage would have elicited loathing and contempt, and possibly fear, from an unemployed teenager.

One explanation is that the issue which dominates all others in this society is whether Northern Ireland remains in the United Kingdom or becomes integrated into a united Ireland. Mark therefore interpreted every question in the survey as a constitutional question; his every answer represented a position on the constitutional issue. It is also necessary to realise that there is a high correlation between religious identity and political affiliation in Northern Ireland. In practical terms, this translates into an almost immutable perception that Protestant equals unionist equals loyalist, and Catholic equals nationalist equals republican. Irish-speakers, it is generally believed, belong to the latter group, and Mark was not alone in believing that they are also likely to be members or supporters of the IRA.

Mark provided the most dramatic interview in the survey, but he was by no means unique. Working-class interviewees in particular gave a similar, if rather less fierce, pattern of responses, but Anita, a 36-year-old civil servant, thought Irish was 'more of a Catholic thing, isn't it?' and chose the words 'divisive, obsolete, irrelevant, gibberish' to describe it.[5] One 17-year-old girl, who thought the Irish language was 'basically more for Taigs than us', when asked if she had seen any Irish language programmes on the television, responded:

> I have never noticed any, but I am sure if they were on the television my da would have them off right away. He wouldn't stand it. He is not what you would call a supporter of anything Irish. He wouldn't even watch the Irish playing football, and he loves football.[6]

This type of response is not universal. Within a short number of years, after the Peace Process had been more or less nailed down, a major survey carried out in April 2000 found that only 21% of Protestants regarded the Irish language and culture as 'very offensive' or 'fairly offensive'.[7] It is significant, and symptomatic of the mindset of those who framed the question, that it was posed purely in negative terms – the most positive response allowed to the question was 'very inoffensive'. Or to put it another way, the notion of unionists reacting positively to the language was so far from their expectations that they didn't even consider it.

The following essays look at the historical, ideological and political contexts which left the language, once spoken throughout the entire island, in a very precarious position. Some examine why the present polarised situation developed, some concentrate on how the political and social forces of our own time impact on the language, and some explore how it may be possible to move away from current simplicities into something that would be both more complex and less fraught. A few of them look at those courageous people who stood against the current of their own time; in particular the small group of Protestant language activists in 19th-century Belfast, and the minority of 20th-century language activists who strove, against the odds, to keep the language revival movement inclusive.

The original versions of these essays were written between 1990 and 2011, mostly by request. Inevitably, they contained recycled material, and in preparing them for this publication I have excised some repetitions, dropped some material and transposed other material to different essays.

The essays are accompanied by a fair amount of scholarly apparatus, and most of the citations are carefully referenced. They contain no deliberate misinformation or distortion of evidence, and I have made strenuous efforts to maintain accuracy and as high a level of objectivity as I can manage. The essays are not, however, scholarly in intent. Nor, I hope, are they simply polemical. They address two issues which I believe to be of fundamental importance. The first of these is my belief that the survival of the Irish language into the future is among the most critical cultural issues facing Irish society, but that discussions around whether or not it is worth maintaining rarely rise above simplistic, knee-jerk responses, on both sides of the debate, that can ultimately be traced to the controversies of an entirely different era. The second, related issue is the alienation of a large section of the people in the north-east of the island from the language, the causes of that alienation, and possible ways of bringing as many of them as possible towards at least an understanding of why some of us are passionately committed to its maintenance, or, at best, to recruit them as fellow advocates or fellow activists.

Our tangled speech

Languages in Northern Ireland

This paper was presented during the Languages of Ulster exhibition at the Linen Hall Library in the early 2000s. It explores the importance of linguistic diversity and makes a case for maintaining that diversity through the adoption of a cultural ecology model. A vivid account of the rich contribution of Ulster Scots and the ways in which Irish, Ulster Scots and Hiberno-English have interacted to form Ulster speech is presented. The essay concludes with a short summary of the history of the languages of Ulster, including migrant languages and sign language.

Our tangled speech[1]

Languages in Northern Ireland

Before I got inside the skin of a second language,
I thought that people who talked down to me about the
ultimate impossibility of translating from one language
to another were a bit affected, perhaps a bit precious.
I have since tried my hand at transferring both the
meaning and feeling of Irish language poetry into
English, and have come to the conclusion that my
patronising friends were right.

If you already know another language well, I don't need to explain anything. For those who do not, I'll try an experiment that concentrates on the tangled speech of Ulster English, and involves a bunch of words that will be familiar to anybody from this neck of the woods who can remember black and white television. The experiment is to translate the following into standard English: 'I couped into the sheugh, and sprauchled out again, clabber an' glaur till the oxters'. I'm not asking for a functional translation, which is easy: 'I fell into the ditch, and scrambled out again, mud to the armpits'. What I'm looking for is a translation that also captures the essentially liquid and muddy quality of a seugh, the ungainliness of a sprauchle, the stickiness of clabber, the adhesiveness of glaur and the homeliness of oxter. Above all, one that captures what can only be called the totality of the word 'coup' – more than a fall, more than a tumble, something like the kind of prat-fall that a child's comic would mark with 'splat!'.

The flavour of that sentence has for most of us a particular expressiveness that is more than the sum of its etymological parts, although the etymology is not to be sneezed at. The particular linguistic tangle here involves *coup* from French, *clabber* from Irish,

sprauchle from Old Norse, *sheugh* from Middle English, *oxter* from Anglo-Saxon, and *glaur* from heaven knows where. All these words are alive in Ulster Scots. Possibly surprisingly, you'll find *seoch* and *glár* in the Ulster dialect of the Irish language, and, in Dineen's *Irish-English Dictionary*, a *spriúchálaí* is 'one who makes awkward gestures, throws his arms about'.

Languages encompass much more than their words – there is the structure, syntax and grammar, and the attendant culture – but for the moment, I will focus on a single word, one that has been the subject of a minor but intense controversy.

The word is 'crack'. All over the south and west of Ireland you will come upon notices painted on the side of pubs indicating that 'Ól, Ceol agus Craic' are available, if not inevitable, and almost certainly unavoidable. As the first two words, *ól* and *ceol*, meaning drink and music, are in the Irish language, it is widely assumed that 'craic', is also an Irish word. Kevin Myers, a man with a deep and unwholesome loathing of the Irish language and all who sail in her, and who knows that the word is a borrowing from English, has complained in the *Irish Times* of the 'pretentiousness, witless posturing' of the Irish version.[2] To take offence at the transliteration of a borrowed word into a language that does not have the letter 'k' is somewhat odd, particularly from someone whose objection is expressed by invoking the word 'pretentiousness', borrowed and transliterated into English from the French *prétentieux*, itself borrowed and transliterated from the Latin *praetensus*.

The use of 'crack' by Irish-speakers, and English-speakers who salt their discourse with phrases of Irish, has caused even greater offence in Northern Ireland, where taking offence is something of an inter-communal competitive sport. In October 1997, the *Irish News* and *Belfast Telegraph* published a number of letters which variously attributed the origin of the word to Old English, Middle Dutch, High German, Scottish Gaelic and Ulster Scots. The controversy, in the way of such controversies, generated more heat than light, but did provide a number of correspondents with an opportunity to insult the Ulster Scots movement for promoting 'this glorified Ballymena accent masquerading as a language'.[3] Ulster Scots enthusiasts can, of course point to the likes of Hugh Porter of Moneyslan, who had published as far back as 1813:

Among the rest that me attracts
There's one of which I hear great cracks
An' that's the *Elegant Extracts*.[4]

This word has been in my vocabulary since before I can remember. 'One more crack out of you ...' meant an utterance, usually a cheeky one, and seems to be embedded into standard English. But the Belfast dialect of my childhood had a number of other meanings. My auntie used to talk about 'crackin' with friends and neighbours – that meant having a conversation full of enjoyable gossip. 'What's the crack?' or 'what's this crack about ...?' means what's new or what's going on – you'll hear both senses in Donegal Irish: 'Cén craic? Caidé an craic seo faoi ...?' A good night's crack meant you had enjoyed yourself. Someone who was good crack was somebody who was entertaining company (the phrase 'You'd be good crack at a wake' is regarded as a compliment of the highest order). You'll hear the last two senses of the word throughout Ireland in both languages.

Sometimes 'crack' seems to mean not so much enjoyment as a form of exuberant drink-fuelled excess. Dominic Behan's version of 'McAlpine's Fusiliers' is the best-known expression of this sense of the word, which is, oddly enough, remarkably close to the Middle English 'crak', meaning loud conversation, bragging talk.[5]

The craic was good in Cricklewood
And they wouldn't leave the Crown
The glasses were flying and Biddy was crying
The Paddies have hit the town.
Oh mother dear, I'm over here
And I'm never coming back
What keeps me here is the reek o' beer
The weemen and the craic

Forty-odd years ago a Celtic scholar from the south of England mentioned to me that he found this eloquent and indispensable word 'craic' to be in use in every dialect of Irish – but not only was it not to be found in any dictionary, it didn't have the feel of an Irish word. On one of the rare occasions when I have been able to out-scholar a real scholar, I mentioned that the word was in use in the north of

England in the early 1800s. It happened that the previous week I had come across that eccentric piece of literary excavation, H.D. Rawnsley's *Reminiscences of Wordsworth among the Peasantry of Westmoreland* (1889), in which one horny-handed son of toil remembered the poet tramping gloomily around the Lake District with his sister, his enormous brood of children straggling behind: 'not a man as folks could crack wi' nor not a man as could crack wi' folks'.

What conclusions can you draw from this word 'crack' about our tangled speech? One is that the word, whatever its ultimate origin, was definitely established in English about 1300, and survives, in the senses outlined above, in modern Scots, dialects of northern England, Hiberno-English and Irish. It also illustrates how porous languages can be – as Irish borrowed 'crack' from either English or Scots, Ulster Scots has borrowed 'gub' and 'slug' (= swallow) from Irish, and Scots has borrowed 'fash', 'footer' and 'Hogmanay' from French. The language that most spectacularly borrows words is English – 99% of the words in the *Oxford English Dictionary* came from other languages.[6] Finally, the row over who owns 'crack' says more about our society, in particular its unhealthy obsession with exclusive ownership of anything that is of value, than it does about the word. Crack is a good word, an expressive word, however you spell it. It's a good word that belongs to anybody who is interested in the concept.

Linguistic diversity is a very big subject, even for a place as small as Northern Ireland, and I am not in a position to speak for all the language communities in our society. In particular, I have no insight to offer on a wide range of experiences relating to, say, ethnic minority language communities who are far away from the epicentre of their culture. Nor have I lived in a society where I did not have a firm grasp of the majority language, or one where the colour of my skin marked me as an outsider. But I can make some points about the phenomenon of language, and about the phenomenon of fragile languages.

First point. Leave aside for the moment the armoury of the descriptive linguist, terms like 'affricate', 'palatalised', 'velar' and 'plosive'. Except for sign languages, languages are essentially a series of pops, whistles, grunts, groans, moans, hisses, whines, hums, snuffles and occasionally clicks. What turns these noises into a language is that in the past they were codified in accordance with an

agreed pattern, and by this pattern you could communicate with somebody who snuffled and hissed in a similar way. These patterns of grunts and groans evolved over thousands of years, changing constantly, gathering new meanings, new nuances and new structures which extended the range of what could be communicated in each language, as well as a series of accidental and arbitrary accretions, excrescences, baubles and whirligigs.

Second point. A language can be a way of asking someone to pass the salt, but it also communicates at a level far beyond the utilitarian. A living language is the expression of an evolving civilisation which is itself diverse. Or to put it another way, each language is a complex of ways of interpreting the world.

Third point. The Donegal writer Seosamh Mac Grianna once wrote: 'Tá an saol uilig taobh thall den scáth beag focal a chuir muid air' – The whole world is beyond the little shadow of words we put on it.[7] In other words, language simplifies and distorts the real world. It is of course obvious that a language in some way reflects the reality that surrounds it, but it is equally obvious that no language captures all of reality. However, and this is close to one of the really important points I'm trying to make, every language has a different pattern for simplifying and distorting reality; every language provides a unique lens, a unique window – a unique partial view – of the world. The sum total of these distortions is the sum total of that part of human wisdom that can be put into words. And the more of these distortions we have, the more we can understand the world.

Fourth point. You may have guessed by now that I am making an argument for cultural and linguistic ecology. It seems to me that the cultural ecology argument is irrefutable. I'm always fascinated by those who are happy to see the death of a language, the death of a culture, the death of a civilisation. They all belong to that class which, as Oscar Wilde put it, knows the price of everything and the value of nothing, but they can be broken down into sub-categories: philistines, vulgarians, cultural cringers, lumpen-utilitarians and begrudgers.

Fifth point. Just when we are beginning to understand the importance of linguistic ecology, most of the languages of the world are in danger of extinction. We are on the brink of a linguistic holocaust. There are between 6,000 and 7,000 languages in the world

at present, more than half of which are spoken by fewer than 10,000 people. To take the statistics another way, 96% of the world's languages are spoken by just 4% of the world's population. On average, one of these languages dies every fortnight.[8] At this rate, it is calculated that a hundred years from now there will be only about 500 languages left – a handful of major world languages and the rest hanging on in there. The linguist John McWhorter speaks about a future in which most of the world's peoples will be: 'subsumed into a slurry of multi-ethnic urban misery and exploitation voiced in just a couple of dozen big fat languages'.[9]

Languages do not die because they are incapable of surviving *as languages*; languages die because their speakers have been economically, socially and (usually) politically marginalised, and often because their speakers have been oppressed for speaking them.

Sixth point. Language preservation. Let me make one thing clear, there is not a single linguistic eco-warrior in the world who wants to preserve a language. A language is not jam, conserve or marmalade. It cannot be put into a deep-freeze, salted, pickled, tinned, smoked or dehydrated. Languages and their cultures are not static, they do not live in libraries or archives or theme-parks. They live in communities, in a constant dynamic between a complex past and a complex present. The survival of a language is the survival of its language community.

Seventh point. The complete, total and irreversible disappearance of a unique language and culture can happen with astonishing speed. According to James McCloskey:

> It is a very, very easy thing to lose a language. All that is required is one short period of inattention or complacency or deliberation, and the community can find itself with a generation of children none of whom speak the older community language. With that single break in the chain of generational transmission, language, and all that goes with it, becomes a walking ghost.[10]

Eighth point. Whatever your personal experience has been, language activists are actually quite a diverse bunch. They don't all look the same, they don't all act the same and they don't all think the same. They don't even talk the same. However, endangered minority

languages also tend to attract nutcases. The Irish language movement, to take but one example, contains some of the finest people I have ever met, but it also has its fair share of tunnel-visionaries, impossibilists, messiahs, linguo-masochists, uber-grammarians and grant-pimps. And I haven't even started on the politicians.

Ninth point. If you belong to a linguistic minority in an overwhelmingly monoglot society, you live your life through two languages and two cultures. You see the world simultaneously through two different lenses and from two different perspectives. Among the advantages and irritations of being inside two cultures is that you can both understand the majority perspective and be infuriated by its grosser assumptions.

Tenth point: Linguistic diversity also benefits the majority culture. Any society will profit from the creative tensions of being interrogated from every possible angle by people living in it who can also see it through a different set of lenses. Having said that, I would also like to say that we speakers of minority languages are not here just for the benefit of the majority – our purpose is not solely to leaven the lump of a monocular monolingual society.

Eleventh point. There's no point in getting excited about the linguistic ecology of far-away places when there is an issue of linguistic ecology on your own doorstep. I would argue that, however strongly we feel about the survival of Mohawk and Arapaho and Bobangi and Liboko, on this island we have a particular responsibility for the languages within our own society whose very existence is threatened. McCloskey, in his small but enormously valuable book *Voices Silenced*, which focuses on the Irish language within a global context, has made this case far better than I can:

> In a broader, global perspective, there are excellent reasons for trying to maintain Irish, but those reasons have nothing to do with nationalist sentiment, nor with any search for an authentic, distinctive, or exclusive *Irish*-ness (whatever that might mean). Far from being driven by an insular or inward-turning impulse, the effort is worth making because it is our contribution to a much larger effort, a global struggle to preserve a kind of diversity which human society has enjoyed for millennia, but which is being lost in our time. Like the Maori and the Inuit,

> we have the good or the bad fortune to be sole custodians of one threatened strand of that diversity.[11]

This brings me to my final point. Those of us living in these islands who are involved with threatened languages know the world through the lens of a powerful, expanding juggernaut of a world language. We also know that same world through the lens of a language and culture that is, like Maori and well over five thousand others, close to extinction.

Languages in Northern Ireland

What forms of linguistic diversity do we have? I will take the languages of Northern Ireland more or less in the chronological order of their arrival in Ireland, with one significant exception. English, the dominant language of our society, is so pervasive that it is enough to know that it first made an appearance in Ireland in the 12th century, and never quite went away. Since the 17th century English has been eroding the position of the other two long-established languages, Irish and Scots.

IRISH

Irish has been around for so long that no-one is certain when it came or even where it came from. Scholars have guessed that it has been on the island for anything from 3,800 to 2,300 years. What we do know is that it is a Celtic language closely related to Scottish Gaelic and Manx, and more distantly related to Welsh. It was spoken by the vast majority of the population in Ulster until the end of the 16th century, but ceased to be a majority language sometime in the 18th century. Historic Irish-speaking communities survived in Donegal to our own day, but none exist in the six counties of Northern Ireland. However, isolated residual communities did survive in the new state, and individual native speakers survived even longer: one speaker from an organic Gaelic-speaking community within Northern Ireland – Rathlin Island – died as late as 1985; the last native speakers of Irish in Armagh and Tyrone died in 1969.

Nevertheless, the language has survived among learners of Irish and children of learners who were brought up with Irish as their first

language. The 2011 Census records nearly 185,000 positive answers to the Irish language question, 10.65% of the population. This figure overestimates the number of fluent speakers of Irish and underestimates the number of people with some knowledge of it. Until we get a better Census question, we will not have accurate figures to work with.

ULSTER SCOTS

Like English, Scots first established a permanent presence in Ulster at the end of the 16th century. The variant we now call Ulster Scots developed through an interaction with English and Irish. There are some difficulties in estimating the number of speakers of Ulster Scots. Although Scots and English both derive from Anglo-Saxon, they had diverged significantly by the 16th century. However, as both Scots and Ulster Scots have been converging towards an English norm for centuries, speakers range along a spectrum from a Scots-flavoured English to a dense form of maximally differentiated Scots. It is essentially at the latter end of the spectrum that the claims for Scots being a distinctive language rest. The 2011 Census records just over 140,000 people with some knowledge of Ulster Scots, 8.08% of the population.

SIGN LANGUAGE

The two forms of sign language spoken in Northern Ireland have grown organically, and can claim distinct linguistic status, as their structure is quite different to that of English. British sign language, for example, is a topic–comment language. 'What is your name?' becomes 'Name (you), what?'; 'Turn right at the traffic lights' becomes 'traffic lights' (one sign) 'turn right' (one sign). Not only is the word order different, but because sign language uses, simultaneously, three-dimensional space, movement, shape, speed, direction and facial expression, some of its grammatical features are simultaneous rather than sequential as in English or Irish. There are also dialects – British sign language has 10 or 12 ways of signing the word 'holiday'. Irish sign language has nothing to do with the Irish language, and has developed with a different grammar from that of British sign language – it was based on American sign language, which itself derived from the French system.

CANT, GAMMON OR SHELTA

Cant or Gammon, the speech of Irish Travellers, is less a distinct language than a specialised vocabulary designed to ensure that outsiders do not understand what is going on. It is a vocabulary-based speech-form that appears to have been used with both Irish and English in the past, and is now used exclusively with English structures.

MIGRANT LANGUAGES

The oldest surviving migrant language in Northern Ireland is Italian, which first established a presence in the late 19th century and is still spoken, but only a minority of people of Italian descent still speak the language. A new question on the 2011 Census enquired about the 'main language' of respondents, revealing that about 3% of the population spoke an immigrant language as their main language. Polish was the most common main language after English, with approaching 18,000 speakers (just over 1% of the population). In descending order, those with more than a thousand speakers were Lithuanian, Portugese, Slovak, Chinese, Tagalog/Filipino, Latvian, Russian, Malayalam and Hungarian, the last four having just over a thousand each.[12] Other languages, such as Hindi, Punjabi, Swahili, Fulani, Xhosa, Urdu, Mirpuri, Vietnamese, Thai and Arabic, were the main languages of just over 13,000 of the population.

These figures need to be treated with some caution. Because of the nature of the question (which focused on 'main language' in the singular), high-level bilinguals are likely to be excluded. Those attempting to assimilate are likely to under-report a language other than the dominant language of wider society, and the very fact of the Census being in English is likely to exclude many of those with a poor grasp of English. One large ethnic group, the Chinese, speaking mainly Cantonese but with some speakers of Mandarin, Hakka and Fujianese, shows only a couple of thousand people speaking 'Chinese' as their main language, and the large Romanian Romany population appears to be underrepresented.

The Census of 2011 led to some distortion of the responses to the questions on Irish and Ulster Scots. Only those who marked English as their main language were invited to the section on Irish and Ulster Scots, excluding the possibility of Irish or Ulster Scots being assessed as a main language. As a result, only a tiny number, less than a quarter of 1%, put themselves down as speakers of Irish as their main language. In my own case, Irish was the language I used in 2011 with my wife, daughter, grandchildren, neighbours and work colleagues. English was the language I used most with the wider world, and with about half my friends. The Census return did not leave space for people like me, except as someone with an ability to speak, understand, read or write: categories that are essentially meaningless in terms of accurate statistics for language vitality or language planning.

'Something of a cultural war'

Linguistic politics in Northern Ireland

The title of this essay arises from a quote from the former First Minister, Peter Robinson, who stated that 'There has been something of a cultural war in Northern Ireland. We intend to fight back' when launching a new cultural initiative in the *News Letter* in 2008. Further interventions by David McNarry and David Trimble on cultural identity are examined, as are some of the reasons why political parties continue to conduct a symbolic and emblematic war.

'Something of a cultural war'

Linguistic politics in Northern Ireland[1]

In June 2008, the highest ranking politician in Northern Ireland, Peter Robinson, First Minister of the Assembly and leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, launched two new cultural initiatives. The event was recorded in an article entitled 'DUP fights back against "erosion of Britishness"' in the *News Letter*, a local unionist newspaper:

> The DUP is launching a fightback against republican attempts to erode the British identity in Ulster. Party leader Peter Robinson yesterday revealed plans for:
>
> - a Unionist Academy, which will promote the unionist culture and the advantages of the union ...
> - a British Cultural and Equality Unit to provide legal advice to the public on fighting the removal of British emblems from Northern Ireland society.
>
> The twin-pronged initiative ... comes amid unionist anger at an unrelenting Sinn Féin campaign to promote the Irish culture and target British structures and symbols throughout the country. The DUP leader told a briefing for journalists at Stormont: 'There has been something of a cultural war in Northern Ireland. We intend to fight back. Our unionist way of life will not be put in some drawer in the back of an office. We are British and intend to stay that way.' ... He insisted the fightback would not destabilise government.[2]

Some politicians can do culture. When someone like Mike Russell in Scotland or Michael D. Higgins in the Republic of Ireland discourses on the interface between culture and politics, or even discusses a cultural topic without any political referents, you can expect subtlety, nuance and complexity. But when a politician who has never before shown

much interest in the subject makes a major intervention on a cultural issue, concerned citizens reach for their bullshit detectors. When that intervention involves the declaration of a cultural war, they begin to worry.

The proposed Unionist Academy juxtaposes 'the promotion of the advantages of the union and the promotion of the unionist culture' as if the two issues are coterminous, and the article, based on a DUP press release, goes on to conflate 'the unionist culture' with 'the unionist way of life' and 'the British identity' as if the terms were interchangeable, and closely related to 'British emblems' and 'British structures and symbols'. This is worth unpicking. The 'advantages of the union' involves a reasonably clear agenda, the defence of a constitutional status quo, which is essentially a political question, although it might have economic or possibly social aspects. The cluster of terms around what Robinson calls 'the unionist culture' is more problematic. Why the definite article? Is there only one unionist culture? If unionism is essentially a political or constitutional ideology, does it have a cultural correlative? How can unionist culture be defined? How do the responses to any of these questions relate to the wide diversity of cultures in Britain and Ireland? And what exactly is meant by the term 'cultural war'?

'War,' said Carl von Clausewitz, 'is not a mere act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means.'[3] It may not be unfair to interpret Peter Robinson's cultural war as the continuation of political activity by other means; his version of 'unionist culture' will certainly be seen by many in Northern Ireland as being driven, essentially, by a political imperative.

What is not in doubt is the fact that, in the summer of 2008, Northern Ireland's political class saw culture as a political issue of some importance, important enough for the First Minister to declare a cultural war against his Deputy First Minister and nearly half of his Cabinet. This essay will examine the background to Peter Robinson's cultural war, paying particular attention to one of its most contentious manifestations, the language issue.

There are two main ways of responding to the spectacle of Northern Ireland politicians engaged in cultural and linguistic coat-trailing and head-butting. There is enough evidence to support a theory that cultural issues provide a diversion, a distraction, a game of smoke and mirrors

designed to maintain the comforting illusion that the dreary integrity of our historic quarrel is intact, while behind the scenes the politicians are busy with their daily round of compromise and pragmatic accommodation. To put it another way, our politicians are fighting a phoney war around a number of issues whose value is primarily symbolic and emblematic, and about which few of them really care.

Whatever element of truth there is in this analysis is, however, belied by the fact that, on one level, our politicians do appear to take culture – or cultural identity – very seriously. In fact, it could be argued that many of them see cultural identity as central to the long-term political future of Northern Ireland.

The cultural war can only be understood as a response to the particular, and somewhat peculiar, constitutional situation of Northern Ireland, and I will try to summarise this with a broad brush. Politics here is dominated by two main political movements, nationalism and unionism. Unionism involves a desire to maintain the current constitutional union – the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Nationalism involves a wish to break up the union with Britain and to form an alternative union between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It is also important to understand that, until recently, there has been a high correlation between political and religious affiliation, and this perception is still alive and well – one of the few points of cross-community agreement in Northern Ireland is the widely accepted proposition that Protestants are overwhelmingly unionist and that Catholics are overwhelmingly nationalist.[4]

To get the full picture, it is also important to know that until recently Northern Ireland was a disputed territory, situated within the United Kingdom but subject to a constitutional claim by the Republic of Ireland. Its status has changed in recent years. The Republic of Ireland's former constitutional imperative to reunite the country was changed by referendum in May 1998 to a constitutional aspiration involving reunification by consent.[5] In reality, however, the political class of the Republic and a large element of its population do not want a united Ireland. It is also clear that Britain no longer particularly wants to keep Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom. Neither polity really wants us, but, in their different ways, both Britain and the Republic are stuck with us.

For both governments, Northern Ireland has presented an intractable conundrum, in that the principles and aspirations of the two main political blocs in Northern Ireland are utterly irreconcilable. Britain and the Republic of Ireland have responded by imposing a political settlement which forces unionists and nationalists to share power. The Northern Ireland Assembly is a devolved jurisdiction within the United Kingdom, but involves certain agreed powers of interference from the Government of the Republic. Northern Ireland's Assembly is the political equivalent of a shotgun marriage – it is certainly not a love-match. It is about as harmonious as you would expect a shotgun marriage to be – politics in Northern Ireland lurches between venomous stasis and theatrical inertia.

This settlement also has an inbuilt instability, as, in theory, Northern Ireland can transfer to the Republic of Ireland if a majority of its citizens wish it to do so. In that context, the traditional high correlation between religion and politics is important, as the Catholic/Protestant balance of the population is shifting. Between 1961 and 1991 the Census figures indicate a significant growth in the Catholic proportion of the population, from 35% in 1961 to 42% in 1991.[6] In 1991 the Catholic community also had a much lower age profile than the Protestant community: Catholics made up approximately half of children under 10, but less than a third of those over 75 years of age.[7]

Census returns for 2001 showed a further growth of Catholics to 44%, against 53% Protestants,[8] while under-10s were 49% Catholic and 44% Protestant.[9] The Irish edition of *The Mirror* greeted these last figures with an extravagant headline: 'Catholic boom: Census shows Protestants will be minority in 10 years'.[10]

Ten years later *The Mirror's* innumeracy was shown up for what it was, but the trend has indeed continued, revealing not so much a proportional increase in Catholics as a marked decrease in the proportion of Protestants. The 2011 Census figures indicate a slight rise in those who were Catholics or had been brought up as Catholics (45%), against a major drop (48%) in those who were Protestants or had been brought up as Protestants.[11] Figures released by the Department of Education the following year indicated significant changes in the future; 57% of the children in Northern Ireland's schools are Catholic, as against 42% Protestant.[12]

There are obvious political and possibly constitutional implications to these figures. The second largest party in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin, responded to the 2001 Census figures by assuming that the seemingly inevitable development of a Catholic majority would translate into a nationalist majority:

> Mitchel McLaughlin, Sinn Féin chairman, said yesterday it was a question of 'when, not if, a majority in the north favours Irish unity'. Another Sinn Féin source said that some analysts were even predicting a united Ireland by 2016, the centenary of the Easter Rising. 'The momentum is gathering fast,' he said.[13]

Alex Maskey, former Sinn Féin Lord Mayor of Belfast, was even more unequivocal in projecting the identity of religious and political allegiance into the future:

> The publication of the new census figures has shown that the Catholic population has increased significantly and, indeed, is set to grow further in the next few years.
>
> This increase has long been expected and predicted by observers and academics alike, with the nationalist population in the Six Counties now at its highest point ever since the partition of Ireland and the pro-unionist population shrinking to the extent that for the first time it will represent just over 50% of the population.[14]

It must be said, however, that a sectarian head-count may not be a particularly useful predictive tool. Besides the issue of when the predicted Catholic majority could emerge as a voting majority, the really important issue, the constitutional issue, is whether or not that religious majority will also turn out to be a nationalist majority. In fact, should a Catholic voting majority become a reality, the future constitutional position of Northern Ireland will depend on three major considerations: what proportion of Catholics will be nationalists, what proportion of Protestants will be unionists, and where the increasing proportion of the population which has abandoned traditional religious allegiance, not to mention an increased immigrant population, will stand on the constitutional issue.

Based on current evidence, Sinn Féin's prediction for the future is either a gross misreading of the current evidence or a deliberate attempt

to mislead its followers. The most reliable current attitudinal evidence comes from the long-running Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT), and its predecessor, the Continuous Household Survey, which goes back as far as 1983. Considerable use will be made of evidence from NILT in the following pages, with the caution that, as well as the inherent weaknesses of attitudinal surveys everywhere in identifying long-term political outcomes, NILT sometimes throws up wildly contradictory evidence. It does, however, identify some interesting patterns.

It is impossible to predict future voting patterns, but we do know that, at present, not all Catholics would vote for a united Ireland. A tiny number (1%) identified themselves in the 2008 survey as unionists, but there are other indications that a large proportion of them do not want a united Ireland, and that their rejection of the unionist label is more to do with the brand image of unionism than with their constitutional preferences. In the same survey, 2% would find such an outcome impossible to accept and a further 21% would not like it but would accept the wishes of the majority.[15] By any reckoning, these people are unionists. It is also likely that there will be a significant number of what could be described as functional unionists, Catholics who no longer care whether or not Ireland is reunited. This is already a large category – between 1989 and 2008, an average of 41% of Catholics in the NILT survey (the figure fluctuates wildly, between 27% and 59%) defined themselves as neither nationalist nor unionist.[16] Some unionist strategists have argued that the union will be safeguarded into the foreseeable future by these groups of Catholic voters.

On the other hand, there is also a small proportion of Protestants who are political nationalists. Again, the brand image of nationalism ensures that the numbers of Protestants identifying themselves as nationalists rarely reaches the 1% threshold. However, responses to the survey between 1989 and 2008 show an average of almost 5% of Protestants agreeing that the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be for it to reunify with the rest of Ireland.[17] These figures were gathered at a time when it looked as if the Celtic Tiger would continue to thrive, thus providing an attractive economic argument for Irish unity. However, it is still possible that, within a generation or two, a larger number of Protestants may be nationalists, and others may not care

whether they live in a British or in an Irish state. It is almost certain that, as the Republic of Ireland becomes more secularised, Protestants will be less and less worried at the prospect of being sucked into a confessional state in which the Catholic Church wields enormous direct power. Nationalist strategists believe that, in these circumstances, they can persuade a reasonably large proportion of the Protestant population to either embrace or tolerate the idea of a united Ireland.

It has taken me some time to get here, but we are now at a critical point in my argument. If our society begins to emerge from the sectarianism that has plagued the region for centuries, it is possible, just possible, that the strong correlation between religious and political allegiance that has characterised it for centuries may begin to fade. If this should happen, it is also possible that at some time in the future, the vote which will decide Northern Ireland's constitutional position will be influenced less by religious allegiance than by the sense people have of which society best reflects their own sense of belonging. In other words, by cultural identity. This is certainly the perspective of a significant number of our politicians, and is one explanation of why cultural identity is now such a live political issue.

Most of the debate around cultural identity revolves around a single word, and how that word is interpreted. The word is 'Irish'. There are of course, other terms – British, Northern Irish, Ulster, Ulster-British, Ulster-Scot – but for the most part, in the context of the Northern Ireland constitutional debate, these tend to be used to express rejection of an Irish identity. The key to the importance of this word is that both nationalist and unionist politicians appear to assume that people who identify themselves as 'Irish' will either give their primary political allegiance to a united Ireland or be relatively content with an all-Ireland polity.

Peter Robinson's cultural war is based primarily on this assumption. He is not alone. Shortly after the launch of the cultural war, David McNarry took up the issue during a Twelfth of July Orange demonstration in Broughshane in north Antrim. For McNarry, 'The most dangerous threat to Britishness in Northern Ireland is the creeping "application of cultural apartheid," in the form of the Irish language agenda'.[18] He went on to argue that:

> 'the number 1 threat was now Sinn Féin's use of Irish language and cultural [*sic*] to attack the unionist way of life.'

He said Gerry Adams was using

> 'the intensity of an Irish language onslaught to strangle our sense of Britishness.'

Mr McNarry offered a dire warning that Sinn Féin wanted an Irish Language Act

> 'to run rampant throughout our country' – and would have got it under Direct Rule.
>
> 'The plan was that in all schools, public places, especially where republicans are in control, British cultural symbols will be thrown out to be replaced with romantic Provo symbols.'
>
> 'In courts, in street names, road signage, emergency warning signs, the list is endless, republicans will push to have dual English and Irish language displayed, to make unionists uncomfortable and erode the British identity ...'
>
> 'If left uncountered the Irish language issue will plague Northern Ireland in the same way the reckless chase for Irish unity by the Provos has resulted in sectarianism, bitter division.'[19]

There is no reason to believe that the syntactic crimes in the quotations above are due to Mr McNarry, as they bear all the hallmarks of careless reporting. On the other hand, he is solely responsible for the somewhat apocalyptic tone of his remarks. He focuses primarily on the legal status of Irish, on its public profile, and on the emblematic significance of that profile. At one level, he depicts Irish as the linguistic equivalent of painting the kerbstones green, white and orange, a territorial marker that indicates that nationalists control the area. But the threat does not end there, as an Irish Language Act could also bring bilingual signage into 'all schools, public spaces'; in other words, into spaces not controlled by nationalists. Public manifestations of the Irish language, such as signage, will 'make unionists uncomfortable and erode the British identity'.

It should be acknowledged that McNarry takes a rather more nuanced approach than some other unionists politicians to the issue of culture, making an explicit distinction between culture and its symbolic

and political use: 'Orangemen and unionist [*sic*] were not and should not be against Irish culture or freedom of expression. But a grave situation has developed in which the culture is being used by republicans in the new-look war in [*recte* on] Britishness.'[20] This distinction may be entirely sincere; however, it is reasonably common for unionist politicians to claim that they are not against Irish language and Irish culture, but against their misappropriation for political ends. It must be added that, in practice, opposition to the political use of the language is generally indistinguishable from opposition to the language itself.

The Britishness to which unionist ideologues like Peter Robinson and David McNarry subscribe is in sharp contrast to that of the rest of the United Kingdom, which prides itself – not always unjustifiably – as a polity in which a wide variety of cultural identities can coexist, and in which a variety of national identities can be maintained and nurtured within a multinational state. Until very recently, it has been quite easy for the Welsh and the Scots to identify themselves as Welsh or Scottish in cultural terms, and as British in political terms, and this position is still possible in the post-devolution era. The state itself, well before devolution, has been highly supportive of the Welsh language and, to a lesser extent, of Scottish Gaelic. From an historic perspective, unionists in Ireland happily described themselves as both Irish and British throughout the 19th century, and in some cases into the 20th, but from a very early stage in the 20th-century Ulster unionism has tended to reject all forms of an Irish identity, certainly in public discourse.

Unionist rejection of an Irish cultural identity in favour of a British cultural identity appears to me to be based, at least in part, on an acceptance by unionists of the nationalist definition of Irishness that was developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; it also appears to have been constructed in contrast to and in reaction to that definition. In this context, the term 'British' is not without its difficulties. Northern Ireland is not in Britain. In fact, the clumsy official definition of the state, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, specifically excludes Northern Ireland from (Great) Britain. It is perhaps unlucky for unionists that the words 'United Kingdom' do not have an adjectival form. Much more important than semantics, however, is the fact that Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom that the British government is happy to give up without a fight. In terms of cultural

identities, even given the identity wars that now convulse the larger island. 'Britishness' can still embrace a wide variety of cultural expressions – there are still those who identify themselves as Scottish and British, or Welsh and British. British cultural identity in Northern Ireland is rather less straightforward. A Britishness that rejects an Irish identity in a place called Northern Ireland can seem rather anomalous; indeed, somewhat unBritish. It also excludes from Britishness those who might want to identify themselves as culturally Irish while accepting, or even embracing, membership of the British state.

One way of understanding unionist hostility to an Irish identity is to look at the nationalist version of the concept. The term spans a range of meanings. You can be Irish because you are a citizen of the Republic of Ireland. You can be Irish because you were born on the island of Ireland (although the Duke of Wellington, when accused of being an Irishman, is said to have responded that 'being born in a stable does not make a man a horse').[21] Critically, you can call yourself Irish to describe your political identity – used in this sense it means you are a nationalist. You can also have an Irish cultural identity – a complicated state of mind that there is not time to explore at this point. For a nationalist, these various meanings of the word 'Irish' can blend seamlessly into each other, and, for a nationalist, the geographical, cultural and political meanings tend to be used interchangeably. Some unionists react to this conflation by rejecting the term; David Trimble's response to being labelled 'Irish' is always intense. Once, when described in the press as a 'Northern Irish politician', he became quite upset, declaring that, while he didn't mind being described as a 'Northern Ireland politician', he was in no way, shape or form to be categorised as 'Irish'.'[22]

The noun 'Irish' is also the term usually used for the ancient language of Ireland, sometimes called 'Gaelic', which manages to be both the first official language of the Republic of Ireland and a fragile and threatened minority language. Although it is deeply embedded within nationalist ideology as an emblem of cultural distinctiveness, only a minority of Irish nationalists speak it. While many find themselves in the same position as W.B. Yeats – 'Gaelic is my national language, but it is not my mother tongue'[23] – it is not uncommon for nationalists, including those who are monoglot speakers of English, to speak of Irish as 'our language', or 'my native language'. Not surprisingly, support for the

language revival in Northern Ireland is mainly to be found among nationalists.

In 1982, Sinn Féin set up a Cultural Department, whose work involved high-profile promotion of the Irish language. Indeed, it involved little else, as in the following 1983 quotation from the party's cultural spokesperson:

> Sinn Féin is committed to the cultural revival because we believe the cultural oppression of our people by Britain, combined with the political, social and economic oppression, prevents us from obtaining national sovereignty.
>
> The Irish language is a great sign of our nationality, and by learning and speaking it we are not only resisting cultural domination but also strengthening our national identity, and asserting our determination to exist as a free and distinctive nation.[24]

The Cultural Department was extremely active, particularly in Belfast. It also tended to regard the language movement with a somewhat proprietorial eye; in 1990 one former Cultural Officer claimed that republican activists were the 'natural' leaders of the Irish language revival.[25] The Department published a pamphlet in 1984 which gives some flavour of its priorities. The seminar on which the pamphlet was based was organised for students at Irish classes in Belfast: 'to introduce learners to the revolutionary ideology of their teachers in relation, first and foremost, to cultural oppression',[26] according to Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, head of Sinn Féin's Cultural Department, who organised the seminar. He went on to say:

> Sinn Féin is pledged to resisting not only the economical and political oppression but also the cultural and social controls imposed by the British and their allies on the Irish people. ... it is our contention that each individual who masters the learning of the Irish language has made an important personal contribution towards the reconquest of Ireland.[27]

The most memorable, indeed most notorious phrase in the pamphlet is from Pádraig Ó Maolchraoibhe:

> I don't think that we can exist as a separate people without our language. Now every phrase you learn is a bullet in the freedom

> struggle. Every phrase you use is a brick in a great building, a re-building of the Irish nation.[28]

The militaristic image of the gun may have been an accidental metaphor. However, in an interview the same year, Ó Muilleoir indicated that his party's cultural struggle mirrored, and indeed was indistinguishable from, its broader military and political strategy:

> We see the armed struggle as the highest point of the cultural revival. We see no contradiction. ... I see no difference between fighting imperialist political control with guns on the street, and fighting imperialist cultural control through this department! ... All movements have acknowledged a need for a cultural attack on oppression to partner a military one.[29]

Ó Muilleoir's approach was echoed in 1990 by Gearóid Ó hEara, who succeeded him as head of the Cultural Department: 'It is impossible to de-politicise the cultural struggle or to separate it from the struggle for self-determination ... there is now a greater awareness of the importance of culture as part of our revolutionary struggle than ever before'.[30]

We will be looking at the Ulster Scots issue in Chapter 4, but, simply to give a flavour of the level of the debate, Jim Shannon's 'We are Ulster-Scots descended from a proud and fiercely independent people with a longer tradition than that promoted by nationalists. Their language is a dead language for a dead people'[31] suggests a depressing symmetry in the linguistic politics of this small piece of land.

These statements not only indicate just how raw the political agenda was in the recent past, they also show each cultural warrior promoting his chosen cultural movement as the exclusive property of one section of the population. It did not seem possible for their proponents to imagine that society in Northern Ireland could learn to embrace linguistic diversity without reductive political baggage.

Gerry Adams, the Sinn Féin President, also sees politics and culture as a seamless garment: 'My own conviction is that the restoration of our culture must be a crucial part of our political struggle and that the restoration of Irish must be a central part of the cultural struggle'.[32] Adams also provided one of the clearest formulations of the nationalist assumption that the Irish language could be a tool for persuading Protestants to adopt a nationalist identity: 'for the Protestant people to

embrace the Irish language today would be for them to reject loyalism'.[33]

This seems to me to be a profound misreading of the complex relationship between cultural identity and political allegiance. It is also a statement that will do little to ameliorate unionist prejudice against the language. Indeed, it is likely to have the opposite effect – in the political culture of Northern Ireland, opposing sides tend to believe each other's propaganda.

While unionists born on the island of Ireland may not be able to escape their geographical fate, they neither have nor want any variety of the political identity that defines itself as 'Irish'. Publicly, as we have seen, particularly among the political class, unionist ideology tends to involve a total rejection of Irishness.

On an individual level, the relationship of many unionists with Irish culture is more nuanced, more problematic, and far more interesting. Because social discourse in Northern Ireland involves a complex interplay of defence mechanisms and avoidance strategies, this complexity is not always easy to identify. In social situations, controversial issues either are avoided or escalate into a row. In a row, people tend to react to their assessment of their interlocutor's ideological position, and to their assessment of the ideological position they believe their interlocutor is ascribing to *them*. As a result, they often find themselves either taking a more extreme position than they actually hold, or defending a position they don't entirely agree with.

It is easy to see why unionists, almost invariably in public and often in private, tend to be hostile to the ideological bundle the word 'Irish' carries with it – indeed, the proportion of Protestants who identify themselves as Irish in the NILT surveys rarely rises above 3%.[34] If nationalists tell unionists that they are Irish, unionists will react to the hidden implication that they should therefore be Irish nationalists. Because nationalists often promote Irish culture to unionists in the hope of persuading them to adopt, or accept, an Irish identity, unionists will react against the implication that an Irish cultural identity is synonymous with an Irish political identity. They will react accordingly even if the person they are talking to has no intention of converting them to nationalism. If someone is promoting the Irish language to unionists, it will be assumed that decolonising and proselytising political agendas outlined above lurk somewhere in the background.

Unionist politicians face another problem. Anyone who has engaged with Anglo-Irish literature will be aware of just how complex, multi-layered and paradoxical an Irish identity can be, but it is a model of clarity and coherence compared to the Ulster British (non-Irish) identity peddled by unionist politicians.

Irish culture can present a very attractive package, particularly to an outsider. I believe that unionist ideologues are deeply worried about this very attractiveness. They are worried that nationalists may be correct in their belief that unionists who engage with Irish culture, and adopt an Irish cultural identity, could well finish up either as nationalists or as unionists who will accept a united Ireland with relative ease. They believe that any weakening of unionist hostility to Irishness, any large-scale engagement with Irish culture, could ultimately undermine the union. David Trimble expressed his own fear of the threat to unionism of Irish culture in 1989 in yet another apocalyptic formulation which draws for its emotional impact on a 17th century atrocity: 'One of the enduring folk memories of the Ulster-British people is the fear of massacre – the fear that the people may cease to be, at least culturally.'[35]

Neither the nationalist nor the unionist analysis of the political importance of cultural identity is necessarily true. Terence Brown has argued that 'It seems that Ulster unionists, Ulster Protestants, whatever one wishes to call them, have felt no need of the concept of national identity',[36] and explores why this may be so:

> It has always been the pious aspiration of the nationalist and the cultural nationalist, that if only the Ulster Protestants could see the error of their ways, once they fall upon the riches of Irish literature, the richness of Irish political culture, they will see that their error is massive, and become converted to Irish separatism, or some kind of Irish independence. That seems to me an improbability in the current circumstances and, if we are to make progress, we have to understand, even if we find the task difficult, why the Ulster Protestant, at this stage, sees no need of that concept of identity. 'I have no need of that hypothesis,' said La Place to Napoleon, when discussing the existence of an explanatory deity. In Ulster Protestant culture, there is a strong sense that they have no need of the hypothesis of national identity, and to discover why it is not needed, and what kind of

> inter-relationship there can be between them and nationalists, is a major project for social and intellectual historians and for the politically-engaged in Ireland.[37]

If Brown is correct in his analysis, not only are nationalists wrong in their belief that they can use culture to convert unionists to nationalism, but unionists are equally mistaken in seeing Irish culture as a threat.

The Irish language has been caught up in the politics of the constitutional issue. So, as we shall see, has Ulster Scots. Both have benefited from this politicisation, in that both have gained recognition and accessed government funding that they would not otherwise have had a snowball's chance in hell of getting. Both, I think, have suffered from having been drawn into a cultural war that is, essentially, the continuation of political activity by other means, and has little or nothing to do with cultural values. Both could well suffer even more in the long term, as the cultural war, as presently fought, trivialises the language issue, misdirects the language activists and sucks the energy out of the language movements.

Culture and politics are inextricably bound one to the other, in a constant state of complex interaction, and it is neither possible nor desirable that they be entirely divorced. However, when people interested in culture find that culture being appropriated as an appendage of some short-sighted political agenda, when they see it being reduced to the brutal simplicities of our politicians' thought processes, they have no choice but to fight for cultural autonomy. A language that is of interest to politicians mainly as an emblem to mark out territory may not suffer more than a temporary setback if it is vibrant and secure, but a fragile linguistic tradition that finds itself in this position and depends on these politicians for its very survival is in a very dangerous situation. Political agendas at their best tend to cramp cultural debate; at their worst they become nothing more than a battleground for ideological tub-thumping.

In conclusion, it is more than probable that the cultural war in Northern Ireland is indeed a phoney war. However, it may not be a phoney war in the sense of being a cynical manipulation of public opinion. Much of the evidence points to the conclusion that our politicians have misread the situation and are engaged in an elaborate and sincerely felt struggle over an issue that, ultimately, is unlikely to

make any difference whatsoever to the political outcome. As Flaithrí Ó Maoil Chonaire put it in his caustic comment on the 16th-century 'Contention of the Bards', in which, while the Gaelic world fell apart around them, the leading Gaelic poets of Ireland bickered over whether the northern or southern half of Ireland had primacy:

> Lughaidh, Tadhg agus Torna
> ollaimh eirrdheirce ar dtalaimh,
> coin iad go n-iomad feasa
> ag troid fa an casair fhalaimh![38]
>
> Lughaidh, Tadhg and Torna
> illustrious poets of our land,
> such erudite hound-dogs
> feuding over an empty kennel.

What about Ullans?

Ulster Scots and the Irish language

The introductory section of this essay explores cultural identity in the context of the peace process, examining some of the prevailing perceptions of the Irish language. However, the focus of the essay is the rise of the Ulster Scots movement and Cruithin ideology. The essay concludes with a review of the Ulster Scots book *Wake the Tribe o' Dan*.

What about Ullans?

Ulster Scots and the Irish language

Ulster Scots is a valuable cultural resource. The dialect of English that I was brought up with in Catholic west Belfast had some words in it derived from Irish (gub, slug, clabber), but many more Scots.

We hirpled and hirstled and sprachled and cowped into seughs with the best of them. We redd up the house and hepped up against the cold. People you didn't like were grulshy, gaukey or gormless, or were geeks, gaums, gaunches, gits, glumphs, glipes, gorbs, gomerils, glunters, skittery goats, gabs and gabshites, and that's only the words beginning with 'g'. Ulster Scots as spoken in its heartlands is infinitely richer and infinitely more expressive.

Ulster Scots and Irish are both under threat. Ulster Scots is being eroded towards an English norm. One generation of neglect could see the death of Irish. Both linguistic traditions are fragile, something they share with most of the world's languages. Both of them are worth maintaining. Jim McCloskey has made this point better than I can:

> Every language that succumbs to the economic, political and cultural pressures being applied all over the globe today, takes to the grave with it an encyclopaedia of histories, mythologies, jokes, songs, philosophies, riddles, superstitions, games, sciences, hagiographies – the whole cumulative effort of a people over centuries to understand the circumstances of its own existence. It is an enormously frightening thought that nine tenths of that accumulation of wisdom, speculation and observation is to be lost within the next century or so.[2]

Politics and cultural identity

It is obvious to anyone who studies the political framework proposed in the Belfast Agreement of April 1998 that its main function was to create structures that enable nationalist and unionist politicians to learn to work together. It was certainly not designed for efficient government. Massive overrepresentation and a plethora of structural levels (east–west, north–south) combined with a series of checks and balances between unionists and nationalists have ensured that it is next to impossible to actually do anything.

To put it another way, Northern Ireland's peace process is an attempt to accommodate the irreconcilable. Its primary aim is to create a workable structure in which the mutually exclusive aspirations of nationalists and unionists can coexist without violence, if not in harmony. To date (2012) it has scored some successes, but while it is inching towards a political accommodation, it is yet to produce a convincing version of normal democratic politics. On the other hand, it provides ideal conditions for the politics of outrage, swagger and emblematic posturing. For this reason alone, cultural politics and the politics of identity have become increasingly prominent.

There are of course advantages in the shift from a shooting and bombing war to a cultural war, and not just because hardly anybody gets killed any more. In spite of the best efforts of our cultural warriors, in spite of the covert and not so covert political subtext underlying many of our cultural movements, and in spite of the fact that people in Northern Ireland only ever read the subtext, culture still has the capacity to be porous and exploratory. By calling something 'culture' rather than 'politics', it is possible to engage in a debate which may have political implications, but which does not inevitably lead to the reductively confrontational absolutes of the constitutional question.

In the Northern Ireland context, language is one of the most easily identifiable manifestations of cultural conflict. Language is protean and multifunctional: a weapon, an emblem, a symbol; even a diagnostic tool for measuring changes in government policy or shifts in the balance of political power. In 1990 James Hawthorne, chairman of the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council, used to speak of the Irish language as the 'green litmus test': if the state could handle Irish, then

at its most contentious, it could handle anything, the ultimate proof of a genuine policy of cultural diversity.

The use of the word 'green' implicitly recognised that the Irish language is usually identified with Irish nationalism. By the mid-1990s a strange and rather depressing symmetry developed in the linguistic politics of Northern Ireland, with Ulster Scots being promoted in some circles as the unionist answer to Irish, partly because of its association with the Plantation, partly because of its potential for embodying a non-Irish cultural identity.

Linguistic conflict in Northern Ireland may be unique in that only a small proportion of the population can speak Irish or Ulster Scots, and fewer again speak either on a regular basis. Unlike other societies, linguistic conflict here does not involve two communities speaking different languages. Instead, it reflects a conflict between two mainly English-speaking political blocs which define themselves in relation to their aspirational or emblematic linguistic identity, ultimately traceable to their sense of origin. This polarising tendency is modified and complicated by another minority which is interested in either Irish or Ulster Scots – or both – as cultural resources rather than as cultural manifestations of a political position.

In this chapter I will look at some of the issues around the politics of Ulster Scots. Some unionist politicians have become active in linguistic politics. One example is Jim Shannon, a DUP Assembly member burdened with an Irish Gaelic surname (Ó Seanáin), who, as well as confusing the Irish language with nationalism, explicitly associates Ulster Scots with unionism and, reflecting interesting inter-Protestant tensions, Presbyterianism:

> We are Ulster-Scots descended from a proud and fiercely independent people with a longer tradition than that promoted by nationalists. Their language is a dead language for a dead people.[3]
>
> We have a language worthy of value in its own right. ... We are Ulster-Scots, descended from a fiercely independent ancestry—from Scots Presbyterianism.[4]

Some more moderate unionist figures express a less extreme version of Jim Shannon's attitude, but continue to illustrate how cultural issues

in Northern Ireland tend to be filtered through the prism of politics. The example here is David Trimble, then leader of the Ulster Unionist Party and First Minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly. His central role in the new political structures made his position on linguistic issues particularly significant.

'What about Ullans?' David Trimble and the language issue

David Trimble was, on and off, the First Minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly between July 1998 and October 2002.[5] On 23 June 1998, the eve of the elections to the Assembly, BBC Northern Ireland broadcast a discussion programme entitled *Let's Talk* in which leading politicians responded to questions from a studio audience. He was asked a question on the place of Irish in the new political dispensation. The exchange is revealing.

> *Questioner*: Part of the Agreement is the promotion of the Irish language, and I see the Irish language as belonging to all the people of Ireland, whatever tradition they come from. What steps do you envisage the Assembly taking to promote the Irish language, [*interrupted here by the chairman, who wanted to discuss more important issues*] and do you see yourself having a positive role?
>
> *David Trimble*: On the language issue. Well, what about Ullans, the Ulster variant of Lallans, which is spoken by about 150,000 people in Ulster? I think there should be a little consideration for it as well. On the Irish language point, I think it's a pity that Irish language enthusiasts in Northern Ireland are not promoting Ulster Gaelic.
>
> *Questioner*: [*talked down by the chairman*] Yes they are.

('Ullans' is both a pun which combines elements of 'Ulster' and 'Lallans' and an acronym – 'Ulster Scots Language in Literature and Native Speech' – created in 1993 as the title for the magazine of the Ulster-Scots Language Society. The term gathered enough momentum to be enshrined in legislation before the end of the decade.)

The political implications of the exchange are worth exploring. Ideological exchanges in Northern Ireland are often in code, and I will attempt to interpret the code implicit in the above exchange.

In arguing that the language should not be exclusively associated with a single section of the population (i.e. Catholics/nationalists), the questioner positioned himself within the context of the discourse of common heritage. However, because he placed his definition of common heritage in relation to Ireland rather than Northern Ireland, Mr Trimble's highly developed antennae would have identified a nationalist subtext. In his response, he drew on the discourse of competitive victimhood, with its classic opening 'what about ...?', always an indication that the speaker will not answer the question.

A viewer from Northern Ireland would decode David Trimble's response as delivering the following message. He regards Irish as the language of nationalists and Ulster Scots as the language of unionists; he refuses to be drawn by the blandishments of Irish nationalists, even if expressed in terms of inclusivity; and his own chosen role is to defend the culture of the unionist (Ulster-British/non-Irish) people of Northern Ireland.

Language also turned out to be a core issue in the Northern Ireland peace process. It may have been the last issue to be resolved in the negotiations leading up to the Good Friday Agreement of 10 April 1998, and in fact, it almost derailed the final settlement. The Agreement was concluded at about 5.30 in the afternoon, after a week of intense negotiations which involved all-night sessions on the Wednesday and Thursday. The last 24 hours saw two crises involving language provision.[6] As late as 10.40 p.m. on the Thursday there was still no agreement on the Irish language, which along with prisoner release was a sticking point for Sinn Féin, one of the nationalist parties, and had a particularly strong advocate in Gerry Adams, the Sinn Féin President. The issue was still being discussed at 1.45 on Friday morning, after the original midnight deadline had passed, and again at 3.25, at which point David Trimble appears to have introduced the issue of Ulster Scots. The reaction of Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, to the 'awful meeting' at which this occurred is recorded in his memoirs: 'It turned out that there was some obscure language called Ullans [Ulster Scots], a Scottish

dialect spoken in some parts of Northern Ireland which was the Unionists' equivalent of the Irish language'. Blair's surprise at this unexpected turn of events was matched by that of Bertie Ahern, the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister), who:

> did not take the same relaxed view of the importance of Ullans as I did, suggesting that maybe David would like to speak some of the 'fecking thing' so we could hear what it sounded like, and David taking umbrage at the idea that the dialect was a Unionist invention, explaining solemnly and at length the Scottish roots of Ullans with all the sensitivity of a landowner talking to the village idiot.

Blair then discussed the language issue on the telephone with Bill Clinton, the American President, who was on standby to assist the negotiations, and they agreed that it should not be allowed to become a stumbling block – in other words, it was agreed that relatively generous provision could be made for both Irish and Ulster Scots. By lunchtime, the Irish language issue, which was also being pursued by the Irish Government, was resolved, and the UK Government team began to hint to the media that a deal had been struck. At that point, Trimble threatened to bring the agreement down because no provision had been made for Ulster Scots. Blair's outspoken adviser Alastair Campbell has published his contemporary reaction in his diaries:

> The whole thing nearly came unstuck over a fuck-up over the wretched implementation [all-island] bodies ... We then had another history lesson from DT [David Trimble] on the importance of Ullans. TB [Tony Blair] could not believe what he was hearing. I said why can't we just say it is promotion of Celtic languages? Because Ullans is not a Celtic tongue, said DT. We had effectively announced the deal was done, give or take a bit or two at the edges, and here we were, with DT ready to unpick the whole thing over this.

It is difficult to extract the exact sequence of events from the published accounts, but this appears to have been the final outstanding issue. It was eventually resolved. There are provisions for both Irish and Ulster Scots in the Agreement; indeed, most of the support infrastructure for both Irish and Ulster Scots is based on the Agreement, and the two

are locked together in a cross-border language body supported by both governments.

This is entirely consistent with Trimble's past record. During the mid-1990s, as Cultural Spokesperson of the UUP, he was a founder member of the Ulster-Scots Heritage Council. As early as 1985, not long after Sinn Féin's cultural campaign began to gather steam,[7] he identified Irish culture as a threat to unionism and founded the Ulster Society for the Promotion of Ulster-British Heritage and Culture, usually referred to as the Ulster Society. The Society's journal says that the Ulster Society was founded 'with the aim of promoting and preserving the distinctive culture and heritage of the Ulster-British people, embracing: language, drama, poetry, music, folk customs, symbolism, and history'.[8] Another edition of the journal made explicit the hostility of the 'Ulster-British' cultural ideology to the Irish language, targeting the Gaelic revival, in a wonderfully Scotto-centric phrase, as an attempt 'to dye Ulster's cultural tartan a solid emerald green'.[9] Trimble appears to have had a personal animus to the language, which he brought to his professional life as a lecturer in law. He is reported as infuriating nationalist students: 'if they had a Gaelic name, he would insist on the English equivalent'.[10]

In 1989, speaking as chairman of the Ulster Society during a speech at a community relations conference, he took exception to both the Irish traditional music played during the social events and the title of the conference ('Varieties of Irishness'). He defined his own cultural allegiance as follows – 'The term I use to describe the culture I grew up in is "Ulster-British". I do not like using the term "Protestant" because of the sectarianism encouraged by the use of religious labels'[11] – but was rather less careful when defining what he called the 'competing' culture:

> what for want of a better word one will call the Irish Gaelic/Catholic culture. The latter has, in the course of the last century or so, tried to develop, or redevelop, its own self-contained culture. It was clearly bound up with the development of political separatism. It was to be 'ourselves alone' politically, culturally and, or, especially, linguistically.[12]

Trimble's Ulster-British culture is defined less by what it is than by what it is not: it is definitely not Irish, definitely not Gaelic, and, if we can infer from the sectarianism encouraged by religious labels, not Catholic.

Language and politics in Northern Ireland: 1921–1999

Unionist rejection of an Irish identity included the Irish language. While this tendency was already strong within unionism, the fact that the public face of the language movement had become increasingly nationalist and Catholic did not help. In 1945, the Minister of Education, enthusiastically supported by the Prime Minister, could dismiss Irish as a 'foreign language'.[13] As Northern Ireland was effectively a single-party state, ruled without a break between 1921 and 1972 by the Ulster Unionist Party, the language movement faced considerable hostility from the state itself.[14]

Education was the one area in which state support for the language had been established before partition, and remained, until the 1980s, the only area within Northern Ireland for which statutory support continued (broadcasting in Irish was banned until 1982, and no funding was made available for Irish-language arts until the 1990s). The UUP progressively reduced state funding for teaching Irish as a school subject, although the party resisted demands to have the teaching of Irish banned on the grounds that, if they did so, 'the very dogs in Belfast – at any rate the Falls Road dogs – will bark in Irish'.[15]

This situation began to change in the 1980s under direct rule from Westminster. Funding for Irish-medium education was first granted, reluctantly, in 1984, but the changes stretched beyond the education system. Influential figures began to argue for a policy which embraced the principle of cultural diversity, and funding began to be made available for a number of Irish language projects in the late 1980s. Government policy until 1998 was entirely reactive, but positive support for the Irish language became an integral part of the political settlement, the British Government resolving to 'take resolute action to promote the [Irish] language' as part of the Good Friday Agreement.

This development was in response to pressure from the nationalist parties, and was initially strongly opposed by unionists, who did, however, eventually accept it on the condition that Ulster Scots should also be included. In the short term at least, this pattern can be expected to continue; nationalist parties will support Irish and unionists will support Ulster Scots, and the small number of non-aligned parties will

probably support both. The principle of the new policy is summarised in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998:

> All participants recognise the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland.[16]

At a later stage, in spite of his earlier resistance to including language among the cross-border implementation bodies to be established as a result of the Agreement, David Trimble did ultimately accept a cross-border language body, and sold it to his supporters by adding Ulster Scots to its remit at the last moment. He also added the rather disingenuous comment that 'A language body (for Irish and Ulster-Scots) was *our* offer' (emphasis in original) and the positive note that 'hopefully the new government of Northern Ireland will be genuinely culturally pluralist'.[17]

This tardy embrace of linguistic pluralism may or may not be a positive development. There are two models for the promotion of cultural pluralism. One involves an inclusivist approach based on a common heritage model, which encourages every citizen to share in a wide variety of cultural activity. The other is a form of voluntary, possibly benevolent, cultural apartheid, reflecting the considerably less benevolent religious, social and political apartheid in which much of the population of Northern Ireland exists. Voluntary apartheid, it should be added, is often disguised by the vocabulary of inclusiveness.

The sudden appearance of Ulster Scots on the cultural and political scene has already been noted. Ulster Scots is a variety of the Scots spoken in the lowlands of Scotland, and established itself in the north of Ireland shortly before the Plantation of Ulster in the early years of the 17th century, subsequently developing a number of linguistic features, mostly derived from Irish, which do not exist in Scotland. Ulster Scots survives today in the areas that were most densely settled by Lowland – mainly Presbyterian – Scots, although it is now spoken by both religious communities.

The political attractiveness of Ulster Scots for Unionists is fairly easy to explain. There is a long-standing sense of affinity between the north

of Ireland and Scotland based on geographical proximity and millennia of contact and interaction. The Northern Ireland accent is heavily influenced by Scots, and there is a high proportion of Scottish surnames in Ulster. Although this sense of affinity is not confined to unionists, they can gain particular political benefits from emphasising the Scottish connection. Scotland, for instance, can offer a version of a British political identity which is not English, and therefore not associated with the sense of betrayal that many unionists feel towards Westminster. Presbyterianism, which originated in Scotland, is the largest Protestant denomination in Northern Ireland. All in all, the combination of a sense of origin in Scotland combined with a sense of common religious allegiance and a shared cultural heritage makes for a very attractive package.

Language, dialect, variant?
The linguistic status of Ulster Scots

As spoken in its traditional communities, Ulster Scots is wonderfully vivid: 'Snickit and cauld and far atween like a stepmother's kiss to her foreganger's wean'.[18] 'Whun A sa the owl clat that had made wer meat A wuz ready tae boak mae guts up'; 'Stannin there wae a boo in yer bak lake a pishin coo'.[19] It is comparatively accessible, and even at its most intense can be understood fairly easily with the help of a glossary. Ulster Scots also has a slender but fascinating literary tradition.

The linguistic status of Ulster Scots, indeed of Scots itself, has been a matter of some dispute. While Scots and English descend from the same root, most authorities accept that 16th-century Scots can be described as a distinct language. The *Concise Scots Dictionary* (which curiously describes standard English as a dialect; it actually derives from a sociolect based on an amalgam of dialects) summarises the historic relationship between Scots and English as follows:

> in the later fifteenth and sixteenth centuries there were two national languages in use in Britain, metropolitan Tudor English in the kingdom of England, and metropolitan Older Scots in the kingdom of Scotland. Though these languages were politically or socially separate, linguistically they were distinct

> but quite closely related dialects, much as is the case with the Scandinavian languages today.[20]

What is implicit here is that although Scots and English came from the same root, they developed in parallel and on a basis of equality. However, the argument for the distinctiveness of Scots and English as 'politically and socially separate languages' changed rapidly in the following centuries.

With the Union of the Scottish and English Crowns in 1603, Scots ceased to be a politically separate language. Even under an independent Parliament until 1707, the language of administration in Scotland switched quickly from Scots to English. That Scots lost its social prestige after 1603 is clear from the complete abandonment of Scots as a literary medium for over a hundred years. Its claim to be a socially separate language has also been weakened by the fact that for almost 400 years it has been in a subordinate position to a standard English norm and has been in a continuous process of converging towards English.

However, there is a strong lobby made up mainly of Scottish nationalists which argues either that Scots continues to be a distinct language or that, as Derrick McClure puts it, 'Unquestionably Scots was once a language; unquestionably it has the potential to become one again'.[21] Their arguments have been taken up by Ulster Scots enthusiasts, with one interesting variation. While most argue that Ulster Scots is a dialect or variant of Scots, some have argued or implied that Ulster Scots is a separate language from Scots. The case for Ulster Scots being a distinct language, made at a time when the status of Scots itself was insecure, is so bizarre that it is unlikely to have been a linguistic argument. It may reflect, in emblematic cultural terms, an ideological division within unionism between a British political identity (within the UK) and an 'Ulster' political identity, the latter finding its most extreme form in a movement for an independent Northern Ireland, or, as its advocates put it, an independent Ulster.

Minority language movements often give prominence to eccentric linguistic theories which would be ignored by more secure language communities. In the case of Ulster Scots some of these eccentricities have been placed centre stage, partly for political reasons. Because Ulster Scots offers itself as a unionist equivalent to Irish, and because the only linguistic model available to unionists is Irish, some of its advocates feel

that they must go into direct competition with Irish at all levels, including the level of its linguistic status. As a result, issues of spelling and grammar have acquired a distinct political tinge.

Unfortunately, it is much easier to make the case for the distinct linguistic status of Irish than for either Scots or Ulster Scots. Even in the sixteenth century, the common origin of Scots and English was reflected in the fact that Scots was called 'Inglis' (= English) as often as it was called 'Scots'. Since that time, as has been noted, Scots has been in a process of converging again – in some cases almost merging – with English. Speakers of all varieties of Scots range from those who demonstrably speak English with a Scots flavour and those whose Scots diverges markedly from standard English. It is only at the further end of the spectrum that the case for Scots being a separate language can be sustained, but it must be acknowledged that even at this level of difference its status is still often questioned.

A.J. Aitken, former editor of *The Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, after studying this issue over a long period, ultimately came down firmly on both sides of the fence: 'if Scots is not now a full "language" it is something more than a mere "dialect". A distinguished German scholar once called it a *Halbsprache*—a semi-language.'[22] In an earlier essay, memorably entitled 'The Good Old Scots Tongue: Does Scots have an Identity?', he was rather less positive. He measured Scots against the widely accepted typology devised by William Stewart in 1968 (standardisation, autonomy, historicity and vitality), and came to the conclusion that 'Scots qualifies as no more than a Dialect and neither as a Standard or a Classical language', adding that 'Equally, of course, there is no sense at all in which Scots could count as a national or an official language according to the terminology proposed in the 1951 UNESCO report on Vernacular Languages'.[23]

Much of this debate is now redundant. On 4 June 1998, the UK Government stated its intention to sign the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, specifying 'the Welsh language in Wales and ... the Gaelic language in Scotland', and 'the Irish language in Northern Ireland at an early date'.[24] Interestingly, the reference to '... the Scots language' was not specific to any territory. On 8 March 1999, the UK Government published a Draft Statutory Instrument to enable the setting up of six cross-border Implementation Bodies, one of

which was for language, and to include Irish and Ulster Scots. Called 'Ullans' – the term used in the Belfast Agreement – Ulster Scots was defined under the Order as: 'the variety of the *Scots language* traditionally found in parts of Northern Ireland and Donegal'[25] (emphasis added).

One of the criteria for deciding the linguistic status of a speech-form is whether or not it has been accepted as a language by the state. Swedish, Danish and the two standard varieties of Norwegian are regarded as being a single language, using strictly linguistic criteria. However, they are recognised as separate languages, because they have been designated as such by their governments.[26] Scots is therefore, by government decree, a language, and Ulster Scots is by government decree a variety of that language. It is notable that the first legal definition of the linguistic status of Scots in Scotland was formulated, in response to a political imperative, in legislation that relates only to Northern Ireland.

Maximally differentiated Ulster Scots

This development could be beneficial to the development of Ulster Scots, as its advocates now need not feel that they must enter into direct – and unequal – competition with Irish on the issue of linguistic status. Previously, some enthusiasts appeared to believe that they could make their case only by using a maximally differentiated form of Ulster Scots – a form as far removed as possible from standard English, and as incomprehensible as possible to English-speakers.

Advocates of the position that Ulster Scots is a different language to Scots suffered from the added complication of having to fight on two fronts. Maximally differentiated Scots, it should be added, except among a declining number of rural speakers, is essentially a phenomenon of the printed page and the public platform.

The maximally differentiated Ulster Scots we have seen to date reflects a number of contradictory strategies, whose only common denominator is to be as different to English, and occasionally Scots, as possible. In vocabulary, this has involved the use of a disproportionate quota of obsolete words and of neologisms invented in Northern Ireland (e.g., 'langblether' for telephone; 'stour-sucker', a direct translation from

German, for 'vacuum cleaner'). Germanic forms are particularly favoured, although there is a ready acceptance of French and Latin-derived vocabulary that was either never used or has become obsolete in English. Spelling sometimes draws on redundant 16th- and 17th-century spelling conventions ('quho' for 'who' etc.), now rarely if ever used in Scotland. This alternates with an erratic spelling which sometimes reflects everyday Ulster Scots speech rather than the conventions of either modern or historic Scots, and sometimes does not (terminal 't' in 'it' and 'at' is pronounced in Ulster Scots with a full glottal stop, but is usually spelt according to the English convention). Unstressed vowels, which often merge into a neutral vowel sound, are often changed in Ulster Scots writing; where Scots writers are content to write 'the', some Ulster Scots writers use 'tha'.

In style, the approach appears to favour a form of folksy nativist purism, manifesting itself as a pastiche of rural speech, and based apparently on the assumption that the native speaker of Ulster Scots can aspire to neither abstract thought nor the passive voice. The result is a jumble of clashing registers far removed indeed from the grace of modern Synthetic Scots, and a very distant cousin to Hugh McDiarmid's interrogation of eternity or William Lorimer's wonderfully earthy version of the New Testament.

It is also often incomprehensible to the native speaker. This is one of the most acute problems facing the Ulster Scots movement. Enthusiasts rightly point out that Ulster Scots has been marginalised and stigmatised, and that its speakers have been imbued with a false sense of inferiority. However, if the movement were to concentrate on linguistic maintenance, through restoring a sense of pride in their speech to these communities, it would have to endorse a high proportion of standard English speech-forms. The drive to establish its linguistic status has resulted in forms of maximally differentiated Ulster Scots, which, if accepted as being the 'correct' form, could reinforce the sense of inferiority among native speakers that the enthusiasts are trying to combat.

The following is an example from an Ulster Scots version of a government advertisement published in the press on 9 February 1999. The original English of the first sentence is as follows:

> Applications are invited for the post of Sub-Editor (English and Ulster-Scots) in the office of the Official Report (Hansard) of the New Northern Ireland Assembly, which is located at Parliament Buildings, Stormont, Belfast.

In the maximally differentiated Ulster Scots version we have:

> It's noo apen fur tae pit in jab foarms fur tha ontake o Unner-Editor (Inglis an Ulster-Scotch) wi tha Chammur o tha Scrievit Accoont (Hansard) o tha New Ulster Semmlie sittin at tha Tolsel Biggins, Stormont, Bilfawst.

Of the 35 lexical items here, only five common words (it's, in, editor, new, at) and less than half of the proper nouns (Ulster, Hansard and Stormont) correspond to their Standard English equivalent. A word-by-word rendering of this into standardised English spelling, but leaving in their original form the terms 'Scrievit' and 'Tolsel Biggins' would read as follows:

> It's now open for to put in job forms for the ontake of Under-Editor (English and Ulster-Scots) with the Chamber of the Scrievit Account (Hansard) of the New Ulster Assembly, sitting at Tolsel Biggins, Stormont, Belfast.

An analysis of some of the elements of this sentence may be useful. 'It's noo apen fur tae pit in jab foarms fur tha ontake o' as an equivalent for 'Applications are invited for the post of' requires no comment. 'Biggin' (= building) is a word of Norse origin, and is still in use in Ulster Scots in the much more restricted sense of 'outhouse'. 'Chaummer' (= chamber) is a French-derived word, now referring only to an upper room in a house or outbuilding, according to the *Concise Ulster Dictionary*. It appears to be used here only because it is not the word 'office'. 'Scrievit', one of the permitted words of Latin origin, means 'written'. It was once common north of the Humber, but survived into modern times only in the north-east of Scotland, according to the *Concise Scots Dictionary*. 'Scrievit Accoont' (written account) is an adequate if not quite accurate and totally unnecessary translation of 'Official Report'.

The use of 'Tolsel' for 'parliament' is particularly eccentric. The word derives from an Old English term for a tollbooth, later expanding its

meaning to incorporate the town courthouse or guildhall. The *Oxford Dictionary* indicates that the term survived longest in Ireland; there is a Tholsel in Kilkenny and another in Carlingford. It does not appear to have been used as an equivalent of the French-derived 'parliament' before the publication of the advert. (It is possible that the original Tholsel building of Kilkenny was used by the Catholic Confederate Parliament of 1642, or even by the Irish Parliament during its occasional sessions in the town between the 13th and 15th centuries, but the term 'parliament' refers to a gathering of legislators rather than to the building they meet in.) 'Parliament', spelt 'Perlament' or 'Pairlament' in the 16th century, is a perfectly acceptable Scots word, and was the official title of the Scottish Parliament. It is rejected here presumably on the grounds that the same word is used in English.

'Ulster' as the Ulster Scots translation of 'Northern Ireland' is particularly interesting, and represents a new departure in official policy. It may be the first official government document since the days of the *Ulster Yearbook* to use 'Ulster' for the territory defined by law as Northern Ireland. This departure may indicate a political agenda on the part of the translator(s). The terminology used in Northern Ireland to name Northern Ireland is contested; 'Ulster', when used to mean the six counties of Northern Ireland, is an exclusively unionist term.

Ulster Scots, Cruithin and the Chosen People

Unionism is now in a process of redefining itself, and the Ulster Scots movement appears to have been drawn into this redefinition, although, like the Irish language movement, it can at times use the discourse of inclusivity. Other reformulations range from civic (secular, inclusive) unionism to several forms of exclusivist Protestant unionism, some of which are based on supposed racial distinctions. One theory involves an identification with the Cruithin, a prehistoric people located mainly in the north-east of Ireland. This identification is sometimes conflated with the Ulaidh, another ancient tribe of the north-east. Another more extreme strain of exclusivist Protestant unionism claims descent from one of the Lost Tribes of Israel.

A novel by Philip Robinson, one of the most prominent voices of the Ulster Scots movement, has engaged in his novel *Wake the Tribe o' Dan*

with the theories of the Cruithin and the Lost Tribes as manifested in an imaginary Ulster Scots speaking community, which, from linguistic evidence, is situated in County Down. I propose to conclude with an analysis of this book, but some of the background to the two ideologies will add to our understanding of the full implications of these themes.

The Cruithin

The Cruithin thesis was first popularised by a unionist politician, Dr Ian Adamson. It was based to some extent on the work of T.F. O'Rahilly and Eoin MacNeill, who argued that the Cruithin were the earliest inhabitants of Ireland who could be positively identified, equated them with the Scottish Picts (Pretani in British P-Celtic), believed that they were conquered at a relatively late date by the Gaels, and claimed that they had originally spoken a British P-Celtic language.

As the basis for a unionist response to the nationalist Gaelic origin-myth, now in disrepute, this theory, combining as it did British origins and the Scottish connection, had its attractions. It also redefines the Plantation as, in Adamson's words: 'the Great Return of the Cruithin to Ulster'.[27] Rather than displacing the native Irish, the Scottish settlers were, unknown to themselves, Cruithin who were simply repossessing their original homeland, having been driven to Scotland by the invading Gaels in the 5th century AD, along with their P-Celtic (i.e. British) neighbours, the Ulaidh. The Plantation, in other words, was not a plantation at all.

Adamson disputes that the Cruithin were British P-Celts, or any kind of Celts, and follows the theories of Zimmer and Rhys, who had equated them with earlier Neolithic settlers.[28] The belief that the bulk of the genetic heritage of the present population of Ireland is rooted in Neolithic peoples who did not speak a Celtic language has found wide support from archaeologists. Adamson argues that 'our predominant genetic heritage is not Celtic at all but can be traced back to the Neolithic period', backing up this claim with an unfortunately worded quote from the archaeologist Peter Woodman: 'The Irish are essentially pre-Indo-European, they are not physically Celtic'.[29] That the population of Ireland is composed of genetic mongrels is undeniable. However, 'pre-Indo-European' and 'Indo-European' – where they mean

anything – are linguistic rather than genetic terms. 'Celtic', where it means anything, is not a genetic term either; it refers either to linguistics, ancient tribal peoples, or more questionably to archaeological artefacts. Given that no one has yet identified either a Celtic 'genetic heritage' or a 'physical Celt', never mind the genetic heritage of a physical pre-Indo-European, to speak of genetic Celts – even to deny their existence – makes about as much sense as speaking of genetic Americans.

The great weakness in Adamson's argument is that, having joined the bulk of academic opinion in demolishing the myth of the genetic Celt, he substitutes for it the equally fanciful theory of the genetic Cruithin. The earliest evidence does indeed indicate that the Cruithin were regarded as a distinct ethnic group in Ireland until the Gaels invented a false Gaelic heritage for them in the 8th century AD. However, there is no justification at all for assuming that they are therefore the oldest stratum in the population, and O'Rahilly himself warned against making such assumptions.[30] O'Rahilly's theories, that the Pretani/Cruithin were 'the earliest inhabitants of Britain and Ireland to whom a definite name can be given' and that the Gaels were a late arrival,[31] while they have gained wide acceptance, are simply theories. Others, such as the Celtic scholar John T. Koch of Aberystwyth, believe that the Cruithin were preceded in Ireland by the Iverni, who were proto-Gaels.[32] The archaeologists J.P. Mallory and T.E. McNeill indicate that as far as the scant evidence is concerned it could equally be suggested 'that our Ulster Cruithin may represent a later intrusion into parts of Ireland from Scotland by either pre-Celtic or even Celtic peoples'.[33]

In his first book, *The Cruithin*, Ian Adamson drew on some rather thin medical data to argue towards an unsustainable genetic conclusion. Scotland, the Isle of Man and Ulster, he says, are populated by a pre-Indo-European population which shares an unusual balance of blood-types, in which group O is higher than group A. The fact that Belfast also has the highest recorded incidence in the world of anencephalus and spina bifida, 'in which an important genetic factor is thought to be present', leads to the extraordinary conclusion that 'Since the inhabitants of Belfast have been shown [*sic*] to be of essentially non-Indo-European stock, this high incidence would also seem to confirm our thesis that they are, indeed, the people of the Cruithin'.[34]

There is some confusion in *The Cruithin* as to who exactly the Cruithin were (or are). Sometimes they are represented as forming the genetic basis of the population of Britain and Ireland; sometimes they seem to be restricted to the northern parts. At other times they tend towards the exclusive. The 'People of the Cruithin' are explicitly identified as the 'Scotch Irish',[35] and implicitly as Protestants, as in this representative passage, which refers to the aftermath of the 1798 Rebellion: 'As for the Cruithin; disgusted, dismayed and finally fearful of the new sectarian aspect of "Irish freedom", many joined the Orange Order'.[36]

However, in Adamson's later publications, the Cruithin theory focused on an inclusive and non-sectarian identity within an Ulster context. While this can be interpreted as deriving ultimately from a unionist political agenda, Adamson has personally made strenuous efforts to transcend politico-religio-linguistic divisions; he has been both President of the Ulster-Scots Language Society and a member of the Ultach Trust, a cross-community Irish language funding body, as well as being active in the Community Relations Council. In *The Ulster People* (1991) he strongly supports recent immigrants on the basis that the cultural heritage of Northern Ireland will be 'absorbed and enriched'.[37] The refined form of the Cruithin theory formulated in *The Ulster People* generously – and sincerely – offers a Cruithin racial identity to those northern Catholics who could get excited about their genetic heritage and want an Ulster rather than an Irish identity. Adamson hotly, if somewhat inaccurately, contests that his early work can be interpreted as sectarian:

> How a proper reading of my work could lead to the supposition that the descendants of the Cruithin are somehow now exclusively Ulster Protestants is hard to fathom. Actually many individuals within the Protestant community are showing great interest in the *common identity* theme I have promoted for so many years and are not only feeling a new confidence in their Ulster identity, but have a desire to share this identity with the Catholic community [emphasis added].[38]

Myths are important for the need they satisfy rather than for any objective truth they may embody, and the Cruithin origin-myth has

touched a deep chord in the unionist psyche. It was a stroke of genius to have revived a prehistoric identity of which we know almost nothing and which by the eighth century AD had been effectively obliterated by the pseudo-history of the Gaelic aristocracy. The advantage of prehistory to the modern myth-maker is that the vagueness and ambiguity of the sources leave ample room for speculation. If the speculation is focused on a preordained conclusion, draws selectively on secondary sources and is wrapped in learned references to a subject of which the general reader knows nothing, so much the better.

Irish prehistory is shrouded in a mass of contradictory, self-serving and unreliable material, mainly from early Gaelic sources. As a result, in the words of Mallory and McNeill: 'invariably, all ... attempts to separate prehistoric truth from mythological chaff can only be done by making a long string of assumptions, none of which demand acceptance'.[39]

Some of the assumptions in Ian Adamson's theories are unlikely to have any wide acceptance outside the imperatives of unionist ideology. Dabbling in racial theories is, however, a dangerous business. Narrow interpretations of his earlier formulations in particular have been adopted by some people who do not share his personal urge to promote them as part of a shared heritage. They have also, through no fault of his, become implicated in the Northern Ireland version of a master-race ideology developed in the Victorian era: British Israelitism.

The British Israelites and the Lost Tribes of Israel

The British Israelite theory, which emerged in its modern form in England in the 1840s,[40] is another venture into prehistory involving a string of assumptions based on a preordained conclusion. In this case the preordained conclusion is that the British people – and their offshoot in America – are descended from the 10 tribes of Israel which disappeared from the historic record after the Assyrian conquest of *c.* 722 BC. They are, in other words, the Chosen People, God's Chosen Few.

The theory is strongly imperialistic, manifesting, in the words of Bryan Wilson, an 'exaggerated identification with the nation and its destiny'.[41] Wilson describes British Israelitism as an 'eclectic' or 'non-

separatist' sect,[42] by which he means that its beliefs penetrate a wide variety of mainstream Protestant denominations and fringe sects. It is also wildly variable, as each theoretician appears to have developed a different series of 'proofs' and come to a different set of conclusions. My focus here is an author who helped develop the theory that the Tribe of Dan settled in the north-east of Ireland. Beginning in the 1860s, the Englishman Edward Hine built on the theories of John Wilson, the founder of the movement, and a posthumous selection of his writings, which internal evidence would date mainly to the 1870s, was brought out in 1891 under the title *Forty-seven Identifications of the British Nation with the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel founded upon Five Hundred Scripture Proofs*.

The theory relies on a back-reading of selected prophesies from the Old Testament. Britain under Victoria, it was believed, fulfilled the following Old Testament prophesies:

> a monarchy ... strong in power ... an island nation, having large colonies ... and known by another name ... a Sabbath-keeping people; ... Its colonies must be in every zone and belt the earth ... [it] must be with the Tribe of Dan ... [it] must be above every nation.[43]

Oddly enough, the British Israelites could reconcile their Israelite descent with anti-Semitism. Hine explained that unlike the British Israelites, the Jews – the Tribe of Judah, those who remained in Israel – were cursed:

> few, bereft of children, without might, without a government, hungry, thirsty, ashamed, a trembling, faint-hearted people, who, in the words of Isaiah, 'Shall leave your name for a curse'.[44]

The most frightening of the 'Identifications' relates to the success of the British children of Israel in eliminating the aborigines of their colonies, thus fulfilling the prophesy of Jeremiah xxx.11: 'For I am with thee, saith the Lord, to save thee; though I make a FULL END of ALL NATIONS whither I have scattered thee'. From this the conclusion is drawn:

> wherever we have Colonies the aborigines are dying out before us. ... It has been observed that this is a cruel thing; but this is

> a wicked observation to make, because it is God's own design. When we find that two large tribes have already disappeared from Tasmania, that at the present death-rate, twenty years will exterminate the Maories of New Zealand, that forty years will render the Indians of Manasseh [= America] extinct, that in many of our smaller Colonies they are already totally extinct, we must submit to the will of God, and accept the fact as a further proof of the infinite supremacy of His sure word.[45]

Hine argued that the British Israelites were Anglo-Saxons rather than Celts – the original meaning of 'British'. How then, he asks, had the Ancient Britons of Wales failed to be exterminated? The most obvious explanation is that the Welsh must be Israelites, based on the undoubted fact that they were still in existence: 'If the Welsh were of the ancient Briton stock, no power would have prevented them from dying out'.[46] The troublesome Irish Catholics, on the other hand, presented him with something of a problem; they also had failed to die out, but were obviously not members of the chosen people. Fortunately, there was a Biblical justification at hand. The Irish Catholics had survived as Canaanites. The Book of Judges (xi.3) records that God instructed the Israelites to drive out the Canaanites, but they disobeyed the command, which, says Hine:

> displeased the Lord, who decreed that 'henceforth', as a punishment for their disobedience, they should continue with them as their troublers, declaring that these Canaanites should be 'pricks in your eyes, thorns in your sides, and shall vex you in the land wherein ye dwell' (Num. xxxiii.55). 'They shall be snares and traps unto you, scourges in your sides' (Jos. xxiii.13). ... THE IDENTITY declares the people of the South of Ireland to be descendants of the Canaanites ... There are many ethnological proofs that they are so descended. They, and only they, are 'thorns in our sides', as Fenianism, Home-Ruleism, Party Processions, Manchester and Clerkenwell testify.[47]

The Canaanites had themselves been cursed, rather unfairly. Because Ham had seen his father Noah lying drunk and naked in his tent, one of his sons, Canaan, was cursed. As a result, Canaan's descendants were destined for all ages to be the servants of servants and the lowest of slaves. The 'southern Irish' Canaanites:

> (who are even now, what they always used to be, 'hewers of wood, and drawers of water') ... were given to idolatry, destitute of mind and reason, with a sort of animal instinct, they vacantly gave themselves over to a foolish, tricksy and false system; and to this day they doggedly and persistently cling to the false and scandalous service, idolatry of another form, i.e., the service of Rome, the 'Mother of Harlots'.[48]

The northern Protestants of Ireland, on the other hand, are descended from the Tribe of Dan, the great seafarers of Israel. Native Irish sources are marshalled to support this argument:

> We have ample evidence of the tribe of Dan settling in Ireland about the period of the Assyrian captivity. This is a matter of history and can be claimed as another historical link. The Tuatha Danian did this, which is no other than the Tribe of Dan, whose early marks exist to this day in the names of places given by them, which are purely Hebrew, such as 'Dan Sobairse', pronounced Dan Sovarke, or Dan Swerick, near Carrick Fergus, and shown in Ptolemy's map of Ireland, and which is literally Hebrew for Dan's resting-place, Dan's Habitation; whereas Dan Sovar—also Hebrew—means Dan in exile. It is also a historical fact that with the Tuatha de Danna both the Hebrew language and words were introduced into the North of Ireland, and as there was no other Tribe of Dan who could introduce the Hebrew, it clearly follows that this must have been the Israelitish Tribe of Dan.[49]

Evidence of similar quality is adduced to show that the Coronation Stone is Jacob's Pillow, the stone on which Jacob slept when he had his prophetic dream. The Coronation Stone is known to have been brought to London from Scone in Scotland, and is said to have originally functioned as the inaugural stone of the High Kings of Ireland at Tara – the Lia Fáil. Hine cited an Irish legend that around the time of the Babylonian captivity, the Lia Fáil was brought to Ireland by a philosopher from the east, whom he believed to be Jeremiah. One sub-sect of the movement believed that Tara is also the resting place of the Ark of the Covenant. The notorious loyalist group Tara is better known for the sexual abuse scandal that brought it to public attention than for

the finer detail of its beliefs, but it is known that the organisation subscribed to British Israelite principles.

The Biblical Tribe of Dan had many characteristics compatible with the self-image of Scots-Irish/Ulster Scots unionism. They were notable frontiersmen, having captured the city of Laish beyond the boundaries of Israel, slaughtering its inhabitants and holding it against a hostile local population. They were famously independent in character, striking at any outside attempt to dominate them, and were equally famous for the tenacity with which they held on to their religious traditions.

That versions of this theory still have currency within sections of unionism is indicated in Ruth Dudley Edwards' study of the Orange Order, in which she gives a long extract from an interview with 'one of the Orange Order's keenest amateur historians', who has married Hine's theory to that of the Cruithin:

> the Stone of Destiny did not belong to Scotland. It was the stone Jacob rested his head on, which was carried to Ireland. It was Ptolemy – the Greek map-maker who lived in Egypt – who said the northern part of the islands of the west, was inhabited by a people of the Hebrew race. The stone was brought here and the Cruithin kings of Ireland were crowned on it. ... I always view the stone as the stone of the United Kingdom, because it came here, went to Scotland and then went down to London and Edward I – his son was named Prince of Wales.
>
> The people that were brought back in the Plantation of Ulster were just really the people that went six hundred, seven hundred years previous over to Argyle and the southern lowlands who were returning to Ulster again. They were only coming back home.[50]

The anthropologist Anthony Buckley published an article outlining the beliefs of Northern Ireland British Israelites in 1989, when the Cruithin theory was beginning to have an impact, but before the Ulster Scots linguistic movement was founded. In his version, Eochaidh, the Cruithin king, is described as 'the Israelitish Irish High King'.[51] This argument is a version of the case made by Hine, who claims that Jeremiah also brought with him a princess from the east, Tephi ('purely a Hebrew word', he says). Tephi, as a Hebrew princess, was descended from King David, and married Eochaidh, king of Ulster and Heremonn of Tara:[52]

> and from her we obtain a direct and unbroken line of ancestry to Fergus the First, who went from Ireland to Scotland, and from Fergus the First of Scotland we get the same unbroken line to the time of James the First, and from James the First of England, we get the same unbroken line to our beloved Victoria, the present glorious Queen of Great Britain and Ireland; for though our George came from the Continent, he married the grand-daughter of King James the First, and so the line was preserved intact. The seed came in by a woman, was preserved by a woman, and ... it will not be strange if the seed goes out by a woman. We cry, "God save the Queen." May it be so.[53]

This fulfils the numerous prophesies that Israel must be ruled by the line of David, such as those in I Kings ix.5; I Chron. xvii.11, 12: 'I will establish the throne of thy Kingdom UPON ISRAEL FOR EVER'.[54] What is particularly interesting here is how frequently the royal line can be shown to depend on matrilineal descent, a characteristic of both Jewish and Cruithin practice.

Wake the Tribe o' Dan

Normally, it would not be necessary to deal with the Cruithin or the Lost Tribes in an essay focusing on the theme of language and identity. However, *Wake the Tribe o' Dan*, one of the small number of publications of the Ulster Scots movement, and one written by a prominent member of the movement, uses these two ideologies as its central theme and links them to a version of an Ulster Scots identity.

Wake the Tribe o' Dan is a novel written by Philip Robinson and published in 1998 by the Ullans Press with funding from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. There are certain constraints on an objective analysis of the ideological thrust of any work of fiction. It is, of course, inappropriate to respond to works of fiction as if everything said in the course of the narrative or expressed by a fictional character is a reflection of the author's own point of view. On the other hand, the author did not make the Cruithin and Israelite themes central to his work without a purpose, and an attempt will be made here to unravel what that purpose may have been.

The following analysis of *Wake the Tribe o' Dan* takes a different approach to the issue of language and ideology from that of the rest of

this essay. It draws on the disciplines of cultural studies and literary criticism to explore the Cruithin and Israelite themes in the novel and to analyse the implications of how those themes were treated. The assumptions behind this analysis are that no text is created in an ideological vacuum, that a creative text can reveal a great deal about its conscious or unconscious ideological context, and that it is entirely legitimate to explore a creative work in this way.

Some things can be said with certainty. The Tribe of Dan of the title, it becomes clear in the narrative, is a version of the Israelite Tribe of Dan described by Edward Hine. The novel is set within the imaginary – and idealised – Ulster-Scots-speaking Presbyterian community of Drumcrun. The significance of the townland's name is highlighted on the back cover of the book, which notes that Drumcrun is Gaelic for Druim Cruithin, the hill of the Cruithin, itself translated in the later stages of the book into Ulster Scots as 'Pechtiesknowe', the hill of the Picts. This identification of an Ulster Scots community with Ulster Cruithin and Scottish Picts probably reflects the influence of Ian Adamson's early work. Another theme shared with Adamson is the argument that the Picts/Cruithin are to be identified with the stone-age peoples of Britain and Ireland. The novel has not only been informed by the Cruithin and British Israelite ideologies; it has drawn attention to these themes before the reader gets to the first page.

The book is described in the blurb as a kailyard novel in which 'each absurd turn of events carries a futuristic ring of truth'. Kailyard (= cabbage-patch) is a once-popular genre, involving a narrative in standard English with much of the dialogue in Scots. The form originated in Scotland in the nineteenth century, but is now regarded as embodying the worst sort of Scottish cultural cringe: 'the falsification of whimsy, the make-believe phantasy of evasion'.[55] At its worst, kailyard is characterised by an escapist and self-indulgent depiction of an idyllic, supposedly timeless rural society awash with humour, pathos, benevolent clergymen and the simple wisdom of the unlettered poor. It is necessary to add that a number of kailyard novels have transcended the limitations of their form and have earned a high critical regard.[56]

Philip Robinson's book had the potential to be much more than the typical lumpen-kailyard novel, in that it touches on important issues of identity and ideology in Northern Ireland at the end of the twentieth

century, and deals with a community which has been underrepresented in creative writing. There is much here for the creative artist to explore, including the relationship between religion, politics, language and identity, the crisis facing what I have described earlier as Protestant unionism, and symptoms reflecting that crisis. Among these symptoms and relevant to the present theme is the search for justification and certainty, sometimes taking the form of such extreme and unorthodox politico-religious ideologies as British Israelitism. The substantial political and social implications of this kind of development can also be explored effectively through fiction.

Overt politics are, however, avoided in the novel. By ignoring both political context and political and religious conflict in a novel dealing with religion, community and identity in Northern Ireland, the author has drastically limited the range of what he could explore. Whether or not this approach could be described as a 'make-believe phantasy of evasion' is less relevant than the fact that the author has chosen to deal with his religious and ethnic themes without reference to any realistic social or political context.

Accepting the limitations of the author's approach, we must then turn to how he has treated the ethnic themes which form the core of the novel, and their implications. It is not intended to deal here with the novel as a whole. The several love-stories, particularly that between Liz Sloan and Steven Hegan, the depiction of a traditional rural society moulded by Calvinist Presbyterian beliefs, and the satire on the 'Ministry of Culture', all of which are important to an assessment of the novel as a creative work, will be largely ignored here; except, that is, where they are relevant to the treatment of the Cruithin and British Israelite themes, and the relationship of those themes to an Ulster Scots linguistic and cultural identity.

Unfortunately, it is not always easy to read the author's intentions in *Wake the Tribe o' Dan* in those very areas. The main difficulty is in trying to discern where the author wishes to distance himself from the ideas expressed by his characters or in the course of the narrative; whether to accept a particular element of the book as an 'absurd turn of events' or to see it as one which 'carries a futuristic ring of truth'. Authorial distancing does exist in the treatment of some themes. Depictions of the social manifestations of Presbyterianism often manage

to successfully combine irony with affection. Humorous explorations of the problems facing 'top-down' action in preserving traditional cultures are rather less successful, but still show an attempt at authorial distancing.

It is much more difficult to detect any such attempt in the treatment of the Lost Tribes. One example will suffice. In what seems to be a Masonic-like ritual, Steven, the central male character, goes through an initiation as a Knight-Errant in the local tent of the 'Danite Knights', the Knights of the Gibraltar Pass. This last is a reference to the tribe of Dan 'passing through the teeth of two continents, in search of the western isles'.[57] The motif of the western isles can be traced to Hine, who devotes several passages to proving that Israel was to reconvene in far-away islands to the north-west, citing, for example, the prophesy of Isaiah that: 'Israel in her lost estate is most plainly directed to glorify the "name of the Lord God of Israel in the isles of the Western Seas"'.[58] The following is an extract from the description of the ceremony in *Wake the Tribe o' Dan*:

> Over the next few years Steven learned a host of unbelievable, incredible things about the history of his own folk. However, on that first night he was treated to a preliminary to his first degree. It was a graphic account ... of the preparation of the tribe of Dan for their flight from Israel ...
>
> ... it was impressed on Steven that he must never talk about these things ... Nothing was to be written down, as every detail had been handed down by word of mouth, without a single change, for over 100 generations.[59]

There is no discernable irony – or distancing – in the passage describing the ritual, which gives the distinct impression that it is written either in the author's own voice or in the voice of an authorial persona. Although the ceremony itself is probably an invention, and although the Israelite 'history of [Steven's] own folk' is described as 'incredible, unbelievable', not only does Steven believe this 'history', the entire male population of Drumcrun – 'the Drumcrun Chosen Few'[60] is depicted as believing it.

Within the ceremony, the Danites explain that they are seeking 'Queen Caschor, guid-dauchter o Noah', who is identified later as the ancestor/matriarch of the Cruithin. A matrilinear, possibly Israelite,

blood-link may therefore be implied between the Tribe of Dan and the Cruithin/Picts, called here 'Pechts'. Does the author wish us to take the treatment of the Pechts seriously or treat it as nonsense? We do not know. The following account of the Pechts, which supplements the 'unbelievable, incredible things' learnt by Steven, is put into the mouth of an old man, Shuey, which may imply that the author wishes to distance himself from what is said. On the other hand, Shuey is depicted as the authentic repository of the community's folk-memory, which gives his version a certain authority:

> 'The pechts was the real first fowk tae bide in Drumcrun. Cum lang afore the Danites sae the did – mair nor echt hunner yeir afore thae boys. Quhan they landit efter the Flood they haed this Queen at was a dauchter o Noah ...' Shuey said all this with his chin resting on his stick and staring at the cairn. ...
>
> Shuey then got back to his story of the first inhabitants of Drumcrun. They always made a chief of one of their women-folk at harvest time. They were no savages either, for they laboured in the fields and grew corn.[61]

These accounts are an amalgam of a number of sources. The influence of Ian Adamson's theories can be detected, as can that of British Israelitism. Other sources include Irish mythology and genuine folk tradition. Queen Caschor, the guid-Dauchter o Noah, is presumably the Cessair of Irish tradition, the first settler of Ireland according to the *Lebor Gabála*, usually mistranslated as 'The Book of Invasions', in which she is identified as the granddaughter of Noah who *unsuccessfully* flees to Ireland to escape the flood. T.F. O'Rahilly believed that the outlines of the *Lebor Gabála* go as far back as the seventh century AD. He interpreted the work as a pseudo-history, the intention of which was to destroy the memory of the non-Gaelic population of Ireland, but also argued that elements of genuine pre-history could still be discerned in the account. The death of Cessair and her followers could be discounted, by anyone who wanted to believe that Noah's granddaughter had indeed come to Ireland, as a distortion deliberately introduced by the Gaels.

Rural folk-practices involved a tradition of preserving the last sheaf of corn, the 'carlin' or 'cailleach' (= old woman). This is usually

explained as a pagan survival, but in *Wake the Tribe o' Dan* the Carlin (who also appears in the ceremony of the Knights of the Danite Pass) is given a different, if rather obscure significance, which seems to involve the guid-Dauchter o Noah and matrilinear traditions of the Israelites and the Picts of ancient Scotland. Liz Sloan – the heroine – appears to have inherited, through the female line, a position as the Carlin, the symbolic queen of the Cruithin of Drumcrun. In the final chapter, when she has decided to leave Drumcrun, her father attempts to secure the succession by willing his house to Liz for her lifetime, and then to her daughter, leaving it to his granddaughter absolutely if she returns to Drumcrun for at least 10 years and has all her children baptised in the local Presbyterian church. His neighbour is impressed: 'He had a new respect for the wile and ageing counsel of George Sloan. What did it matter if the Carlin skipped a generation or two?'[62]

There are other echoes of folklore relating to the Pechts which has been collected in Scottish-settled areas of Ulster, but which bears little resemblance to the account given by Shuey. The Pechts in the authentic folk material were described as small and stocky people who lived in caves, souterains and holes in the ground, and had feet so enormous that when it rained they would either stand on their heads or lie on their backs and 'shelter themselves under their feet'.[63]

The novel gives the impression that in some way the Cruithin and the Lost Tribes are connected with Ulster Scots and Presbyterianism. The ceremony of the Knights of the Gibraltar Pass finishes with the helmsman saying 'Poustie be til wor leid' (= health – or power – to our language).[64] 'Wor leid', in the context, is presumably Ulster Scots rather than the Hebrew brought to the north of Ireland in ancient times by the Israelites (and which Hine thought was the Irish language).

'Wor leid' in the novel appears to be an exclusively Presbyterian phenomenon. Church (i.e. Church of Ireland) Protestants have a marginal role in the novel. The only Drumcrun family who do not speak Ulster Scots, and use their 'telephone voice' all the time are the Doyles: 'Church folk that belonged to St George's in Ballypeden'.[65] As the schoolmaster's family, they may not be natives. Such is the self-sufficiency of the world of Drumcrun that, in a novel set in Northern Ireland and in which religion bulks large, Roman Catholics are never even mentioned. There is an uncanny echo here of some early examples

of the Irish language equivalent of kailyard fiction, which exclude Protestants from their idealised picture of Ireland.

In one interesting deviation from the unitary ethnicity implied in the book, a distinction appears to be made between the Ulster Scots/Presbyterian Cruithin and a broader Ulster Protestant identity related to the Tribe of Dan. One unidentified person involved in the ceremony of the Knights of the Gibraltar Pass speaks in the 'Corinthian twang of Ballypeden or even further away', which may imply membership of the Church of Ireland.[66] The ceremony features another religious motif which may also imply a broader Protestant identity. As the Sons of Dan pass Gibraltar, a voice asks (in maximally differentiated Scots):

> 'Quhat first maun zes mind?' (= What first must you remember?)
>
> 'Nae graven images,' replied the helmsman.[67]

The issue of graven images resurfaces in the treatment of the Cruithin. Shuey explains that the Pechts 'weren't pagans either for no folk in Drumcrun ever made graven images',[72] a claim supported by a reference to the 'curlicues' on what are presumably megalithic monuments, which Shuey claims were built by the Pechts. The rejection of graven images not only is a motif of the Chosen People of the Old Testament, but is one that has particular resonance for the wing of the reformed church with Puritan and Calvinist roots. It is impossible to believe that there is any intention to imply that the Pechts had embraced the values of the Reformation thousands of years before the coming of Christianity to Ireland. However, if the Pechts were presumed to have been of Israelite origin, and to have maintained their Israelite heritage, Shuey's explanation that they were not pagans does make some kind of sense.

The author's intentions, however, remain opaque. While we may assume that he had a purpose in bringing together Cruithin, British Israelite, Ulster Scots and Presbyterian identities in the novel, the uncertainty of tone, and, in particular, the difficulty the reader has in distinguishing between 'absurd turn of events' and 'futuristic ring of truth' defeats any attempt to determine what that purpose may be.

Ulster Scots
linguistic or ethnological identity?

That there is a market for the Cruthin/Ulster Scots equation can be seen from letters to local newspapers. The argument of the following two examples from the *Belfast Telegraph* is based on a racial identification of the Cruithin with a Protestant unionist Ulster-Scot identity, and appears to be a variant of the theories of Ian Adamson. The Israelite theme does not appear to have reached the popular press.

'Non-Celt' argued that: 'Ulster Scots [*sic*] ... is the largest cultural and genetic grouping in Ulster. The Gaelic invader never arrived in sufficient numbers to effect substantial change. In fact, no other cultural or genetic grouping ever arrived in sufficient numbers to challenge Ulster Scots' numerical superiority.'[68] Another correspondent, 'Ulster-Scot', gave an interpretation of the Ulster-Scot identity which brings into sharp focus some political and religious implications that may not be shared by all in the Ulster Scots linguistic movement:

> The Ulster-Scots' presence in north-east Ireland has lasted for a millennia [*sic*] and pre-dates the presence of the Gaelic-Irish on this island. Our Pictish and Celtic ancestors established the Kingdom of Dalriada, which straddled the North Channel in its sovereignty, and it was a true Ulster-Scots nation State. ... Lowland Scots formed the majority of the Planters of the 17th century whose re-colonization of Down and Antrim came centuries after their Pictish ancestors were ethnically cleansed by the Gaelic-Irish. ... The Ulster-Scots' independent, free-thinking character led them to embrace Protestantism so that in the modern day they were synonymous with loyalism and unionism. ... Betrayal by its friends and terrorism and intrigue by its enemies has failed to break the spirit of the Ulster Scots' nation which has its own lesser-used language.[69]

It is interesting that in these versions the Ulster Scots identity pre-dates not only that of the Gaelic Irish, but also the arrival of Anglo-Saxon in Scotland by many hundreds of years,[70] and the development of Scots from Anglo-Saxon by well over a thousand. In other words, this Ulster Scots identity is an ethnological rather than a linguistic term.

Elements of this formulation appear to have been adopted by the Ulster-Scots Heritage Council, which recently commissioned a gable-wall mural in east Belfast to celebrate Ulster Scots culture. The centre of the mural is a red hand, with a scroll interlaced between its fingers. In the folds of the scroll are the phrases: 'Ulster & Scotland; shared language; shared literature; shared culture'. On either side is an outline of Ulster and what appears to be most of Scotland, Wales in its entirety and the north of England, but also a portion of Cornwall. The most interesting part of the mural for our purposes, however, is a legend in large letters at the top consisting of three lines: '4000 years of / ULSTER-SCOTS / History and Heritage'. This puts the date for the emergence of an Ulster Scots identity two and a half thousand years before the first speakers of Anglo-Saxon began to make their way into south-east Scotland. In her commentary on 'the murals of new loyalism', Judy Vannais makes a comment on the theme of linguistic and political polarisation with which this chapter opened:

> Even the content of the Ulster-Scots series of paintings (there are half a dozen more in the pipeline) are a kind of "soft sell" representation of the siege mentality. With their emphasis on Ulster identity (one new mural design recasts St Patrick as the "Apostle of Ulster") there is no attempt to transcend the adversarial relationship with the "other community". [Nelson] McCausland [Director of the Ulster-Scots Heritage Council] explains that the cultural debate which came about after the ceasefire was the result of "a wave of Irishness, everyone was swamped by Riverdance. But it just didn't click with a lot of people, so they looked for other cultural expressions to identify with and found Ulster-Scots". McCausland calls this "The right not to be Irish". This attitude is very much in the "us vs. them" mind-set; it is ours, not yours, or "what we have, we hold". It is not much further from there to "no surrender", culturally speaking.[71]

Nelson McCausland was Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in Northern Ireland between 2009 and 2011.

Conclusion

There are two opposing tendencies within the linguistic movements of Northern Ireland. One inclines towards the promotion of Irish and Ulster Scots as elements of a complex shared heritage. The other will tend to reinforce polarisation: Irish and Ulster Scots as emblems reflecting and sustaining the political and religious divisions of society. As is probably clear from this analysis, I am firmly committed to the common heritage approach.

In the short term, there is little chance that the shared heritage model will have much impact. There is a greater affinity with and access to Irish within the nationalist community, and grassroots support for Ulster Scots tends to be restricted to the unionist community. In both cases, people who try to break the stereotype face considerable psychological and practical barriers. Realpolitik will probably ensure that political support will continue on a polarised basis; for mainly emblematic considerations, Irish will continue to depend mainly on nationalist parties and Ulster Scots on unionist parties. For both sets of language activists, it is clear that the advances made by Irish and Ulster Scots have depended to a very large extent on support from politicians, and there is very little to encourage either movement to engage in the extremely difficult task of trying to create new patterns.

Within the movements themselves there are forces which will reinforce polarisation. The culture that has grown around the Irish language movement is still influenced by developments in the early part of the 20th century. Although the notion of the Gael as a racially pure Celt has received a severe battering, and is now almost vestigial, and although the popular identification of an Irish Gaelic identity with an Irish Catholic identity is much less strong than it was, there are still real and perceived links in Northern Ireland between the Irish language movement and political nationalism.

The Ulster Scots movement, for anyone who has read widely in the ephemera of the Irish language movement of a hundred years ago, brings a depressing sense of *déjà vu*. Although the Irish language movement in the early years of the 20th century was divided between an inclusive and an exclusive wing, the exclusive formulation, which married a Celtic/Gaelic racial identity with a nationalist political and

Catholic religious agenda, was the most vociferous, although it also used the rhetoric of inclusivity in a profoundly cynical way. Some recent formulations made by supporters of Ulster Scots appear to follow a similar pattern, in which an occasional assertion of inclusivity is accompanied by a set of assumptions which substitutes Cruithin, British P-Celt or British Israelite for Gael, unionist for nationalist and Presbyterian for Catholic.

Language maintenance, language revival

This essay begins by providing some background to the 'historical' Irish language movement countrywide. It explores the successes and failures of the southern government's attempts to maintain the language in the Gaeltacht heartlands and examines the movement to revive the language outside the gaeltachts in both jurisdictions. It concludes with a section on Irish in the north and proposes that the model for language revival developed by Joshua Fishman, that of 'inter-generational transmission', be adopted countrywide.

Language maintenance, language revival

The language movement must be seen initially as a reaction to the disastrous decline of Irish as a spoken tongue in the nineteenth century. The scale of decline can be illustrated through the Census returns of the period.

For example, the 1891 Census shows that while 100% of over-60s in the barony of Kinnataloon in County Cork were Irish-speakers, no children under 10 could speak the language.[2] On a national scale, Garret FitzGerald has shown from an analysis of the 1881 Census that at least 45% of those born in Ireland in the first decade of the 19th century were brought up as Irish-speakers.[3] Figures from the 1891 Census, while they record 680,174 speakers of Irish in Ireland (14.5% of the population), most of whom can be assumed to be native speakers, also show that only 3.5% of those born in the 1880s were brought up speaking the language.[4]

The first effective mass movement to counteract this trend came with the founding of the Gaelic League in 1893. The original aim of the League was the maintenance of the language in the Gaeltacht, the areas in which Irish had survived as a spoken language. However, although the League may have helped slow the decline of the language in historic Irish-speaking areas, this decline was neither halted nor reversed. Paradoxically, the main ideological impact of the language movement was not in the Gaeltacht, but among English-speaking nationalists.

In effect, the League developed both a conservationist and a revivalist role in pre-partition Ireland, both roles being subsequently adopted by the southern state. It is, I believe, important to distinguish between these aspects of the language movement. Language conservation involves maintaining a language as a vernacular within communities which already use it. Revival involves restoring a language as a vernacular to

areas and communities to which it has been lost: in the case of Irish, this involved some communities that had not spoken the language for hundreds of years. Because the conditions for maintenance and revival are significantly different, and because the distinction between the two processes has been constantly underemphasised, I would like at this point to examine the dynamic underpinning each of them separately.

Language maintenance

The continuity of all linguistic groups depends on what I will call here linguistic momentum. By this I mean the forces which ensure that a language is used in society and passed on from one generation to the next. In the case of dominant and expanding language groups, the engine which drives the momentum of language use is the control of society by that group, the high status that such control confers, and the necessity of using the language to function in society.

A different kind of momentum applies to the continuity of minority language groups. Most minority languages have survived through their being rooted in traditional linguistic communities. Even then, their survival as community languages can depend on a complex of internal and external factors, including geographic and social isolation, ethnic identity, ideology, or high status within a significant social institution; even, in fact, lack of opportunity to learn the dominant language. Without such supportive sociolinguistic conditions, you have a kind of residual linguistic momentum, which resembles nothing more than a car whose engine has been turned off. The car may still be moving, but the impetus that sustained its momentum has been lost, and it will inevitably grind to a halt.

Ireland in the latter half of the 19th century illustrates not only how fast a language can decline, but also how it can survive in the face of overwhelmingly hostile social and political forces, without a support structure, and in spite of the apparent complicity of the communities themselves in its loss. In the scattered and usually remote areas where Irish did survive, a significant proportion of the community were monoglot Irish-speakers, near-monoglots, or people who were more comfortable or expressive speaking Irish than English or who had built up relationships with other members of the community through Irish.

In these conditions, Irish was the language which was spoken naturally and instinctively in important language domains, even where most of the speakers may have been functionally bilingual.

The conservationist policy of the post-independence southern state was based on the state's ideological commitment to the preservation of the language. Its purpose was to maintain the historic Gaeltacht, and ultimately to facilitate its expansion.

However, the dynamic of language shift from Irish to English was already well established. In spite of the new supportive ideology and the high status of Irish within the state – which was often more formal than actual – many Gaeltacht communities continued to be affected by sociolinguistic forces militating against Irish, as well as the demoralisation which had destroyed Irish as a community language in the rest of the country, and the residual contempt of Anglophone communities for their Irish-speaking neighbours. Instead of an expanding Gaeltacht, Irish-speaking communities continued to switch from Irish to English – although more slowly than before – even after independence, a pattern of language shift which has not been reversed. It had been hoped that Irish would be restored as a community language in areas that were already shifting towards English, and in which the younger generation had lost the language. This expectation appears to have been completely confounded. Except for a small transplanted community of native speakers in County Meath, Irish as a significant community language today exists only in areas in which the younger generation were brought up with Irish as their first language three generations ago. Nor have all such areas survived as Gaeltachts. Estimates of the number of habitual Irish-speakers living in the widely scattered Gaeltacht areas vary considerably, but are still very small. In 1981, Desmond Fennell estimated it as being less than 30,000.[5] In 1990, Reg Hindley – a much more hostile observer – calculated it at a maximum of 10,000.[6]

The historic Gaeltacht is facing a crisis, and its long-term future is now in question. Most younger Gaeltacht people can express themselves as well in English as in Irish, which is dominating an increasing number of language domains within Gaeltacht communities. The smaller size of these scattered communities, greater social contact with monolingual English-speakers, and the repatriation of English-speaking children of

emigrants has also affected the sociolinguistic dynamics within the historic Gaeltacht. Many native speakers are choosing English as their normal means of communication, and fewer Gaeltacht families are bringing up their children as Irish-speakers. Irish as a language of communication within Gaeltacht communities is becoming increasingly a matter of conscious choice rather than instinct.

Language revival in Southern Ireland

Where language maintenance aims to support a historic linguistic status quo, language revival is primarily aimed at reversing the linguistic status quo and creating a bilingual society from a monolingual one.

The first step in reviving a language is essentially propagandistic. It involves persuading as many people as possible of the value of the language and engaging their support. Because positive attitudes to Irish are meaningless without a pool of speakers of the language, the second stage involves language acquisition. The language movement in Ireland has always expended a great deal of its energy on consciousness-raising campaigns and language-teaching, and has had a remarkable level of success in these two stages. A dramatic change in attitude to the language, restricted largely to nationalists, from its lowest point in the late 19th century to a high level of esteem has been achieved. In the southern state this esteem probably peaked in the 1920s and 1930s, partly because Irish figured centrally in the process of political and social consolidation of the post-independence decades, and partly because it was widely believed that the revival process would be successful. The intensive process of gaelicisation which was instigated during the 1920s was mainly focused on the civil service and the education system. Its triumph was in creating a significant pool of largely middle-class speakers of Irish as a second language. The 2011 Census indicates that about a million people in the Republic of Ireland have learned enough Irish to record themselves as Irish-speakers. Many of these learners have a strong emotional and ideological commitment to the language, and this group includes most of the prominent figures in the language movement, and a number of influential leaders of opinion and decision-makers.

This achievement should not be dismissed: the Republic of Ireland is possibly the only country in the world where learners of a language outnumber native speakers. The gaelicisation process in the south did, however, fail to reverse the decline of the Gaeltacht, and failed to create new language communities. It also, ultimately, led to a backlash against Irish from those who felt that the education system failed them, from those whose commitment to the language had never been wholehearted, from almost all unionists, and from a large number of nationalists for whom the language had a subsidiary role or was irrelevant.

This last group had been largely silent in the pre-independence period, partly because of the imperative to maintain a show of unity, and partly because the language issue was an extremely useful part of the nationalist armoury. While the country was ruled from London, the Irish language movement could be looked on as both a symbol of nationhood and a tool for opposing British rule. While desirable, it was not absolutely necessary to go to the trouble of learning or using the language to utilise it either as a symbol or as a means of resistance. This is clear from the advice given by Henry Morris in 1903 during the campaign to have mail addressed in Irish accepted – and delivered – by the Post Office, which at its height saw 600 items addressed in Irish being submitted daily (details of the campaign were filed in the London Post Office in bulky folders labelled 'Correspondence addressed in Erse'):

> Those ... who can write the whole letter in Irish should do so, but those who cannot do that much should at least address the letter in Irish – and in Irish only – except in cases where great dispatch is necessary.[7]

This nationalist, anti-British, oppositionalist motive lost much of both its function and its force in post-independence southern Ireland; ironically, just at the period when an intense government-inspired drive to revive Irish was in progress. Nationalists whose support for Irish had been inspired mainly by political considerations, while they may have continued to pay lip-service to the ideals of the revival, were inevitably less fervent after independence, particularly when the difficulties facing the revival could no longer be blamed on the British. There developed, in fact, a considerable degree of ambivalence to the revival of Irish. This

ambivalence may explain why some of the revivalist policies were so unrealistic, and why many of those which were realistic were carried out so ineffectively, as the late Colmán Ó hUallacháin notes:

> Certain things done about Irish owe their importance to their use as a particular kind of outward sign, while the degree to which those involved are affected may be minimal from the point of view of actual understanding or use of the language for communication. ... Of course ... the use of language may be seen as a symbol. ... However, the kind of relationship between the symbol and what it symbolises can vary. In the case of Irish, it is helpful, for clarification of important aspects of its development in society during this century, to characterise as 'emblematic', its employment as a symbol having only minimal, if any, reference to communication in society though, at the same time, conveying some kind of reference to ethnic distinctiveness.[8]
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> It is worth noting also at this stage both that emblematic use of language may frequently feature in political manoeuvring, and that, in educational matters, such use can lead to ambivalence. The inclusion and fostering of a language as a subject on the curriculum might well be sufficient to satisfy people emblematically, without involving the measures which would be necessary if there were to be tangible results with reference to acquisition of communicative ability in, and use of, the language in society.[9]

The weakness of the language revival in both parts of Ireland relates to 'use of the language in society'. The majority of people who can speak Irish do not in fact use it regularly in their daily lives. To propose that this large number of people who know the language but do not use it can be described as a 'language community' may be to stretch the term 'community' beyond its normal use. Because the term 'language community' can be so imprecise, this paper adopts the term 'active language community' to describe those in anglicised areas of Ireland who, through an act of will or choice, use the language frequently in their daily lives.

At this point, I would like to introduce an argument which may appear to be breathtakingly obvious, but does not always receive the

attention it deserves. This involves recognition of the fact that some groups of speakers of a language have more linguistic significance than others, and that this significance is related less to the number of speakers than to the degree to which the language is integrated into the daily life of its users, their social coherence, and – most importantly if the language is to survive – the community's ability to successfully regenerate itself as a speech community.

Obviously, active speakers of Irish are more linguistically significant than those who know the language but rarely or never use it. Even then, I would argue that the revivalist active language communities are less significant than the organic language communities of the historic Gaeltacht. Even small demoralised Gaeltacht communities have greater potential for long-term survival than anything the revival has produced after more than a hundred years of effort.

The language movement has failed to create new language communities in which the language is integrated in a meaningful way into the lives of its speakers, and in which the community has meaningful social cohesion. Its most challenging task, besides the maintenance of the language within the historic Gaeltacht, is to create new significant linguistic communities.

How that can be done is the central problem facing the language revival. One important contribution to this debate has been made by Joshua Fishman, who, in his influential book *Reversing Language Shift*, has developed a systematic – if rather mechanistic – approach to language maintenance and revival.

Fishman devotes an entire chapter of his book to an analysis of the language revival in the Republic of Ireland. According to this analysis, the strategy adopted in the Republic has resulted in what he describes as a remarkably stable level of language maintenance. This maintenance, however, involves the transmission of the language through several generations as a second language. Learners of Irish as a second language teach Irish to a new generation of English-speakers which in its turn teaches it – as a second language – to yet another generation of English-speakers. The weakness Fishman perceives in this strategy is that every generation must meet and overcome the same challenges: rather than surpass the achievements of the previous generation, each new generation must struggle to keep up with the one that went before.

Ultimately, Fishman makes the case that long-term language survival depends on the language domain of the most basic social unit, the family. He argues that the most essential element in the survival and growth of a minority language involves what he calls inter-generational transmission – the passing on of the language from parents to children, supplemented by the building of social contacts between such families. Fishman does acknowledge the value of teaching threatened languages, and activities aimed at increasing the status, recognition and support structures of the language in society. However, he argues strongly that, unless the stage of intergenerational transmission is attained, all other revival policies are unlikely to succeed: 'success in intergenerationally unimportant functions is merely camouflaged failure'; 'the road to societal [language] death is paved with language activity that is not focused on intergenerational continuity'.[10]

In Ireland, the number of scattered Irish-speaking families which have developed a self-sustaining social network over a number of generations is comparatively small, and there has been a critical failure to create new organic speech communities. This may have been the most significant failure of the language movement in both parts of Ireland. We have failed, almost entirely, to create new self-sustaining Irish-speaking communities. In spite of significant investment in the language of time, energy, and, in the Republic, money, except for one tiny community in Northern Ireland, not a single city, town, village, townland or street of Irish-speakers has been developed among anglicised communities.

Paradoxically, the failure to create new significant language communities can be partly explained through the concept of linguistic momentum. That linguistic momentum which allowed Irish to survive against enormous pressures in pockets of the country is now working in favour of English, and is, in spite of the best efforts of the revivalists, effectively inhibiting the development of Irish as a community language outside the Gaeltacht.

One of the problems of the revival is that we have either failed to recognise or have consistently underestimated just how difficult it is to create new viable language communities in the context of a largely monoglot society which speaks one of the world's dominant tongues. The revival's over-dependence on promoting Irish in the education system was based on the assumption that use would follow knowledge.

We have found, to our cost, that it does not necessarily do so, and our understanding of the sociolinguistic dynamics involved is still underdeveloped. At this point, I would like to try to identify some of the problems involved in creating new language communities.

I would argue that a sustainable new minority language community in which the language is transferred from generation to generation, although it may be originally inspired by ideology, ultimately needs to be underpinned by an internal social dynamic which can transcend the initial impulse. To draw a possibly dubious analogy, the motive for marrying is rarely the same motive that keeps you married.

The creation of such a community will depend in the first instance on Irish-speakers who have made a conscious commitment to the language. Its maintenance over a number of generations will depend on the creation of an environment in which its members find themselves speaking the language automatically and instinctively rather than as a conscious, willed act of defiance against the forces of society. If this argument is sustainable, the creation of social domains in which the language is dominant, but in which the language movement is not itself the focus, is the most important element in the creation of new organic language communities. It is, however, remarkably difficult to create a new social environment in which speaking Irish is felt to be the natural thing to do.

The dynamics which underpinned the historic Gaeltacht cannot be reproduced: monoglot Irish-speaking grandparents cannot be conjured out of the air. Nor can the language be saved by trying to reverse the brutal social forces of the past which brought Irish to the brink of extinction. The experience of several hundred years of living next door to, and under the control of, one of the most powerful nations in the world, military defeat, social marginalisation, legal sanctions, mass emigration and ultimately famine cannot (and should not) be imitated. Only a few language enthusiasts, possibly driven by desperation, advocate the disuse of English: most espouse bilingualism. In any social situation, there will therefore always be a choice of languages for those who are bilingual, and none for monoglot speakers of the majority language. The implications of the imbalance of sociolinguistic pressures in favour of English, and against Irish, are therefore considerable.

Another problem involves the difficulties many learners of Irish face in changing their normal language of communication from a language they have spoken since infancy and which everyone in their society can speak – a language of major status which is the dominant language of the mass media – to a second language with an unstable social base. Many learners of Irish also find to their dismay that they do not have the same linguistic resources or range in the second language, and speak English more fluently and more richly. Even children from Irish-speaking homes can find that they are more expressive in English than in Irish in some linguistic domains by the time they reach their teens.

This combination of social and linguistic pressures leads many who have attempted to become involved at some stage of their lives in creating a new language community to effectively abandon the language. The country, in fact, is littered with failed Gaeilgeoirí, some of them disillusioned and filled with resentment and a sense of failure or self-contempt, others adopting a range of strategies from denial to feigned indifference. At their worst, former enthusiasts can involve themselves in the worst kinds of tokenism and jobbery. The sense of desperation felt by those who remain committed to the language can sometimes result in an impossibilist, theatrical fanaticism.

Irish in Northern Ireland

At present the revivalist movement, north and south, is based almost entirely on ideological commitment, and there are both close similarities and marked differences between the revivalist situations in the two parts of the country.

The most significant difference is that the post-independence revival in southern Ireland has received massive support: it has, in fact, been largely state-sponsored and state-led. The revival of Irish has, or had, an important place within the official state orthodoxy. Irish is enshrined in the Constitution as the first of the state's two official languages, and the state officially sponsors a bilingual Ireland as one of its aims. The government of the Republic has invested significantly, although not always effectively, in a wide variety of initiatives to promote Irish through, for example, the educational system, the arts and broadcasting.

The position of Irish is in some ways more complex in the Republic than in Northern Ireland. Because the state pursues both a revivalist and a conservationist programme, there can be unresolved tensions on a policy level between the needs of the minority Gaeltacht communities and the perceived needs of the far larger – and far more influential – minority of non-Gaeltacht Irish-speakers. The entire issue is further complicated by the implications of the official status of Irish within the state, earlier unrealistic expectations of the progress of the revival, an element of ambivalence towards the language issue, and the progressive disengagement of the state from the ideals of the revival. It is clear that, particularly since the 1960s, although the formal status of the language remains unchanged, the state appears to have been engaged in an elaborate deathbed ritual: the intensity of its protestations of support for the language in inverse proportion to its commitment. Although state support for the language has become increasingly tokenistic, and in spite of the growing recognition that many of the state's earlier policies have failed, many language activists believe, probably correctly, that any diminution of the formal status of Irish is a prelude to its complete marginalisation within Irish society. As a result, a great deal of energy is wasted in the demoralising process of fighting to protect the language's present – in Ó hUallacháin's term – emblematic status.

These complexities do not affect the revival movement in the north, which has to deal with a quite different set of problems. When Northern Ireland was established as a distinct political entity in the 1920s, organic Irish-speaking communities within the new state had almost disappeared. A scattering of older native speakers in residual Gaeltachts in four of the six counties of Northern Ireland had died by the middle of the century. However, new generations of revivalist Irish-speakers continued to emerge. The central defining reality of the Irish language movement in Northern Ireland is that it is essentially and unambiguously a revivalist phenomenon. As the state is at worst hostile and at best indifferent, there is no formal constitutional status to defend, and language activists do not face the frustrations of dealing with official ambivalence, double-speak or double-think.

Because it is clearly understood that the dominant social and political forces in society are inimical to the language, language activists in

Northern Ireland focus on the revival within the context of an anglicised society. Irish-speakers exist and are sustained entirely by the ideology of the language movement and the largely voluntary efforts of the revivalists.

Irish in Northern Ireland faced enormous hostility from the state until very recently. Only one party, the Ulster Unionist Party, held power from the early 1920s until 1972. Unionist ideology under the new state involved a conscious rejection of any identification with Ireland beyond the geographical, and the embracing of an ersatz 'British' cultural identity. On 15 August 1945, when the nationalist MP Eddie McAteer used a few words of Irish in Parliament, he was interrupted by the Prime Minister, Sir Basil Brooke, and the Minister of Education, Lieutenant-Colonel Hall-Thompson, with calls of 'No foreign language here', and forbidden to continue speaking in Irish.[11] Although Scottish Gaelic and Welsh programmes had been broadcast by the BBC since the 1920s, Irish was banned from BBC Northern Ireland for 50 years[12]. Despite continued demand for an Irish Language Act, the language still has no official status in Northern Ireland.

The survival of Irish in Northern Ireland was a considerable achievement, and reflects the enormous dedication of those involved in the movement. In one important development, a group of parents who had learned Irish as a second language built a small estate, Pobal Feirste, in Belfast. This now contains 17 houses, and, small as it is, is the largest concentration of Irish-speaking families in Ireland outside the Gaeltacht. Belfast also has an Irish language social club, and a cultural centre which at one time housed an Irish language newspaper, a bookshop, a cafe, a publishing house, an arts centre, a theatre and several groups which are developing the economic potential of the language. Other parts of Northern Ireland reflect similar vitality. A recent development – as recent as the 1970s – is the phenomenon of Irish-medium education, now focused largely on children from English-speaking homes. At the moment more than 5,000 children in Northern Ireland attend Irish-medium schools. It may be useful to note that there is a (completely misplaced) perception in Ireland that the language is actually more secure in Northern Ireland than in the Republic.

There are now some significant differences between the relationship between nationalism and the language movement in the two parts of

Ireland. As has been noted, involvement in and support for the language movement in pre-independence Ireland was often based on an impulse to resist the forces of the British state. With independence, this motive disappeared in southern Ireland, where it was discovered that what is acceptable, indeed liberating, as an oppositional, anti-establishment ideology is often seen as oppressive when it becomes established as the official orthodoxy. In the south the promotion of Irish as a focus of nationalist resistance is now largely seen as irrelevant, except among those who ascribe to theories of post-colonialism, and those who hark back with nostalgia to the simplicities of the pre-independence oppositionalist movement and envy the apparent simplicities of the movement in the north of Ireland.

For this and a complex of other reasons, including the decline of the unitary nation-state within the European Union, and a current re-examination of the history and ideology of the state within Irish society, the ideology of the language movement, particularly in the Republic, is now undergoing a process of redefinition. The early revivalist ideology had been based largely, though not exclusively, on a form of nationalism which identified the language as the indispensable, defining essence of the nation, and a particularly reductive essentialism became the basis of the revival during the first decades of the southern state.

This formulation is now generally avoided, partly as a result of the conflict in the north, partly because it has been associated with what is now seen as an unattractive life-denying official orthodoxy, partly because the state has so obviously failed in its attempt to revive Irish as a national language, partly due to resentment that the language has sometimes been used for short-term political ends, partly in reaction to the mindset that concentrated on emblematic issues rather than the building of speech communities, and partly because of increasing awareness of other minority language models. This is accompanied by a growing disappointment that the nationalist impetus which gave the earlier language movement its focus has been insufficient to create new self-sustaining speech communities, north or south.

The cluster of new formulations now emerging around the language issue tend to avoid essentialist definitions deriving ultimately from nationalist ideology, but rather concentrate on a kind of non-dogmatic cultural ecology – cultural continuity, cultural pluralism, the validity

and value of minority identities, Irish as a source of personal enrichment. While this shift in the revivalist ideology may sometimes be a rationalisation of a nationalism which dares not speak its name, it also reflects an approach that is shared by some other minority language groups in other parts of the world.

The Northern Ireland language revival exists in a kind of ideological time-warp, as the context of the language movement is in some ways closer to that of pre-partition Ireland than to the present movement in the south. Both inside and outside the language movement in Northern Ireland, there is often an association, or perceived association, between the language movement and resistance to the state, and, for many people, their initial engagement with the language was sparked by an oppositional impulse. There is no doubt that political nationalism often provides the stimulus for involvement in the language movement in Northern Ireland, and is, in fact, the source of much of the vitality of the present phase of the movement here.

Northern Ireland, however, has its own set of internal complexities. Nationalists are in a minority in the state, and there are other tensions and sources of conflict both within society and within the language movement which are not reflected in the south – between Catholic and Protestant, nationalist and unionist, constitutional and non-constitutional nationalist. As can be imagined, in the highly politicised atmosphere in Northern Ireland, any association of the language movement with nationalism can produce an equal and opposite response to the language from the unionist community. Although unionists are alienated by revivalist arguments based on Irish nationalism, the dominant discourse within Northern Ireland, a perspective on the Irish language related to that now developing in southern Ireland can prove attractive to them. It is, however, likely that, unless they can be convinced that space is being made for a unionist perspective within the language movement in Northern Ireland, unionist involvement will be minimal.

There are three sets of impetus that may help create that space. Some language enthusiasts – often nationalists themselves – are deeply concerned at the alienation of unionists from the language, and are prepared to take measures to create the space within the movement for a unionist perspective. Others share the new perspectives developing in

southern Ireland based on principles which transcend nationalist ideology. A third element involves increasing exposure to and co-operation with language movements in other societies. In particular, there has been a marked increase in the level of interest in and degree of contact between the Irish language community in Northern Ireland and Gaelic-speaking Scotland. Professor Donald MacLeod, in an article in the *West Highland Free Press*, has called attention to the fact that the Scottish Gaeltacht involves both 'a Celtic Protestantism and a British Catholicism'.[13] Whether or not these developments will translate into significant unionist involvement in the language is impossible to predict. However, within a language movement which, in the past, drew its main strength from nationalist political ideology, there is a significant and growing resistance to being labelled or confined by political formulations, and a new openness and generosity of spirit which may make unionist involvement a reality.

'Spiritual Beyond the Ways of Men'

Images of the Gael

This essay examines the 'images of the Gael' from Scrabo's first century AD descriptions to the pseudo-history of the Book of Invasions to later stereotyping by the Normans and the British. It also explores the changing 'self-image' of the Gael, particularly in the seventeenth century, and the move towards defining Irish identity in terms of religion and the associated themes of dispossession. It continues through to the Revival era, where native speakers of Irish became idealised and the rejection of 'English' culture in favour of 'pure' Irish culture was very much in vogue. The essay concludes by arguing against these stereotypes and for a more accepting and inclusive, and less prescriptive, image of the Irish speaker.

'Spiritual Beyond the Ways of Men'
Images of the Gael[1]

The earliest description we have of the Irish is from the Greek geographer Strabo, who, in the first century AD, described them as incestuous cannibals 'who are complete savages and lead a miserable existence because of the cold'.[2] Solinus, in his third-century description of Ireland, was equally hostile:

> There are no snakes there; only few birds, and an inhospitable and bellicose race of people. Those who are victorious in battle paint their faces with the blood shed by their victims: custom and aberration amount to the same thing. When a mother gives birth to a male child, she puts its food first on her husband's sword, and gently feeds it into the little one's mouth on the sword tip; and does so with heathen prayers that it may not meet its death but in battle and in arms.[3]

Like most stereotypes of the Irish throughout the last couple of millennia, this picture of unrelieved barbarity and aggression was remarkably persistent.

One of the few things the experts seem to agree on is that the word 'Gael' is not Irish but Welsh. Its early form is 'Goidel'. Irish, like many other languages, has a tendency to swallow syllables. No consonant stranded between two vowels can regard the future with complacency; as mother, father and brother become mo'er, fa'er and bro'er in Belfast, Goidel became Gael. Goidel appears to derive from a Welsh term, gwydd, which can mean an untamed forest, as well as embracing nuances of 'wild' and 'uncultivated'.[4] If this etymology is correct, a Gael to a fifth-century Briton was a Gwyddel, a wild man of the woods. This negative perspective is quite understandable, for the Irish spent much of the fifth century plundering the Welsh coast.

It has been argued that the early Christian missionaries from Britain first used the uncomplimentary term 'Goidel' to mean an inhabitant of Ireland. Alternatively the Goidels are identified as a Continental Celtic tribe which settled in Ireland a century or so before Christ and ultimately dominated the island, imposing their language and customs on the previous inhabitants. This theory is complicated by the fact that they do not appear to have originally called themselves Goidels, and that the language the scholars call Goidelic appears to have dominated the country before the Goidels did. When the Dál Riata from what is now north Antrim invaded Scotland in the fifth century, the language they brought with them to Scotland was Goidelic. However, neither they, nor the Dál nAraide of south Antrim, nor the Ulaidh, who were by that time restricted to what is now County Down, had been conquered by the Goidels.[5] One fact does appear to be indisputable: although the country was ethnically very heterogeneous, it had achieved a remarkable linguistic and cultural unity by the early Christian era.

Linguistic unity was followed, possibly as early as the seventh century, by a conscious attempt to create a sense of racial unity among the Gaels. T.F. O'Rahilly has argued that this project was inspired by 'a desire to unify the country by obliterating the memory of the different ethnic origins of the people',[6] through an attempt 'to provide a fictitious antiquity for the Goidels'.[7] An origin-myth was deliberately created which combined an inextricable mixture of genuine tradition and straightforward lies, underpinned by a mixum-gatherum of the entirety of current scholarship, which at that time involved the Bible and the classics. The ultimate result of this programme was the *Lebor Gabála*, the Book of the Takings of Ireland, commonly known by the mistranslation 'The Book of Invasions'.

The compilers of the *Lebor Gabála* were, however, handicapped by a reverence for the traditions they were trying to subvert. Although the basic ideological thrust of the construct was never in question, those involved had so much respect for the genuine material that they kept trying to incorporate it into an essentially hostile narrative. In attempting synthesis, they achieved chaos: different interest groups kept trying to incorporate different traditions, resulting in an editor's nightmare of at least 14 separate versions.[8]

However, the basic plot remains the same, as does the basic intention of replacing the heterogeneity of seventh-century Ireland with a sense of unity. The account begins with Adam and Eve, and ends with the conquest of Ireland by the Goidel. We can look on the Book of Invasions as a sort of seventh-century community relations project. Everyone in Ireland knew that the country was full of non-Goidels, pre-Goidels and anti-Goidels, all of whom took a very dim view of the Goidels. The consensus-seekers, however, put their trust in the long view. They buried past differences by proving beyond reasonable doubt that all pre-Goidelic people in Ireland had either perished or been banished. The first two settlements were wiped out by plague and flood, and the people of Nemed were driven out by the Fomorians, a race of pirates who caused trouble to everyone. The next group was the Fir Bolg, nowadays usually identified with the Belgae, a Celtic tribe which gave its name to Belgium, but described in Irish literature as the Bagmen, who, in one version, made a living selling bags of Irish earth to the Greeks to spread around their cities as a protection against snakes.[9] These were defeated by the Tuatha Dé Danann and all killed: 'except for a few. And those who survived fled from the Tuatha Dé to the islands and peninsulas of the sea, where they have lived ever since.'[10] The Tuatha Dé were themselves defeated by the Gaels, who had come to Ireland from Israel by way of Spain in order to justify their other name as the Milesians, the children of Míl Espáne, itself a variant of the Latin 'miles Hispaniae' – the soldier from Spain. The Tuatha Dé Danann are represented in the Book of Invasions as a very powerful people with extraordinary magic powers. They were not totally destroyed by the Goidels, but driven underground, where they live in raths, hills, islands and under the sea, whence they complicate the lives of people living above ground. O'Rahilly argues that the *Lebor Gabála* version of the story of the Tuatha Dé Danann represents the destruction of pagan religion, and 'owes it origin to a desire to reduce the deities of pagan Ireland to the level of mortal men'.[11]

The Goidels themselves are traced to a certain Goidel Glas, a descendant of Shem's brother Japhet, by way of Magog. Goidel Glas is credited with fashioning Goidelic from the best of the 72 languages of Babel, which accounts for the perfection of the language. His mother was a daughter of the Phareo, and was called Scotta. Just before the

escape from Egypt, Goidel Glas was bitten in the thigh by a snake. Moses cured him with his miraculous staff, but the spot where he was bitten remained green throughout his life. Hence the epithet 'glas', which means 'green'. Moses also prophesied that the descendants of Goidel Glas would live on an island in the north that would always be free from snakes, that no Gael would ever die from snake-bite, and that the Gaels would hold Ireland until the end of time.[12]

This useful Biblical justification proved to have a shelf-life of extraordinary length and tenacity. It surfaces as late as the 19th century in a sectarian song from the south Armagh/north Louth area. The song was, interestingly, written in English, although the area was bilingual at the time. This version of the origin of the Gael may have derived from the retelling of the legend in Keating's 17th-century History of Ireland. The ballad is particularly interesting in that its nationalism does not even make a tokenistic nod in the direction of the non-sectarianism of the republican tradition.

Ye true sons of Granualle, Milesians so pure,
Who sprang from the stock of Cordelius [recte: Goidel Glas]
That was bit by the snake, and by Moses was cured,
And green was the spot he was healed on.
Patriot David was chosen our King
And Goliath the giant he slew with a sling
And down from his race our Virgin did spring,
Who bore the Messiah, who trampled the serpent
That came to the garden where Adam was tempted,
And he died on the cross for to have sin exempted
While St Peter's day was a-dawning.
And now to conclude, my advice to you,
Is to tear down all rotten foundations
And banish this crew that our land did pollute
And corrupted our true ordinations.
We'll raise up a storm and chase them away
All the informers from King Harry's day
And all other tribes that with them would say;
We'll send them a-sailing, all useless and carrion,
To some other island that's fruitless and barren,

For this one was promised to Moses and Aaron,
While St Peter's day was a-dawning.[13]

The fundamental message of the Book of Invasions was simple and straightforward. Everyone in Ireland, except for a few lowlifes on the western seaboard, was a Gael. For the next thousand years, the term 'Gael' was synonymous with 'Irishman' (or 'Irishwoman'). Interestingly, this perception persisted in the face of a comprehensive counter-narrative, a version of which survives in Dubhaltach Mac Firbisigh's enormous manuscript *Book of Genealogies*, dated 1650: 'the time of the religious war between the Catholics of Ireland, and the heretics of Ireland, Scotland and England'.[14] In this, he quotes an earlier account of the characteristics of the various ethnic groups in Ireland, which Eoin McNeill describes as 'fine old ascendancy talk':[15]

> Here are the distinctions which profound historians draw between the different races which are in Ireland, namely, between the descendants of the Firbolgs, Fir Domhnann and Gailiuns and the Tuath Dé Danann and the Milesian.
>
> All who are white of skin, brown of hair, bold, honourable, daring, prosperous, bountiful in the bestowal of wealth, property and jewels, and who are not afraid of battles or combats, they are descended from the Milesians in Ireland.
>
> All who are fair-haired, vengeful, large, every plunderer, all who are musical, professors of music and entertainment, those who are adepts in all druidical and magical arts, they are descended from the Tuath Dé Danann in Ireland.
>
> Every one who is black-haired, who is a tattler, guileful, tale-telling, noisy, contemptible, every wretched, mean, strolling, unsteady, harsh and inhospitable person, every slave, every mean thief, every churl, every one who loves not to listen to music and entertainment, the disturbers of every council and every assembly, and the promotors of discord among people, these are the descendants of the Firbolg, Gailiuns, Liogairne and Fir Domhnann in Ireland, but the Firbolg are the most numerous of these ...
>
> This is taken from an old book. And, indeed, that it is possible to identify a race by their personal appearance I do not take upon myself positively to say, for it may have been true in ancient times, until the race became repeatedly intermixed.[16]

While the Norman invasion barely dented the positive self-image of the Gael, it did set in train a series of events which eventually led to a division between Gaelic identity and Irish identity. For the first half-dozen centuries after the Norman invasion, however, the terms 'Gael' and 'Irish' remained indistinguishable. The continuity of both the self-image of the Gael and the picture painted of them by hostile outsiders in this period is also remarkable. Giraldus Cambrensis, a Welsh Norman priest who wrote two books describing Ireland in the late 12th century, justified the invasion, in terms that echo ominously through the centuries, as both a civilising mission and an ecclesiastical reform of the church in Ireland, a reform which was actually under way before the Normans came. His moral unease finds its expression through the most extravagant abuse. The only thing Giraldus praises about the Irish is their musical skill: 'their external characteristics of beard and dress, and internal cultivation of the mind, are so barbarous that they cannot be said to have any culture'.[17] As a Welshman himself, he may also have understood the derivation of Gwyddel, the Welsh word for the Irish, for he describes them as: 'forest-dwellers, and inhospitable; a people living off beasts and like beasts'.[18] He also assumes that civilisation can only take root in the 'civis' or town, and, as the Irish did not have towns, they were automatically debarred from civilisation. They were also lazy: 'For given only to leisure, and devoted only to laziness, they think that the greatest pleasure is not to work, and the greatest wealth is to enjoy liberty'.[19] To a picture of laziness, barbarity and irreligion, Giraldus adds the vices of deceit and cunning ('above all other people they always practise treachery'[20]) uncontrolled violence, a predilection for thievery, along with low standards of sexual morality – including incest and intercourse with cows, 'a particular vice of that people'.[21]

It can be instructive to compare this image of the Irish to the contemporary self-image of the Gael. Not only was there a high consciousness of the contribution Ireland had made to Christianity during the dark ages, but the Gaels had St Patrick's word for it that Irish was the first official language of heaven. Ireland in the 12th century had a high degree of cultural autonomy, a standardised literary language, and the oldest and largest vernacular literary tradition in Europe, which included poetry of awesome metrical and self-referential complexity.

There was also a profound sense of the antiquity of Irish society. A near-contemporary of Giraldus Cambrensis, Muircheartach Mac Lochlainn, king of Tir Eoghain, could trace his pedigree accurately through 23 generations to Niall of the Nine Hostages, at the dawn of Christianity. With rather less accuracy, he could trace himself back through a further 53 generations to Érimón son of Míl, from which it was only 35 generations to Adam.[22] To members of this society, the Normans were the worst kind of parvenus, corner-boys and freebooters.

This uncomprehending mutual contempt of Norman and Gael set the pattern for the next half-millennium. The struggle for political domination ebbed and flowed, although the English interest gradually gained the upper hand. The struggle for cultural dominance had a rather different pattern, and London was frequently alarmed enough by the gaelicisation of the Norman and English settlers to pass laws against it.

However, beginning in the 16th century, and coming to a head in the 17th, the pattern began to change under the influence of a new set of interlocking factors. During this period, the Gaelic aristocracy was defeated, the Reformation began to have a serious impact, new waves of settlers undermined Gaelic society, and the English language made increasing and ultimately irreversible advances. One constant, however, is the continuing unremitting hostility of English-speaking writers to the Gaelic way of life. Richard Stanyhurst, for example, in a work published in 1577, says of the gaelicising process: 'this cancer took such deepe roote, as the body that before was whole and sounde, was by little and little festered, and in maner wholly putrified'.[23] Stanyhurst prayed that God would help those who governed Ireland to enlighten the natives: 'reduce them from rudeness to knowledge, from rebellion to obedience, from trechery to honesty, from savagenesse to civilitie, from idelnes to labour, from wickednesse to godlynesse, wherby they may sooner espy their blyndnesse, acknowledge their looseness, amende their lives, frame themselves plyable to the lawes and ordinaunces of hir majestie'. It is interesting that the Anglophone Stanyhurst was an Irishman and a Catholic. From this point in history, the automatic equation of Irish identity with Gaelic identity becomes increasingly inaccurate. An overlapping and consistently shifting complex of new polarities affecting allegiance and identity began to develop in Irish society: Irish against

English, Catholic against Protestant, Gaelic-speaking against English-speaking, Native Irish against Old English against New English.

The Anglophone view of the Gael, however, remained largely locked in colonial mode. Of the many examples given by Joep Leerssen in his superb study *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael*, this synthesis by Baron Ronsele in 1692 represents almost a paradigm of the colonial view of the native Irish:

> Those that have described the humours of the natives would speak of the Irish in this manner. They are naturally strong, very nimble, haughty of spirit, silly in their discourse, careless of their lives, great admirers of their foolish and superstitious religion, which they neither understand nor follow, according to the canons of the Church of Rome: they are patient in cold and hunger, implacable in enmity, constant in love, light in belief, greedy of glory, great flatters and dissemblers, stubborn as mules, great cheats in their dealings, ready to take an oath on all occasions, commonly great thieves, very barbarous when they have the upper hand, of a bloody temper, very unjust to their neighbours, breakers of their trust, mortal enemies to all those that are not of the Romish religion, and ready to rebel against the English on all occasions. A fine description indeed of a nation.[24]

The self-image of the Gaels also underwent a radical change in the 17th century. The flight of the earls and the defeat of the Catholic Confederacy had, of course, destroyed the Gaelic aristocracy, which had until then been the linchpin of Gaelic culture. Gaelic society now moved into a new phase, that of a culture of dispossession. At the same time, the more perceptive among the Catholic clergy saw that the deep-rooted Gaelic sense of identity and anti-English sentiment could be used as very powerful weapons in the Counter-Reformation. Just when the culture should have lost self-confidence, it found a new ideological base and justification which was based not on the Gaelic aristocracy but on Catholicism. As early as 1618, Aodh Mac Aingil, writing from Louvain, identified loyalty to the Catholic faith as a source of Irish pride and identity:

> It is certain ... that Ireland is a pure maiden in the faith, and kept her maidenhood for Christ since the time she accepted the

> faith through the preaching of our noble apostle, nor ever yielded to any kind of error or heresy. And this is her greatest privilege in the eyes of God and the world, for no other region in the world received this privilege, i.e. to be free from all heresy.[25]

This last formulation – Ireland free from all heresy – implicitly excludes Protestants from membership of the Irish people. Over a hundred years later, Tadhg Ó Neachtáin took Mac Aingil's arguments several steps further:

> And although the Jewish race were God's own family and people ... they were given such a blow as never befell any other people but the Gaels. From this it is easy to understand that there is no people in Europe more dear to God than the Gaels, and that he loves them the more because they never allowed their faith to be extinguished as did the Jewish race. For they lost their faith and their heritage, and although the Gaels lost their heritage, their faith still lives. This proves that they are being helped and protected by the love of God more than other races. From this it can be said that they are God's chosen people.[26]

This redefining of Irish identity in terms of religion also had a secular aspect which involved a defence of Gaelic civilisation. As in most redefinitions of this kind, the most creative minds were among those whose own identity was problematic. The leading propagandist in this programme was one of the Gaelicised descendants of the Normans, the historian Geoffrey Keating.

It is a remarkable testament to either the self-confidence or the short-sightedness of the Gaelic tradition that hardly anyone before Keating had bothered to answer Giraldus Cambrensis, not to mention Spenser, Stanyhurst, Hammer, Camden, Barclay, Morrison, Davis, Campion or any of the other detractors of the Irish he names in the foreword to his history. Keating, although himself descended from the very Normans Giraldus represented, set himself to refute their slurs on Gaelic civilisation by demonstrating its antiquity and outlining its achievements; by proving, in other words, that Gaelic society was genuinely civilised. The fundamental thrust of his programme can be

seen in the unlikely etymology he developed for the origin of the name 'Gael': *gaoith-dhil* which he himself glosses as 'grádhuightheoir na heagna'[27] – lover of intellect and learning. This seemingly secular programme was as essential to the Counter-Reformation in Ireland as the devotional literature.

In his foreword, Keating cleverly adopts the tone of a neutral, objective observer:

> I deemed it not fitting that a country so honourable as Ireland, and races so noble as those who have inhabited it, should go into oblivion without mention or narration being made of them. ... if any man deem that I give [the Gaels] too much credit, let him not imagine that I do so through partiality, for I belong, according to my own extraction, to the Old Galls [the Anglo-Normans]. I have seen, however, that the natives of Ireland are much maligned by every New Gall [New English] who speaks of the country.[28]

Later in the same passage, Keating unites the Gaels and the Old Galls under the common name of 'Éireannaigh' – Irish people, claiming that they are comparable with any other people in Europe in three things: 'in valour, in learning, and in being steadfast to the Catholic faith'.

At one stage, while gathering material for his history, Keating was refused access to a number of important sources by some northern Gaelic families because he was of Norman descent. Equally blinkered was the approach taken by the Established Church to the question of converting the natives to Protestantism.

Attempts made since the time of Elizabeth I had been hampered by the fact that the colonial elite could never decide whether it was their language or their religion that contributed most to the barbarity of the natives. The Act of Supremacy of 1560 itself undermined one of the principal foundations of Protestantism, the use of the vernacular, by ordering that clergy who could not read the *Book of Common Prayer* in English should conduct the service in Latin.[29] Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the leaders of the Church of Ireland showed great reluctance to do anything that might increase the status of Irish, even at the cost of depriving monoglot Irish-speakers of the word of God, and undermined nearly all attempts to use Irish for proselytising purposes.

The policy of the Anglican Church involved anglicisation in language as well as religion. William Bedell, who as an Englishman had no such hang-ups, was savaged by his fellow Anglo-Irish bishops for producing an Irish language version of the Old Testament in the 1640s. Ussher, the primate, rebuked him severely:

> The course which you took with the Papists was generally cried out against, neither do I remember in all my life that anything was done here by any of us, at which the professors of the gospel did take more offense, or by which the adversaries were more confirmed in their superstitions and idolatry, whereas I wish you had advised with your brethren before you would adventure to pull down that which they had been so long a building.[30]

This letter of Jonathan Swift, in spite of his characteristic self-subversion, illustrates the extent to which the language issue was entangled with the questions of religion, class and politics in his time:

> It would be a noble achievement to abolish the Irish language in this kingdom, so far at least as to oblige the natives to speak only English, on every occasion of business, in shops, markets, fairs, and other places of dealing ... This would, in a great measure civilize the most barbarous among them, reconcile them to our customs and manner of living, and reduce great numbers to the national religion, whatever kind may then happen to be established. ... I could heartily wish some public thoughts were employed to reduce this uncultivated people from that idle, savage, beastly, thievish manner of life, in which they continue sunk to a degree, that it is almost impossible for a country gentleman to find a servant of human capacity, or the least tincture of natural honesty, or who does not live among his own tenants in continual fear of having his plantations destroyed, his cattle stolen, and his goods pilfered.[31]

The attitude of the Established Church essentially left the field to the Counter-Reformation activists. As a result, the labours of such as Keating, Peter Lombard and Theobold Stapleton, as well as scions of old Gaelic learned families such as the O'Husseys, O'Clerys, Wards and O'Mulconroys, developed a body of religious and secular literature in

Irish which resulted in an extension of the meaning of the word 'Gael'. By the end of the 17th century, it is not always easy to know whether the term 'Gael' means a descendant of the Goidel, or an Irish-speaker, or a Catholic. Its opposite, 'Gall', except in a historic context, invariably meant both 'English' and 'Protestant'. This development paralleled a shift in the English language, by which 'Irish was interchangeable with 'Catholic', and the Established Church was known as the English Church.

In most of the sources in Irish from the 17th and 18th centuries, the twin themes of dispossession and religion are the most prominent in all references to the Gaels, paralleling the decline of their social, political and economic status, and the increasing unlikelihood that Gaelic civilisation could survive. The convention of bemoaning the fate of the Gael for every misfortune to hit Ireland was so strong that even such an extravagant burlesque as 'The Midnight Court' justifies its theme in terms of Ireland's oppression:

> Old stock uprooted on every hand
> Without claim to rent or law or land;
> Nothing to see in a land defiled
> Where the flowers were plucked but the weeds ran wild;
> The best of your breed in foreign places,
> And upstart rogues with impudent faces,
> Planning with all their guile and spleen
> To pick the bones of the Irish clean.[32]

Another extraordinary shift in consciousness took place. Although Gaelic society had been aristocratic in the extreme in its social mores, the more depressed that society became, the more the rural poor began to identify themselves with their dispossessed aristocratic masters of long ago. This perception appears to have transferred easily with the language shift from Irish to English.

As they became less and less of a threat, the English image of the Gaelic Irish as dangerous and warlike barbarians gradually became replaced by that of the Irish as buffoons in any language. The picture of the foolish, unreliable, childlike, basically lovable but essentially inferior Irish which developed in English literature and in the English consciousness did not particularly distinguish between the Irish in

general and the Gaelic Irish in particular. It also failed to make the distinction between Protestants and Catholics on which Irish Protestant self-esteem rested. In Ireland, however, the English-speakers consoled themselves for their low status in English eyes by despising their Irish-speaking fellow-countrymen. To some extent, this became internalised even among Irish-speakers: 'Gael' developed a further nuance through the adjective 'gaelach', which has a secondary meaning of 'unsophisticated', 'simple', 'commonplace'; *Nach Gaedhealach na ruidíní iad* – 'What common folk they are'.[33] Mozart's friend Michael Kelly (b. 1764), during an audience with the Emperor of Germany, was addressed in Irish by the aristocratic General Kavanagh of Borris-in-Ossory. When he was unable to reply, the Emperor asked him why he did not know his own language, and he explained, to the amusement of the Emperor, and in the face of the evidence, that 'none but the lower orders of the Irish people speak Irish'.[34]

Kelly's remark reflects the perceived reality of his own class, and within a couple of generations it actually became the reality. However, in spite of the fact that they had no leadership, and were despised by most of the English-speaking population, in some parts of the country Irish-speakers retained a strong sense of identity and loyalty to their culture that lasted through until the first half of the 19th century. Monck Mason, who led one of the most intensive drives to use Irish for proselytising purposes, wrote in 1829, at a time when more than a third of the population spoke Irish:[35] 'The peasant is assiduously instructed to consider the Protestant Bible an heretical book, but nothing will persuade him that heresy can be uttered in his native tongue, and he imagines that Satan is dumb in it'.[36] In his history of the Irish Society, published in 1846, Mason noted that:

> In the North of Ireland, where it is generally supposed that the use of the Irish language has died away, there are places among the mountains and even hills where it has lingered and where its extinction is prevented by the circumstances of peculiar affection; the old inhabitants appear to anticipate its departure with great regret, and to be jealous of every approach to it. No wonder, therefore, that they are anxious to have it taught, in the fond hope that this will contribute to restore it. This feeling is quite general in the Glens of Antrim.[37]

In fact, more Gaelic manuscripts survive from the early nineteenth century than from any other period. The difference between this and all other periods of Gaelic literary activity is that the late scribes were, like the rhyming weavers in the same period, overwhelmingly of the artisan class: small farmers, stonemasons, hedge-schoolmasters. This surge in scribal activity in part grew from a conscious attempt to rescue what could be saved of the tradition from annihilation, a pattern which is repeated in all periods of Gaelic culture as far back as the legend of Seanchán Torpéist's quest for the lost Táin Bó Cuailnge.

However, the number of Irish-speakers dropped markedly in this period, and political and religious leaders of Irish society threw their weight and esteem behind the anglicisation process. Daniel O'Connell famously recommended the abandonment of Irish. In some areas, the Catholic Church, alarmed at the success of the proselytisers in using Irish to convert the natives, saw English as a bulwark of the faith. They launched a campaign against literacy in Irish, destroyed manuscripts, and encouraged the use of English in bilingual communities. Rising emigration made knowledge of English essential, and the spread of the national schools, in which the teaching, or even use, of Irish was forbidden, played a major part. The Famine accelerated the anglicisation process: after it, the flood of manuscripts reduced to a trickle, and any remaining pride in the language seems to have left the common people. In the 50 years between 1841 and 1891, the number of Irish speakers in Ireland declined from close to three million to three-quarters of a million. A society which has a secure sense of identity and self-esteem does not commit this sort of cultural suicide. In the rush to learn English the loss of Irish was deemed both inevitable and desirable, and almost the entire population appears to have been keen to throw out the bathwater, the baby, and ultimately the bath. Mícheál Ó Raghallaigh of Ennistymon in County Clare captures something of this loss of heart in the foreword to a manuscript collection of poetry he completed in 1853:

> Dear reader, do not blame or condemn me for the badness of the writing in this book, for I am a tradesman and it was in my spare time I made this collection. For this reason it cannot be as neat as a manuscript written by a proper copyist. But for all that, when it appeared to me that none of my contemporaries was collecting any of the works of our poets I thought I would

> not let them all be lost. But there is not much use in saving them, for our young people are ashamed to learn the language of our ancestors. For this reason, there will not be a word of Irish in the kingdom one hundred years from now if they continue in the manner they are following in my own time.[38]

Before we go ahead to the time of the Gaelic League and the language revival, it may be useful to trace the gradual growth in tolerance towards the Gaelic tradition among some elements of the English-speaking population since the 17th century. This increased tolerance developed first into sympathy, and ultimately to identification, and eventually affected the sense of identity of English-speaking Ireland.

From the 17th to the 19th centuries, the linguistic situation was never simply Catholic/Gaelic versus Protestant/English, in spite of the best efforts of ideologues on both sides. Some Irish-speakers, sometimes from aristocratic or learned Gaelic families, converted to Protestantism. Douglas Hyde records evidence that some of the children of Cromwellian settlers could not speak a word of English.[39] Pádraig Ó Snodaigh has shown that large numbers of Gaelic-speakers from Scotland settled in Ulster,[40] and we have evidence of Presbyterian communities which were Irish-speaking by descent or social absorption until the late 18th century. Landlords often needed to know Irish to deal with their tenants, and proselytisers who learned Irish to convert native-speakers often became interested in the language for its own sake. The situation, in short, was both complex and fluid.

Another factor that increased understanding of Gaelic Ireland, and one which should not be underestimated, is that of scholarly curiosity. This process began as early as the 17th century when Archbishop Ussher, although deeply hostile to Gaelic Ireland, as we have seen, began investigating pre-Norman ecclesiastical history, and his pupil Sir James Ware wrote a history of Ireland which drew on the work of Dubhaltach Mac Firbisigh. Later histories of Ireland, particularly by Irishmen, began to draw Gaelic civilisation in a more sympathetic light as more historic material became available.

Several other factors accelerated this process throughout the 18th century. That the country did not rise with Scotland during 1715 and 1745 seemed to prove that Ireland had been entirely pacified. Sympathy with the natives could now be safely indulged, and even a recognition

of the noble past of a defeated people could add an extra frisson of empathy for their condition. Ironically, Protestantism, with its emphasis on the vernacular bible, had created the new science of comparative linguistics, improving the status of Irish in scholarly circles, so that it became fashionable for a time to trace Gaelic back to its supposed Scythian and Hebrew roots. The sublime as an aesthetic standard became stylish, and, towards the end of the century, wild untamed scenery was sought by converts to the new sensibility. Irish-speakers were, of course, particularly thick on the ground where the scenery was at its most sublime, and at its least useful in terms of agriculture. MacPherson's Ossian put Scottish Gaelic on the cultural map, and Irish antiquaries rushed into print to prove that Ossian was originally an Irishman, a project that soon expanded into one to prove that Ireland had once had a great and ancient Gaelic civilisation. The quality of its music was the one aspect of Irish life that had never been dispraised, and Irish music reached new heights of fashion through the adoption of such as Carolan by the 18th-century landed gentry. It is notable that the image of the 'real' Irish in their remote mountain fastnesses is not, in its essential elements, all that different to the hostile caricatures of earlier ages. Joep Leerssen has pointed out that the individual ingredients composing the image of Ireland were simply adapted to the new fashions.

The final, and possibly critical factor in the change in attitude towards Gaelic Ireland developed in the interval between the religious wars and the rise of democracy. Now that Catholic Ireland was no longer seen as a threat, Protestant Ireland could afford to indulge its resentment against England, and did so by developing a consciousness of its own Irishness. Among a minority of the Ascendancy, the attraction of the Gaelic past as the essence of Irishness, and its ancient wrongs as a metaphor for present disaffection, proved irresistible. Lawrence Parsons, a prominent member of the patriot party, in an uncanny echo of Keating, defended the study of older Gaelic manuscripts on the grounds that it would: 'relieve this country from its most unjust charges of ignorance and barbarism, at a time when it was far more enlightened and civilised than any of the adjacent neighbours'.[41] Charlotte Brooke, in her *Reliques of Ancient Irish Poetry*, wrote of her 'endeavour to rescue from oblivion a few of the valuable reliques of [Ireland's] ancient genius' as well as

of the noble past of a defeated people could add an extra frisson of empathy for their condition. Ironically, Protestantism, with its emphasis on the vernacular bible, had created the new science of comparative linguistics, improving the status of Irish in scholarly circles, so that it became fashionable for a time to trace Gaelic back to its supposed Scythian and Hebrew roots. The sublime as an aesthetic standard became stylish, and, towards the end of the century, wild untamed scenery was sought by converts to the new sensibility. Irish-speakers were, of course, particularly thick on the ground where the scenery was at its most sublime, and at its least useful in terms of agriculture. MacPherson's Ossian put Scottish Gaelic on the cultural map, and Irish antiquaries rushed into print to prove that Ossian was originally an Irishman, a project that soon expanded into one to prove that Ireland had once had a great and ancient Gaelic civilisation. The quality of its music was the one aspect of Irish life that had never been dispraised, and Irish music reached new heights of fashion through the adoption of such as Carolan by the 18th-century landed gentry. It is notable that the image of the 'real' Irish in their remote mountain fastnesses is not, in its essential elements, all that different to the hostile caricatures of earlier ages. Joep Leerssen has pointed out that the individual ingredients composing the image of Ireland were simply adapted to the new fashions.

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'informing the British muse that she has an elder sister in this isle'. She went on to claim that 'the portion of her [Britain's] blood which flows in our veins is rather ennobled than disgraced by the mingling tides that descended from our heroic ancestors'.[42]

It was equally in the interests of English-speaking Catholics to extol the virtues of their Gaelic heritage. While most 17th-century apologists for Gaelic civilisation wrote in Irish or Latin, 18th-century scholars like Charles O'Conor wrote in English. Their attitudes percolated the drawing rooms of the English-speaking Catholic bourgeois in the 19th century through the songs of Thomas Moore, long after they had gone out of fashion in England, and were reinforced by the work of scholars and literary men such as Ferguson, Mangan, O'Donovan, O'Curry, and Petrie, and the publications of the various learned societies. Eventually the Gaelic legacy was incorporated into political nationalism through the work of Thomas Davis and the Young Irelanders. Together, all these influences created a vague consciousness of former greatness which was subscribed to by members of all sections of society.

It should be pointed out that, with the notable exception of late 18th- and early 19th-century Belfast, which was then as far ahead of its time as it is now behind it, most of these developments tended either towards antiquarianism or towards the depiction of a romanticised remote past. Few of them embraced the living language of the Gaelic-speaking poor, who continued to be regarded with the kind of disdain evident in George Moore's memory of the tenants on his father's estate: 'the ratlike faces with the long upper lip that used to come from the mountains to Moore Hall, with banknotes in their tall hats, a little decaying race in knee-breeches, worsted stockings and heavy shoon, whom we used to despise because they could not speak English'.[43]

The great achievement of the Gaelic League was that it convinced the likes of George Moore that the language of this decaying race with its ratlike faces was worth reviving. Moore became – temporarily – so enthusiastic about reviving Irish, in fact, that he set about creating a modern literature in Irish – which he did not speak, although he tried to master it by proxy by threatening to disinherit his nephews if they didn't learn it. The process behind that shift in consciousness is worth investigating.

It developed, first of all, as a function of the English language. It is a cliché worth repeating that the ideology of the Gaelic League never caught on in the Gaeltacht. It was originally formulated by middle-class English-speaking intellectuals who were *au fait* with the thinking of their time. It had its most potent influence on upwardly mobile, lower-middle-class, urban English-speaking Catholics. Its leadership cadre included a spectacular proportion of priests educated at English-speaking Maynooth.

One of the League's first aims was, obviously, to counteract the perception of the Irish-speaker as the epitome of backwardness and ignorance, a perception which was deeply embedded in the Irish psyche. Professor Mary Hayden, on an expedition to find Irish-speakers in the Dublin Mountains, asked an old man if he could speak the language: 'Do I speak Irish, is it?' he replied. 'I may be ignorant, Ma'am, but I'm not as ignorant as that.'[44] Inevitably, and understandably, the counter-image of the Irish-speaker was expressed in over-emphatic terms. It was idealised, and idealisations distort as much as caricatures. However, it should not be thought that the pre-Gaelic League attitudes towards the native speaker died out instantly because some crowd of Dublin counter-jumpers decreed that the Irish-speaker embodied the essence of all that was best in the Irish character. Indeed, such attitudes are alive and well one hundred years later.

The unfortunate people of the Gaeltacht thus found themselves the subject of two contradictory versions of themselves. On the one hand, their nearest neighbours, who had just lost Irish even if they still had not acquired English, were conscious that Irish-speakers were the most benighted and backward people on earth. This contempt was compounded by resentment and jealousy. English-speakers on the edges of the Gaeltacht saw distinguished foreign scholars and other paying guests disturbing their own area, which had just, painfully, acquired civility, and flocking to the houses of unlearned bogtrotters who still spoke Irish. On the other hand, a new species of Irish-speaker, the Gaeilgeoirí, east-coast enthusiasts who had learned Irish, created an ideal which endowed Gaeltacht people with every virtue known to Gaelic civilisation, and a few that had been specially invented for the occasion: 'the patient white-souled Ireland of the Irish-speaking districts' as Pearse put it.[45]

A further complication was that the revivalists themselves often held deeply ambivalent views of native speakers. Many of them were urbanised middle or lower middle class, who secretly despised all culchies, munchies and teuchters, of which Gaeltacht people were the ultimate example. Those who genuinely fell in love with the Gaeltacht – and there was, and is, much to fall in love with – wanted it to remain in an undeveloped, pre-industrial, timeless state, complete with thatched cottages, turf-stacks, donkeys, curraghs and chimney corners, and deeply resented the modernisation that the people who lived there all the year round wanted most. Gaeltacht people have still not recovered from this multiplicity of role-models.

The process of idealising the Irish-speaking people of the most remote parts of the west of Ireland stemmed in part from the fact that these scattered communities were the only places in Ireland where Irish was alive as a community language, and the only ones which embodied, in no matter how attenuated a form, this two-thousand-year-old civilisation. It was also rooted in the most modern form of political ideology.

There is obviously no space here to investigate complexities of nationalism in any depth, but it should be made clear from the outset that nationalism was central to the ideology of the Gaelic League, although Douglas Hyde, in one of the greatest creative fudges of modern Irish history, created an ethos in the early days that attracted a number of unionists into its ranks. This was made possible by one of Hyde's formulations – the argument for cultural continuity – which was essentially apolitical: 'I believe that it is our Gaelic past which, though the Irish race does not recognise it just at present, is really at the bottom of the Irish heart'.[46] 'Do what it may, the race of today cannot wholly divest itself from the mantle of its own past.'[47] 'The Gaelic League is the only body in Ireland which realised that Ireland had a past, had a history, had a literature, and the only body in Ireland which sought to render the present a rational continuation of the past.'[48] His other main contribution to the revivalist ideology was to make an appeal for cultural nationalism as a logical extension of political nationalism. This turned out to be the more potent argument of the two:

> I wish to show you that in Anglicising ourselves wholesale we have thrown away with a light heart the best claim we have

> upon the world's recognition of us as a separate nationality. What did Mazzini say? What is Goldwin Smith never tired of declaiming? What do the *Spectator* and *Saturday Review* harp on? That we ought to be content as an integral part of the United Kingdom because we have lost the robes of nationality, our language and customs.
>
> It has always been very curious to me how Irish sentiment sticks in this half-way house – how it continues to apparently hate the English, and the same time continues to imitate them; how it continues to clamour for recognition as a distinct nationality, and at the same time throws away with both hands what would make it so. If Irishmen only went a little further they would become good Englishmen in sentiment also. ... It is a fact, and we must face it as a fact, that although they adopt English habits and copy England in every way, the great bulk of Irishmen and Irishwomen over the whole world are known to be filled with a dull, ever-abiding animosity against her, and right or wrong, to grieve when she prospers, and joy when she is hurt. It is just because there appears no earthly chance of their becoming good members of the Empire that I urge that they should not remain in the anomalous position they are in, but since they absolutely refuse to become one thing, that they become the other: cultivate what they have rejected, and build up an Irish nation on Irish lines.[49]

This aspect of the language revival movement found its ideological roots in the thread of modern European romantic and cultural nationalism that derives partly from Rousseau, but mostly from the German historian Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder was a Lutheran minister who had been profoundly influenced by a sect in his native Germany, the Pietists, which believed in the innate wisdom of the common, unlettered people. He postulated the nation as the product of a complex of influences – climate, environment and the accidents of history – which, through a long, slow process of development, produce the language that is both the reflection of the experiences of the nation and the tool by which its consciousness is formed. For Herder, organic nations were manifestations of the divine plan, each nation reflecting an aspect of God's multiplicity, and making a unique contribution to civilisation. He saw the language of the common people as the essence of the nation.

Herder influenced Goethe, inspired the folklore and linguistic work of the Grimm brothers, and changed the focus of the study of history from that of the leaders of society to that of the community.

His enormously sophisticated theories sometimes came through in the propaganda of the Gaelic League in a rather simplified form. '[God] wished us to be by ourselves out in the ocean, with our own particular language, music, religion, customs and other things. In addition, he made the ancient Romans afraid to come near us, so that we are not like any other nation in Europe', wrote R. Mac Searraigh Gordon in 1898.[50]

The Gaelic League seems to have been genuinely free from undue political or sectarian influence between, say, 1893 and 1899. In the next ten years, however, it came under the influence of two groups of ideologues: radical nationalists – the IRB in particular – and the Catholic Church. It should also be said that these years were also those in which the League made its greatest impact on Irish society, and it can be argued that, without the support of these two groups, the Irish language movement would never have had even the limited success it has had. I intend to concentrate here on the influence of the Church, as the more complex and interesting of the two.

In the ideology of Herder, as filtered through the League, the native speaker of Irish embodies the soul and consciousness of Ireland. It need not surprise us if the Catholic Church, another body with a stake in the welfare of the soul of Ireland, was attracted to the work of the League. This issue is extremely complex: the Church and the League clashed on a number of issues, and many of the Catholic clergy were influenced by the burgeoning nationalism of the time, and sincerely involved in the ideals of the revival. There is also some evidence to indicate that the Church itself did not initiate its involvement, but was targeted by the League as the organisation which could best deliver the ideals of the revival to a broad public. What is not in doubt, however, is that the Catholic Church was involved in a conscious attempt to influence the League's ideology. There were two prongs to the campaign. One involved defining the immutable essence of the Gaelic mind – the mentality and world-view which is moulded by the language. The other involved resisting the corrupting influence of English civilisation: in particular, English literature. Both these themes were addressed by Cardinal Logue in 1899, just six years after the founding of the League:

> Now anyone that knows, as I know, to my sorrow, and as many heads of families know that we never had in Irish that broad and fetid stream of corruption which is flooding the country at the present day through English literature. Wherever the Irish language is spoken, the people are pure and innocent, and it is only where this flood comes in, which is not merely a flood now but a torrent, that if there is not care taken by the priests and clergymen of every denomination, and by the heads of families, the flood will corrupt the innocence of the youth of holy Ireland.[51]

Fr John O'Reilly, in a Gaelic League pamphlet published the following year, with the dramatic title *The Threatening Metempsychosis of a Nation*, argued that because the Gaelic mind was essentially Catholic, it was incapable of expressing such anti-Catholic thoughts as 'No priest in politics'. 'That phrase,' he said, 'could not be rendered into the Irish idiom. The Genius of the Gaelic tongue could no more assimilate it than the human system could assimilate a dagger in the stomach.'[52]

He was also in the privileged position of being able to define the Gaelic mind:

> The Irish mind, away back in its most pagan days, was emphatically and eminently a mind inclining to religion. It was chaste, idealistic, mystical. It was spiritual beyond the ways of men; and it could not rest, or live, without contact with the other world; without the conviction of some ideal hereafter. It was clean of heart, and saw God, darkly and from afar, if you will, but with the invincible conviction of the clean heart's instinct. It was passionately loyal to chief, whether earthly lord or spiritual shepherd. ... The Irish mind was the most kind and towardly soil ever known under the sun for the seed of the gospel to fall upon. That seed fell at last and it grew; and it endured, and it remains, and we are here to-day on the strength of it, and our country is still a trumpeting witness for Christ in the wilderness of an almost re-paganised world. ... The Irish mind was loyalty itself to spiritual authority. It knew no envy of the influence of its pastors, and it never dreamt of invidious malicious distinctions between the man and his office, between the doctrine and the preacher; and this is a great part of the secret of the sound and splendid endurance of our faith to this day.[53]

This was to be contrasted with its opposite, the English mind, in which O'Reilly neatly fuses nationalist, anti-English sentiment with an attack on the corrupting influence of the English language on the thought-processes of those who speak it. It did not appear to strike either himself or his readers that the pamphlet itself was written in English:

> It is a fleshly spirit, bent towards earth; a mind unmannerly, vulgar, insolent, bigoted; a mind whose belly is its God, yet which cannot endure the word belly; a mind to which pride and lust, and mammon are the matter-of-course aims of life, the only objects conceivably worthy of pursuit; a mind to which real Christian virtue is incredible, and sure to be set down as clever hypocrisy, or stark imbecility; a mind where every absurd device, from grossest Darwinism to most preposterous spiritualism, is resorted to and hoped in ... a mind to which the virtue, or the idea of humility is unknown; contrition or self-condemnation an absurdity.[54]

This claptrap, of course, had nothing to do with the people of the Gaeltacht. It was created as a role-model for the unfortunate idealistic revivalists, who henceforth spent their time and energy in the pursuit of purity rather than prepositions. It was also a spectacularly dramatic example of internalised colonialism. The ideals offered were not those of the Gaelic way of life of any period, as anyone with any knowledge of the sources will know. The ideals were, in fact, those of Victorian England, filtered through French Jansenism, with a touch of theocracy, and embodied in an extreme form the convergence of Victoria's England with ultramontane Ireland.

This campaign was remarkably successful. The perception of Gaeltacht people as being spiritually superior to those of the rest of the country has survived, just about, until our own time, as did the picture of the revivalist Gaeilgeoir first defined in Behan's *The Hostage*: the fáinne-wearing, joyless, puritanical, gun-toting non-smoking non-drinker with the cold eyes. There are other images of the 20th-century Gael: neolithic Blasketman, earth-mother, the pedant, the set-dancer wearily seeking the crack, the boyo, the activists of whom Seosamh Mac Grianna said 'it must be the unending dry pleasureless work which dries the sap from them and leaves them without joy', the ones who blame it all on the Government, and those who have been so offended by the

received caricature that they have dedicated their lives to the equally self-defeating task of publicly embodying its diametric opposite.

All current images of Irish-speakers diminish us. Attempts to define a civilisation may pass a few pleasant hours in a pub, but a civilisation, a tradition, is far too complex to be captured by any definition. The process of defining has itself an inbuilt weakness, in that a definition is always in danger of turning into a self-sustaining prescription, which is in danger of being turned into an orthodoxy; and an orthodoxy, if it is not careful, can finish up as a slogan – the ultimate simplification. This tendency towards prescriptiveness is of course a permanent temptation to ideologues, and we have seen ideologues with agendas of their own moulding the image of the Gael from the earliest times. The thousands who have found that the language enriches their lives have benefitted very little from any of these creations. A new understanding of Irish-speakers – a more generous one, which accepts the wide diversity of a group of people whose only common characteristic is that they speak Irish – would be a welcome development. What is not needed is a new image, with all the implications of prescriptiveness involved in the process of image-making. The issue is far too important for that.

Plus ça change

The Irish language and politics

This essay explores the links between political allegiance and linguistic loyalty, looking in detail at the development of the Gaelic League and its gradual and increasing engagement with nationalist politics. It concludes with some contemporary reporting in the Irish language media on the issue of the Irish language and the unionist tradition.

Plus ça change
The Irish language and politics

In Northern Ireland, identities tend to come in packages. There is sufficient correspondence between political and religious affiliations to allow generalisations such as 'Catholic/nationalist' and 'Protestant/unionist' to be useful and sometimes meaningful simplifications. Political scientists squabble profitably among themselves about whether our current troubles are best defined as a religious conflict expressed in political terms or a political conflict with a powerful religious dimension.

It is this perceived link between politics and linguistic loyalty that I wish to examine here. The perception is not entirely without foundation: Irish-speakers in Northern Ireland tend to belong overwhelmingly to the Catholic, and probably nationalist, end of the spectrum. Fewer than one in 20 of those knowing Irish and identifying their religion in the 1991 Census were Protestant.[2] At the same time, many of the minority of Catholic nationalists who are interested in Irish dispute the automatic association of the language with a political position. In their rhetoric, at least, they claim to believe that the language is a cultural resource which belongs equally to everyone living on the island of Ireland, nationalist and unionist, Catholic and Protestant. This perspective is shared by a small number of Protestant nationalists and an equally small number of Protestant unionists who have developed an approach to the language issue in which support for Irish coexists with support for the political link with Britain.

On the other hand, most unionists in Northern Ireland see the Irish language movement as being inseparable from Irish nationalism.

What I have set out to do here is to try to identify what gave rise to such a fundamental divergence of perceptions in our own time. It should be noted at this point that the present unionist discomfort with and resistance to the Irish language is of recent date. When Queen Victoria came to Belfast in 1849, she noted in her diary:

> I have all along forgotten to say that the favourite motto written up on most of the arches, etc., and in every place was 'Céad Míle Fáilte' which means 'a hundred thousand welcomes' in Irish. ... They often called out 'Céad Mile Fáilte' and it appears in every sort of shape.[3]

In a way we should not be surprised at the burghers of Belfast using Irish to express their loyalty to the Crown. Nineteenth-century Ireland saw no necessary conflict between a cultural identity which was Irish and a political identity which was British. In fact, Irish was fashionable in Belfast in the 19th century. The inscription on the Belfast Lord Mayor's chain is in Irish – 'Érin go bragh' (Ireland for ever). The foundation stone of what became the Royal Victoria Hospital was bilingual – Latin and Irish. The first society ever to have as its aim the preservation of Irish as a living language was founded in Belfast in 1830, more than 60 years before the founding of the Gaelic League. All the leaders of the language movement in Belfast – James McDonnell, Samuel Bryson, William Neilson, Robert McAdam – were Protestants, and, as far as I can make out, none of them appear to have been political nationalists. The youngest of these, McAdam, did not die until 1895, the year the first branch of the Gaelic League was founded in Belfast.

But if we examine the period between, say, 1885 and 1915, we will see the development of a significant change in perception. The language movement at the beginning of this period involved people of every political persuasion. It was also weak and ineffectual. By the end of the period, we can see a powerful and influential mass movement which was effectively controlled by the most radical wing of the nationalist movement, and in which unionist involvement was almost invisible.

At this point, it may be useful to dig a bit deeper into the multiple meanings of that slithery term 'political'. Politics, in spite of the best efforts of its practitioners, still means more than gaining and exercising power, and continues to carry nuances of citizenship which are rooted

in concepts of civic and communal responsibility. Any group which organises itself to influence and change society is engaged in activity that is essentially political. The feminist movement speaks, accurately, of 'gender politics'. In that sense, a movement to maintain and revive a language is political.

However, in Northern Ireland today, and throughout the island during the period under discussion, the term also refers to the issue of the constitutional relationship between Great Britain and Ireland: unionists favouring the maintenance of the political link with Britain, nationalists favouring independence from Britain. In the tiny space remaining, 'politics' can mean what it means in much of the rest of the world: party political head-butting over who should serve society, control society, or benefit from the spoils of power. Conventional party politics can be complicated by two kinds of disciplined organisations: those that attempt to influence party politics by infiltration, and those that bypass political structures through revolution. In Ireland at the turn of the century, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, commonly referred to as the Fenians, was both a revolutionary organisation and one which operated by infiltrating other organisations.

The Gaelic League was founded in 1893 to promote the Irish language in Ireland, and always claimed to be non-political. This claim often depended on selective use of the various overlapping senses of 'political' outlined above. It was, inevitably, political in the sense of being a single-issue pressure-group, but its claim to be non-political can be justified in the sense that the organisation avoided, for a long time, becoming embroiled in party politics. Its relationship with the ideology of Irish nationalism, however, is more complex, and is worth examining in detail.

The League was formed in response to Douglas Hyde's famous 1892 lecture 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland'. Hyde was the son of a Church of Ireland rector from Roscommon, and was President of the League from 1893 to 1915. He had, and still has, the reputation of being a non-political figure, partly because of his stand in the Gaelic League crisis of 1915, which will be discussed later, and partly because of his recurrent claims that the League was non-political. In that context, what he had to say in 1892 is worth examining.

Hyde's arguments can be broadly divided into two main themes. One of these argues for the value of Irish in terms of cultural continuity. In 1901 he summarised that strand of his argument neatly: 'The Gaelic League is the only body in Ireland which realised that Ireland had a past, had a history, had a literature, and the only body in Ireland which sought to render the present a rational continuation of the past'.[4] His formulation in the 1892 lecture unfortunately uses the word 'race', but it is clear that Hyde, the descendant of a Cromwellian settler, is talking about culture rather than blood: 'I believe that it is our Gaelic past which, though the Irish race does not recognise it just at present, is really at the bottom of the Irish heart';[5] 'do what it may, the race of today cannot wholly divest itself from the mantle of its own past'.[6]

If we examine these statements in the context of their intellectual and ideological environment, we can see a close connection with a tradition rooted in the ideas of the 18th-century German historian Herder, widely recognised as the father of cultural nationalism. (The symbiotic relationship between cultural and political nationalism is too big a question to begin to discuss here.) We can also see in these quotations an element of essentialism: the belief that the essence, or soul, of Irishness is to be found in the Irish language. In his summary of the speech in his autobiography, written in Irish, Hyde made this explicit: 'The soul of Ireland, I said, was in that great mass of people ... who were the Irish nation ... who had Irish as their language'.[7]

The second thread of Hyde's argument concentrates entirely on political nationalism. He argued that Irish nationalists, as nationalists, should support the language because the preservation of Irish was the most effective defence of Ireland's cultural distinctiveness, and therefore of her nationality:

> I wish to show you that in Anglicising ourselves wholesale we have thrown away with a light heart the best claim we have upon the world's recognition of us as a separate nationality. What did Mazzini say? What is Goidwin Smith never tired of declaiming? What do the *Spectator* and *Saturday Review* harp on? That we ought to be content as an integral part of the United Kingdom because we have lost the robes of nationality, our language and customs.

> It has always been very curious to me how Irish sentiment sticks in this half-way house – how it continues to apparently hate the English, and the same time continues to imitate them; how it continues to clamour for recognition as a distinct nationality, and at the same time throws away with both hands what would make it so. If Irishmen only went a little further they would become good Englishmen in sentiment also. ... It is a fact, and we must face it as a fact, that although they adopt English habits and copy England in every way, the great bulk of Irishmen and Irishwomen over the whole world are known to be filled with a dull, ever-abiding animosity against her, and right or wrong, to grieve when she prospers, and joy when she is hurt. ... It is just because there appears no earthly chance of their becoming good members of the Empire that I urge that they should not remain in the anomalous position they are in, but since they absolutely refuse to become one thing, that they become the other: cultivate what they have rejected, and build up an Irish nation on Irish lines.[8]

If Hyde was, as is sometimes claimed, an apolitical figure, or even a cultural rather than a political nationalist, why does this lecture reflect political nationalism so strongly? I think that there may be two explanations. In the first place, Hyde himself was a nationalist, who had secretly supported the Fenians in his youth. In his memoirs he refers to his unsuccessful attempts to convert James Goodman, Professor of Irish in Trinity College Dublin, to nationalism.[9] But there is another explanation. The Gaelic League was partially modelled on the Gaelic Athletic Association, which had been founded shortly before, in 1884. Hyde recognised that the strength of the GAA was to have harnessed nationalist energy to the promotion of Gaelic sports, and it is likely that he saw the nationalist impulse as the most effective way for the Irish language revival to become a mass movement.

However, as well as harnessing the energies of both political and cultural nationalism, Hyde claimed that 'this is no political matter', and attempted to appeal to unionists: 'This [the revival of Irish] is a question which most Irishmen will naturally look at from a National point of view, but it is one which ought also to claim the sympathies of every intelligent Unionist, and which, as I know, does claim the sympathy of many'.[10] This perspective is undermined by his west of Ireland contempt

for Ulster unionists: 'In two points only was the continuity of Irishism in Ireland damaged. First in the north-east of Ulster, where the Gaelic race was expelled and the land planted with aliens, whom our dear mother Erin, assimilative as she is, has hitherto found it difficult to absorb',[11] followed by 'In spite of the little admixture of Saxon blood in the north-east corner, this island is and will ever remain Celtic at the core'.[12]

Within the ideology of the League there was, from the beginning, an unresolved conflict between non-political rhetoric and the nationalist subtext which underpinned both Hyde's own ideology and that of many of his followers. By sheer force of repetition, supplemented by the magic of his attractive personality, and an extraordinary ability to fudge contentious issues, Hyde managed for a considerable time to disguise some of the political implications of the language movement he helped to create. Up to a point, he was successful. A number of prominent unionists, including a sprinkling of liberal aristocrats and clergy, became involved in the language movement in its early years. The League also attracted figures such as the Rev. Richard Kane, Grand Master of the Belfast Orange Lodge and organiser of the Anti-Home Rule Convention of 1892, who was a patron of the Belfast Branch of the League, and Lindsay Crawford, Grand Master of the Independent Orange Order, who actually stood for election to the executive committee of the League. In 1898, the League took its non-political principle so seriously that it did not participate in the unveiling in Dublin of a monument to Wolfe Tone.[13] The following statement was written in 1906 by a member of the executive committee of the League, the Rev. James Hannay, a Church of Ireland clergyman and popular novelist who wrote under the pen name of George A. Birmingham:

> I myself claim to be a Loyalist, that is to say I believe King Edward to be by right and in fact Sovereign of this Kingdom of Ireland ... Quite possibly, though I do not know this, I am one of a minority in the League. But ... my principles and my opinions have made no difference whatever to my position in the League and I can safely assert that a similar welcome awaits anyone who, holding opinions like mine, is yet anxious for the preservation of the Irish language, and is willing to work for it, leaving aside all political questions.[14]

The monument to Tone was actually organised by a body which acted as a front for the militantly republican IRB, and it is generally acknowledged that the 1798 celebrations were critical to the revival of that organisation. The IRB had already attempted to take over the GAA and was soon to infiltrate Sinn Féin, which in its early stages was neither republican nor militaristic. The subliminal nationalism of the Gaelic League made it an organisation that could provide perfect cover for IRB activities, as is clear from Sean T. Ó Ceallaigh's description of how he used his position as business manager of the League's paper *An Claidheamh Soluis* to promote the IRB as early as 1903:

> When working for An Claidheamh Soluis in the early years I had an opportunity to do a lot for the IRB. ... I used to go around the country to feiseanna trying to increase sales of the paper, and, of course I met many young people of my own age in the different towns ... and I recruited young men for the IRB in every one of them.[15]

There was already an instinctive resistance to the League from some unionists who were themselves enthusiastic supporters of the language. W.B. Yeats records that the Gaelic scholar Standish Hayes O'Grady refused to have anything to do with the League on the grounds that it was a 'Fenian organisation'.[16] As the nationalist impulse behind the League became more obvious in the early years of this century, and in particular when the League began to work closely with the Catholic Church, partly to gain its support for the teaching of Irish in schools, unionists began to find themselves more and more isolated within the language movement. Hannay soon recognised what was going on, and resigned from the League in 1907, writing a private letter to Hyde to explain his reasons:

> I take the Sinn Féin position to be the natural and inevitable development of the League principles. ... I do not myself believe that you will be able to stride the fence much longer I think the movement you started will go on, whether you lead it or take the part of poor Frankenstein who created a monster he could not control.[17]

In the event, Hyde lasted another eight years. During that period the relationship between the League and the nationalist movement became

ever clearer and less ambiguous. For example, it was in the League's paper *An Claidheamh Soluis* that Eoin Mac Neill, co-founder with Hyde of the Gaelic League, published his article 'The North Began'. This article led to the founding of the Irish Volunteers, an armed organisation formed as a nationalist counterweight to the Ulster Volunteer Force. In other words, whatever success Hyde and his followers within the League had in attracting unionists to the language movement in the early years, fewer and fewer unionists could now find any space within the movement. As a further complication, unionism was itself undergoing a process of redefinition, and was beginning, partly in reaction to nationalist ideology, to move away from an Irish unionism towards a unionism that rejected any form of Irish cultural identity.

At this stage, another conflict began within the League. The radical nationalists – Sinn Féin, now moving towards a more militant stance, and the IRB – began to assert themselves within the organisation in reaction to the home rule crisis. Hyde himself was accused variously of supporting John Redmond's constitutional nationalist Irish Parliamentary Party and of being a unionist. It is difficult to know which of these accusations represented the greatest insult. In an article in *An Claidheamh Soluis* in July 1913, Hyde attempted to explain his position:

> making friends all round, and getting the whole country, priests and people, Parliamentarians, Sinn Féiners, O'Brienites and Unionists, to bring pressure to bear upon big and vital issues, specially upon our education boards, so as to accomplish Irish-Ireland changes according as we are ripe for them.[18]

The most comprehensive response to this perspective came in an article in the republican paper *Irish Freedom* in September:

> The work of the Gaelic League is to prevent the assimilation of the Irish nation by the English nation ... That work is as essentially anti-English as the work attempted by Fenianism or the Society of United Irishmen.

The article continues:

> The Gaelic League does not stand to take sides in the political differences that separate [nationalist] Irishmen into different parties, and therefore it is claimed to be non-political. This

> claim can only be upheld by twisting the plain meaning of the words. The claim ... may have misled a few unionists into the Gaelic League and to that extent may appear to be useful, but in practice it is only misleading ... It has undoubtedly led some unthinking Nationalists into great confusion. It has confused the one straight issue for them, and that straight issue is whether the Irish nation or the English nation is to predominate in Ireland. The Irish language is a political weapon of the first importance against English encroachment.[19]

I know of no better definition than this of the radical nationalist perspective on the language. The implication of defining Irish as an 'anti-English' 'political weapon of the first importance' appears to be that the function of the language movement was to assist the political movement.

By this point, Hyde's fight to leave a space for unionists within the language movement was as good as lost. The main area of struggle was now between those who were trying to keep the League open to all nationalists and those who were attempting to use it for one section of nationalists.

The issue was decided at the Annual General Meeting of the League held in Dundalk in 1915. Rumours were circulated that John Redmond's nationalist party intended to take the League over in the same way it had earlier attempted to take over the Irish Volunteers. Diarmuid Lynch of the IRB organised a coup. This is how he describes it in his memoirs:

> I communicated with prominent Gaelic Leaguers throughout the country – who were also IRB men – urging that delegates favourable to our political views should without fail be selected to attend at Dundalk ... Nominations were made accordingly ... the new Coiste [executive committee] was safe from the IRB viewpoint.[20]

It is said that Hyde resigned as President of the League when its Constitution was amended to include a 'Free, Gaelic Ireland' among its objectives. Colmán Ó hUallacháin disputes this, and it may be worth our while to examine closely what happened on that historic occasion. Sean T. Ó Ceallaigh records in his memoirs that he was approached by Thomas Clarke and Sean Mac Diarmada to persuade the McHale

Branch of the League to propose a motion that the League should support political freedom for Ireland. The following is the text of the McHale motion:

> that the Gaelic League shall be strictly non-political and non-sectarian, and shall devote itself to realising the ideal of a Gaelic-speaking and independent Irish nation, free from all subjection to foreign influences.[21]

When a number of delegates objected to this motion on the grounds that the second part of the proposal was as political as the first part was not, Colonel Moore proposed the following amendment:

> that the Gaelic League shall be strictly non-political and non-sectarian, and shall devote itself solely to realising the dawn of a free Gaelic-speaking Ireland.[22]

Hyde expressed his unease with the use of the word 'free', saying 'I would consider that a political resolution, if it means that Ireland should be free from British rule'. He did, however, accept Moore's casuistic definition of the word: 'that Irishmen were free in the same way as Englishmen, Scotsmen and Welshmen are free' and the motion was passed unanimously. However, when the results of the elections to the new Central Committee came through, and when Hyde saw how the new committee would indeed be 'safe from the IRB viewpoint', he swept his papers from the table and left the hall. The following day he tendered this resignation from the League on health grounds.

Extraordinarily, the habit of loudly proclaiming the non-political aims of the League survived, even after it was completely, and obviously, dominated by radical nationalists. In 1918, Hyde wrote a private account of this phenomenon:

> I heard him [Sean T. Ó Ceallaigh] myself speak to a crowded meeting in the Mansion House saying he spoke as a representative of Sinn Féin – he, the secretary of the Gaelic League. Notwithstanding this, a number of Sinn Féiners make it a point to set up a terrible hullabaloo if anyone ventures to say that the Gaelic League is political. This is part of that obliquity of vision, amounting almost to a disease, a kink of the mind, which I have observed in numerous representatives of

> that party. The fact, however, remains that they have left the Gaelic League a body to which no Redmondite and no Unionist can any longer subscribe.[23]

The 1915 meeting was the moment when the language movement was subsumed into the nationalist political movement. From the start, as I have noted, the League was ambivalent in its attitude to Irish nationalism. Although Hyde attempted to create an ethos which could create a space for non-nationalists, that effort itself was ambivalent, and ultimately failed. I can trace no unionists involved with the language who were not already involved before the first few years of the century. The importance of the 1915 Ard Fheis was that it linked the Gaelic League unambiguously not only with nationalism, but with one section within the broader nationalist movement – that it became no more than the cultural wing of a political, and ultimately military, movement, and that its place within that movement was subordinate.

It may be useful to examine both the advantages and disadvantages for the language of the League's engagement with nationalist politics. In the first place, it is more than possible that the League would never have had the impact on Irish society that it did have without the driving force of nationalism, and that it would have been as squeaky-clean and ineffectual as its predecessors, the Gaelic Union and the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language.

In addition, within a very few years, the group which instigated the takeover of the League in 1915 came to dominate the politics of the newly independent Irish Free State. The revival of Irish was a major ideological plank in the policies of both pro-treaty and anti-treaty post-independence parties. There was, in fact, sharp competition between them to be identified as the party that could be seen to be doing most for the language revival.

On the other hand, some of those involved in committing the League to a narrowly political programme later regretted their actions. Even Eoin Mac Neill, who succeeded Hyde as President of the League, and, as Minister of Education, became responsible for much of the early state revival policies, later wrote: 'I now think that the Gaelic League ... should have kept entirely clear of politics, and that its failure to do so, for which I am in part responsible, has been bad for the objects of the

League'.[24] Obviously, Mac Néill's interpretation should be read in terms of the third, narrower form of politics I have tried to define above.

Among the disadvantages of the politicisation of the League was an almost complete polarisation of unionist and nationalist perspectives on the language. The political subtext of the League's early ideology may have raised unionist suspicions, and its increasing identification with radical nationalism in the years between the Home Rule crisis and partition confirmed them. This partly explains, even if it does not excuse, the brutality of the Ulster Unionist Party's treatment of the language in the Northern Ireland state.

However, a surprisingly large minority of northern unionists today show an interest in the language. Although some of this may stem from a fascination with the otherness of what is seen as a unified Gaelic/Catholic/nationalist package, it is also rooted in the crisis of identity which is now affecting unionism. Some of those who seek a more satisfactory sense of identity than a denial of Irishness are beginning to look towards the nineteenth century, when it was both possible and fashionable for unionists to be interested in the language.

The perception that the Irish language movement – if not necessarily the language itself – is closely identified with nationalism remains a barrier to these people. This identification, it must be said, is based on past and current realities. Gearóid Ó Caireallaín as the President of the Gaelic League, in an article entitled 'An Ghaeilge sna Sé Chontae' (Irish in the Six Counties), notes that his priority is the development of a 'vigorous, living' language community. He argues that unionists in Northern Ireland will see any developments in favour of Irish as 'concessions to nationalists'. Nationalist political parties, he argues, have no genuine commitment to the language, and his concern in this article is to secure a prominent place for Irish on their agenda so that the language will benefit from horse-trading between nationalist and unionist parties.[25]

It could be argued that this approach is purely pragmatic: that in the reductive world of Northern Ireland, where all issues become the constitutional issue, the only way to find support for Irish is by promoting the language through those who cannot refuse to be supportive. This would be done in the regretful knowledge that, as happened with Hyde, such an approach would link the language ever

more firmly with nationalism, and make a mockery of the movement's continuing claims to be non-political. The passage quoted below illustrates that old habits die hard, for the passage does contain a pale reflection of Hyde's genuine non-sectarian and ambivalent non-political approach, linked with some incoherent gestures towards the rhetoric of common heritage:

And on the other side of the story, there is the British government.

This is the crowd that has been tormenting Irish speakers throughout this country for hundreds of years. They did not do anything for Irish throughout the long years when they controlled all Ireland, and they continued with that anti-policy [*sic*] during their time in the Six Counties.

Whatever concessions northern Irish-speakers got in recent years, they were hard won from the authorities.

Let it not be forgotten that there were native speakers of Irish alive in the area of the Six Counties when the northern state was founded.

There were speakers in County Tyrone, in County Antrim and in County Down.

Stormont never did anything to preserve or conserve that native learning. Ethnic cleansing was the only policy the Unionists adopted and except for the Irish Folklore Commission in Dublin, we would not have even the archaeological [*sic*] remains.

But things have changed and we may be on the threshold of a new era. We'll see.

Irish fits naturally and comfortably into the framework of parity of esteem, that is to say that the Irish language aspect of northern life must be promoted – brought up to speed, so to speak – if nationalists and Catholics are to be satisfied.

Without doubt, Irish has a cross-community aspect. There is evidence that certain Protestants are taking an interest in the language today – as they always did – and I welcome that.

But the development of Irish should not be dependent on Protestants taking an interest in it. And it cannot be said that Irish should be promoted only on a cross-community basis.

There is nothing in Irish to prevent Protestants, unionists and loyalists from taking an interest in it, just as they can take an

> interest in football, hurling, camóige, traditional music and Irish dancing if they wish to.
>
> But if they do not wish to, that is up to them. There is no harm in trying to attract them, and it is necessary not to put any obstacles in their way.
>
> But it must be admitted that the Irish language is a basic, inseparable part of Irish culture and any group which takes on Irish is taking on Irishness.[26]

Now that the language movement appears set for a period of intense politicisation, where is the space for those of us engaged with the language and genuinely committed to making it available to the entire community? Irish is so weak in the unionist community in Northern Ireland that unionists cannot engage with the language without the help of (mainly nationalist) Irish-speakers. There is no point in engaging in denial, or playing the game that Hyde condemned – and of which he himself was to an extent guilty: 'that obliquity of vision, amounting almost to a disease, a kink of the mind', the tendency to claim that the language movement is non-political, while at the same time pursuing what is really a political agenda. This will not be believed. Nor is there any point in trying to use Irish culture, or arguments for adopting an Irish cultural identity, to sugar the pill of Irish nationalism. Political antennae in Northern Ireland are too acute. On the other hand, cries to 'depoliticise' the language are usually disguised (political) attacks on nationalism, and a nationalist perspective on the language is just as valid as a unionist one.

It would be foolish to underestimate the difficulties of creating a neutral space for the language in our ideology-ridden society, and it is unrealistic to expect that the entire Irish language movement will break the mould that has now been established for the best part of a century. The challenge facing the Irish-speaking community is whether or not enough people can be found within it with the generosity, the courage, and the restraint to allow those of the unionist tradition to engage in the language on their own terms, as unionists. I believe, however, that there are enough Irish-speakers with the breadth of vision that would make such a development possible, and that there are enough unionists with a similar generosity of spirit to make it meaningful.

The Protestant Gaelic Tradition

This is a version of the text of a pamphlet prepared in 1990 – it was the Ultach Trust's first publication. It explores the (then little known or discussed) historical involvement of Protestants with the Irish language. Short biographies outlining the involvement of Patrick Dunkin, Arthur Brownlow, James McDonnell, William Neilson, Samuel Bryson, James McKnight, John McCambridge and Robert McAdam are included.

The Protestant Gaelic Tradition

The Irish language in our time tends to be associated exclusively with a single religious and political tradition. However, at different stages, the language has been spoken by members of every possible form of Christianity in Ireland and Scotland, a pagan warrior society, subsistence farmers, royalists and republicans. This chapter traces briefly one little-known strand of the Gaelic tradition.

The word 'Gaelic' is now used mainly to describe only the form of the language used in Scotland, while 'Irish' involves both a cultural and a political context, so that unionists often find themselves choking on the political package that goes with the word. Here, the terms 'Irish' and 'Gaelic' are used more or less randomly. The Protestant Gaelic tradition does not necessarily reflect any particular political creed, and present politically inspired attitudes to the language are, on both sides, deeply unhistoric.

Scottish Gaelic, economics and the biological imperative

Irish and Scottish Gaelic are dialects of one language: bardic poetry written in Scotland until the 17th century is indistinguishable from that written in Ireland. The influence of Scottish Gaelic on the text of the first book ever published in the language, a translation of Knox's *Book of Common Order*, written in 1567 'for the men of Scotland and Ireland', is barely perceptible. Until 1830, Gaelic speaking Protestants in Scotland used Bedell's Bible, translated in Ireland in the 17th century; indeed, it is still the basis of the Scottish Gaelic version.

Planter and Gael stereotypes ignore how the peoples of Ulster and Scotland intermingled for a thousand years before the Plantation. Between about 500 and 637 AD, the kingdom of Dalriada encompassed north-east Ulster and western Scotland. Even after it divided, the Scottish Gaels continued to expand; by the 11th century, Gaelic was the dominant language in Scotland, although it then began to decline in the face of the encroachments of English – the precursor of Lallans – and, to a lesser extent, Norman French. Professor Derrick Thomson has calculated that the only regions in Scotland that never came under Gaelic influence at any time were Lothian, the Shetland Islands and the Orkneys. In other words, most of us with a Scottish ancestry are descended, at some stage, from Gaelic speakers.

Robert the Bruce inherited lands in Ireland which he passed on to his brother, who was chosen by the Irish Gaelic families as High-King of Ireland. The McDonalds, the Gallaghers and the Sweeneys were Scottish Gaels who had settled in Ireland, and the Lordship of the Isles as late as the 15th and 16th centuries included much of Antrim. Everyone knows that Antrim and Down had been so extensively settled by the beginning of the 17th century, largely from Scotland, that they were never part of the plantation of Ulster.

It is impossible to quantify precisely the number of Gaelic speakers among the settlers, but we do have a number of indications that many of them had a Gaelic background. Western Scotland, in particular, was still largely Gaelic speaking in the 17th century, and many settlers came from there. It is interesting to note that Scots were initially excepted from the expulsion order during the 1641 rebellion: this may have been partly due to some sense of cultural unity as well as a shared sense of grievance against the established church. Gaelic speaking Scottish Episcopalians dissatisfied with the religious settlement of 1688 migrated to Antrim, and a Presbyterian Gaelic speaking community founded at the same period survived in Ballymascanlon near Dundalk until the 19th century. We know that Gaelic-speakers from Scotland settled in Ulster after the rebellions in 18th-century Scotland, and there are records of settlers arriving in Ulster unable to speak English.

Another ignored aspect of the development of society in Ulster is the extent to which settlers and native Irish intermingled. Even when English-speakers came, they were initially in a very small minority in

many areas. Surrounded as they were by a monoglot Irish-speaking community, many of them learned Irish. Marriages between the two groups were commonplace, and many Irish Gaels converted, either from conviction or to maintain their property: 17th-century jury lists, restricted to members of the established church (Church of Ireland), show plenty of Gaelic surnames.

The complexities of the linguistic patterns of Ulster in the 17th and 18th centuries have never been thoroughly researched. A few examples may give some sense of how the real situation contradicts the stereotype.

Patrick Dunkin

Patrick Dunkin was a Church of Ireland clergyman, educated at Trinity College, Dublin, who was appointed Prebender of Dunsfort in County Down in 1640. The 'Patrick' should not surprise us: it was popular in Scotland and among Irish families of Norman descent, but at that period was rare among the native Irish. Dunkin was forced by three Puritan ministers to flee to the Isle of Man – which was both Gaelic speaking and Royalist. He wrote a poem in Irish on his plight – a fascinating document. Dunkin blames the 'Roundhead thugs' for killing his people, and accuses them of destroying St Patrick's faith and inventing a 'religion without authority'. He lambastes the Puritans for refusing to accept bishops, fast-days, feast-days and the Creed:

> Master Low and Master Brown
> May the Lord of Creation harm the pair
> They love Parliament above the King
> They will come to a bad end.

The last six verses, in traditional style, lament that the heroes of old are not alive to defend the poet. Among the heroes he lists are Cú Chúlainn, the O'Neills, the son of Brian Boru, and the Norman families of Savage and Russell.

With the Restoration, Dunkin returned to Ireland, and in 1666 he is recorded as 'Precentor of Armagh and Rector of Killeavy'. Brendan Adams has written that it is obvious that Dunkin's native language was Irish and that, in attacking Protestants of another denomination, 'he had a sufficiently large audience of his own persuasion to make such poetic efforts worthwhile'.

Arthur Brownlow

Arthur Brownlow is not as well-known as his descendant Lord Lurgan, who owned the greyhound Master McGrath, but is far more interesting. He is a fascinating example of the political, religious and cultural cross-fertilisation of the late 17th century. His grandfather, William Brownlow, an English planter, had acquired extensive land in Armagh, including the site of Lurgan, and married Elinor O'Doherty, of the prominent native Irish family. Their eldest daughter married Patrick Chamberlain, of a Gaelicised Norman family, described as a Papist in 1650. Arthur, son of the latter couple, was reared in Niseirath in County Louth, and inherited his grandfather's estate on the condition that he change his surname to Brownlow. This gave him the use of three surnames: normally he referred to himself as 'Arthur Brownlow (al. Chamberlain)', but he was also known as Mac Arttúr, the Gaelic surname adopted by the Chamberlains.

Thomas Molyneux wrote of him in 1708: 'This gentleman is more curious than ordinary, and he has by him several old Irish manuscripts which he can read and understand very well'. Among his collection was material that would not otherwise have survived. There is no evidence that Brownlow's interest in Irish literature and history extended to favouring the native Irish. Although he flirted briefly with the parliament of 1689 which supported King James, he also sat in the parliaments that passed the penal laws, and had been appointed by the government to disarm Catholics in the county. Whenever possible, he replaced Irish Catholic tenants on his estate with English.

At the same time he had sufficient imaginative sympathy with the dispossessed Irish to translate a lament for Owen Roe O'Neill, the leader of the rebellion in the 1640s:

> Ireland has lost her spouse and only stay, Her rudder's broke,
> her pilot's cast away, She is weak, and falling to decay.
> And yet I pity not her wretched state, She never yet was faithful
> to any mate, For her best lover felt her greatest hate.

The house Arthur Brownlow built is now the headquarters of the Ulster Society, a group set up to research Ulster culture from a unionist perspective. The original owner may be a good starting point for a radical rethink of the Gaelic element in that culture.

The Gaelic revival in the north of Ireland

At the start of the 19th century, Belfast was known to its citizens, whose civic pride was unencumbered by modesty, as 'the Athens of the North'. The title was not entirely undeserved, for the town seems to have been full of talented people busily reshaping the politics, science, industry and culture of their time. One little-known result of this ferment is that the revival of Irish music and the Irish language was inspired by Belfast Protestants. A brief, necessarily sketchy, account of some representative figures will give some idea of the cultural openness of Belfast's golden age.

JAMES McDONNELL

Dr James McDonnell was active in almost every aspect of Belfast's public life: the Belfast Literary Society, the Linen Hall Library, the Belfast Academical Institution and the Natural History Society. He founded the Belfast Dispensary, the Fever Hospital, the Belfast Medical School, and the General Hospital, later the Royal Victoria Hospital.

He was born in the Glens of Antrim in 1763, and, in his teens, learned to play the harp – badly, according to Art O'Neill, his teacher. He could, however, appreciate what he could not achieve, and throughout his life worked ceaselessly to promote Irish music. He was the main organiser of the Belfast Harpers' Festival in 1792. In fact, Edward Bunting's collection might never have been published without McDonnell's support, and occasional nagging, for Bunting's musical talents were matched only by his indolence and dissipation.

Irish was the language of the Glens in McDonnell's youth, and he was a language enthusiast all his life. His children's nurses were all Irish-speakers, and he made an enormous collection of Irish manuscripts. He employed Patrick Lynch, an Irish scribe from County Down, to collect the words of the tunes Bunting recorded. McDonnell also founded the Irish Harp Society, and later the Ulster Gaelic Society. This was the first society of its kind whose aim was to 'revive our language'.

He kept such a prudent distance from the United Irishmen that Wolfe Tone nicknamed him 'the Hypocrite'. When Henry Joy McCracken was hanged after 1798, McDonnell evaded a request to revive him. Five years later, McDonnell contributed to a reward for the capture of his

close friend Thomas Russell, after which William Drennan dubbed him 'the Brutus of Belfast', and many of his friends never forgave him.

WILLIAM NEILSON

The Rev. William Neilson was born in 1774 at Rademon, near Crossgar in County Down. The local landlord described his father, Moses Neilson, as 'a man of much culture and learning ... perfection in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and in the native Irish tongue'. He went on to remark, quite casually, that 'the Dissenters and Papists of this place mostly speak in that language'. William served as minister in Dundalk to the Ballymascanlon Gaelic-speaking Presbyterians, the fifth Gaelic-speaking minister to do so. He toured the north of Ireland in 1805, preaching in Irish, and gave a sermon 'to a numerous and respectable audience' in the Donegall Street Meeting House in Belfast; he was elected Moderator of the General Ulster Synod in 1806.

Neilson's politics were liberal – he proposed a motion supporting Catholic emancipation to the Ulster Synod in 1813 – but not revolutionary: he spent most of 1798 copying an English/Irish Dictionary, and was praised by the authorities for his moderating influence on his flock. He was arrested that year for incitement to treason after preaching in Irish in his father's church in Rademon, but was released when the manuscript of his sermon was translated. In 1808, Neilson published *An introduction to the Irish Language*, dedicated to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. Neilson's introduction is an important scholarly source of County Down Irish. As well as the first folktale in Irish ever to be printed, the book contains numerous dialogues in the common speech of the people, with an English translation. Besides their linguistic interest, these give a fascinating insight into the life of the time. Neilson calls Irish 'one of the most expressive, philosophically accurate, and polished languages that has ever existed'.

He was in a fairly good position to judge, for he was a gifted linguist, and was appointed Professor of Irish, Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Oriental Languages in the Belfast Academical Institution in 1818. In Belfast, he gave a number of lectures on Irish literature. He lasted only three years in his post, and died on 26 April 1821, probably through overwork. Just before his death, he was offered the Chair of Greek in Glasgow University.

SAMUEL BRYSON

Samuel Bryson's father and brother Andrew were, like Neilson, Presbyterian clergymen. His father, who was minister in Rosemary Street and later in Donegall Street, proposed a motion in favour of Catholic emancipation to the Linen Hall Library. Andrew had been Neilson's predecessor in Dundalk, and four of his Irish sermons survive. Samuel himself was an important scribe and collector, without whom some important material would have been lost forever. Between 1803 and 1810 he wrote eight manuscripts, which include sagas, romances, his brother's sermons, a fine collection of songs, and a unique late version of the story of Deirdre and the Sons of Uisneach.

Bryson lived until 1853 but we know very little else about him, except that he was assistant-surgeon in the 32nd Regiment, was on the staff of the General Hospital in 1836, and was involved in the Belfast Harp Society, the Natural History Society and the Literary Society. Through the Gaelic poems of Hugh McDonnell, who lived in Belfast in the 1840s and 1850s, we know that Bryson once cured McDonnell of a cough, smoked a long-stemmed pipe, and, on occasion, sat up all night discussing the meaning of Irish words.

McDonnell, Neilson and Bryson represent a strand of the Protestant tradition which is now very faint. They unselfconsciously regarded Irish as their 'mother tongue' and spent much of their lives promoting it. Nevertheless, none of them could be described as republican separatists. The identification of Irish with a political ideology is a fairly recent invention: the language movement did not become overtly politicised until the twentieth century.

JAMES McKNIGHT

Interest in Irish was not confined to Belfast intellectuals. The leader of the Ulster Tenant Right movement, James McKnight from Rathfriland in County Down, described his background to a surprised Gavan Duffy:

> I was familiar with most of the airs in Moore before his melodies were heard of. My father had an enormous store of scraps of this kind and when I was a child he used to sing them to me in Irish. You would hardly expect this from a black-mouthed Presbyterian.

McKnight himself was an Irish-speaker: on his deathbed he corrected an old servant-woman whose west Ulster rendering of the Lord's Prayer offended his ear.

JOHN McCAMBRIDGE

John McCambridge, an ancestor of Major James Chichester-Clark, was the last Gaelic poet of the Glens of Antrim. 'My mother knew him well,' wrote Eoin McNeill, 'and says that on every possible occasion he tried to interest people in the Irish language, and would rather talk about it than anything else.' McCambridge wrote the beautiful song 'Aird a' Chumhaing'. He had been intending to emigrate to Scotland: according to the story, he imagined himself in Kintyre, looking back on the Antrim coast, and wrote this song of exile. It is said that the song made him so homesick that he decided not to go.

Unfortunately, McCambridge's religion was a drawback for an Irish enthusiast in the Glens. Before the Famine, there had been a sustained attempt to proselytise Irish-speaking Catholics, then numbering about three and a half million. The movement was based on the theory that the Catholic peasantry regarded the Bible in English as the work of Satan, but would read the Irish version, 'believing that the devil is dumb in that language'. The teaching of Irish at Inst (the Royal Belfast Academical Institution), which had ceased with the death of William Neilson, was revived in 1833, largely for proselytising purposes. No church survived this number-crunching Christianity with much dignity: in the Glens, Catholic clergy encouraged their flock to speak English rather than Irish, and in other parts of the country scribes were forced to burn Gaelic manuscripts. All Protestants promoting Irish in the Glens of Antrim were therefore suspect, and McCambridge's efforts to check the decline of the language failed.

ROBERT McADAM

The proselytising movement was severely criticised by the greatest of the Irish language enthusiasts in the mid-19th century, the industrialist Robert McAdam (1808–1895), one of those multitalented men who were almost commonplace in Belfast in the nineteenth century. With his brother, he set up the Soho Foundry in Townsend Street, eventually employing more than 250 workers, and patented a design for a steam

turbine. McAdam spoke 14 languages and was involved in the Literary Society, the Natural History and Philosophical Society, the Linen Hall Library and the Harmonic Society, lecturing on subjects as diverse as geology, the statistics of Belgium, the state of society in Sweden, and the potato.

However, his dominant passions were the language, music and archaeology of Ireland. There was a background of family interest in Irish: an uncle had made a collection of songs in Gaelic. At 22, McAdam was appointed secretary of the Ulster Gaelic Society. He collected songs, proverbs and stories while travelling around Ireland on business – he was the first person in Ireland to systematically collect folklore – and built up an enormous collection of Irish manuscripts, employing scribes from all over Ireland, including the poet Hugh McDonnell, who wrote his *Philosophy in Belfast* during the Famine years. For all its erratic spelling, this treatise on natural history was the most important original 19th-century prose work in Irish.

McAdam'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'. The following year he founded the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*. With Hugh McDonnell he compiled a large English/Irish dictionary, which was intended for publication. Unfortunately, this project, like many of McAdam's, failed. The Ulster Gaelic Society, with its aim to revive Irish, disappeared. The Harp Society, which he revived in 1839, kept the harp alive for a while, but the last professional harper in Ireland disappeared from history when the pleasure gardens on Queen's Island were swallowed by the shipyard in the 1850s. McAdam never published the 400 songs in Irish he had collected, or McDonnell's book, or the Irish language newspaper he proposed.

That the language still had some prestige in public life in Belfast as late as 1849 is obvious from the mottos McAdam prepared in Irish to welcome Queen Victoria on a visit to the city. In the same year, however, Irish faded from the curriculum in Inst. Although John O'Donovan was appointed Professor of Celtic in the newly established Queen's College,

he never had any students, and when he died the Chair of Celtic lapsed.

McAdam's last years were dogged by ill health and poverty. His business was bankrupt, his manuscripts were auctioned, and all his ideals seemed to have failed. However, Belfast today has its Chair of Celtic, and Irish-medium schools and cultural centres. Some children in Belfast are raised with Irish as their first language. In 1895, shortly after McAdam died, the first branch of the Gaelic League in Belfast was founded. More than half the committee were Protestants – the last kick of the old cultural liberalism. The rebirth of the Irish language movement in Belfast had its own ironies. That other relict of liberalism, the Natural History and Philosophical Society, of which McAdam had been vice-president, turned the Irish class onto the streets.

The Irish language in Belfast until 1900

This essay looks at how Belfast related to the Irish language, or – equally importantly – how it sought not to relate to it. It also investigates why the highly effective anglicisation project was not a total success, and how Irish continued, against the odds, to maintain a cultural presence in the city. There is a particular focus on the cultural revival of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The Irish language in Belfast until 1900[1]

In 1603, the castle of Belfast was granted to Sir Arthur Chichester, who soon began to fortify the surrounding settlement. When he was made Lord Lieutenant of Ireland the following year he undertook, with energy and some relish, 'first to plough and break up those barbarous people [the native Irish] and then to sow them with seeds of civility'.[1]

Chichester's Belfast was a frontier settlement, an English-speaking Protestant community set in the middle of an area that was overwhelmingly Catholic in religion and Gaelic in culture. It guarded a strategic ford between Antrim and Down, and provided a beach-head for what the English crown hoped would be the final pacification of Ulster. The cluster of dwellings which comprised the town was given a charter in 1613, not because it had grown to any significant extent but in response to a political and religious imperative; it was one of 40 new boroughs established to ensure a Protestant majority in the Irish Parliament. As in most colonising projects, there was also a cultural aspect to the conquest; the 'civility' that was to be sown involved not only the introduction of Protestantism but the destruction of Gaelic society, culture and language. Belfast town under Chichester was deliberately designed as a node of anglicisation.

There is a remarkable continuity in Belfast's history in that the interlinking political and religious conflicts of Chichester's time are still unresolved. While these themes have been well documented, much less study has been made of the cultural dynamics of the past 400 years, and even less work has been done on how language has

fitted into this cultural/political/religious mix. This essay will look at how Belfast related to the Irish language, or – equally importantly – sought not to relate to it. It will also investigate why the enormously effective anglicisation project was not a total success, and how Irish continued, against the odds, to maintain a cultural presence in the city.

Given its later history, it is apt that the earliest reference to Belfast is in the context of a territorial struggle: '665 AD, the Battle of Farset between the Ulaidh [Ulstermen] and the Cruithin, where Cathasach, son of Laircine, was slain'.[2] By the late seventh century the Ulaidh, who had once controlled most of Ulster, had been forced back to what is now County Down. Every so often they managed to extend their territory. At one stage, Fiachna dubh drocheach (Fiachna of the black bridges), who became king of the Ulaidh in 750, extended their territory across the Lagan, building a bridge known as Droichead na Feirsi – the bridge of the Farset.[3] There was not to be another bridge at Belfast for a long time.

The last chiefs of the Ulaidh, the Dunleaveys, were eventually defeated and found a new vocation as hereditary physicians to various Gaelic families in Ireland and Scotland – Doctor Livingstone of the Congo came from a Scottish branch of the family. Their opponents, the elusive Cruithin, were soon to be written out of history when Gaelic ideologues created a unified racial origin-myth in the eighth century. In a bizarre act of repossession, both the Cruithin and the Ulaidh were reincarnated as the basis for a unionist origin-myth in the cultural wars of the late 20th century.

The oldest stratum of Gaelic Belfast survives in the palimpsest of its placenames. A small stream running into the river Lagan created a sandbank which at low tide provided its most easterly ford. The Irish for a sand-bank which can also serve as a river-crossing is 'fertas', which through time became 'fersat', then 'fersaid', and the Farset river took its name from the sandbank. There is some debate as to the exact translation of the Irish form, Béal Feirste. Most scholars now reject the version 'the mouth of the Farset (river)', but are divided between 'the mouth of' and 'the approach to' the sand-bank ford. Dozens of placenames in the surrounding area have Gaelic roots: Divis, Malone, Cromac, Shankill, Falls, Knockbreda, Cregagh,

Legoniel, Ballymurphy, Castlereagh, Benmadigan, Stranmillis. Some older townland names, such as Multyhogy and Ballydownfine, survive only on property deeds, and the splendidly named Ballyroculgalgalgie – the townland in which the castle stood – has disappeared. Many of these placenames are descriptive; Cromac, for instance, refers to a bend in the Lagan, and Legoniel means the hollow of the limestone, but others have historic resonances. Among these latter is Knockbreda, the hill of the Bréadach, a people of Cruithin origin whose annual tribute of a hundred cows, sheep and pigs to the Ulaidh is recorded in a Gaelic poem in the 11th-century Book of Rights. Skegoniel means 'the bush of the Earl' and may refer to the Norman Earl of Ulster. Baile na mBráthar, the original name for Friar's Bush, is likely to refer to an old monastery, and Shankill, the name of the parish in which Belfast was set, means 'old church'.[4]

A castle guarded the ford from the twelfth century, but we have no idea when or by whom it was built. Hugh de Lacey captured or recaptured it late in the century, and it appears in various annals at later dates, always in the context of being taken or destroyed by someone – O'Donnell, Edward the Bruce, the Earl of Kildare, the Earl of Essex, and above all the O'Neills. In the second half of the 16th century it changed hands up to a dozen times.

In this period a great swathe of land in south Antrim and north Down, with the exception of the garrison town of Carrickfergus and – intermittently – Belfast Castle itself, was held by the O'Neills of Clandeboye, an offshoot of the great O'Neill family, who had exploited the power vacuum left by the retreat of the Norman Earldom of Ulster to expand to the east. This family maintained the traditional way of life of the Gaelic aristocracy, including the maintenance of hereditary bards, such as the Ó hEachagáin family (from whom the townland of Ballyaghagan on the Antrim Road is probably named) and the Ó Gnímh family of Larne.

The first mention of the Farset in Irish poetry dates from 1573, when the Earl of Essex, who had been granted most of Antrim and Down by Queen Elizabeth, appeared in Belfast to make his claim. Neither Sir Brian O'Neill, chief of Lower (northern) Clandeboye, nor Brian Ó Gnímh, his chief poet, was particularly happy with this development, and Ó Gnímh wrote a poem urging his patron to attack

and kill the upstart Saxon. Bardic poems, composed by the professional poet in a dark cell with a boulder on his stomach and his head wrapped in a plaid, are elegant artefacts, marshalling a dense, formal and archaic linguistic register and frighteningly complex metres which could be mastered only after years of study. To modern taste they are usually unreadable, and this one is as turgid as any; its main interest for us is that it praises the Farset, now a sluggish and foetid seugh, for the beauty of its water.[5]

O'Neill, who had become chief of Lower Clandeboye mainly through his ostentatious loyalty to the crown, took Ó Gnímh's advice and resisted Essex for about six months. Although defeated near the ford, he retained possession of the castle. There are two accounts, at least one of which must be fiction, of what happened the following year in the castle of 'Belfyrst', as Essex calls it in his contemporary if self-serving version. The other, given below, was written in Irish in the mid-17th century document popularly known as the *Annals of the Four Masters*:

> Peace and friendship were established between Brian the son of Felim Bacagh O'Neill and the Earl of Essex, and a feast was afterwards prepared by Brian to which the Lord Justice and the chiefs of his people were invited, and they spent three days and three nights pleasantly and cheerfully. At the end of this time, however, while they were drinking companionably and making merry, Brian, his brother and his wife were seized by the Earl, and all his people, men, women, youths and maidens, put unsparingly to the sword in Brian's own presence. Brian, his brother and wife were afterwards sent to Dublin, where they were cut in quarters, and this is how their feast ended. This unexpected massacre, this vile and treacherous murder of the lord of the race of Hugh Boy O'Neill, head and principal of the race of Eoghan, son of Niall of the Nine Hostages, and of all the Gaels, except a few, gave the Irish sufficient grounds for hatred and outrage.[6]

According to Essex, being aware that Brian was secretly conspiring to rebellion, and suspicious of his 'lewd practices', he ordered his arrest, but as Brian's followers in the town resisted, 115 of them were slain.[7] Evidently some form of settlement already existed 30 years

before Chichester's time, and we know from contemporary maps that a church stood on the site of the present St George's in High Street. In 1574 the inhabitants of the 'town' of Belfast were undoubtedly Irish-speakers.

Chichester had also been granted 52 townlands of O'Neill land in south Antrim, which he tried to plant exclusively with English settlers. He disliked and mistrusted both lowland and highland Scots, but the accession of James VI of Scotland to the English crown gave the Scots a power-base. Conn, the feckless chief of the southern Clandeboye territories, was tricked out of two-thirds of the 60,000 acres he still controlled in north Down by two Scotsmen – an extended drinking session, Belfast Castle and a brawl played a part in this also – and soon tricked himself out of most of the remaining third. This area was heavily settled by lowland Scots, who then began to settle in Antrim. In the immediate vicinity of Belfast, Chichester and Sir Moses Hill managed to bring a number of English settlers, who then began to expand west along the Lagan valley. The population of Belfast in the early 1600s thus reflected both incoming communities, but the native Irish were thin on the ground when the Plantation Commissioners visited in 1611: 'The town of Belfast is plotted out in good forme wherein are many famelyes of English, Scotish and some Manksmen already inhabitinge of which some are good artificers who have buylte good tymber houses with chimneyes after the fashion of the English palle'.[8] Curiously, the Protestant Manxmen were almost certain to have been Gaelic speakers.

No urban settlement exists in isolation from its hinterland, even if it wants to, and Gaelic culture continued to survive outside the town walls. There is strong evidence of the survival of Irish in the immediate locality. According to G.B. Adams, the Petty Census of 1659 indicates that more than 40% of the population of the Barony of Castlereagh was Irish-speaking; 20–50% of those who lived in what is now east Belfast were native Irish, and there were areas within a couple of miles of the town in which the proportion rose to over 80%.[9] The Belfast market was commonly referred to as the 'margymore' (margadh mór – great market) into the 18th century.[10]

Surprisingly, the native high culture was maintained for some considerable time in pockets in the surrounding area. Fearflatha Ó

Gnímh, who was still making poems for the O'Neills of Clandeboye in 1638, composed a long lament on the downfall of Gaelic society. The bardic poems of the 17th century are often deeply felt and powerful; far closer to what we now think of as poetry than the elaborate clichés of most of the earlier work. 'It is not the English who are the intruders, but the Gaels who are aliens,' he said: 'If it be fated for her to become a new England called Ireland, for ever in the hands of her foes, then it would be better to leave this island.'[11] Ó Gnímh was among the first to compare the Gaels in their disaster with the Israelites in captivity. Another poem by him laments the decline of learned Gaelic families such as O'Higgins, Ward, McNamee and Daly: 'I am blinded with tears and a mist of grief at how few are still alive of the professors, prophets and seer-poets'.[12] In yet another poem he notes that because the honour of the poetic craft was gone, the learned classes would be better off as 'husbandmen of the ploughland'.[13]

We have other tantalising glimpses of the survival of cultivated literature in Belfast's hinterland. Two Gaelic poets from County Down, for example, composed poems of exile during the Cromwellian Wars. One of these was Feardorcha Ó Mealláin, a Catholic priest, who reflects fatalistically on the banishment to Connacht, like Ó Gnímh comparing the Gaels to the Israelites in the time of Moses. He has no expectation of earthly deliverance, but comforts his dispossessed flock with the thought that 'heaven alone is their native soil'.[14] The other, Pádraig Mac Donnagáin (Patrick Dunkin), not only had a technical mastery of classical Gaelic metre, but was also a Trinity-educated Anglican clergyman. He was a Royalist who had been forced by three Puritans he describes as 'roundhead thugs' to flee to the Isle of Man. He curses them roundly for destroying St Patrick's faith and inventing a 'religion without authority', and laments through six verses that the heroes of old were not there to defend their people. It is interesting that, as well as Cúchulainn and eight named individuals or branches of the O'Neill family, Dunkin refers to the Norman families of Savage and Russell as defenders of the Gael.[15]

As late as 1680, Cormac O'Neill, a descendant of Sir Brian, married to one of his Castlereagh O'Neill cousins and living in Broughshane in mid-Antrim, commissioned the *Book of Clandeboye*,

an anthology of prose and poetry relating to his family. The collection includes a poem praising his own father, Art Óg, as a Gaelic poet, and another, written by one of the Ward family during the Cromwellian Wars, urging him to take up arms. There are also a number of more recently composed poems to Cormac himself. These are not particularly successful, and it is typical of the unreality of the tail end of the bardic tradition that, at a time when Belfast had been lost to the family for generations, one poem refers to Cormac as 'the dragon of the Farset'.[16]

In the years 1700–01, when the Welsh scholar Edward Lhyud toured Ireland in search of Gaelic manuscripts, Belfast was still a village of no more than a couple of thousand inhabitants, only a tiny proportion of whom were Catholics – as few as seven in 1708.[17] This of course does not mean that there were no Protestant Gaelic-speakers among them, as the Reformation had had considerable success in east Ulster, and it is also possible that some of the incoming Scots could speak Gaelic, which was still strong in Argyll and had survived in pockets of Ayrshire and Galloway. However, the orientation of the town would have been strongly anglophone at this stage.

Lhyud leaves us a glimpse of the native learned class in their final degradation. In Larne he came upon one of the Ó Gnímh family who had obviously taken the advice of Fearflatha to become a husbandman of the plough: 'I met Eoin Agniw, whose ancestors had been hereditary poets for many generations to the O Neals; but the lands they held thereby being taken away from his father, he had forsaken the Muses and betaken himself to the plow; so we made an easy purchase of about a dozen ancient manuscripts on parchment'.[18] In Lurgan, Lhuyd also met Arthur Brownlow, alias Chamberlain, alias Mac Artúir, a Protestant landlord who owned an impressive collection of manuscripts. Brownlow, whose family was raised to the aristocracy as the Lurgan family, was a Gaelic scholar, and a patron of poets and scribes. His collection included the *Book of Clandeboye* – Cormac O'Neill, the dragon of the Farset, had taken the losing side in the Williamite Wars and fled to France – and the priceless *Book of Armagh*, obtained from its last hereditary custodian, Flann Mac Maoir, who had pledged it for £5 so that he could travel to London to give evidence against Oliver Plunkett.

Some hereditary learned families in the vicinity held on to their patrimony much longer, although through time they too became gradually reduced in circumstances. 'Clog an Uachta', reputedly the Bell of St Patrick, had been in the keeping of two learned families, the Mallons and the Mulhollands, since about 1100, but had disappeared from view in 1446. On his deathbed sometime before 1819, an old schoolmaster called Henry Mulholland, living in Edenduffcarrick near the seat of the O'Neills of Shane's Castle, directed one of his ex-pupils to dig up and keep the contents of an old oak box in his garden. The box contained St Patrick's Bell and its shrine, along with a copy of Bedell's Irish translation of the Bible.[19]

Belfast at the time of Lhuyd's visit was an unlikely setting for the Irish language to thrive. However, an unbroken thread of Irish language activity in the town began within a couple of decades. The initial impetus was to evangelise the Catholic Irish through the language. James Blow, the Belfast printer, had already published the first English language Bible in Ireland and a collection of Scots poetry when in 1722 he also printed a bilingual Catechism directed at the people of Rathlin Island. This work was commissioned by John Hutchinson, Anglican Bishop of Down and Connor, an Englishman with a scholarly and evangelical bent. Few of the inhabitants of Rathlin could speak any English, and although there was 'neither Protestant minister nor Popish Priest as yet settled amongst them' they were, according to Hutchinson, 'well disposed towards religion, and very capable of civil improvements'.[20] It was intended to promote civility by not only converting the islanders to Protestantism, but using Gaelic to enable them to learn English.

The 1720s also saw the publication in Dublin of the first major collection of Irish music, and about the same time a Belfastman called Mulholland began to make a collection of Irish songs, the airs of which were published by his son nearly 90 years later, in 1810, under the title *A Collection of Ancient Irish Airs*.[21] It is not clear whether the words were also collected, but in the published work, all the titles are given in Irish. While Mulholland was clearly of Irish Gaelic stock, we know nothing else about him. However, as we shall see, a significant core of Protestant middle-class Irish-speakers began to develop in Belfast during the 18th century, and it is likely – although

I have found no documentation to prove this before the last decades of the century – that Catholic native speakers of a lower social class were also beginning to settle in the town.

Mulholland's work foreshadowed one of the most significant cultural events of Belfast in any period, the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792. We tend to imagine cities, like characters in novels, in the context of a critical defining moment. In Belfast this period was comparatively short, and barely extended beyond the 1790s, but those years mark the period in which an earnest market town became the meeting-place for a number of critical streams in Irish society: political, social, religious, intellectual, economic, cultural – and linguistic. It is certain that the Irish language was an integral part of the life of Belfast at this time, and continued to be so for a considerable time.

Although the published Bunting collections did not include the original lyrics to the songs, which were of course in Irish, the declared aim of the festival's organisers was not only 'to preserve from oblivion the few fragments which have been permitted to remain as monuments of the refined taste and genius of their ancestors' but to 'revive and perpetuate' the 'music, poetry and oral traditions' of Ireland. They therefore decided 'that the Rev. Mr Andrew Bryson of Dundalk be requested to assist, as a person versed in the language and antiquities of the nation' to transcribe the words of the harpers' songs. Bryson was a son of the Presbyterian minister of the Donegall Street congregation, and his younger brother Samuel copied an important collection of Gaelic manuscripts in Belfast between 1805 and 1810. Unfortunately, Bryson did not turn up, and all we have of his contribution to Gaelic culture is a handful of sermons held in the Central Library in Belfast.[22]

However, the McCracken family employed Patrick Lynch in 1803 to gather song lyrics orally from native speakers – he collected more than 200, now preserved in Queens University. Lynch was from a family of Gaelic scribes who kept a school in Loughinisland, 20 miles from the town, and Patrick was already teaching Irish in the Belfast Academy when he offered private tuition in the Northern Star in 1795.[23] The McCrackens were assisted by the organiser of the Festival, Dr James McDonnell, a remarkable figure who was involved

in every important cultural institution in Belfast: the Belfast Literary Society, the Linen Hall Library, the Belfast Academical Institution, the Natural History Society. He founded the Belfast Dispensary, the Belfast Medical School and the General Hospital, which eventually became the Royal Victoria Hospital – ensuring, as previously noted, that the foundation stone of the General Hospital was inscribed in Latin and Irish. McDonnell himself was a native speaker from the Glens of Antrim. He had a lifelong passion for the language, bringing his children up as Irish-speakers in Belfast, and founding the Irish Harp Society and the Ulster Gaelic Society. The Linen Hall Library had been presented with an Irish Bible in 1793, and McDonnell may have been behind the decision made by the library two years later: 'That Mr Caldwell write in the name of the Society to such gentlemen as he knows to be possessed of Books or MSS in the Irish language intimating the desire of the Society to procure such'.[24] McDonnell himself collected and commissioned the copying of manuscripts; one completed in 1912 by Séamus Mac Giolla Rua notes that it is for the use of Dr McDonnell 'a mBéal Áth Fearsaide na lung' – in Belfast of the ships.[25]

It may be useful at this point to investigate what may have stimulated this flowering of interest in Gaelic culture. One context is geographical. The growth of Belfast through the 18th century brought a large number of people into the town, some of whom would have come from Irish-speaking areas. Not that they had to come far. Even as late as the end of the century Belfast was set in the midst of a complex linguistic patchwork in which English, Scots and Gaelic influences mixed. As one commentator noted in 1795, 'even to this day the Irish is spoken by a great majority of the inhabitants of the Kingdom'.[26] A generation later, in 1820, Christopher Anderson estimated that there were nearly 93,000 Irish-speakers in County Down, more than 56,000 in Antrim, a similar number in Armagh, and approaching 28,000 in Derry. Tyrone had a massive 141,000.[27] The Gaelic-speaking area of the Glens of Antrim was only 30 miles to the north of the town, and there were pockets of Irish-speakers even closer; in Aghagallon and Aghalee on the eastern shores of Lough Neagh in 1800, for instance,[28] and on the north shore a few miles west of Antrim in 1815. We know of this last only because Earl

O'Neill of Shane's Castle, a descendant of the Brian O'Neill killed by Essex in 1574, attempted to root out the old graveyard of Edenduffcarrick because 'the frequent funerals and the *Caoine* or *Irish Cry*, so close to his castle, gave him annoyance'[29] – the Irish 'keen' did not survive the loss of the language. There were also Irish-speaking areas close to Belfast in County Down; the entire area from Ballinahinch to Newry was a Gaeltacht in the early 1800s, and in 1784 one commentator noted of Rademon, near Crossgar, that 'The Dissenters and Papists of this place mostly speak in that language [Irish]'.[30]

The Rademon Dissenters indicate that the language was not exclusively associated with the Catholic community. James McKnight, another enthusiast, who was born near Rathfriland in 1801 and who was for a time editor of the *Belfast News Letter*, described his own early exposure to Irish to a startled Gavan Duffy: 'I was familiar with most of the airs in Moore before his melodies were heard of. My father had an enormous store of scraps of this kind and when I was a child he used to sing them to me in Irish. You would hardly expect this from a black-mouthed Presbyterian.'[31] Although Catholics such as Lynch were involved as teachers and scribes, all the leaders of the language movement in Belfast in the 18th and early 19th centuries were Presbyterians, with the exception of McDonnell, who belonged to the Church of Ireland.

The specific conditions that nurtured an interest in the language among these Belfast Protestants at this particular period are complex. The comparative stability of Ireland since the Williamite Wars and the spread of Enlightenment ideas had encouraged the growth of a climate of tolerance, reinforced among Presbyterians by the development of 'New Licht' theology and the shared experience of the penal laws. Radical democratic ideals may have stimulated a sympathy with the dispossessed and their culture. In addition, the Celtic romanticism that had swept Europe in the wake of MacPherson's Ossianic forgeries had created an interest in the scholarly and antiquarian aspects of Gaelic culture in Ireland.

Nonetheless, these factors do not fully explain the unique commitment of the Belfast enthusiasts of this period to the living language. The native speakers among them may have had a strong

instinctive attachment to Irish, and a number were identifiably of Scottish or Irish Gaelic descent. We can also detect in the late 18th century a significant cultural reorientation among Irish Protestants no matter what their perceived origin. Long residence in Ireland had established a sense of a distinctive Irish identity in some, and the political circumstances of the times had created a desire for a cultural distinctiveness in others. A.T.Q. Stewart, in his history of the Belfast Royal Academy, commenting on the inclusion of Irish in the curriculum in the 1790s, wrote that 'The liberal Presbyterians and especially the United Irishmen were genuinely anxious to revive the Gaelic language and culture as part of their attempt to establish a national identity'.[32]

However, there must be more to it than this. Some of the most committed republicans, such as Tone, were entirely indifferent to the language. On the other hand, some pro-union and apolitical individuals were passionate supporters of Irish. Joep Leerssen has argued for a new interpretation of the patriotism of this period, which he places part-way between its origin in an anti-absolutist whiggism and its later identification with separatist republicanism. Patriotism was 'neither national chauvinism nor proto-nationalism', but rather espoused 'the virtue of social responsibility and selfless devotion to the common weal', 'characterised by its tendency towards heteronomy: the constitutional acceptance of local particularisms between the state's different regions'.[33] Within this political and social definition, engagement with the Irish language could constitute one cultural manifestation of a higher form of civics.

In the context of these varying approaches to the Irish language, it may be useful to look at the variety of political commitment among language enthusiasts. Thomas Russell took lessons in Irish from Lynch, and, as Mary Helen Thuente has demonstrated, the United Irishmen's paper, the *Northern Star*, published articles on the glories of Gaelic Ireland and a number of translations of Irish poems, as well as a single edition of what was intended as a regular Gaelic magazine.[34] However, those who were most active in the cultural aspect of the movement appear to have been either apolitical, as far as that was possible in Ireland, or moderate nationalists or liberal unionists. McDonnell, who had been involved in the United Irishmen

in the early, constitutional stage, distanced himself from the movement: he evaded an appeal to attempt to revive Henry Joy McCracken when he was hanged, and was bullied into contributing to the price put on Russell's head. McKnight was a strong supporter of the union and hostile to Catholic emancipation.

It is a measure of the ease with which Belfast unionists could identify with Gaelic Ireland that Samuel Ferguson and a group of friends studied Irish in the 1830s, mainly with a view to translating Gaelic poetry into English. Ferguson in particular adopted a revolutionary approach to translation: a simple diction allied with a style that attempted, with considerable success, to capture the feel and metre of the Gaelic originals. He used this skill to great effect in savaging the English versions in Hardiman's *Irish Minstrelsy*. However, it is obvious that while Ferguson's outrage was ostensibly directed at translations that were 'spurious, puerile, unclassical – lamentably bad',[35] his real target was the underlying ideology behind Hardiman's anthology, the marshalling of Gaelic poetry in support of a Catholic and nationalist Irish identity that implicitly excluded the Protestant and unionist community from Gaelic culture.

Another unionist – and one who had none of Ferguson's sectarian hang-ups – was the Rev. William Neilson, who in 1808 dedicated his major work, his *Introduction to the Irish Language*, to the Lord Lieutenant. His father, a native speaker of Irish, was minister to the Rademon congregation. Neilson was himself a notable scholar who died of overwork in 1821 as Professor of Irish, Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Oriental Languages in the Belfast Academical Institution, within days of being offered the Chair of Greek at Glasgow University. He preached regularly in Irish – he was arrested in Rademon in 1798 for doing so by a Yeoman who assumed he was preaching sedition – and during a tour of the north in 1805 gave a sermon in Irish 'to a numerous and respectable audience' in the Donegall Street Meeting House in Belfast. We will never now know if the audience understood the sermon, but even if most of them did not, the fact that a large number of people would sit through a – presumably lengthy – Presbyterian sermon in Irish indicates that the language had a high social status in the town at the time. The same tour elicited a long if inelegant praise-poem in English from one of the weaver poets, John

McKinley, the Bard of Dunseverick, beginning: 'All hail to thee in whose sweet accents bland / flows the primeval language of our land.'[36]

In the preface to his *Introduction*, Neilson makes a powerful argument for the study of the language which, in the manner of the high-minded but pragmatic liberal Presbyterianism of the time, mingles linguistic and historical scholarship, aesthetics, morality and utility. This passage is worth quoting at length for the insight it provides into the mindset of the early language enthusiasts:

> That the Irish is the best preserved dialect of the ancient and extensive Celtic language, is allowed by the most liberal and enlightened antiquarians. To the general scholar, therefore, a knowledge of it is of great importance; as it will enable him to trace the origin of names and customs, which he would seek in vain in any other tongue. To the inhabitants of Ireland it is doubly interesting. In this language are preserved the venerable annals of our country, with as much fidelity, as is usually found in the primitive records of any nation; while the poetic and romantic compositions, with which the Irish manuscripts abound, afford the finest specimens, of elegant taste and luxuriant imagination.
>
> It is, particularly, from the *absolute necessity* of understanding this language, in order to converse with the natives of a great part of Ireland, that the study of it is indispensable. If Irish be no longer the language of the court, or the senate, yet the pulpit and the bar require the use of it, and he that would communicate moral instruction, or investigate the claims of justice, must be versed in the native tongue, if he expects to be generally understood, or to succeed in his researches. In travelling, and the common occurrences of agriculture and rural traffic, a knowledge of Irish is also absolutely necessary.
>
> It has been said indeed that the use of this language should be abolished, and the English prevail universally. But without entering into the merits of this position, while the Irish exists, and *must* exist for many years to come, it is surely reasonable and desirable, that every person should be able to converse with his countrymen; as well as to taste and admire the

beauties of one of the most expressive, philosophically accurate, and polished languages that has ever existed.[37]

Neilson evaded the issue of whether the language should be maintained or abandoned, though it is quite clear where his sympathies lay. However, a much more robust approach – nothing less than the revival of Irish – was taken by the Ulster Gaelic Society, which was founded by McDonnell in 1830 when an informal group he had set up two years earlier persuaded the Marquess of Downshire to become a patron. Downshire – a descendant of Moses Hill, who had helped Chichester plant the district around Belfast with English settlers – is an interesting example of planter assimilation to an Irish cultural identity. The society had two secretaries. One was the Rev. Ruben J. Bryce, from 1824 to 1880 the head of the Belfast Academy (which acquired the 'Royal' the year he retired), in which he revived the teaching of Irish. He had been born in Scotland, but raised in Killaig near Coleraine. Five miles from his home was an area in which 'The inhabitants all spoke Irish and very few even spoke English, or as our people called it, "Scotch"'.[38] The other was Robert McAdam, then a young man of 22.

McAdam (1808–95), who was born in High Street and ended his days in College Square North, was one of those multitalented men who were almost commonplace in Belfast in this period. With his brother he set up the Soho Foundry in Townsend Street, eventually employing more than 250 workers and exporting all over Europe and as far afield as Egypt. He spoke 14 languages, composed music, was involved in all the usual cultural societies, founded, edited and funded the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, and organised a major exhibition in the Belfast Museum in 1853 for the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

His dominant passion was the Irish language. His motivation was in some part scholarly: 'around us lie scattered the ruins of the ancient structure fast hurrying to decay. Before these are altogether swept away, let us gather a few fragments.'[39] He was an assiduous collector of manuscripts; towards the end of his life he had arguably the largest private collection of Gaelic material in the country, and sufficient scholarship to edit and translate texts in classical Irish.

There was some background of family interest in the language; an uncle of his had collected the texts of 40 Gaelic songs. McAdam added hundreds more, as well as collecting proverbs and stories – he was the first person in Ireland to systematically collect folklore, which was well preserved in parts of east Ulster. The Ordnance Survey Memoirs of 1832 record of Glenariff that:

> Numberless legendary and fabulous tales and songs are recited and sung around the fire by persons who do little else. ... A great many beautiful Irish airs are sung by the females in that part of the parish and there are many in it who neither speak nor understand English.[40]

About 1814, the Rector of Dungiven described how the accuracy of the oral tradition was maintained in his parish:

> In the winter evenings a number of seanachies frequently meet together and recite alternately their traditionary stories. If anyone repeats a passage, which appears to another to be incorrect, he is immediately stopped, when each gives a reason for his way of reciting the passage, the dispute is then referred to a vote of the meeting, and the decision of the majority becomes imperative on the subject for the future.[41]

Not only did McAdam collect in the field throughout Ulster and north Leinster on business trips, he also found a ready source of material among Irish speaking immigrants to Belfast. This class is not well documented, but we have occasional glimpses of them: Charlemont Street – now buried under Castle Court – was inhabited exclusively by Irish-speaking basket-makers from Omeath in the early 19th century; their nickname 'fadgees' (from 'A Pháidí' – the vocative of 'Paddy') was later applied to Italians.[42] It is clear from the notes to the material he collected that many of McAdam's sources lived in Belfast: 'On the landing of the French. From Lane when he was blind drunk', 'This story was taken down from a Blacksmith in Belfast about the year 1830', or the following:

> The last remnant of the once powerful family of Nugent who resided on the County Antrim Coast was a woman of extraordinary appearance and habits. She had met with an

accident in her youth which injured her spine and curtailed her growth so that she was a deformed dwarf all her life. Though quite dependent on the charity of the country people for her subsistence she preserved a stately demeanour and would not suffer any person to pass her without a salutation of respect. ... She often repeated the following dirge in which is extolled the former splendour of her race. She lived about 40 years ago. Belfast 1830.

> If only I knew how to carve stone
> And place one stone beside another,
> My love would not have died in a crooked slated house
> Or even in a big house with a loft
> But in a gold-roofed castle in the middle of a lake ...[43]

McAdam was also committed to the promotion of the living language. He employed scribes to teach the reading and writing of Irish in Irish speaking districts and he tried to develop a script for everyday use, a simplified spelling system, even a form of shorthand. In the 1850s he proposed a scheme for a weekly newspaper in Irish, and successfully campaigned to have a question on knowledge of Irish included in the 1851 Census.

Possibly his most ambitious project involved compiling a huge English–Irish dictionary. This document has an extensive foreword, written in Irish, in which he explains that he undertook the work because of 'My great love for my native country and my passion for the language'. He has written the dictionary in the common tongue so that 'the language can be learned from it quickly without much need of a schoolmaster or any other teacher'. McAdam laments the decline of Irish among the younger generation, which he blames on scholars concentrating on the older and more difficult forms of the language, and, in a remarkable statement from a Belfast Presbyterian, 'the neglect of the Catholic Church in teaching the Catechism and preaching in Irish even though that tongue had been the shield and protector of their faith for three hundred years'.[44]

McAdam's patriotism was of the kind defined by Leerssen, and he appears to have been a unionist. When Queen Victoria visited Belfast in 1849, he composed a series of 'mottos' in Irish to welcome her.

> A thousand welcomes, Ireland's Queen
> To Ulster's city of learning and art;
> Though cold the storm on her mountain peaks,
> Loving and loyal her people's hearts.[45]

Victoria was given a tumultuous welcome. She was greeted by an enormous floral tribute in which 'Céad míle fáilte' (a hundred thousand welcomes), delineated in chrysanthemums, was spectacularly misspelt, and, as her diary illustrates, the loyal burghers of Belfast had no hesitation in displaying their loyalty in Irish:

> I have all along forgotten to say that the favourite motto written up on most of the arches, etc., and in every place was 'Céad Míle Fáilte' which means 'a hundred thousand welcomes' in Irish. ... They often called out 'Céad Míle Fáilte' and it appears in every sort of shape.[46]

McAdam also commissioned work from native scribes. One of the most interesting aspects of social life during the late 18th and early 19th centuries is the huge explosion of literary activity in Irish. Gaelic learning, which in 1600 was almost solely in the hands of an aristocratic caste, had undergone a number of paradigm shifts. As the Gaelic aristocracy dwindled or became anglicised, patronage shifted to the Catholic church; the Counter-Reformation was led to an astonishing extent by priests and monks from the traditional poetic class, although the rule of celibacy obviously limited their ability to pass on their skills to the following generations (the late 18th century in particular is littered with poets who had been priests or clerical students but had failed the celibacy test). By 1800 the survival of Catholicism was no longer in doubt, and the church had, with some notable exceptions, accepted the inevitability of anglicisation.

The final stage of native literary activity involved hundreds of individuals, mostly from the lower socio-economic level – farmers, tradesmen and hedge-schoolmasters – who were involved in an extraordinary project of trying to rescue the Gaelic literary heritage from oblivion. This class was too poor to sustain a publishing industry – what few books in Irish were published during this period were mainly religious texts – and the cultivation of Irish literature depended almost entirely on scribal activity, possibly the last literary

tradition in Europe to do so. More manuscripts survive from the first half of the nineteenth century than from any other period in Irish history. Scribes borrowed and copied manuscripts, recorded songs, and occasionally composed new work. Creativity also existed among the unlettered, as McAdam noted in 1853:

> Even now the poetic talent exists to a considerable extent among the native peasantry. Persons are to be met with in different localities, who possess (in the Irish language) a remarkable facility of versification and whose productions are often by no means deficient in play of fancy or pungency of satire.[47]

McAdam became a patron to a number of these scribes, commissioning and buying manuscripts from Simon Mackin in Fermanagh, Art Bennet in Mullaghban in south Armagh, P.H. Garret and John McNeill in the Glens of Antrim, Michael Levins, Patrick McGeogh and Brian Ó Searcaigh in Louth, Aindriú Ó hEigeartaigh and Sergeant Pádraig Ó hUiginn in Donegal, and a dozen more throughout Ulster and north Leinster.

From one of these scribes, Hugh McDonnell, we get the first glimpse of the new industrial Belfast through the eyes of a Gaelic poet. McDonnell, from Meath, worked with McAdam in the Soho Foundry during the 1840s and early 1850s, collecting and copying manuscripts, helping with the dictionary, and writing his 'Philosophy', a treatise on natural history: a remarkable document, one of the last original prose texts in Irish to come out of the native tradition, and probably the most important of the 19th century. He also taught Irish in the town; the directory of 1849 lists his address at 88 Millfield and describes him as 'Teacher of the Irish language'.[48] He was a poor scribe but a fair poet, and had a ragged, defiant pride in his heritage that sustained him through a lifetime of indignities. On the last page of his 'Philosophy' he describes himself in Irish as 'Aodh Mac Domhnaill, file Ultach' – Hugh McDonnell, Ulster poet – and traces his genealogy back for seven generations, finishing with 'son of Alistair, son of Randall of the Horses, son of Big Séamus of Louth, son of White Seán of Louth'.

McDonnell lived in poverty and died in the poorhouse in Cootehill. Like many of his class, he had been employed as a Bible teacher by

Protestant evangelical societies who, through teaching literacy in Irish and supplying copies of the Irish Bible to their students, hoped to convert the Irish-speaking population. This marks a new development in which the language had become a pawn in the growing conflict between evangelical Protestants and an increasingly assertive Catholic Church. The commitment to Irish of Protestants such as Dr James McDonnell, William Neilson and McAdam was marked by a sense of inclusivity, and saw its maintenance as a thing of value in itself. To the evangelists, it was essentially an instrument for conversion, and most of them saw literacy in Irish as a step towards anglicisation. This movement may also have had a political subtext; it appears to have been assumed that loyalty to the union would follow conversion to Protestantism.

The Church of Ireland had initiated this movement about 1818, and it took some time before the Presbyterian Church became involved. After a brief turf war, a compromise was reached in which all of Ireland except the north-east Ulster was left to the Church of Ireland. In 1832 Dr Henry Cooke proposed 'the cultivation of the native language' at the General Synod, and within two years, the study of Irish by all students for the ministry in Belfast had become compulsory. The revival of the Irish class in the Belfast Academical Institution in the early 1830s was intended to promote not the language, but what its proponents called 'the second Reformation'.

These societies, which had been very active in the first half of the century, used native scholars, most of them Catholics, as teachers. Competition for patronage was intense – the scribal class, on the evidence of surviving letters to potential patrons in which the scholarship and morals of rivals are attacked, sometimes looks like a rural, Gaelic Grub Street, but the Bible schools offered patronage on an unprecedented scale. When the schools began to register their first successes, the Catholic church organised a ferocious backlash which effectively destroyed the scribal class, whose main motive for involvement in the Bible societies was their poverty.[49] In the words of Peadar Ó Gealacháin, one of McAdam's scribes:

> These Irish teachers were in every part and direction under the greatest persecution imaginable by Priests and by their hearers as it was considered a Protestant system and some of

these unfortunate teachers were murdered and more of them received the worst treatment that could be invented.[50]

One result of the evangelical campaign was that the Catholic clergy began to actively discourage the use of Irish among their flock, condemn and occasionally excommunicate the teachers, and, it is said, confiscate and sometimes burn manuscripts and books in Irish. The scholar John O'Donovan, who toured Ulster in the 1830s collecting place-name lore, records that 'the teachers of the Bible through the medium of the Irish language have created in the minds of the peasantry a hatred for everything written in that language'.[51]

One incident in 1848 illustrates the plight of a learned family which had sunk in status but still maintained the tradition of scholarship. The Ó Brolcháin family of Maghera and Inishowen was an ecclesiastical dynasty that had produced a series of clerics and Gaelic poets between the 11th and 18th centuries. In the early 19th century O'Donovan had 'met several of this family in the province of Ulster, where they are remarkable for love of learning and native intelligence; but none above the rank of tradesmen, policemen, or small farmers'.[52] In Inishowen, the wife of the local landlord had instigated an evangelical campaign, and Pádraig Ó Brolcháin (Patrick Bradley) and his family paid the price when the local parish priest raided his home: 'Eleanor Bradley stated that Fr McKeague came to the house at 12 o'clock and forcibly carried off books and assaulted her twice – when she tried to prevent him – and with so much violence the second time that she fell on the dunghill just outside the door'.[53]

McDonnell was on the receiving end of this Catholic backlash not once but twice. He had worked for a Church of Ireland organisation in south Ulster in the 1820s, and been driven from there. At some time in the late 1830s, he moved to the Glens of Antrim, which was under the control of the Presbyterian Home Mission and directed from Belfast. He was to be driven from there also by Fr Luke Walsh, in the course of an extraordinarily vicious controversy conducted between 1842 and 1844 in two Belfast journals, the Catholic *Vindicator* and the Protestant *Banner of Ulster*. Walsh, like many priests, had originally favoured the schools:

> under the conviction that those schools had been supported by patriotic individuals, merely with a view of keeping alive among the people a knowledge of the Irish language – a measure in which I had been most willing to concur. But when we understood ... that proselytism was the real object ... we opposed the system and the people withdrew their confidence.[54]

To describe Walsh as opposing the system is something of an understatement. He excommunicated some teachers and subjected the rest to colourful abuse: 'a set of abandoned and unprincipled swindlers ... foul birds of prey ... hungry foxes ... base junto ... vagabonds ... parasites ... carrion crows ... the vilest trucklers and pretenders I know ... low and vile instruments ... the very dregs and lees of the Catholic people'.[55]

McDonnell retreated in disgrace and found refuge in Belfast, where he stayed until about 1854. He began to write poetry, which was preserved by McAdam, who valued his work and showed great toleration of McDonnell's aggressive Catholicism and nationalism. In one poem McDonnell describes Dr Cooke showing him the Gaelic Bible and asking him to 'turn into an old Presbyterian'. But, he says:

> I'll no longer believe the voice of the fraudsters
> – Since my own eyes saw every deceit and injustice –
> Who make believe that Luther was saintly,
> And I think that Cooke will be feeling foolish.[56]

A number of his 40-odd poems are set in Belfast, including a satire on a local quack doctor; another praising the scribe Samuel Bryson, an apothecary, who had cured him of a cough; an elegy for Doctor James McDonnell on his death in 1845; and a piece welcoming William Smith O'Brien, the Young Ireland leader, to the town in 1847. These are of varying quality, but two other works are of some importance.

In 1847, the worst year of the Famine, Belfast was inundated with starving beggars fleeing from the countryside. Because of the danger that they could introduce fever to the town, a public meeting was held at which it was proposed that unlicensed beggars would be imprisoned. The inhumanity of this decision, compounded by the fact

that a Catholic bishop had presided at the meeting, infuriated McDonnell: 'Have you ever heard, my friends, from poets or bards, or read in the scripture from apostles or prophets, that the Commandments are broken by poverty, misery, famine or plague patiently borne?'[57]

The other piece is a humorous sketch in verse and prose describing the arrival of his friend Peadar Ó Gealacháin in the Soho Foundry. Ó Gealacháin, another Meath-man but a far better scholar than McDonnell, had also been invited to work with McAdam in Belfast, and the poem describes the reaction of a countryman suddenly exposed to the brutal environment of 19th-century industrial Belfast. The Soho Foundry is described as an urban hell:

There were otherworld hosts there worshiping demons
Their skins like coal and complexions black as the sloe
A druidic priest was sacrificing to Baal
There were cauldrons on embers as in Babylon
Every wheel in the Province – including Máire's spinning-wheel
Was whirling furiously at a galloping rate.
When I saw that awesome, horrifying, alien sight
I lost the strength of my limbs and all interest in women.[58]

This was not, however, to be the dawn of a new age of Gaelic literature. The latter half of the 19th century saw a marked decline in Irish language activity in Belfast. The language ceased to be taught in the Belfast Academical Institution in 1849, and although John O'Donovan had been appointed to the Chair of Celtic in the new Queen's College in that year, he had few pupils, and the Chair was discontinued at his death in 1861. Spoken Irish entered a stage of accelerating decline, and McAdam, now working largely alone, gradually became less active.

Only the odd sign that the Irish language had any relationship to Belfast's public life remained. General William James Smythe of Carnmoney, a hero of the 'Kaffir' Wars of the 1830s, was patron of a society set up in Belfast in 1882 'to promote the study of the Irish language and literature together with the history of Ireland, and to cultivate the practice of the national music'.[59] When the Belfast corporation erected the new fruit and vegetable market in the early

1890s, a scroll was carved over the central arch reading 'Lámh Dearg Eirinn' – the red hand of Ireland, and the same motto was placed by the corporation on the Ulster Hall. 'Erin go Bragh' – Ireland for ever, is inscribed on the chain of office of the Lord Mayor of Belfast, and the platform banners of the Anti-Home Rule Convention, held in the Botanic Gardens in 1892, had the same slogan.

In the same year a class was established in the Belfast Museum (the Old Museum Building) in College Square North. In 1895, the year McAdam died, a branch of the Gaelic League was formed in Belfast. Among its patrons were Church of Ireland and Catholic bishops, the Moderators of the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches, and R.R. Kane, organiser of the Anti-Home Rule Convention and Grand Master of the Belfast Orange Lodge. More than half the committee were Protestants: the last kick of the old inclusivity. The fact that some of the most prominent members were also unionists represents the first, doomed attempt of the modern language movement in Belfast to be non-political. The group that held the class in the Old Museum affiliated to the League, and were promptly expelled from the building by its owners, the Natural History and Philosophical Society, an organisation founded by James McDonnell and of which McAdam had been vice-president, so the class was held in the doorway of Robinson and Cleaver's shop on Donegall Square.

A new era had opened for the language in Belfast.

Irish in Belfast
1892–1960

This essay focuses on Belfast 'as the crucible of the Irish language revival movement in Ulster'. It examines the battle for the survival of the language in the 1920s and 1930s, looking in particular at the key role played by Comhaltas Uladh (the Gaelic League) and, in the early years, the Catholic Church. The work of some of the major Irish language figures of the era such as P.T. McGinley, Seán Mac Maoláin and Tarlach Ó hUid is also examined, as is the fierce opposition of the new unionist state to the language. The essay concludes with an account of the Irish classes held at the YMCA, Belfast and the development of the innovative Irish language club, Cumann Chluain Ard.

Irish in Belfast 1892–1960[1]

Belfast was the crucible of the Irish language revival movement in Ulster, whether we date that movement from 1895, when a branch of the Gaelic League was established in the city, or go back to the Belfast Gaelic Society of 1830. It was also where the main battle for the survival of the language in Northern Ireland was fought out in the 1920s and early 1930s.

The new state, fiercely opposed to Irish, set up its headquarters in Belfast City Hall before moving to Stormont Buildings in 1932. Opposing the state was a group of amateur language enthusiasts whose only institutional support came from the Catholic Church, which proved to be both an indispensable and an erratic ally. Belfast was also the locus of some important experiments: Cumann Chluain Ard, the first 'English-free zone' in Ireland, and, slightly outside our time-frame, the Shaw's Road community, the most significant urban Gaeltacht in Ireland, which in its turn sowed the seeds for the Irish-medium education movement in Northern Ireland.

As early as 1892, a year before the Gaelic League was founded, the Belfast Naturalists' Field Club, nearly 30 years old, set up an Irish class in the premises of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society in College Square North. Its teacher was P.S. Ó Seagha, a native speaker of Irish from Kerry who had been posted to Belfast by the Customs and Mail Service.[2] The Field Club movement combined a strong self-improvement ethos with what was for its time a remarkably advanced sense of social inclusion – while it was essentially middle-class, working-class members were made welcome, as were women. By the end of the century, these clubs had become a magnet for the bright young things

of the period, and although Ó Seagha described it as 'a sombre body', it probably offered the nearest thing to an intellectual bohemian lifestyle that Belfast could offer. It is not entirely surprising that such a gathering, predominantly led by young, middle-class Protestants, should take up Irish.

From the Field Club class emerged the Belfast branch of the Gaelic League in 1895. Another Customs and Mail officer, P.T. McGinley, hosted the first meeting of the new branch in his house on the Beersbridge Road. McGinley had caused some consternation among learners of Irish, accustomed as they were to the melodious Irish of Munster, with his Donegal accent, which they found somewhat harsh.[3] In the excitement of setting up the branch, no one thought to inform the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society that the class had turned itself into a branch of the Gaelic League, and when they returned to College Square North they were shown the door. The first Gaelic League class in Belfast, it is reported, was held in the doorway of Robinson & Cleaver's.[4] They eventually found premises in the Belfast Art Society Rooms, 49 Queen Street.[5]

The original make-up of the Belfast Branch was, like that of the Field Club, remarkably inclusive. Its founders certainly went out of their way to present a broad front. Patrons included the Catholic Bishop of Down and Connor and the Church of Ireland Bishop of Down, Connor and Dromore, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, and a galaxy of clergy of all denominations, including the redoubtable Rev. R.R. Kane, Grand Master of the Belfast Orange Lodge, organiser of the Anti-Home Rule Convention and a man noted for his fiery denunciations of Popery. The Patrons were led by a liberal unionist, Dr John St Clair Boyd, and included Francis Joseph Biggar: Protestant nationalist romantic; bibliophile; indefatigable committee-man; dabbler in literature, history, folklore, traditional music, kilts and nonsense. Ó Seagha and McGinley were perhaps untypical in being Catholics from Irish-speaking districts. The *Gaelic Journal* noted the range of membership the following May, claiming that the language could 'unite in honest and thoroughgoing sympathy on thoroughly National grounds, Irishmen whose religious and political principles are sundered as the poles'.[6] At its AGM in September 1896, reporting on a growth of membership from 22 to 120 in the first year, St Clair Boyd repeated

this theme: 'it is pleasant to state that the society includes member of all creeds and classes, being strictly non-political and non-sectarian'.[7]

The religious and political make-up of the early membership has not been analysed in depth, but the active members appear to represent a colourfully wide range of backgrounds. Among those who attended classes in the early days was Mary Hutton, wife of a Unitarian Minister, and a formidable scholar who worked on the original texts of several Old Irish versions of the *Táin*. Rather than editing them, she recreated a unified version of the story in verse: an unfortunate judgement, as the verse was not very good. Rose Maud Young of Galgorm Castle near Ballymena was involved at an early stage and later published a three-volume anthology of Irish Gaelic poetry. An aunt of Lady Brookeborough, her brother was to organise the Larne gun-running. Other members included Éamonn Ó Tuathail, later Professor of Irish in TCD, who published Gaelic folktales from Tyrone and Cavan, and Hugh McMillen who, under the name of Aoidhminn Mac Gréagóir, collected the folklore and the word-hoard of Rathlin and the Glens of Antrim. The sculptor Rosamund Praeger was involved. Among the more politically radical were the Catholics Ailbhe Ó Monacháin, an artist who later took part in the 1916 Rising, and Cathal Ó Seanáin, active in the labour movement and the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and the Protestants Alice Milligan, poet, playwright, feminist, socialist and political activist, and Bulmer Hobson, Quaker and IRB organiser.

Early language enthusiasts, unless they were native speakers, usually acquired Irish at night classes, but a number adopted more unorthodox ways. Séamus Ó Ceallaigh learned the language in the Sperrins during summer holidays with his grandparents. Cathal O'Boyle, father of the music collector Seán O'Boyle, used to accompany an Irish-speaking RIC constable from Kerry on his night-beat through the streets of Belfast. Seán Mac Maoláin took day-trips to the Omeath Gaeltacht every Saturday, quizzed his father, who turned out to have been a native speaker, and finally married a native speaker from Donegal. The League organised trips to the Glens of Antrim, the Sperrins, Omeath and Donegal. Some members on Field Club trips sought out and found native speakers in the Mournes.

However, many of those involved in the early days of the Gaelic League in Belfast had little or no knowledge of the language. Of the

patrons, Monsignor O'Laverty certainly had a scholarly understanding of Irish, and probably spoke it; the Rev. Canon Crozier, then the Church of Ireland Vicar of Down, had won a prize in Irish in TCD; St Clair Boyd did his best to acquire Irish; and Biggar never got around to learning it. We know little about the rest. R.R. Kane had ensured that the Ulster Unionist Convention of 1891 had a banner declaring, 'Erin go bragh' – Ireland for ever, but there is no evidence that he spoke the language. It is possible that there is truth in the oft-told story that he used the Irish version of his name when signing the minutes of his lodge meetings, but this has yet to be authenticated.

The list of active members above includes one, Alice Milligan, who never succeeded in learning Irish; one, Hobson, who never really tried; and one, Praeger, for whom we have little information, but most of the rest had acquired the language to a very high degree. However, this cohort may not have been typical. A description of the annual general meeting of the Belfast Gaelic League at the turn of the century survives. Its author, Osborn Bergin, was already demonstrating the tetchiness that was to make him a legend even within the notably cantankerous confederation of Celtic scholarship. His main complaint, besides the difficulty of getting a cup of tea in Belfast on a Sunday, was that even P.S. Ó Seagha was speaking English. He had a point. A rule ensuring that business of the Gaelic League in Belfast was conducted through the medium of Irish was not implemented until 1933.[8]

The language movement scored some successes in mainstreaming the language in the education system in the early years. Irish was introduced to the curriculum of the Catholic teacher training college for women in 1902, and the education authorities recognised and funded two colleges in Belfast to provide in-service training in the language to working teachers. What looks on first sight like an unnecessary doubling of effort hinged partly on disagreements in the city on methodology, but mostly on the issue of whether to use Ulster or Munster Irish. In 1906, a young Protestant medical student at Queen's College Belfast established the university Gaelic Society whose aim was to restore Irish as the common language of Ireland. William MacArthur was supported by the flamboyant Professor R.M. Henry, brother of the painter Paul Henry and a political nationalist, who was prepared to support any movement that would annoy his more staid colleagues. MacArthur was not so

much apolitical as anti-political where the language was concerned; he included a rule in the constitution of the Gaelic Society that is now probably illegal: 'Any member introducing a religious or political subject at any time shall cease to be a member'.[9] He went on to become a pillar of the establishment. By the time he wrote an introduction – in limpid Irish – to a pamphlet celebrating the half-centenary of the Gaelic Society, he was Lt-Gen. Sir William MacArthur, DSO, OBE, CB, KCB, BB, BCh, BAO, DPH(Oxon), MD(Belf), DTM&H(Cantab), Hon. DSc(Oxon), MRCPI, FRCPI, FRCP.

The early Gaelic Society, like the early Gaelic League, transcended sectarianism. Over 50 people attended its inaugural meeting in 1906, more than double the number of Catholics attending Queen's at that time. The society continued to involve Protestants and unionists until the outbreak of the First World War, but an account of its history written in 1956 returns repeatedly to its subsequent failure to break the sectarian mould that was established between the end of the war and the early 1920s.[10]

Irish had not been taught at Queen's since the death of the great scholar John O'Donovan in 1861. Henry and MacArthur succeeded in having the subject restored in 1908–9. According to the official history of Queen's: 'the inclusion of Celtic as a subject for the faculty of Arts aroused no controversy, partly, perhaps, because the appointment of a Church of Ireland clergyman (F.B. O'Connell) as the first lecturer made it impossible for Protestant opinion to take alarm on sectarian grounds'.[11] Controversy followed the appointment, however. Another Protestant clergyman attacked the new lecturer in print for his interest in Irish; the usual intimidation followed and O'Connell had to be put under police protection. O'Connell was a native speaker of Connemara Irish and a first-rate linguist, speaking at least 10 languages including Hebrew, Aramaic, Hindustani and Russian. He published a grammar of Old Irish and a book on the poetry of the Quran (which he apparently knew by heart), and edited a version of the *Midnight Court*, an astronomical tract, and *Selections from Keating's 'Three Shafts of Death'*.

He was also highly eccentric. As an undergraduate in TCD he and two other divinity students had established a 'Druidical Society' in which members were forbidden to speak English, drink ginger beer or

mention politics, religion or dialects; they could be expelled for talking sensibly. The society's short-lived magazine, *An tEorpach* (The European), accepted any language but English, and O'Connell edited contributions in Spanish, Dutch, Japanese and Irish. His undergraduate high spirits seem to have followed him into adulthood – he wrote a story in Irish in 1921 called 'The rejuvenation of Ivan Smithovitch'. As a lecturer he was a disaster. He had neither the organisational or political skills to make a success of the post, and loathed giving lectures, marking exams, setting papers and attending faculty meetings. Henry, who had in abundance the skills O'Connell lacked, spent most of the latter's final decade in Belfast protecting him. At one stage Henry chased him to the railway station to recover that day's examination papers, which O'Connell, the archetypal forgetful scholar, was bringing to Dublin in his pocket. In 1925 his incompetence finally caught up with him and he was sacked.

In Dublin he finally found a job he could do when he was appointed deputy head of the new radio station. Four years later, on his way to lunch with de Valera, he absent-mindedly stepped out in front of a bus and was killed. In death he ran into more trouble – the train that carried his body back to Connemara was met in Clifden by a large crowd of Catholics in what the local press described as 'a state of tense excitement'. The reason for this was that O'Connell was rumoured to have converted to Catholicism – his second wife was Catholic – and the local parish priest had decided he should be buried in a properly consecrated, Catholic graveyard, whether his family wanted this or not. The family eventually succeeded in burying him with his parents, but had to guard his remains overnight.[12]

O'Connell added colour and learning to the life of Irish-speaking Belfast. Given his loathing of teaching, he is unlikely to have added much to the sum of the city's speakers. That was left to others. No fewer than three language courses were written in Belfast in the first 20 years of the century. McGinley based his 1903 course – in Donegal Irish – on the Gouin method. The Belfast Gaelic League had identified this method, which involved short verb-based action narratives, as early as 1895, and had adapted it to Irish.

Another Customs and Mail officer, Seán Ó Catháin, having learned Munster Irish in London, arrived in Belfast in 1905 and set up a training

school following his own version of the Berlitz method, later identified as the 'direct method'. By 1909 Ó Catháin had designed a grammar-based conversational course that was once held in such high regard that it ran through eight editions.[13] More than 90 teachers, two thirds of whom were National School teachers seeking a college certificate in Irish, attended the second course, which was held in the League's new headquarters, 'the walls of which are decorated with all sorts of language charts, and also strange-looking phonetic diagrams, charts and pictures'. The article describing the training school adds a sentence in Irish which notes that 'you would think that it was a doctor's surgery'.[14] Another description says that 'Pictures, charts, diagrams, etc., cover the walls on all sides, so thickly indeed as almost to shock the aesthetic sense'.[15] Among the material decorating the wall was a six feet by eight chart showing the various groups of consonants in columns, and vowel diagrams showing frontal and side views of the lips, tongue and teeth. The college was more than a grind-school for teachers; it provided classes in Classical and Old Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Celtic philology, history and literature as well as modern Irish, and ran series of public lectures by prominent writers and academics.

The third course, based on the phrase method, was published in 1919. By an odd coincidence, its author's father and brother worked for the Customs and Mail. Fr Dónall Ó Tuathail had learned Irish from old people in the Glens of Antrim when serving there as a priest from 1909 to 1912, and became one of the most revered teachers in the north. A description survives of one of his classes some time between 1916 and his early death in 1922:

> In a large school in Donegall Street I found many classes studying the Gaelic idiom of Tír Chonaill [Donegal]. The largest and most elementary, composed mainly of undernurtured mill workers, was in charge of a small, delicate, keen-eyed priest whose dress was stippled over with chalk and classroom dust.[16]

Both the courses and the teachers were needed to keep up with the demand for classes among all economic groups. In 1902, there were 20 branches of the League in Belfast alone, and the west Belfast branch was reported to have had 500 members of whom 440 attended classes regularly. A snapshot of the League in this year may be useful. The

Belfast District Committee had established premises in Lombard Street, founded a Gaelic Choir, staged a couple of plays (one written by the ubiquitous McGinley), and successfully campaigned to have Irish taught in St Mary's Catholic teacher training college on the Falls Road – the first 'professor' of Irish appointed was Fr Gearóid Ó Nualláin, a speaker of Munster Irish and an uncle of Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien/Myles na Gopaleen. What was known as the Irish-Ireland movement was in full swing. Carmichael's Hat Factory in North Street advertised the Irishness of its headgear, and monumental sculptors in Divis Street let it be known that inscriptions in Irish were a speciality. Twelve Belfast branches of the League had established hurling clubs – attending classes in the Irish language and history was compulsory. Irish was also being taught in a number of Catholic primary schools in the city as an optional or extra subject. Significantly, except for the original branch and another one operating from middle-class Mount Merrion, most of the new classes at this time were held in Catholic primary schools and the branches were organised on the basis of Catholic parishes.[17]

Four years later, the movement had taken over an entire building in Murray's Terrace. The new premises, renamed Craobh Ruadh, are described at length:

> The League has secured possession of the entire premises, containing over a dozen rooms. In a few of these one hundred or one hundred and twenty can be comfortably seated, and one (that occupied by the Irish Training School) provides accommodation for about one hundred and sixty persons. ... Craobh Ruadh forms probably the largest and best equipped headquarters of the Gaelic League anywhere.[18]

In a comparatively short time, the movement had undergone both an extraordinary expansion and a significant change in its make-up. Since the early 1900s, language activists in Belfast have been overwhelmingly Catholic, a pattern which dominated the movement for the next century. Seán Mac Maoláin became involved as a teenager in the 1890s, and was active in the movement in the city until 1930. From the evidence of his 1969 book *Ó Ghleann Airbh go Glas Naíon* (From Glenarriff to Glasnevin), the circles he moved in appear to have been exclusively Catholic. This may have been a class issue; the Protestants tended to be

middle-class and Mac Maoláin and his associates, barring the inevitable scattering of priests, schoolteachers and Customs and Mail officers, were working class. The sole reference to a Protestant Irish-speaker in the book relates to a visit to Belfast by Douglas Hyde around 1912, by which time there were few unionists still active in the movement, and the IRB was poised to take it over. Hyde's speech was held in St Mary's Hall in Bank Street, and when he argued passionately that language enthusiasts should be motivated by love of Ireland rather than hatred of England, P.T. McGinley responded ('with a twinkle in his eye'): 'I agree with the Craoibhín (Hyde), but, in the absence of that pure love of Ireland, hatred of our English rulers is not at all a bad working substitute'.[19]

McGinley, it should be remembered, hosted the inaugural meeting of the Belfast branch of the League in 1895. By contrast, a 1913 article he wrote for the first and only issue of *Craobh Ruadh*, issued by the Belfast district committee, leaves little room within the movement for unionists. Entitled 'Cá bhFuil ár dTriall?' (Where are we going?) the article analyses various motivations for learning the language:

> Why do people learn Irish? It is a great deal of trouble for many of us to learn or teach Irish, with perhaps little to show for it at the end. Is it as a pastime or is it to sharpen our intellects so that we can learn some other academic subject better: or do we want to read and discuss Irish literature in the Irish language? It may be worth learning for any of these reasons, but I do not believe that any of the above-mentioned motives is the fundamental or most weighty reason for cultivating Irish. Ordinary people are not interested in these things. We want a more restful pastime than being immersed in books and wrestling with idioms and phonics and the accent of a strange tongue. There are those who would pursue scholarship for its own sake and would learn a language to enable them to acquaint themselves with its literature; but ordinary people would not do anything like that. It is because of nationalism alone, and dignity and racial pride, that ordinary people will take the trouble to learn a new language. It is because of the spirit of nationalism that so many of the people of Ireland are learning Irish and having their children learn Irish. And they have that right.[20]

The association of Irish with nationalism, and after 1915 with republicanism, fuelled unionist hostility to the language. This hostility should not be underestimated. In 1920, the unionist leadership, waiting in the wings for the state of Northern Ireland to be established, drew up a blueprint for the survival of the new state. Its message was blunt, and somewhat chilling: 'The essential point to remember is that the Unionists hold that no rebel who wishes to set up a Republic can be regarded as merely a "political opponent", but must be repressed'.[21]

For these leaders of unionism, the word 'rebel' encompassed both constitutional and physical force nationalists, as both wings of the nationalist movement wished to incorporate Northern Ireland into the southern state. The same suspicion applied to Irish language enthusiasts. This crude summary requires some qualification; more sophisticated unionists were aware that the language movement had another tendency which reflected its early principle of political and religious inclusivity, and the movement, even as a nationalist activity, was sometimes seen by pragmatic unionists as being relatively harmless. Mac Maoláin notes with some surprise that the League's headquarters were never raided.

There were two more elements in the unionist mindset which must be taken into account. Ulster unionism by this point was in the final stage of a redefinition from an Irish unionism – culturally Irish and politically British – to a British unionism which rejected on principle all forms of Irish identity beyond the purely geographical. As there is no more unequivocal manifestation of an Irish cultural identity than the Irish language, interest in the language was itself seen as subversive to the state. As late as 1945, when a nationalist MP, Eddie McAteer, spoke Irish in Stormont, he was interrupted by the Minister of Education and the Prime Minister calling out 'No foreign language here'.[22] Woven through these political and cultural threads was, inescapably, a deeply embedded and ugly sectarianism. Institutional unionist sectarianism found its most dramatic formulation when Northern Ireland's first Prime Minister defined it as 'a Protestant state for a Protestant people'.

The language movement had expended much of its energies on educational issues, and Irish in the education system became one of the first targets of the new government. Lord Londonderry, the Minister of Education, tried but failed to ban the teaching of what he dismissed as 'the so-called Irish language' in St Mary's teacher training college, but

had other successes. By 1923 [illegible] Organiser of Irish Language Instruction, limited the [illegible] which could be devoted to the language in primary schools as an optional subject, and withdrawn recognition and funding from the two independent Irish language colleges in Belfast. It is possible that even more restrictions might have been put on the teaching of Irish, but at this stage the language lobby had some leverage. Up to a third of primary schools under Catholic management had refused to recognise the new Ministry of Education, and were being funded by the southern government. The campaign lasted from February to December 1922, and according to Belfastman John Duffin, its chief organiser, the Minister's opposition to concessions on the teaching of Irish was the last stumbling block in the negotiations.[23]

However, in 1924 a new set of regulations restricted the teaching of Irish as an optional subject to the upper classes of the primary system. It was then marginalised to the outer edges of a crowded curriculum. Of the optional subjects, at least two had to be chosen from the A-List of subjects, history, science, nature study and horticulture; only then could Irish be chosen from a list which included French, Latin, algebra and geometry. As a result, the numbers of primary schools teaching Irish as an optional subject was halved – to 78 – between 1924 and 1927.

In response to the squeeze on Irish as an optional subject, teachers and pupils had begun to switch to the only alternative within the curriculum, the teaching of Irish as an extra subject for fees, and increasing numbers took up Irish as a fee-paying subject (from third standard up). In 1926 the Ministry of Education banned the teaching of Irish in the third and fourth standards, resulting, within a year, in a drop of 70% in the numbers studying the subject. Between 1923 and 1926 the numbers studying Irish as an extra subject in Northern Ireland fell from 5,531 to 1,290, and in 1934 the subsidy towards Irish as an extra subject was finally withdrawn.

Given the polarisation of attitudes to the language and the unchallenged power of the Unionist Party in Northern Ireland, it is perhaps surprising that Irish survived within the education system at all. Its survival may have been partly due to a decision taken by pragmatic unionists not to ban Irish outright from the education system, but to marginalise it, and to make whatever teaching was undertaken as

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ineffective as possible. Lord Charlemont, Londonderry's successor, provided the most quotable rationale for this policy in 1933, one which demonstrates the centrality of west Belfast to the language movement: 'forbidding [Irish] under pressure will stimulate it to such an extent that the very dogs in Belfast – at any rate the Falls Road dogs – will bark in Irish'.[24] Charlemont may have been the most liberal of the Ministers of Education during the period; in an internal memorandum to the Prime Minister he did make a case for the academic study of Irish as the ancient language of Ireland, but any public statement aimed at a unionist audience, while avoiding the gratuitous abuse of other Ministers, was uncompromising:

> There is no doubt that the fact that some recognition is given Irish by the Ministry has greatly disarmed criticism on the part of anti-British elements in the population, while the actual results in spreading a knowledge of the language are insignificant.[25]

In the early years of the state, there was little resistance to the undermining of Irish in the education system. The instability and violence which accompanied partition had left the Gaelic League demoralised and in disarray in the north. Liam Andrews, the leading authority on the history of the language movement in Northern Ireland, could find records of only one branch, in Belfast, that was still functioning in 1923.[26] Mac Maoláin gives an account of his efforts to keep the language revival work going during this troubled period, sometimes travelling through sniper fire to maintain his classes.[27]

Early in 1926, Fr Lorcán Ó Muireadhaigh made the eminently sensible suggestion that, as the condition of the language in the two jurisdictions was significantly different, the Gaelic League should be organised separately within the six counties of Northern Ireland. He was immediately accused of partitionism, a serious charge in Irish language circles at the time, and particularly galling for a priest with an impressive republican record.[28] Ó Muireadhaigh was a fine scholar and a superb organiser with a short fuse and a domineering personality. He was also a dialect bigot and, as we shall see, a Catholic triumphalist. His response to the accusation was to form a new organisation, Comhaltas Uladh, for the 10 counties of Ulster (Louth was annexed to

Ulster on dialect grounds, but it may be no coincidence that Ó Muireadhaigh was himself a Louthman).

It is a testament to the force of Ó Muireadhaigh's personality that, with Seán Mac Maoláin's help, he succeeded in establishing Comhaltas Uladh before the end of the year. He also used the Catholic Church effectively: of the 20 members of its first executive committee, 12 were priests.[29] Comhaltas Uladh remained technically within the Gaelic League but it was, and still is, effectively independent, guarding that independence with a jealously approaching paranoia.

The achievements of Comhaltas Uladh, particularly in its first three or four decades, were in the circumstances remarkable. In 1926 there were only a handful of branches of the Gaelic League in the north. This rose to 78 by 1940, peaked at 182 in 1946, and averaged 155 per annum over the next nine years.[30] Its involvement in the Gaeltacht summer colleges provided exposure to the language in a natural setting to tens of thousands of learners, and, where the teaching was effective, a high standard of tuition. The continuing importance of these colleges in stimulating interest in Irish and establishing social networks among young speakers and learners of Irish cannot be overestimated.

The greatest achievement of Comhaltas Uladh may have been in ensuring that Irish maintained a presence in the education system in Northern Ireland. The organisation made its first approach to government in February 1927, when a deputation, which included Ó Muireadhaigh, five other Catholic clergy and a nationalist MP, met the Minister of Education, and argued that Irish should be restored to the status it had in 1922. They were unsuccessful, endured the Minister telling them that Irish was dead or dying and that French would be much more useful, but did get one concession, the restoration of Irish as an optional subject in standards three and four – as an alternative to history. This was actually the revival of an earlier strategy; as far back as 1922 the Ministry had considered linking Irish and history as alternative options, on the principle that the kind of Irish history which would be taught in Catholic schools would be even more subversive than the language.

This tiny concession, finally formulated in a Ministry circular in March 1928, was the subject of a unionist backlash in June from the

extremist Loyalty League, whose membership was 'confined solely to men and women of British race and blood'. The League reproached the Ministry with a charge that still has resonance; some things never change:

> As loyal subjects of his Majesty the King, we strongly resent this pandering to a cunning foe, for although presented in the form of an optional subject, it can soon be arranged that each school will require a Gaelic teacher, even in Protestant districts, and each teacher will be as a rule a secret fomenter of strife.[31]

If unionist opinion on the language question could range from the patriarchal condescension of Charlemont to the knuckle-trailing intensity of the Loyalty League, those who supported the language were by no means monolithic. By the time Comhaltas Uladh was founded, the transition from an inclusive language movement that genuinely hoped to sidestep sectarianism and politics to one more or less dominated by a Catholic/nationalist ethos was complete. However, even within that narrowing of its terms of reference, there was still a wide ideological range within the movement.

The principle of inclusivity remained, as it were, on the statute books. Sometimes the non-sectarian, non-political mantra was trotted out, cynically, to a world that – in as far as the world took notice – was deeply sceptical of the claim. Sometimes the non-sectarian principle was used to disguise the intention to use culture to convert unionists to nationalism. The movement did, however, involve a number of people who clung to the old ideal; this, it must be said, was by no means a majority activity, but it remained remarkably durable. During the Dáil Mór (AGM) of Comhaltas Uladh in 1931, for example, a number of delegates proposed, without success, that the organisation drop the references in its constitution to a free and Gaelic Ireland that had been inserted in 1915 by a claque led by the IRB. Their hope, admirably unrealistic in the context of its time and place, was that this might encourage Orangemen to join.[32] We will be examining later another attempt in the 1940s to sidestep the reductive political and religious structures of Belfast.

Irish nationalism consisted of a number of overlapping ideological strands, the two most important of which were a secular republicanism

that had its roots in the enlightenment principles of the 18th-century United Irishmen, and an instinctive Catholic nationalism with its roots in the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. That these very different ideologies could be blurred in everyday discourse does not negate the profound differences between them. The latter half of the 19th century had also seen the growth of ultramontanism – a rigidly centralised and reactionary Catholicism with theocratic tendencies – in the institutional church. Unionists, with their exaggerated attachment to the British crown and empire, were hostile to secular republicanism, but the triumphalist tendencies within contemporary Irish Catholicism, as demonstrated south of the border, scared them witless.

For a long time, Catholic nationalism was in the ascendant among the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, and was itself reinforced by social forces. One of the hallmarks of Catholicism, both in doctrine and in practice, is a highly developed sense of social cohesion. After partition, institutionalised discrimination by successive unionist governments in Northern Ireland towards its Catholic minority forced the community to develop this to an exaggerated level, a phenomenon described by observers in recent times as 'Catholic communalism', and experienced by many of its dissidents as Catholic coercion. But it worked. In an extremely effective form of passive resistance, cultural, social and sporting activities among the Catholic community in Northern Ireland were organised as an alternative society within the state, usually on the basis of parishes. Catholic communalism was itself reinforced on an institutional basis by segregated education and on a social basis by the fact that much of Belfast is divided into exclusively Catholic and Protestant areas. It could be argued that, whatever harm it has done in other ways, the ghettoisation of Belfast actually worked to the advantage of the language movement.

Irish in Belfast became integrated into this matrix of resistance. For both unionists and nationalists it was a highly emblematic cultural expression of resistance to the state. To the nationalist community it was a source of communal and personal dignity, even for those who could not speak it. Comhaltas Uladh could not have ignored the only institution that had the power to deliver the survival of the language in the education system, and given the times that were in it and the nature of the organisation's founder, it is unlikely that they wished to do so. As

a result, the organisation was dominated by what Liam Andrews describes as its clerical faction; 10 of its 16 presidents between 1926 and 1970 were Catholic clergy,[33] and every public event swarmed with Catholic churchmen, supplemented by a sprinkling of Catholic teachers and an occasional constitutional nationalist politician.

While one is left with a sense of an organisation whose ethos was overwhelmingly Catholic, the Irish language movement was not entirely monolithic, and other factions also existed quietly within and on the edges of Comhaltas Uladh. A police report of one public meeting held in a Catholic parish hall in Belfast in October 1927 noted the presence in the hall (but not on the platform) of 'local suspects and a large number of past and present members of the IRA'. Inevitably, the majority of these would have been from a Catholic background, although the republican movement always had a thread of anticlericalism running through it, and a tiny number of Protestant members. The public face was, however, clerical and constitutional. At this particular meeting the speakers included Bishop (later Cardinal) MacRory, seven priests, including Ó Muireadhaigh, and Lord Ashbourne, an eccentric, bekilted, Catholic Peer of the Realm who regularly addressed the House of Lords in Irish. Joe Devlin, the leader of the constitutional nationalist party, sent his apologies, and the event was closed by a song from the Christian Brothers' choir.

The range of opinions from the platform is instructive. MacRory's address was couched in an inclusive language which was subverted by the reality of the platform party, but was doubtless sincerely meant:

> You do not ask a man or woman when they come to you whether they are orange or green – whether they are republicans or unionists. Every man and woman, every boy and girl who wants to learn the Irish language ... is welcome. Anywhere in the world, and especially in the city of Belfast that has been torn by dissention, any movement ... that brings the people together is doing a public service deserving of support.

Ó Muireadhaigh, always combative, took a significantly different tack. He severely criticised the Catholic Truth Society for not using Irish, although the language movement was, he said, doing the work of God in fighting a battle against English civilisation, whose values were

represented in the cinema, the newspapers, the dance halls and the jazz dresses in shop windows (this was the era of the flapper, whose short dresses outraged puritans throughout the western world).

Andrews comments that Ó Muireadhaigh's language activism was permeated 'by his desire to protect the values of rural patriarchal Irish Catholic society from anglicisation and modernism'.[34] Indeed, his agenda was capable of going even further than his obsession with short dresses, jazz and the debilitating moral effects of the mass media. Andrews records a speech given by Ó Muireadhaigh, again in Belfast, in September 1932:

> The Gaelic League is fighting to keep the old civilisation of our country alive. It is a fight between the civilisation which Patrick started at Tara, Saul and Armagh, and the civilisation begun by Martin Luther and has carried on since, the fruits of which we see today. ... We want to make Ireland what she was, a great Catholic and Gaelic nation that had her own pride and glory and that brought the Faith and civilisation to the rest of the world.[35]

Ó Muireadhaigh was not the first member of the clerical faction to take such an extreme position. In 1929, another member of the Comhaltas Uladh executive, Fr Clenaghan, had described the Irish language as 'a rampart of defence against the principles of the Reformation', and as 'a sacred tongue interwoven with the spirit of faith', while English was 'the language of the foreigner impressed by the blighting cold of Protestantism'.[36] Without the overt sectarianism of remarks such as these, similar sentiments can be detected underlying statements from other leading members of Comhaltas Uladh – the word 'pagan' was often used to describe England and anglicisation, and came to include the Americanisation of popular culture through film and music, but may have been a code word for anything Ó Muireadhaigh and his friends disapproved of.

While these ideological battles were being waged, some people got on with the job of reviving the language. Mac Maoláin describes his last major project in Belfast, the building of the Ard-Scoil, the League's headquarters, in 1928. This had involved the delicate task of bringing together constitutional nationalists and republicans, and had one major

gimmick, an invitation to Éamon de Valera to open the key fundraising event. The RUC warned Mac Maoláin not to proceed with the invitation. De Valera indicated that he was not particularly keen to challenge the northern authorities without good reason, but that he would follow the advice of the organising committee. The committee decided to cancel the invitation, and Mac Maoláin telegrammed de Valera to inform him of the decision. On leaving the post office, he was met by a priest who was outraged by the committee's decision, had brought the chairman (another priest) around to his point of view, and rescinded the decision. This behaviour was extraordinary, but is a fair indication of the power of the Catholic clergy within their community at the time, and their uncontested dominance of the language movement in the north. The unfortunate Mac Maoláin had to send a second telegram; de Valera took a northbound train, was arrested in Newry and was tried in Belfast. After addressing the judge in (Munster) Irish, he was held to be in contempt of court and sent to prison for a month. It was a month well spent; such was the outrage that money poured in. The Ard-Scoil was built in Castle Street and remained the headquarters of the League in the city until it was accidentally burnt down in 1985.

A split developed immediately within the Belfast Gaelic League. Some republican members were indignant that the Devlinite nationalists had been given too much credit during the fundraising drive, feared that they could take over the movement in Belfast, and began one of those destructive power struggles which plague minority language movements. This turn of events disgusted Mac Maoláin so much that he resigned from the League in 1929 and the following year he left Belfast for Dublin, where he spent the rest of his life.

By the mid-1930s the Irish language lobby and the government had reached a kind of uneasy equilibrium on the issue of Irish in the education system. Comhaltas Uladh then turned its attention to the radio. Broadcasting was controlled by London, which was comparatively relaxed about broadcasting minority languages; indeed, the BBC had broadcast programmes in Scottish Gaelic and Welsh since the 1920s. As it turned out, Irish was barely heard or seen on BBC Northern Ireland until 1981. Comhaltas Uladh made representations in 1936 for programmes in Irish, especially lessons in the language. This request was considered by the local Regional Director George Marshall,

a morose and gloomy Scot who had been startled to earn the social acceptance of the unionist ministers he met in the Reform Club. He turned the request down: 'The number of Gaelic speakers in Northern Ireland is negligible, and, as far as schools are concerned, the proportion of those where the Irish language is taught is quite small and is practically confined to secondary schools'.[37] However, the representations did have some effect; the request to help learners of the language was ignored, but for a couple of years a live broadcast of the Derry Feis included a number of songs in Irish.

In the early 1940s, at a time when the war was going badly, the British Government considered initiating a charm offensive on southern Ireland, which was then still a member of the Commonwealth. With this in mind, the Dominions Office in 1940 proposed to the BBC that a 'Gaelic period' be broadcast 'ostensibly for the benefit of Gaelic speaking people in Northern Ireland and among the Irish population of English and Scottish cities'. In the best traditions of BBC independence, Marshall consulted Andrews, the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, for whom Irish was 'a language expressive of separatism',[38] received a predictable reaction, and responded frostily to the proposal:

> I do not quite understand what the Dominions Office mean by the introduction of a Gaelic period into the programmes broadcast from the Belfast station. ... you might point out that there are no Gaelic speakers in Northern Ireland, by which I assume is meant Erse or Irish ... it would be most unwise to introduce the Irish language into programmes from the transmitter in Northern Ireland, as this would certainly bring a great deal of criticism from listeners in this Region.[39]

Marshall had bought so completely into the unionist Ulsterisation programme that he was pursuing a bizarre censorship of Irish culture in the BBC. The results of Gaelic sports fixtures, played mainly by non-Sabbatarian Catholics on Sunday, were not broadcast until Monday, by which time, in Rex Cathcart's words, 'they were history, not news', and Marshall carpeted the distinguished broadcaster Sam Hanna Bell for giving air time to the Belfast Gaelic Choir.[40] In 1943 he even managed to block a proposal from BBC Scotland to broadcast a golden jubilee celebration of the Gaelic League in Glasgow.[41]

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About the same time that these battles were being lost, the seeds of a new development in the language movement were sown when the O'Neill Crowley GAA club set up a branch of the Gaelic League in the Clonard district of west Belfast in 1936. None of the original members could speak Irish fluently. Two years later, in 1938, with one fluent learner and two native speakers,[42] the branch acquired new premises, renamed itself Cumann Chluain Ard and began to expand. This development was not halted by the internment of some of its members during the Second World War. Cumann Chluain Ard was rather more radical than other branches of Comhaltas Uladh at the time; its membership was mostly working class, republican and left-leaning. Because the club had no links with the church, it attracted the militant, the disaffected and the mildly disreputable – artists, actors, Protestant nationalists, Esperanto enthusiasts, freethinkers and communists as well as republicans and a sprinkling of ordinary decent citizens. Early on, the club introduced an important innovation, when Tuesdays became Irish-only nights.

Cumann Chluain Ard moved to new, much larger premises in 1944 and for the next nine years the club worked on a broad front with a distinct nationalist and socialist agenda. Two consciousness-raising pageants 'Ireland Live On' and 'One Easter Morn' were staged between 1950 and 1952. A pamphlet produced about this time gives some flavour of the group's ideology: 'the language and its natural corollary, Irish nationalism, will take its place in the public life of Belfast'. The pamphlet attempted to grapple with economic realities: 'a Gaelic Speaking Ireland was not something mystical or abstract, but a definite cultural and economic objective', and called for the language to be aligned with the social and economic consciousness of the Irish worker, 'who should be made to understand that the revival of the language is not of only academic interest but an essential part of the age-long struggle in Ireland for freedom'.[43]

In 1953 the club became involved in a campaign organised by a radical group of language activists in the Republic to have a proper support structure for the Irish speaking districts of the west of Ireland. They persuaded the normally staid Belfast district committee to back the campaign, called 'Sabháil an Ghaeltacht' (save the Gaeltacht), and made a couple of serious tactical mistakes, refusing, for example, to

speak English to reporters, and being run out of Dundalk for their over-vigorous criticism of local politicians. This activity proved to be a turning point, changing the group from a broad-front Irish-Ireland cultural organisation with an interest in the language to one deeply implicated in linguistic politics. The same year, the club became an 'English-free zone', initiating what became known among its critics as the Great Purge of Fifty-Three. From that point, Cumann Chluain Ard was to have a fraught relationship with Comhaltas Uladh, establishing a pattern of noisily leaving the organisation at irregular intervals and then storming back vengefully.

In 1953 the club also underwent a significant ideological transition. Its radical stance on the language issue had caused a significant number of its members to question the relationship between the language movement and politics, in the sense of both political parties and political ideologies. They believed that where the interests of a political ideology and those of the language clashed, the political ideology tended to prevail. They argued that political parties, as soon as they got into power, temporised and wriggled but always betrayed the language. The Gaeltacht campaign had been partially successful, resulting in the establishment of a Ministry for the Gaeltacht, but, uniquely among Irish language groups in the north, Cumann Chluain Ard subjected the new ministry in the Republic to heavy criticism, even before the new minister had time to make a pig's ear of drawing the Gaeltacht boundaries. The Catholic Church at this period was entering its long retreat from the language, proving that no church could be trusted either (members picketed the local bishop in the 1970s). Politics and religion were therefore left at the door. In a strange but satisfying completion of the circle, Cumann Chluain Ard had repossessed the ideals of the early Gaelic League.

The club attracted a number of highly idealistic activists who became involved in various experiments, not all of them with the blessing of the organisation. One group tried to revitalise the economy of the Gaeltacht by setting up a factory in Gweedore. Another loosely associated group tried to establish an alternative language-based economy in Belfast, setting up a newspaper, shops and services, and a barter system. Both schemes failed through an excess of idealism compounded by insufficient capital or business expertise. A later attempt to set up a

bank, on the model of the credit union system, was better thought out, but failed to develop. One group became involved in the organisation 'Misneach' (courage), led by the writer Máirtín Ó Cadhain, which was regarded by most of the Irish language establishment as being very extreme.

Comhaltas Uladh had long been stuck in an intellectual rut. As well as its stultifying conservatism, the organisation failed to develop a strategic vision, continuing to act as if the priorities of 1926 were the only possible priorities, as if a course of action undertaken in the era of the flapper was not a response to the circumstances and ideology of its time, but true for all time and in all circumstances. The organisation failed to embrace new approaches and new thinking on language maintenance or revival. Unconventional approaches were what Cumann Chluain Ard did best, and possibly the most unconventional development of the 20th-century language movement in Belfast was the founding of the Shaw's Road Gaeltacht in Belfast.

Cumann Chluain Ard was not the only important development in the period between the 1930s and 1950s. Crises seem to bring the issue of identity to the forefront of people's consciousness, and the war years had seen an increase in language activity, the most interesting of which took place not on the back streets of the Falls Road, but in Crumlin Road Jail. The IRA, acting on the principle that England's difficulty was Ireland's opportunity, sided with Hitler during the Second World War. As a result, thousands of active IRA men, with a sprinkling of retired IRA men, brothers of IRA men, and people who looked as if they might have been IRA men were interned during the war. In the enforced leisure of imprisonment without trial, republicans traditionally learn Irish, and Belfast became one of the most effective centres for language transmission on the island: the other was the Curragh in Kildare.

Tarlach Ó hUid, our main source for the language movement in Crumlin Road Jail, was something of a fantasist, which undermines the value of his testimony. He claimed to have been baptised Terence Samuel Caesar Augustus Walter Hood in Deptford, London in 1917. Only the first and last names are true, and there appears to be no basis for his claim that his parents came from the north of Ireland. At the age of 18 he joined the Greenshirt Movement for Social Credit, a fringe radical group equally opposed to fascism and capitalism, but enthusiastic about

the street politics of the time. Ó hUid began to learn Irish in London, swapped his green shirt for a kilt, came to Ireland, converted briefly to Catholicism, joined the IRA and became involved in a border bombing campaign. After a period in Dublin learning bomb-making skills, he was transferred to Belfast on the outbreak of the Second World War.

Ó hUid had strong anti-sectarian principles, filling the pages of *War News* with quotations from the United Irishmen and John Mitchel, and his language enthusiasm found expression in a section entitled 'useful sentences in Irish', with examples such as 'Throw the hand-grenade', and 'Aim the rifle at him'.[44] The second volume of Ó hUid's autobiography, *Faoi Ghlas* (In Prison), deals with his five years of internment, most of which was spent in Crumlin Road Jail. If he is to be believed, when the internees in Crumlin Road Jail founded a Gaelic Society in 1941 there were fewer than 10 reasonably fluent speakers among them; by the following year there were 75 who spoke only Irish to each other, and by 1945 fluent speakers were counted in their hundreds.[45] Prison was to have an effect on the class profile of (male) Irish-speakers in the city:

> The boys of Company F were the poorest, and most unhealthy-looking of any I met in the IRA. They had been born and raised in tiny kitchen houses in the back streets of the Pound Loney on the Falls Road, ill-fed, ill-clothed, barely educated, all of them of below average height, all skinny, pasty-faced. ... In prison, nearly all of them did their level best to learn and speak Irish, and some of them became fully fluent.[46]

The Catholic Church had worked out a modus vivendi with republicans; left-wingers were another story entirely. Since the Russian revolution the church had been obsessed by 'atheistic communism' and saw socialism as the first dangerous step in that direction. In 1931, at the height of the depression, Pope Pius XI published an encyclical warning his flock that they could not be both Catholics and socialists, and asking those who had drifted into socialism to return to the bosom of the church. Those leftists who were involved in the language movement were inevitably regarded with suspicion by the clerical faction.

The clerical axe fell, however, not on the subversives of Cumann Chluain Ard, who probably were too unimportant to show on the

church's radar, but on one of the most prominent figures in Comhaltas Uladh in Belfast. Cathal McCrystal, a fervent if independent-minded Catholic and a mild left-winger, took part in a cultural delegation to Russia in 1955, and incautiously praised the USSR for its treatment of women. He returned to a storm of abuse, and was denounced from numerous altars and in the pages of the nationalist newspaper, *The Irish News*. According to his son, Comhaltas Uladh disassociated itself from him; he was removed as chairman of the Belfast district committee, was sacked as editor of *An tUltach*, the journal he had edited for 20 years, and many of his former friends never spoke to him again in any language. Other versions indicate that he was treated to a relatively short period of quarantine until clerical wrath could find another target. McCrystal, an imperturbable little man with a great flair for the dramatic, used to ostentatiously read a Russian-language missal during Sunday Mass in his local church.[47]

McCrystal was among those who were distressed by the exclusivity of the language movement. In 1943 he wrote an introduction in Irish to a handbook celebrating the half-centenary of the League in which he insisted that the celebrations, while well earned, were flawed because 'only the Catholics of the Province are involved. We could easily, by ignoring Protestants, create a division between us that is more powerful than the political gulf that separates us. We have to show them that we want their assistance and their company, that this heritage belongs to them too.'[48]

Tarlach Ó hUid, freshly released from prison, also believed that the language could and should transcend politics and religion. In the late 1940s, he managed to establish a class in the premises of the Young Men's Christian Association in Belfast specifically targeted at Protestants. The group called itself the Gaelic Fellowship, and had two teachers, Seán Pasker and Drew Donaldson. Pasker, a civil servant from Dublin who had left Ireland after the 1916 Rebellion and learned his Irish in London, spoke Munster Irish; Donaldson spoke a Donegal dialect, and each had a hearty contempt for the dialect of the other. Some of the group were nationalists, and mixed easily with Catholic Irish-speakers when Pasker arranged visits to Irish language events run by Comhaltas Uladh, but others found it more difficult to do so. This left a deficit in the opportunities to practise the language, and in 1955

the teachers approached the secretary of the YMCA to suggest that fluent Catholics should be invited into the classes to help. Donaldson reported indignantly to a friend that the response was less than full-hearted, and that it looked as if there was a question mark over whether or not Catholics could be recognised as Christians. The idea was not pursued by the teachers, but at a later date, one of the class members invited a young Catholic woman to come along. Finding this situation rather daunting, she brought two Catholic friends with her. Within a short time a number of 'big Catholic lads' had joined the group, and Pasker became alarmed, as this was breaking the conditions under which he had rented the premises. In early 1961 he drafted a letter to the class to inform them that all members of the Gaelic Fellowship would be required to register as associate members of the YMCA. As none of the Catholics would be eligible to join the YMCA, they would obviously have to leave the class.

The situation could not have turned out well, and in fact turned out as badly as it could have. One of the members pre-empted the letter by disclosing its contents to the Catholics. Her own sister immediately resigned, followed by Donaldson and another member, complaining that if Harold Meek, a Jew, could attend, fellow Christians should not be excluded. The three who resigned were all nationalists. The class continued until 1966, although often without an effective teacher; Seán Pasker suffered a series of strokes and died in 1965.[49]

This period begins and ends with two attempts to maintain the Irish language without the endemic sectarianism and reductive politics that blight Belfast. Both failed. Against the odds, however, the language has survived and sometimes thrived. Against the odds it may still be possible in the future to grow and sustain a language community that genuinely embraces the entire population.

Belfast in 20th-Century literature in Irish

This essay explores the challenges facing urban writers at a time when a modern literary idiom had not yet been developed for those writing in Irish. It looks at the tensions between those who were Gaeltacht loyalists and those who wanted to develop their own literary voice in an era where modern Irish literature was solely the product of the language revival. It focuses on the early writers Seán Mac Maoláin, Earnán de Blaghd (Ernest Blythe), Tarlach Ó hUid and Séamus Ó Néill, and on the contemporary writer Gearóid Mac Lochlainn, exploring how they represented the city in their writing and, in the case of Mac Lochlainn, how he developed a voice that is genuinely and uniquely urban.

Belfast in 20th-Century literature in Irish

While urban writers in Irish may deal with the same society as their English language counterparts, they come at it from an unusual angle, the double perspective of people who simultaneously share the broader experiences of the majority and live within a distinctive cultural milieu. These authors also have a unique relationship with their audience. They address only a portion of their contemporaries – only a fool tries to address posterity – and writer and audience share a common sense of values to an unusual degree.

In a divided community such as that of Belfast, English language authors inevitably write in the knowledge that they have at least two local audiences, and this, consciously or unconsciously, influences their approach to their material. Michael McLaverty, for instance, had a deep personal loathing of the unionist state, but his treatment of political and sectarian themes is so restrained that this is barely perceptible in his fiction. Writers in Irish, who have little chance of being overheard, are constrained only by the preconceptions of the language community, and while this brings its own difficulties, there are areas in which they have rather more freedom of expression than their English language contemporaries.

Finding a literary voice – a problem for any emerging writer – was far more difficult. When the language movement began at the end of the 19th century, modern creative writers in Irish faced a number of challenges, not least being the lack of a modern – never mind an urban – literary idiom. The language itself was in a state of arrested development – from the 17th century, it had been stretched or recast

only in the areas of theology and poetry. By the late 19th century, Irish survived as a living tongue only in remote rural areas, and literacy in Irish was at an all-time low. It took some time to develop an adequate modern vocabulary; pedants dug into their lexicons and essentialist nativists their memories of their monoglot grannies to come up with terms for such new-fangled items as bicycles and telegrams. Some of the early proposals were extremely bizarre. The first suggestion for telegram was 'scéal-ar-bharr-bata' (news on the top of a stick) taken from the saga literature, and it took some time before a more sensible term, 'sreangscéal' (wire-news) was adopted.

On the other hand, the oral tradition had great vitality. Verbal dexterity was highly valued in Gaeltacht society and pungency of expression admired. The rural idiom was informed by a stock of poetry and storytelling which utilised a formal linguistic register ultimately rooted in literary sources. Writers could also draw on various strands of the literary tradition, and the language itself, in the right hands, lends itself to compound neologisms. A gifted writer could fashion a personal literary style from this varied inheritance, but it must be said that the living language had been moulded by an irredeemably rural context, and it had never taken root in modern industrial society. If it is true that art is a collaboration between the artist and the community, Belfast did not provide a particularly rich linguistic community for the creative writer to collaborate with. The vivid urban idiom of Belfast was and is in the language of the vast majority of the population, English enriched by Scots and Hiberno-English.

The Donegal writer Séamus Ó Grianna identified the problem of finding an urban idiom in his usual overstated way in 1932. Although he had already spent nearly 10 years in Dublin, and was to live there until his death in 1969, he rejected it utterly as a subject for his creative work: 'I could not write in Irish about Dublin life, even if I tried it. And the reason is because there is no life in Dublin of which Irish is the expression.'[1] He developed this theme in an article in Irish in the 1950s:

> [Dubliners] speak English from the heart … as Gaeltacht people speak Irish … Not that I could imitate their English no matter how long I listened to them … Most of my English is nothing but a dry lifeless thing that I got from books and newspapers.

> What they have is alive. It is to them what Irish is to the people of the Gaeltacht.[2]

It is not necessary to agree entirely with Ó Grianna's analysis – Liam O'Flaherty was a Gaeltacht-born writer who was capable of dealing successfully in English with urban themes, and writers such as Joseph Conrad and Josef Skvorecky have proved that a learner can get inside the skin of a second or third language and produce high-quality creative work. However, the point he makes about the discordance between living Irish and the realities of Dublin life has validity, and applies with even more force to the Belfast situation. Throughout the 20th century Dublin attracted a large number of native speakers of Irish, and was the centre of the revival movement, academic scholarship and, ultimately, state-sponsored attempts to modernise the language. In Belfast, the Irish-speaking community was much smaller, and consisted for the most part of learners, who ranged from the stumblingly incoherent to the highly fluent – but even at the highest level of competence, speakers tended to be either stolid grammarians or dialect dogmatists. Not only did Belfast's Irish language writers have to master the language, they also had to create an idiom for a language community which existed more as an aspiration than a reality.

There were a number of other challenges to be overcome. Modern literature in Irish was solely the product of the language revival, and the revival movement was, inevitably, full of ideologues, some of whom were certifiable crackpots. Among the most energetic revivalists was a clerical-led element of the most regressive and anti-modernist tendencies of Irish Catholicism, who could not distinguish between the Irish language and their own puritanism, a compound of Victorian and Jansenist values. The dominant group among the revivalists, both clerical and lay, were linguistic essentialists who revered the native speaker as the living embodiment of the eternal Gaelic mind (Ó Grianna is also relevant here, as his own literary ideology and practice were based on that assumption). While it was sensible to found a literature on the living tongue, the compunction to defer to the idiom and mores of marginal rural communities – filtered through self-censorship and generally subject to the approval of the clerical faction – further restricted the range of both subject matter and modes of expression.

Those most admired were people who had mastered the speech of the rural Gaeltacht, but in Belfast in the early days even this situation was complicated by a dialect war between champions of Munster Irish, led by a surprisingly large number of Kerrymen working in the town on behalf of the Customs and Mail, and the ultimately successful Ulster Irish faction. Fidelity to the idiom of Ó Grianna's townland of Ranafast in Donegal, an area generally recognised as having the richest oral tradition in the county, was ultimately raised to a fetish, and deviance from this norm was frowned upon.

The wonder is that any literature in Irish was produced in Belfast at all. There is, however, a surprising amount, most of it produced after the Second World War. Oddly enough, Belfast was to the fore in the development of Irish language theatre. The earliest drama production of the revival, a pageant with one act in Irish, was staged in Belfast in 1899, and a folk play by P.T. McGinley, a Donegal man living in the city, was produced in Belfast the following year. This play[3] was probably the model for Douglas Hyde's *Casadh an tSúgáin* (The Twisting of the Rope) in 1901, which stimulated a torrent of Abbey Theatre folk plays in English. McGinley was a figure of some importance in the revival, but his literary work has more historic importance than intrinsic merit. As well as the first Irish language play of the revival, he was the author of the first example of an Irish language short story to be set in Belfast. This is a retelling of the urban folk myth of the man who got so drunk the night before the *Titanic* left that he missed the boat, and has no artistic value whatsoever.

While there is little Irish language material written in or about Belfast in the first four decades of the 20th century, we are fortunate in having accounts of the early years in two autobiographies which were written much later.

The most complete account was that of Seán Mac Maoláin, born in 1884 in the Glens of Antrim, whose 1969 book *Ó Ghleann Airbh go Glas Naíon* (From Glenarriff to Glasnevin) provides a fascinating picture of life in Belfast between the late 1890s, when the family moved to Belfast, and 1930. After a short time at a national school in the city, Mac Maoláin began to work in the hackling room in one of the Belfast mills. This was the first of a number of jobs: delivering goods for a grocer, as a halfpenny runagate (the nickname for a telegram boy), in

the Belfast Ropeworks, as a baker, and finally as a full-time organiser for the Gaelic League.

Mac Maoláin never really hit his stride as a writer. He wrote a large number of novels and two books of short stories, but these have few if any admirers. One book published in 1942, *I mBéal Feirste Domh* (My Time in Belfast), a series of sketches of Belfast life, is more successful, mainly for its depiction of a way of life that has gone forever. Mac Maoláin had an extraordinary mastery of Irish, but little sense of fictional structure or narrative, and his writing chokes on a surfeit of authentic idiom. The autobiography, which in spite of its title is set mainly in Belfast, is largely free from these faults. Although Mac Maoláin had no gift for inventing realistic dialogue, his linguistic talents served him well in recording actual speech, and his accounts of conversations heard six decades earlier, in several dialects of Ulster Irish as well as occasionally English and Scots, have the ring of authenticity. As in the Belfast book, the autobiography provides many insights into the life of the time. The following account is of his first job, working in a flax-mill from half past six in the morning until six o'clock in the evening for five shillings a week in the last couple of years of the 19th century:

> In one part of the mill they hackled the flax until there wasn't a midge's worth of husk on it; and in another they spun it into a thread as fine as a hair from a horse's tail. The hackling section, where I was put to work, was very dusty. The air was thick with particles of tow from the flax, so you couldn't draw a breath without letting a mist of pouse into your lungs.
>
> Men who had spent a fair number of years at the hackling were crucified with wheezing and coughing; but – by their own reckoning – they had a medicine that would give them relief. That medicine was rum; and many of the hacklers thought that the finest stuff was to be had in a certain pub in the middle of the Falls district. And for this reason, the same pub was often called The Hacklers' Well.[4]

Like Hugh McDonnell's mid-19th-century poem, this is obviously a countryman's account of the city. In the English translation above, the obvious imagery – midges and horsehairs – is rural, but the Irish is even more so; anyone familiar with the Ulster dialects will be able to trace

the linguistic genealogy of this passage, which is based on the Ranafast dialect, with occasional modifications from east Ulster and a smattering of standardised terms. It works in the autobiography because, while not a city idiom, it is obviously the author's own conversational voice, the experiences are filtered through his personal idiolect, and what he chooses to describe – a location that is exotic to most of his readers – is in a style and language not only familiar to most of his audience but aspired to by many.

The language reflects Mac Maoláin's own linguistic inheritance. His first source was his father, who, as he discovered to his astonishment when he began to learn the language, was a native speaker of Antrim Irish. A few years later, a Protestant under-gaffer in the bakery in which he worked told him he had learned some Irish in Newry from a man from Killeavey in south Armagh. Mac Maoláin made enquiries from another baker from the area, discovered that Irish was almost gone from that district, but found out that it was still fairly strong in Omeath. He began to visit the Omeath Gaeltacht every Saturday, taking an excursion train to Warrenpoint (one shilling and eight pence return), walking a mile to Narrow Water and taking the ferry across to Omeath (two pence each way), then walking into the hills to practise his Irish and collect songs and stories from the old people. Through his contacts in Omeath he discovered that there were still Irish-speaking 'Fadgies' in Belfast, and contacted one old woman who had set up business in St George's Market. On their first meeting, she sang a south Armagh song to him, and attracted some hostile attention. When Mac Maoláin mentioned this to her, she responded in English: 'I'm in no bother about them. I'm not depending on them. I could thatch St George's Market with five-pound notes.'[35]

Mac Maoláin found his next and most important linguistic mentor in a young woman from the Donegal Gaeltacht whom he married in the spring of 1910. The couple settled in a Protestant district. Their reluctance to pass under the Orange arch at the end of the street drew the attention of their neighbours, and they were driven out in July, retreating to an exclusively Catholic area. Sectarianism had already been among the early culture shocks Mac Maoláin had experienced in his move from the Glens to the city. On his first day as a delivery boy his carter had asked him what school he went to. That evening a neighbour

had told him 'with a sour smile' that he would not have the job for long because 'You don't dig with the right foot, sonny', and the following day he was replaced by Sammy Joe Buchanan.[6] Belfast's sectarian tensions appear again and again in the book. About a third of workers in the Instrument Room in the Telegraph Office were Catholics, and when, at the news of the Relief of Ladysmith during the Boer War, the Protestant workers stood up to sing 'God Save the Queen', the Catholics drowned them out with catcalls until they had finished. Mac Maoláin believed that this incident was the reason he was sacked soon afterwards. Sectarianism in the bakery, which was overwhelmingly Protestant, was rather more subtle; new Protestant workers would always be sure to have some meat in their sandwiches on Friday.

Although Mac Maoláin had become involved in the language movement when it still involved a number of Protestants, including some unionists, the circles he moved in appear to have been exclusively Catholic. This may have been a class issue, as the Protestants tended to be middle-class and Mac Maoláin's associates, barring the inevitable scattering of priests and schoolteachers, were working-class. The sole mention of a Protestant Irish-speaker in the book refers to a visit to Belfast by Douglas Hyde around 1912, by which time there were few Protestants still active in the movement, and the radical nationalists were poised to take it over. Hyde's speech was held in St Mary's Catholic parish hall, and when he argued passionately that language enthusiasts should be motivated by love of Ireland rather than hatred of England, P.T. McGinley, responded ('with a twinkle in his eye): 'I agree with the Craoibhín [Hyde], but, in the absence of that pure love of Ireland, hatred of our English rulers is not at all a bad working substitute'.[7] This is an interesting shift on McGinley's part; the original Belfast branch of the League had been formed in his own house on the Beersbridge Road, and had involved a significant number of Protestants and unionists.

Mac Maoláin's accounts of the political and social ferment of the Belfast of his time are anecdotal rather than analytic, and seen through the eyes of an Irish language enthusiast, sometimes with comic consequences – not all of them deliberate. He opens a description of the vast crowd which marched to sign the Covenant with the comment that Irish could not be a foreign language for these unionists because the Ulster Hall, where the oath was signed, had a plaque inscribed 'Lámh

Dhearg Éireann' (the red hand of Ireland) in the foyer. The march is described, aside from a comment on their being a fine body of men, mainly in terms of their headgear; it seems there had been a run on hard hats in the Belfast shops, and many of the marchers sported bowlers that were either too large or too small. But, he explains, the threat to resist home rule by force of arms was of little interest to Gaelic Leaguers in Belfast because their attention was taken up entirely with a crisis, which he describes minutely, in the battle between Munster and Ulster Irish.[8]

Within a few years Mac Maoláin joined the Irish Volunteers, took the anti-Redmond side in the split, but was not invited to join the group who went to Dungannon at Easter 1916 to take part in the rising, accepting with a good grace that his comrades had recognised that he was no soldier. He was kept busy with an enormous increase in interest in Irish that came in the wake of the first Dáil. Two of his cousins, the Duffin brothers, were assassinated, and he was shot at and grazed on the cheek by a B-Special on the Springfield Road in the company of the surviving brother.

Throughout this time he kept the language revival work going, sometimes travelling through sniper fire to classes. In one incident in 1921, during the Treaty ceasefire, the League invited Eoin MacNeill to speak in Belfast, rejecting the advice of a senior civil servant who tried to persuade Mac Maoláin to cancel the invitation. The meeting was held in St Mary's Hall in Bank Street, and a large and threatening crowd of loyalists gathered at Castle Junction, a few yards away. St Mary's Hall was also the headquarters of the IRA, and on Mac Maoláin's suggestion, 10 or so Volunteers armed with handguns held the would-be attackers at bay while MacNeill delivered his address.

By 1923, however, the League was almost broken. We know from other sources that Mac Maoláin was one of two key figures who breathed new life into the language movement in Northern Ireland in the mid-1920s, but, oddly, he barely refers to this in the book. He does, however, describe his last major project in Belfast: the building of the Ard-Scoil, the League's headquarters, in 1928. This had involved the delicate task of bringing together constitutional nationalists and republicans, and had one major gimmick, an invitation to Éamon de Valera to open the key fundraising event. De Valera accepted but was

arrested in Newry and taken to Belfast, whereupon, after speaking Irish to the judge, he was sentenced to a month in jail. The public were outraged. The money poured in and the Ard-Scoil was built in Castle Street. It remained the headquarters of the League in the city until it was accidentally burnt down in the 1980s. The almost inevitable split followed and a disillusioned Mac Maoláin resigned from the League in 1929; the following year he left Belfast for Dublin, where he spent the rest of his life.

The other Irish language writer who published memories of Belfast in the early 20th century was Earnán de Blaghd, in his 1957 memoir *Trasna na Bóinne* (Across the Boyne). De Blaghd, who was born in 1889, is better known to English-speaking Ireland as Ernest Blythe, and is remembered mainly for being Minister of Finance in the Free State in the 1920s and almost destroying the artistic excellence of the Abbey Theatre in the following decades. De Blaghd was born and raised on a farm near Magheragall, about 12 miles from Belfast. He was raised in the Church of Ireland, and his family was strongly unionist, although his mother, who was of Presbyterian stock, spoke of a family tradition of involvement in the 1798 rebellion. He became interested in Irish as a small boy through a number of servant girls from Irish-speaking areas in Armagh, Louth and south Down who taught him scraps of Irish and told him traditional stories. During his teens he joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and he played an active part in the War of Independence.

De Blaghd had a vigorous if unsubtle mind, and, possibly because of his unusual background, he had an unusual take on the major events of his time. He lays the entire blame for the rise of Orangeism in the early twentieth century on Joseph Devlin and the Ancient Order of Hibernians, for instance, and he wrote a book on the importance of the Irish language in converting Ulster Protestants to nationalism. His style is equally idiosyncratic; one of his hobbies appears to have been the invention of neologisms, and the book supplies a helpful glossary of words that have never – ever – been used by anyone else. Culture, politics and religion are represented by terms for cultural apostasy, Presbyterian, sectarian, democratic, factionalism, heckling, suffragette, conservative, radical, liberal, partition, agitation, conviction, ideals, fanatic, protest, rifle. His interest in theatre is reflected in his inventions

for melodrama, theatrical flat, variety show, performance and intermission; there is a collection of other eccentric terms for things as diverse as vegetarian, rhubarb, linoleum and homing pigeon. This last utilises a word from Scottish Gaelic, which sits oddly in the context of an Irish based ultimately on the Munster dialect. Aside from this peculiarity, the prose is completely at home with its subject matter. While not particularly graceful, the language is as forceful and blunt as its author, and has little of the faux-rurality adopted by many of de Blaghd's contemporaries.

De Blaghd spent little time in Belfast, and most of his three volumes of memoirs relate to Dublin, where he went to work at an early age. He did, however, spend the years 1909–13 as a journalist in Bangor and Newtownards, and made an occasional foray to the city to practise his Irish (he attended the classes held by the Munster Irish faction) and on Sinn Féin and IRB business – he was for a few years head of the Belfast Circle of the Brotherhood, which never consisted of more than a dozen members, 'and I administered the oath to the few recruits we got'.[9] The Belfast IRB had an importance beyond its numbers, having revitalised the movement in the 1890s under the leadership of Denis McCullough and Bulmer Hobson, another Protestant republican, but there are very few insider accounts of radical nationalist activity in the city. De Blaghd gives us only an occasional glimpse. We learn from him that Belfast was the only place in Ireland which had a girls' branch of the Fianna, the youth wing of the Irish Volunteers, that it was named after Betsy Gray and that James Connolly's daughters were the dominant forces within it. This was not a sign of early feminism; according to de Blaghd, the Belfast boys tried to get rid of the girls' branch every year at the organisation's Ard-Fheis, and it survived only because of the support of the other groups 'who had no girls to annoy them'. It is typical of de Blaghd's honesty that he then acknowledges that in 1912, 'We Sinn Féiners in the north were a tiny, unimportant minority'.[10] He found the aging remnants of the Liberal tradition in the city to be just as ineffective as the republicans, and when he tried out a socialist meeting, it was poorly attended and consisted of a lecture on Burns: 'For all that I had always loved Burns, that meeting did not improve my opinion of Belfast socialists as a revolutionary or reforming force'.[11]

There is an interesting sidelight on the Ulster Literary Theatre, one of the few cultural bright spots of the Belfast of the time. Bulmer Hobson had sought the support of W.B. Yeats for a Belfast branch of the Irish Literary Theatre, but had been given a dusty reception, probably because Yeats was in the early days of his war against the political misappropriation of culture. Hobson, for whom culture was clearly a branch of propaganda, reacted by setting up an independent Ulster Literary Theatre. De Blaghd gives a substantial account of one of their plays, an historical skit (he gives two terms for this) called *Suzanne and the Sovereigns* in which James and William fought at Derry and the Boyne only because they were both in love with Suzanne, the daughter of a Belfast Alderman. When Suzanne ran away with William's banner-painter, he offered Ireland to James, who said he had enough troubles already. That de Blaghd could speak so highly of this piece of froth is an indication of the lack of aesthetic rigour he later brought to the Abbey, but his account of the audience reaction is revealing of the difficulties of presenting anything with political overtones to a Belfast audience. The occasion had a full house in the Ulster Minor Hall, with islands of nationalists and unionists hissing and cheering according to their convictions, and the humour of the piece was the only thing that stopped blows being struck. As he left the theatre, de Blaghd overheard a group of 'obvious Protestants who appeared to think that the play concealed some kind of nationalist propaganda, talking about what they had seen and heard. "It was very good,'" said one of them, "but they're all a pack of bloody Fenians."'[12]

If de Blaghd's background was unusual, that of the next significant Irish language writer to engage with the city was even more so. Tarlach Ó hUid, author of two volumes of autobiography, three novels and a book of short stories in Irish, claimed to have been baptised Terence Samuel Caesar Augustus Walter Hood in Deptford, London in 1917. He also claimed that both his parents came from the north of Ireland; his mother was a devout Baptist, while all that remained of father's original faith, not identified, was a profound hatred of Irish Catholics. Hood was sent to the local Church of England school and became a Methodist Sunday School teacher. At the age of 18 he joined the Greenshirt Movement for Social Credit, a fringe radical group equally

opposed to fascism and capitalism, but enthusiastic about the street politics of the time. About the same time he began to learn Irish with the London Gaelic League, and the following year, having abandoned the Greenshirts, visited Ireland for the first time, wearing a kilt. Never one to do things by halves, he stopped smoking St Bruno tobacco in favour of a foul brand called Irish Twist, and in 1937, still bekilted, he joined the IRA and converted briefly to Catholicism. The following year he moved to Ireland permanently, and after a fortnight in a Gaeltacht college in Donegal, became involved in the IRA bombing campaign on the Tyrone–Donegal border. Within weeks, a group of his companions had blown themselves up while preparing a bomb. Towards the end of the year, after a drunken constitutional nationalist had erroneously congratulated him for burning down a Presbyterian Church in Strabane, Hood abandoned the Catholic Church in disgust and became a Methodist again. The Second Donegal Battalion refused to accept a 'Protestant Englishman' as their new leader, so he spent some time in Dublin learning bomb-making and other useful skills, and was transferred to Belfast on the outbreak of the Second World War.

In Irish language circles, Terence Hood had become Tarlach Ó hUid, but in Belfast between 1939 and 1946 he adopted the *nom de guerre* Terry Wilson. He was soon put in charge of *War News*, a stencilled propaganda sheet run from an office in College Square North, the street in which Robert McAdam had spent most of his life. At this stage, most of the IRA supported Hitler, and Ó hUid's commandant had a high regard for Goebbels' propaganda methods: particularly the notion that the bigger the lie, the more likely it was to be believed. His instructions to Ó hUid on the outbreak of the bombing campaign in England were interesting:

> Check the newspapers, and every time you see an item about a fire or an explosion over the water, make as much of it as you want – and say that it was our boys that did it. It could well be true![13]

Ó hUid had strong anti-sectarian principles, filling the pages of *War News* with quotations from the United Irishmen and John Mitchel. The paper was distributed from the republican headquarters in the Pound Loney on the lower Falls:

> Women would come there from every area in Belfast with children in prams. A pile of *War News* was put into the false bottom of each pram, the child plonked on top of it, and off she [*sic*] would go. Liam took some of the parcels to country towns in the car, and others would be transported in milk-carts belonging to Republicans. Sometimes parcels were even sent on the buses as if they were no more than copies of the *Irish News*.[14]

This section of the autobiography is full of detail of wartime Belfast from the perspective of a multiple outsider – an English-born Protestant Republican on the run from the authorities, dodging police raids, broadcasting every Sunday in his most cultured English accent from a different house in a different area: 'This is the Irish Republican Army calling', a loaded Webley in his hand. One of his evasive strategies was the adoption of a self-consciously military stride to distinguish himself from Belfast Catholics, who tended, he says, to slink through the streets 'like a crowd of pickpockets'.[15] Some of Ó hUid's best writing is here, particularly the chapter describing his final capture. He had evaded a detective pursuing him by hiding in the toilets in the Great Northern Railway station, but, in order to prevent his fiancée from being followed to the safe house in which the *War News* was printed, broke cover to warn her and was caught. After interrogation by the Special Branch – he seems to have developed an affection for some of them, and one Catholic detective later asked him to tutor his daughter in Irish – he was imprisoned until the end of the war.

By the time he wrote the first volume of autobiography in 1960, Ó hUid had become disillusioned with the IRA, and presents a less than favourable picture of some of the events and people he was involved with. One particularly ugly incident involved the 'Butt and Belt Men', two heavies whose job was to impose discipline on Volunteers with belt buckles and pistol butts. When the *War News* office was raided – Ó hUid escaped by pushing past two armed detectives and running down the stairs – the Butt and Belt Men beat a false confession from a wine victim and ran him out of town. Another scene in which horror and farce intermingle involves a court-martial in which a group that had plotted to take over the Northern Command from the incompetents who ran it are saved from the death penalty only because the court

chairman forgot that Ó hUid was merely the note-taker and allowed him to vote.

The second volume of Ó hUid's autobiography, *Faoi Ghlas* (In Prison), an account of his five years of internment – most of which was spent in Crumlin Road Jail – was published much later, in 1985. While the first volume had been written during the disastrous IRA campaign of the 1950s, the second, which appeared in the middle of the latest troubles, is even less flattering to the republican movement, although there are warm and affectionate depictions of many of his former comrades. Ó hUid claims to have become disillusioned with the IRA by the end of 1941, largely because of the organisation's tendency to execute members as spies on very thin evidence. However, through loyalty to his original oath, and because he had been responsible for recruiting a number of other men who were still interned, he refused to sign a release form – the Government offered freedom to those who swore to give up their involvement in the republican movement – and was among the last to be released. He also experienced a genuine conversion to Catholicism, having begun to attend mass to avoid the company of the other Methodists in the prison, whom he describes with the snobbery of the political prisoner as 'thieves, pimps, sodomites, drunks, rapists and perhaps even murderers'.[16] Most of his considerable energies were spent on the Irish language. In 1939 there had been only a handful of reasonably fluent speakers among the republican prisoners in Crumlin Road Jail; by 1945 they were counted in their hundreds.

Ó hUid's personal achievement was remarkable. When he went to jail he had some Irish that he had picked up in various night-classes, a few days in Connemara and a fortnight in the Donegal Gaeltacht. In prison, with no access to native speakers of Irish and depending entirely on books, he developed an extraordinary command of the language, and began to write prose and poetry. One novel and most of the short stories in his book *Taobh Thall den Teorainn* (The Other Side of the Border) were written in prison. However, the lack of an authentic language environment came at a certain stylistic cost, lending a curiously antique quality to his prose that reminds this reader of Joseph Conrad at his most baroque. Ó hUid had a taste for unusual or old-fashioned phraseology – one gets the impression that he was determined to use

every word or idiom he had ever gathered – and various linguistic registers bump into each other disconcertingly in a style that is often over-literary, and sometimes so elaborate as to be almost unreadable.

His other main flaw as a prose-writer (his verse is not worth reading) was a difficulty in getting on with a story; he cannot glimpse Cave Hill from his prison cell without a reference to Wolfe Tone, and a character in a novel buying a book in Smithfield Market unleashes a note on the history of the Catholic community in Belfast and a reference to the fact that Henry Joy McCracken had worked around the corner in a street named after his own uncle. The autobiographies and the three novels are also marred by frequent, and sometimes long passages of ponderous reflection which rarely add to the reader's interest and certainly interrupt the narrative flow. However, Ó hUid does have an interesting story to tell, and sometimes manages to tell it. In *Faoi Ghlas*, for example, the demoralisation of the prisoners at the end of their long term, when the gallant foreign allies had been defeated, and those who refused to sign their release forms were released in a deliberately haphazard manner, is well handled. Another fine passage describes the first night of the Belfast Blitz, which he witnessed from his bunk. Brian Moore, who recounts the same event in *The Emperor of Ice Cream*, had been stationed on the roof of the Mater Hospital next door to the prison, and Ó hUid's version does not suffer by comparison.

Ó hUid's 1949 novel *An Dá Thrá* (Both Sides of the Divide) is a study of Belfast society from the perspective of a Protestant IRA activist from Strabane who lodges with an elderly Protestant couple in north Belfast. The hero bears a close resemblance to their only son, who had joined the navy and been killed during the war, and the woman more or less adopts him. The couple are well drawn; the husband is inarticulate but decent, a strong unionist but uncomfortable with the bigotry of some of his workmates, and the relationship between husband and wife is delicately depicted: he tolerates her nagging in the knowledge that it comes from the trauma of the loss of her son. The hero, unfortunately, is a cardboard cut-out of the author, high-minded, priggish and in love with a Catholic girl. Alan Titley has identified the major flaw in the novel, a thematic uncertainty to which 'there is no resolution, either personal, political, or in terms of the plot'.[17]

Where the novel does score is in a number of descriptions of the city from the perspective of a stranger. The following describes the hero's second day in Belfast:

> The silence of the Belfast Sabbath surprised Liam after the noise and excitement of the previous night. He hardly met two people between Eglinton Street and Royal Avenue. The Old Lodge Road was filthy and depressing, the blind pulled down on the smeared window of every miserable little shop, old newspapers and orange skins thick on the ground, and that hostile silence everywhere, so that his step on the pavement sounded like the clatter of cavalry. The only comparison for Belfast on a Sabbath morn, thought Liam, was London during the Great Plague.[18]

Ó hUid's final novel, *Adios* (1975), is also set partly in Belfast but has very little to recommend it. He did, however, produce a number of competent short stories during the 1940s, and one in particular, 'Guth an Aoire' (The Voice of the Shepherd) is very close to being a total success. This is an account of a riot on the night of the twelfth of July following a skirmish during an Orange parade in the Docks area. The shepherd of the title is the local priest who believes he can prevent his parishioners from taking part in the riot. There is an extraordinary scene in which he discovers that, like the Plains Indians, working-class Catholics choose different leaders for war and peace, and his authority has dissolved. When he arrives at the scene, a bonfire has been lit, half-dressed women and girls still dressed for their night's dancing are digging up cobblestones, and the men are gathered around the war chieftain, the local IRA leader: 'a bald man who was issuing orders and striking the back of his right hand on his left palm to emphasise his words'. When the priest orders everyone to go home peacefully, no-one stirs, and a mutinous murmur runs through the crowd:

> The bald man spoke to him, but not disrespectfully.
>
> 'You'd better go home yourself, Father. There may be a bit of a row here tonight, and it's no place for the likes of you.'
>
> At that moment a shout was heard from the top of the street.
>
> 'Here they come!'
>
> 'Too late,' said the bald man, 'But you go into that doorway, Father, and you'll be safe enough.' And he began to run.

The priest, still appealing to his parishioners, is swept off his feet by the rush of the crowd:

> 'Be careful, you pack of eejits,' said a young man, 'Don't you see you've flattened the priest.'
>
> He bent over him, helped him rise to his feet, and guided him to a door. He left the priest there on the kitchen floor, dazed and leaning against the wall. Then he hurried up the street cheerfully humming '*Confraternity men, to the fight*'.[19]

Ó hUid's slightly older contemporary Séamus Ó Néill – an academic born in Castlewellan in County Down in 1910 but brought to Belfast at an early age – also attempted to depict the sectarianism of the city, in his 1959 novel *Máire Nic Artáin* (Mary McCartan). This is the story of a well-meaning, insecure and rather insipid Catholic woman married to a well-meaning, even more insipid Protestant man, Seoirse Mac Giolla Rua (George McElroy). Most of the action of the novel is set between the Home Rule crisis and partition. Máire and her husband have fled from the rural, personalised sectarianism of their original home, which from internal evidence is not far from Castlewellan, to the impersonal sectarianism of Belfast, where they live in a back-street off the Shankill Road. Both families had opposed the match, and Seoirse had been disinherited by his father, who objected to the prospect of him raising 'a swarm of papists'.[20] Seoirse has found work as a labourer in the Shipyard, and while they dream of saving enough to buy a farm in their original home, it becomes increasingly obvious that this will never happen. The novel follows the corrosive decline of their marriage under the burden of poverty, the death of their child, and Máire's social isolation – she has lost her family, gives up the practice of her religion, and is unwilling or unable to integrate into her new society. Seoirse takes a different route; he tries to ingratiate himself with his workmates by joining them in drinking and gambling, thus ensuring that the couple will never escape the poverty trap, and eventually joins the Orange Order. While this last act gives him a certain sense of purpose, it finally alienates him entirely from his wife.

The novel deals with important themes. The inability of this very ordinary couple to live up to the one heroic act of their lives could be

the basis for a profound study of the human condition. As a study of how sectarianism can destroy personal relationships, it has great potential, and Ó Néill provides interesting and convincing insights into the shock facing rural-bred people moving to back-street Belfast – his own family had made a similar shift in 1916.

However, the novel does not succeed. It has enough structural and stylistic flaws to ensure that most of its strengths are dissipated. Few male Irish writers in either language can depict the complexities of love between a man and a woman, unless the woman is a mother, and Ó Néill is worse than most:

> 'Oh, Seoirse, you're tormenting me, you're breaking my heart. How could you think such a thing? Wasn't it to you I gave the love of my heart? Didn't I always love you? Wasn't it for you I abandoned my faith and family?'
>
> 'I never asked you to abandon your faith.'
>
> 'That's true, and I didn't have much religion at the time. I came through too much that took it from me, but I abandoned everything for you. And now you're betraying me, you're looking at me as if you doubted me. I can't stand it, I can't stand it.[21]

Character motivation is often as unconvincing as the dialogue. While Seoirse's father had made it clear that he wished to have no more to do with him, it is not clear that Máire's family would have been so inflexible; indeed, the novel ends with a particularly clumsy and unnecessary scene when her brother tries to visit her and is beaten to death at the end of her street. Máire's rejection of the uncouth but kindly attempts of the women in her street to befriend her after she has lost her child is not necessarily inexplicable, but remains totally unexplained.

The style is uneven. Sometimes the novel reads like a first draft, sometimes it is over-written and packed with Donegal idioms, from time to time it appears to be a poor imitation of Hemingway's muscular minimalism. Sometimes it is quite powerful. The finest sustained passage is towards the end, a six-page description of the twelfth of July parade, the first one in which Seoirse takes part, passing through Carlisle Circus. This passage is full of accurate detail: 'They marched in four ranks, not with the steady, measured tread of soldiers, but every man doing his best, walking briskly with the short quick steps of city folk'.[22] This

passage is the moral heart of the novel, following Máire's confused emotional state, climaxing at the point where Seoirse has passed her and she feels that he 'was lost to her among those crowds of men, those crowds of men who were passing her, for it seemed to her now that they were endless', and identifying the moment when the marriage dies:

> She knew now why she had taken the ribbon from Seoirse that morning. The ribbon was coming between them. This parade and all it represented, these banners, these crowds, this music was coming between them.
>
> It was as if Seoirse was a piece of foam being swept from her on a flood, or a drowning child she could not rescue. She turned around. She wanted to leave this place, leave all that was around her. But no-one behind her would move aside, and when she tried to push through a woman spoke to her harshly, and told her to stay where she was, and she had to stay. She had to stand there until the last of the men had passed, and she began to hate them, and hate the women who were keeping her there as a hostage. And Máire knew she was a hostage in a foreign land.[23]

Ó Néill lived most of his life in Dublin. Ó hUid tried to live in Belfast, but, like Mac Maoláin, fell out with the local Gaelic League and moved, also to Dublin. It is remarkable that most of the following generations of writers – the most notable exception being Gréagóir Ó Dúill – have stayed in or near the city. There are quite a number of them. An incomplete list of Irish-language creative writers from or living in Belfast, taken at random from one bookshelf, would include: Art de Creag, Brian Ó Maoileoin, Gearóid Stockman, Alex Bán Mac Conaill, Deirdre Nic Grianna, Anraí Mac an Ultaigh, Seán Ó Dúrois, Joe Bogle, Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, Pól Ó Muirí, Gearóid Mac Lochlainn.

To conclude, I will focus on the last of these writers. Mac Lochlainn is a west Belfast poet who is a master of street argot. He owes something to Padraic Fiacc, something to Ciarán Carson, and a lot to Bob Marley. He is the first Irish language poet to use the linguistic register of the first cohesive generation of native speakers of urban Irish. This has been referred to earlier in this essay. Irish literature in the past had been haunted by the impossibilist ideal of writing a language that has all the richness and vigour of 19th-century monoglot societies, but as if there

had been no break in the continuity and development of Gaelic civilisation. The natural tension between pedant and public that controls the rate and nature of language change has, in the case of Irish, been left too much in the guardianship of the former. However, when the Belfast Irish speaking community was founded in the 1960s, there emerged, for the first time, a generation of urban native speakers whose first priority was communication; not grammar, not accuracy, not vocabulary, not nativist idiom. They developed, in fact, a creole with simplified grammar, restricted register, code-switching, interlinguistic interference, a series of created and accidental neologisms. And then this version of the language took on a life of its own, and its speakers began to become creative in its use – it is as if the language had compressed 300 years of structural change into a single generation. Now that the oldest of this generation are in their late forties and raising their own children, this new register has established itself as the dominant linguistic pattern in Irish speaking Belfast, and is the language of the thousands of children now coming through the Irish-medium school system. They have also, partly due to the high esteem they enjoyed within west Belfast society, influenced language learners of their own generation, Mac Lochlainn among them. Mac Lochlainn was the first to recognise the latent creative potential of Belfast-creolised Irish, the first to have the sophistication to make it work, but he has also benefited from it. Until this generation came along, no one realised that it is possible to create in the language even if you do not know the 16 rules for not leniting the initial consonant of a genitive governed by a feminine noun. His adoption of another master of creole, Bob Marley, as a model was a stroke of genius, not only as a creative strategy for writing in a non-standard form of a language, but as a mode for expressing his own chaotic temperament, and the anarchic reality of his broken society.

Mac Lochlainn is a natural bohemian who plays in a rock band, and, on the evidence of his poetry, knows a lot of people who take a lot of drugs. His Belfast is an underground of smoke-filled pubs, late-night drinking sprees, chaotic, self-destructive, lost lives. He is a performance poet, who chants or half-sings his poems, and his most innovative (but by no means only) mode is a tumble of images and puns, with an astonishing range of contrapuntal references, ninth-century sagas, Native American folklore, *sean-nós* song, reggae music, modern

literature. These poems tend to be symphonic in form, and usually need to be experienced as a whole, but the following shortened extract may give some flavour of his work:

> They say that you are looped, flipped, nuts, whacko,
> out of your tree and out of the game,
> Off your rocker, broke-down, bonkers,
> Schizo-manic-psycho, weirdo basket-case ...
> Flipped-out-skipped-out,
> short-of-a-shilling fruitcake,
> Screw-ball, freakshow.
> That's what they are saying about you,
> who is barred from every bar
> between here and Sailortown,
> everybody avoiding you like a hole in the head,
> tired of your bungee-jump hello,
> sick of the sobs of your highly-strung out-of tune guitar,
> tired of your jerky juke-box song,
> your wopped-out word-waltzes
> your shake-it-all-about hokey-cokey conversation,
> your jump-down-turn-around one-man-céilidh ...
> your half-baked advances on their half-arsed women
> and half-cut men,
> your intellectual scrambled eggs ...[24]

This underworld exists in most western cities, but Belfast also has a particularly virulent form of civil strife, and Mac Lochlainn approaches this from a number of angles: curiously impersonal, imagistic snapshots; tragicomic incidents; and highly personal reflections. One dream-sequence brings to life a scene that has haunted most of the inhabitants of the city at one time or other, but is particularly vivid for those who stay out late at night:

> I see myself in the back seat of a hackney cab
> beside a silent brute of a man.
> His black leather jacket reeks of beer,
> and he's got a hand-gun stashed in his oxter.
> It bulges like a wad of notes.

A pine deodorizer dangles against the windscreen
I'm being scrutinised through the rear-view mirror.
I'm in the wrong dream yet again,
wondering when to make my move, when to jump
out the door and roll down the road
like a lost hubcap
before coming to with a jump in my own bed.
The memory is razor-sharp.[25]

Creative writing in Irish is more vibrant now than it has ever been. Ever. There is more talent and a wider range of subject, approach and form than at any other period in the town's history. It is now possible to make fun of both the language and the language movement from within. I will finish with the words of one of Gearóid Mac Lochlainn's sequences dedicated to Mo Chara – one of his large cast of broken-down idealists. ('Mo chara' means literally 'my friend' but has a multi-referential framework which evokes anchorite saints such as Mo Ling, while commenting with both affection and self-irony on the Babu Irish of the Jailtacht – this form is grammatically wrong when used as a vocative. It is also commonly used as a nickname.)

Mo Chara says he will never speak Irish again.
Not till the fuckin' cows come home, to use his words.
Every eejit in this town has a cúpla focal, he says.
It's getting fuckin' trendy.
Even the new neighbours speak it.
Before long everybody will have Irish,
just like mobiles, e-mail
and friggin' cable, he says.
When that time comes I'll not say another word of it
or English either for that matter.
I'll rise above it all
on wings of silence
and a smile on my coupon like ...
like fuckin' Harpo! he said
and he went on by
hop-scotching down the street.[26]

The Pobal Feirste Neo-Gaeltacht

Lessons to learn?

This essay provides a detailed account of the involvement of Aodán and his family with the Shaw's Road Gaeltacht in west Belfast, the only successful urban development of its kind in Ireland. It charts its development and discusses patterns of language use among the community. The origin and meaning of the word 'Gaeltacht' is discussed, as is the development of its use in Ireland. Attempts to found other urban Gaeltachts, notably in Dublin, are also examined. The essay provides an authoritative account of the founding of the first Irish-medium school and its struggles to achieve government recognition and funding.

The Pobal Feirste Neo-Gaeltacht
Lessons to learn?

In 1975, my wife, Áine, and I decided to build a house in a small Irish-speaking community in Belfast. Both of us had learned Irish as a second language, and both of us had connections with the language through our families.

Áine's father and two of her mother's brothers had learned Irish to a high standard. My father's father had learned Irish in the 1890s and, although he never learned to speak it fluently, briefly taught it at night classes (a not unknown phenomenon in the early years of the language revival). The woman he married had been raised in an area in the west of Ireland from which the language had just been lost. Both her parents were native speakers, and her grandmother had only broken English, but my grandmother could not speak Irish. My father never fulfilled his lifetime ambition of becoming a fluent speaker, but my mother had attended an Irish-medium school in the south of Ireland. Her own father was a native speaker, but her family discovered this only recently, more than half a century after his death. Over four generations, every generation in my family had either a native or a revivalist speaker who did not pass the language on, through the family, to the next generation. This is how languages die.

We wanted to break this pattern; in fact, to reverse it. We knew of parents in Belfast who, with varying degrees of success, had brought up families with Irish, and we knew of other families who had tried but failed to do so. To be honest, we were not convinced that we would have the strength of character to succeed ourselves. But there was an alternative. A group of married couples, most of them a decade or more older than us, had already set up a community of Irish speakers, and we knew some of them. By joining this community, we would not have

to face the difficulties of trying to bring up children in isolation, and we would be able to benefit from their experience. The community also had land available, and, having built their own houses, had the know-how to guide us in building our new home. To put it another way, they had already done most of the hard work. What was daunting was not knowing how the community worked: was it like a commune, or a kibbutz, or was it just a group of people who had chosen to live in close proximity? It was also daunting to discover that while Áine and I could talk about literature and history and politics in Irish, our new house was full of everyday objects like plugs and sockets and doorknobs and skirting boards for which we did not have the terms, and none of our language courses had taught us how to speak to babies.

We still live in the community, and we brought up our daughter, Aoife, with Irish as her first language. She survived the experience without any major trauma beyond a mild period of teenage rebellion when she would speak to us only in English – how else could you rebel against parents who are language activists? Unless she wanted something, which gave us leverage. She never really turned against the language, as we had seen in some other families. This was as much as we had dared to hope for – we decided early on not to pressurise her into becoming a language activist. This may have been a clever move, for, in fact, Aoife also lives in the community, teaches in an Irish-medium school, and is bringing up her two sons with Irish as their first language.

Involvement in the community enabled us to succeed far beyond our expectations. Not only did we pass the language on to the next generation, but we enabled our daughter to pass it on to our grandchildren. The community enabled us to succeed, as a family, to live a significant part of our lives in a language that could have died out completely sometime over the last century. Whether the example of the community indicates a new direction for the Irish language movement is a more difficult question to answer.

In this chapter I will be giving an account of the community in which I live. Much of this account is second-hand, for when the first meeting about the community took place I was 12 years of age, and when the first houses were built I was still at school. Although I have lived here for 35 years, and have spent most of those years actively involved in the language movement, I will try to be as objective as I possibly can. My

community is a social experiment that may or may not transfer to other societies. If this account is to be of any use to anybody considering a similar venture, it must be seen, firstly, within its particular social (and political) context, and secondly, it has to be treated as an experiment, and its strengths and weaknesses analysed as coldly and as clearly as possible.

The cluster of houses we live in is on the outskirts of the city, and is known to our English-speaking neighbours as 'the Irish houses'. Its origins are in 1961, when a group of families came together to develop a community in which their children would be brought up speaking Irish as their first language. The first houses were completed in 1969. In the early years, the community, revealingly, described itself as a cóilíneacht – a colony – and called itself Pobal Feirste, 'pobal' meaning 'community' and 'feirste' derived from the Irish language version of the name 'Belfast'. It is usually referred to as the Shaw's Road Gaeltacht. I will be using both Pobal Feirste and the term 'Gaeltacht' in this chapter.

The word Gaeltacht, which originally meant something like 'Gaeldom,' has now become what could be described as a geo-linguistic term. It usually refers to those scattered areas – mainly in the west of Ireland – where the thread of linguistic continuity has never been broken, where the language has been passed on from one generation to the next for thousands of years. These survival language communities, all situated in rural settings, are quite small and increasingly fragile: probably fewer than 30,000 people in the historic Gaeltacht use the language on a daily basis. (In the mid-19th century there were more than three million native speakers of Irish.) The geographic sense of the term was actually a borrowing from Scottish Gaelic, a close relation of Irish. The Scottish Gaelic term Gàidhealtachd, however, refers to the geographical entity of the Highlands of Scotland, once Gaelic-speaking, but where the language survives now only in isolated pockets: paradoxically, it does not apply to the Western Isles, where the language is strongest.

If we accept that a Gaeltacht is a geographical entity in which Irish Gaelic is the language of a significant proportion if the inhabitants, then the two acres in Shaw's Road is undoubtedly a Gaeltacht. However, it is significantly different to the historic Gaeltachts in that it was created, deliberately, by learners of the language, and is situated in Belfast, an

urban setting which has been overwhelmingly English-speaking for more than 400 years.

There are not many neo-Gaeltachts in Ireland. Twentieth-century Ireland has had a remarkable record in developing an unusual pattern of language maintenance, a pattern of intergenerational transmission that involves generation after generation transmitting Irish to the following generation as a second language, mainly through the education system.[1] To date, this process has been remarkably successful, if knowledge of the language is your yardstick. Census returns in the Republic of Ireland (where Irish is designated as the first official language) show that perhaps one and a half million – the vast majority of them learners – have at least a reasonable competence in the language. Only a small minority of these people use Irish to any significant degree in their daily lives. Where the society has failed, spectacularly, is in promoting intergenerational transmission within the family. While there are a number of isolated families who raise their children with Irish as their first language, the society has failed even more spectacularly to create new, organic language communities outside the historic Gaeltacht areas.

There have been other attempts to establish neo-Gaeltachts. In the 1930s the Irish government gave farms in the rich lands in the east of the country to groups of native speakers from the beautiful, if unproductive, western Gaeltacht areas. The most successful of these was Rathcarn, 40 miles from Dublin.

These state-sponsored efforts to transplant traditional Gaeltacht communities to anglicised parts of Ireland were an exclusively rural phenomenon, but there have also been Irish-speaking communities in Irish cities in the past. We know that the language had a considerable presence in most of the major cities in Ireland during the 18th and 19th centuries. This is not surprising, as more than half the population of Ireland in 1800 spoke Irish. Even Belfast, in the anglicised, industrialised north-east, had clusters of Irish speakers in the 19th century. However, except possibly for the Claddagh district of Galway City, which survived into the 20th century, these could be described primarily as secondary language communities, consisting primarily of incomers from Irish-speaking areas. These linguistic communities tended not to renew themselves, and generally lasted no more than one or two generations

unless they were revitalised by new waves of Irish-speaking incomers. Inevitably, they declined with the decline of the language in the historic Gaeltacht.

The Shaw's Road Gaeltacht was not the first attempt to create an urban neo-Gaeltacht, although it is by far the largest and is generally acknowledged to have been the most successful. As early as 1924, shortly after the establishment of the new independent state in the south of Ireland, a housing society was formed in Dublin whose purpose was 'to establish and maintain a community of Irish speakers' in the capital.[2] By 1927 the group had been leased two acres of land in the northern outskirts of the city of Dublin. The following year they had built ten houses. This could have formed the nucleus of a significant linguistic community, as there were a further 29 acres on the site which could have been developed as an urban Gaeltacht. Unfortunately, the group did not have sufficient funds to build the necessary access road into the development. Although one of the central aims of the new state was the revival of the Irish language, the authorities gave it no support, even though the group had been under the impression that the entire site 'would be utilized solely for the erection by the Nua-Ghaedhaltacht [Neo-Gaeltacht] Society of houses for occupation by Irish speakers'.[3]

The remainder of the site was developed by other, rather better organised housing societies, who built 250 additional houses. Little else is now known of the experiment, but the community, soon enveloped in an English-speaking environment, did not survive, and all that remains of this attempt is that the estate is known as Páirc na Gaeltachta – Gaeltacht Park.

The failure of the Dublin scheme was partly due to a lack of understanding by the authorities of the dynamics of language revitalisation. This is not surprising; the new independent government of the southern Irish state had, in the 1920s, no precedents for their attempt to restore a language that had been in retreat for hundreds of years and that was now the native language of only a narrow segment of the population. The main focus of the state-sponsored language revival at that time was, firstly, increasing knowledge of the language through the education system (Irish was made a compulsory subject), and secondly, using the language, along with English, in the state system. It appears to have been assumed that widespread knowledge of the

language would automatically be followed by widespread use. We have learned, to our cost, that it is by no means as simple as that, and that a much more sophisticated approach, involving the development of linguistic communities and, in particular, intergenerational transmission through the family, is the most effective way of maintaining a threatened language.

It is possible that other factors militated against the development of the Dublin community. The pioneering sociolinguist Colmán Ó hUallacháin told me in 1974 that his father had been invited to join this community in the 1920s. Although the elder Mr Ó hUallacháin and his wife were then raising their family with Irish, his response was that it was bad enough to meet Irish language activists at conferences and meetings and festivals without having to live beside them. Such a response – while a surprising one from a committed language revivalist – is not unique in the Irish context. When schemes such as these are proposed, which happens every so often, a common reaction is for people to respond that they would be happy to live in such a community, but not if X is going to live there. The identity of X varies from time to time and from place to place, but the man in question – and it was always a man – belongs to a recognisable type; he is prominent in the language movement, has a strong, prickly personality, and is known for his dedication to the language, but is suspected by other language activists to be slightly unbalanced and to suffer from either a Napoleonic or a messianic complex. Despite this, in various parts of Ireland, small groups of Irish-speaking families have chosen to live near each other. Except for one small group outside Cork City, they tend to do so quietly and without drawing attention to themselves. One of their reasons for doing so is to avoid the possibility of living within an ass's roar of X.

Little is known of the Dublin experiment, which leaves a number of unanswered questions. How long did it survive as a linguistic community? What impact, if any, did it have on the wider community? What language did the children speak among themselves? What kind of education did they have?

While the experiment itself seems to have been forgotten, the ideal behind it never was. The theme of an urban Gaeltacht emerged again in the second half of the century. During the 1960s, for example, the writer Máirtín Ó Cadhain argued for the creation of city communities

which would have all the characteristics of modernity – at least what passed for modernity in Ireland in the sixties:

> You could have in the Galltacht [English-speaking areas] ... real Gaelic communities, juvenile delinquency, Beatles, shebeens [illegal drinking dens] and all. There must be one big community in Dublin. It is a challenge. Are we worthy to take it up? If we had flourishing communities such as I say throughout Ireland, and specially in the big urban areas, the Gaeltacht itself – the historical Gaeltachts – would no longer be anything except one other Irish-speaking community.[4]

Ó Cadhain, an important literary figure as well as a language activist, was one of those people around whom an entire folklore has gathered. Among the many anecdotes about him is that he himself was invited to join an Irish language community in Dublin, but when he discovered that a certain individual (X) was also intending to become a member, he refused. The community never got off the ground. There is a whole list of possible contenders for the identity of X.

Pobal Feirste, the Shaw's Road Gaeltacht

The establishment of Pobal Feirste, like other 20th-century attempts to build new Irish-speaking urban communities, was a conscious act of language revival. In a circular written in the early 1960s, the proposed new community was contextualised as a kind of vanguard to a radical re-Gaelicisation of Ireland, one that would involve the linguistic reconquest of Ireland by the historic Gaeltacht: 'We believed that if the real Gaeltacht [an Ghaeltacht cheart] was to expand, Irish speakers in the Galltacht [English-speaking areas] had to strengthen themselves as a unit so that the preparatory work could be done to facilitate that expansion'.[5] this model of language revival envisaged a reversal of the centuries-long process by which Ireland had originally been anglicised, where nodes of anglicisation gradually expanded to embrace the entire island except for remote, isolated communities. While the historic Gaeltacht already provided such potential nodes of expansion, this approach did not involve the expansion of the historic Gaeltacht field by stony field, but the establishment of linguistic nodes in the major centres of population. Another pamphlet issued by the group in the early

1970s put even more emphasis on the importance of gaelicising the cities: 'Unless Irish-speaking communities are founded in the Galltacht [English-speaking areas], Irish will not survive, never mind be revived'.[6] They also argued that a community had a better chance of having an impact on the state system than individuals or scattered families: 'Without such a community we cannot demand our rights as citizens: for local authorities or government cannot provide for people who are scattered among those who have other requirements'.[7]

As well as reviving Irish in the broader society, the community also aimed to revive the language within the family structure – what came to be known as intergenerational transmission. One additional reason for coming together as a community was to make that task easier. On 14 November 1965, the *Sunday Press* newspaper published an article about the community's plans, including their intention of setting up an Irish-medium school:

> Now, there are thirty-six Irish-speaking families in Belfast but the school would be open to anyone who wants to send their children along ... The idea for the school and houses originated four years ago. At that time, there were only seven Irish-speaking families in the city, and most of us had just got married. We concluded that one of the difficulties of bringing up a family through Irish was that we lived in different parts of the city. The idea of living together in one community emerged.[8]

Around 1973, the community issued a bilingual pamphlet which gives an insight into the early history of the project, and the community's view of itself:

> A group of newly married couples were bringing their children up with Irish in Belfast in the early sixties. Most of them knew each other and they had opportunities to share their views and experiences.
>
> They also could learn from the experiences of the generations which had gone before them, a half a dozen or so Belfast families who had been Irish-speaking for twenty-some years ... The young couples decided, in order that their children would not be raised in isolation, as had happened to other Irish-speaking families in Belfast and Dublin and in other parts of

the country, that it would be a logical, natural step to live beside each other.

At one stage, there were nineteen families which favoured of this idea, but for all that, when a piece of land had been bought on the Shaw's Road on the edge of Andersonstown there were only five families remaining. During 1968/9, with borrowed money, the land was bought and five houses were built. Two years later, another three families came forward and built houses on the site.[9]

At the time of writing [September 2011], there are 22 houses in the community, with a third generation growing up, most of them grandchildren of the generation which founded Pobal Feirste. There is not space here to deal in detail with the history of the community, but, as it would never have existed without the extraordinary achievements of its founders, it may be useful to provide some analysis of the founding generation – those who built homes between 1969 and 1975 – and of the society from which they came.

There were 10 families in this group, and nine houses – one family left to go to the Donegal Gaeltacht around 1974. The houses were built in three stages. The first group of five families moved into their houses in the spring of 1969, a few short months before the community tensions within Northern Ireland erupted into civic violence, followed by a 30-year low-intensity war that saw the deaths of more than 3,000 people. Three more homes were built within the next couple of years, and then a single house was built in the mid-1970s. All adult members of the community had learned Irish as a second language. They were all Catholics, were all from Belfast, and most of them lived in West Belfast, which is a rather atypical society, as I have tried to describe in an earlier publication:

> After partition, consistent hostility from successive unionist governments in Northern Ireland towards its Catholic minority, which in Belfast sometimes took the form of orchestrated pogroms, drove that community back in on itself. The extraordinarily cohesive society that developed as a reaction to institutionalised discrimination was to have a major effect on the development of the language. ... Two factors were at work

> here; ideological nationalism, sharpened by the compulsion to resist a hostile state, and the communalist dynamic of the Catholic community. Catholic communalism was itself reinforced on an institutional basis by segregated education and on a social basis by the fact that much of Belfast is divided into exclusively Catholic and Protestant areas. Some of these ghettoes are the size of a small city: the main Catholic area in West Belfast currently has a population larger than that of Derry.
>
> The survival of Irish in the city was tenuous enough for a long time, but the unusual if unappetising social structure of Belfast actually worked to the advantage of the language movement. ... The socio-linguistic and political circumstances in which Irish has survived in Belfast are distinctive; a small organic Irish-speaking community within an urban network of language learners within a large disaffected Catholic/nationalist minority with a high birth-rate in a Protestant/unionist city in an unstable Protestant/unionist state within a Catholic /nationalist island.[10]

Because of this unusual situation, the Irish language in West Belfast has what a sociologist might call a high level of emblematic cultural capital; it is often referred to as 'our language' by people who do not speak it. Some of the status of the language rubs off on speakers of the language – as a kind of lay priesthood they can be accorded the respect due to those who live the dream, but sometimes mixed with a certain level of ambivalence involving negative memories of particular teachers or natural suspicion of the zealot. However, it should be added that Pobal Feirste relied to a very large extent on the goodwill of the broader community, and that its school, which will be discussed below, would never have survived without the active support and generosity of the people of West Belfast.

The traits of cohesion and group loyalty described as Catholic communalism are even more pronounced among Irish speakers, and the founders of Pobal Feirste belonged to an even tighter social grouping, a factor which may have contributed to the success of the project. All 10 couples were associated with a club called Cumann Chluain Ard, an organisation noted for its radicalism on language issues. Indeed, many of them had first met there; not only did they belong to the same social

circle, they largely belonged to the same generation – most having been born in the period between the mid-1930s and the mid-1940s. Many of them were related – in fact, seven of the families had a brother or sister in the group, and there was one group of three siblings.

Most of them also had a similar socio-economic background. Gabrielle Maguire in her book *Our Own Language: An Irish Initiative* notes that 'The founder members of the Shaw's road Community were mainly working class people',[11] a statement which reflects the community's self-image. This is a reasonably accurate statement, and, in the early days would be supported by a socio-economic breakdown of the jobs held by the menfolk. Only one man would be classed among the professional middle class; typical job descriptions would be carpenter, bus driver, mechanic, sheet-metal worker.

However, it was rather more complicated than that. Interest in and commitment to educational achievement were relatively high within the group (this was a common characteristic within working-class Catholic Belfast, where education was commonly seen as the main path to economic advancement). There was also a tendency for the womenfolk to have higher levels of academic achievement than the men: two of them were qualified teachers and another had a university degree. Many of them, both men and women, sought academic qualification. Their work profile also changed, and not only for those who had pursued higher education. A socioeconomic profile of the first generation in the 1990s would have placed more than half the parents firmly in the professional or business middle class: teachers, an accountant, a translator, newspaper editors, managers, a lecturer in a third-level college.

This indicates that the founders of Pobal Feirste were an unusual group of people. They were, in fact, both social and economic entrepreneurs. Not only did they manage to create a small estate of houses with few resources, and not only did they create a minority language community within a linguistic community that speaks English, the most overwhelmingly powerful language in the western world, but a high proportion of them showed ability, through either business or education, to advance their own economic circumstances. This small group of people also managed to have a major impact on the society around them, as we shall see.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the families in the early years was in creating a linguistic environment in which the children spoke Irish as a matter of course. They had no exemplars to follow, and this issue was a cause of great concern. Some of the families already had young children, and had experience of bringing up children in Irish in isolation. Because of this, they were highly aware of just how powerful the general linguistic environment can be, and were aware that, while Irish would be the language of the home and of communication between the parents and between parents and children, there was a good chance that English would become the default language of communication between the children on the street. Even if they could manage to create a linguistic bubble in which Irish was the dominant language, there would be no lack of English in the wider society, from relatives, from English speakers in the wider neighbourhood, from friends, in shops, on the television – everywhere, perhaps, except in the two acres of land belonging to Pobal Feirste. It was also understood that in social situations in which bilinguals are in contact with monoglots, the language of the monoglots will tend to dominate even when the monoglots are in a minority. It was also understood that children are not ideologues, that they will understand the real social dynamic around them, respond instinctively to that environment, and automatically adjust to the linguistic patterns around them. It was assumed that it would take only a couple of English-speaking children in frequent contact with Shaw's Road children to have a significant impact on the children's language patterns.

In this respect, the situation of the houses was particularly fortunate. When the first houses were built, Shaw's Road was situated on the edge of the city – a rather ragged edge, as the city was expanding well beyond Shaw's Road, but this expansion was uneven, leaving large tracts of undeveloped greenfield sites. Behind and below the houses were large fields. Above them were a row of rural labourers' cottages from an earlier era, inhabited by older people who had no children living with them. Facing the houses was a large, well-established estate of hundreds of homes and thousands of children, but between Pobal Feirste and this estate was a busy main road. In the early years there were enough young children among the various families to form a cohesive social group. While they were small, and too young to cross the road by themselves,

there was an opportunity to develop Pobal Feirste as a small linguistic island, and the parents took advantage of this temporary isolation. They organised events among the children to strengthen the linguistic environment, to create a sense of cohesion, and to develop Irish as the default language among them. Children from a number of other Irish-speaking families in Belfast were included in these activities.

More research is required on the dynamics of language use within communities in which bilingual speakers of a fragile minority language are in contact with monoglot speakers of a powerful one. In the absence of such, we depend largely on personal experience and anecdotal evidence. The following account is based primarily on my own experience when my wife and I came to live on Shaw's Road in 1976. By this time, as I have noted, most of the difficult work had already been done by the pioneering generation.

Patterns of language use among the children were well established when we joined. There were about 30 children, mostly below 10 years of age, and they formed a coherent group, with rather less stratification by age than would be found across the road. Irish was the language they used among themselves, although all children were fully fluent in English by the time they were four or five. If monoglot English-speaking children from the estate across the road joined them, as they occasionally did, they spoke English to them, and sometimes among themselves while these children were present, but invariably switched back to Irish when the English speakers were not present. When our own daughter was born in 1977, the children in Pobal Feirste spoke only Irish to her. For us the most valuable and most amazing feature of the Shaw's Road Gaeltacht was that it enabled us to bring up our daughter in a linguistic environment which, while it had been created by an act of will and would be criticised by detractors as an artificial creation, was, for her, completely natural. The great achievement of the founders of Pobal Feirste was to prove that a small group of determined people could create such an environment. (It should perhaps be added that this environment was reinforced by the Irish speakers in our own immediate families.)

No community remains static, and there have been major changes to the language environment surrounding the next generation of children.

However, before we discuss these changes, I would like to turn to the issue of education, as it is in this area that the wider world was most likely to impact on patterns of language use. Indeed, it was in this area that Pobal Feirste was to have its most significant impact on the wider society.

As has been noted above, the community was already planning for an Irish-medium school in 1965. It had identified education as a key issue, one that could change the community's linguistic dynamic completely. Education in Northern Ireland was an exclusively English-medium system, so a couple of bilingual children in a class of monoglot English speakers, or a handful of bilingual children scattered over a number of classes, would inevitably speak English with their peers. This itself would not be a problem, but there was a distinct danger that they would also begin to speak English among themselves. English-medium education could, and almost certainly would, affect the children's use of Irish as a default language among themselves.

By 1971, two children in the community had reached school age and had begun to attend English-medium schools. However, in that year there was a concentration of children at or approaching school age: seven children in the community itself and two from other Irish-speaking families. The community decided to set up their own school. Two years previously, hundreds of families had been burned out of their homes in Belfast, and many of them had been provided with temporary accommodation in prefabricated chalets. As the families were rehoused, these chalets were beginning to become available, so the community bought one, dismantled it, and then re-erected it on the site behind the house – over a weekend, according to the folklore. The school opened on 1 September 1971.

The first teacher was a native speaker from the Donegal Gaeltacht who had recently retired, the second was a young Belfast woman who had been raised as an Irish speaker, and then the classes were taught for a number of years by qualified teachers from within the community itself. Until 1979, all but one of the children were from Irish-speaking families, and numbers gradually rose from the original nine children to just over 30.

There were two further developments, in 1978. A number of children had reached secondary school age, which itself introduced another

challenge. Their parents set up a secondary school for the five or so older pupils. Heroically, they managed to keep it going for two years, but the challenge of trying to involve a range of specialist teachers – all teaching on a voluntary basis – for such a small number of children proved too much and the school ceased to operate. Two of the families continued to provide Irish-medium education for their children by enrolling them in a school in Dublin, 100 miles away. Their fathers each spent half a week in Dublin looking after the children after school.

The second development was to have a more lasting impact. Although the community was concerned to maintain the language as a living presence, which involves a certain level of protection of its linguistic ethos, Pobal Feirste never saw itself as an isolated linguistic bubble defending itself against a flood of English, but as part of a language movement that aimed at both the survival and, more importantly, the revival of Irish as a community language. It was not envisaged as a ghetto, but as a seedbed to enable the language community to grow.

One way of achieving this was to open Irish-medium education to children from English-speaking families. This had already been done, with some success, in the Republic of Ireland. In recent years, however, a more scientific approach had been taken to early-years immersion education, particularly in Canada and Wales. My wife, Áine, who was a primary school teacher working in the English-medium sector, had made a particular study of the literature on the subject, and offered to set up an immersion preschool as a feeder to the primary school. Uptake was slow at first; immersion education was new to Northern Ireland, and people were understandably wary. Seven children took part in the first session, and of these four went on to the primary school. The subsequent growth was astonishing. Thirteen children joined the following year, all of whom went on to the primary school, followed by 25, then 40, and then 50. By this final year, children were being turned away and other groups were beginning to set up their own Irish-medium preschools, and not just in Belfast. An Irish-medium primary school stream was set up in Derry City, 70-odd miles to the north-west, in 1983 and eventually developed into a free-standing school. In 1987, a second school was founded in Belfast and another school in Newry, 40 miles to the south. There are now more than 5,000 children in Northern

Ireland who receive their education through the medium of Irish, at preschool, primary and secondary levels.

This was a considerable achievement from a tiny beginning with nine children in a second-hand hut in a muddy field. At the time, the school was illegal. After the group wrote to the Ministry of Education to outline what they proposed to do, they received a reply in November 1965, citing paragraph (c) of Section 66 (1) of Education Act:

> It is the Ministry's view that instruction given entirely through the medium of Gaelic would not constitute '... efficient and suitable instruction ...' for the children of an independent school. A complaint would then be served by the Ministry ... if the proprietors do not remove the deficiency complained of with a specified time the Ministry then formally strikes the school off the register. It is an offence against the law to conduct an unregistered school.[12]

When you have decoded the message here, you realise that the letter says that the parents would be prosecuted. The parents dealt with this problem by ignoring the education authorities. This may have been easier in the early 1970s than previously or subsequently. When the school was set up, Northern Ireland was in turmoil, hundreds of people were being killed every year, and the authorities had more on their minds than a small illegal school. In 1972, the Northern Ireland Parliament was prorogued, and we were being governed directly by the London government. London did not know or care much about the Irish language, but they were by no means as hostile to it as the unionist government had been. Even so, the authorities were not keen to include Irish-medium schools in the education system. The implications were significant; to endorse an Irish-medium school would be to endorse the legitimacy of Irish-medium education. Once they began to administer a bilingual rather than a monolingual system, they would inevitably come under pressure to begin funding Irish-medium schools. This they had no intention of doing, and they dragged their heels for years.

When Áine and I joined the community, the issue of the school dominated everything: endless meetings, endless fund-raising activities. We had no children at the time, and I made a personal vow that I would not allow Irish-medium education to take over my life. It is a mistake

to miss a meeting, however, and at one monthly meeting in 1977, I was volunteered in my absence to take over the correspondence with the education authorities. Irish-medium education then took over my life for the next seven years. The school was finally recognised as an independent (non-funded) school in 1979 – an important strategic breakthrough which established the legitimacy of Irish-medium education, although it did not make the fund-raising any easier. It was finally grant-aided in 1984, 13 years after its foundation. The campaign for recognition of the school opened the doors for the development of the entire Irish-medium sector.

Even today, education in Northern Ireland tends to be divided on sectarian lines, but in the 1970s almost all Catholic children went to Catholic schools, and Protestant children attended schools in the state sector. The community, although offered status as a Catholic school, refused, even though such a status would have made it much easier to achieve state funding. This was primarily for two reasons: first, the parents would lose control of the school if it was part of the Catholic sector, and they were not persuaded that the Church would maintain the school's linguistic ethos. The second was a matter of ideological conviction, and was by no means pragmatic: a significant proportion of the parents believed that in spite of intense sectarian tension, and although the school was situated right in the middle of a Catholic ghetto, the first Irish-medium school in Northern Ireland should remain open, in principle, to people of all religions and none. A newspaper interview with one of the parents in 1973 makes this clear:

> Mrs Ó Monacháin said the school was not directing its attention to only the Catholic side of the community. 'The Irish language is not the property of Catholics' she said. 'The founder of the Gaelic League was a Protestant, and in fact there are many Protestants in Belfast who are fluent in Irish.'[13]

Protestant uptake was highly unlikely at that time; the previous year nearly 500 people had been killed in the civil disturbances, which had a strong sectarian element. This spirit of inclusiveness has survived within the sector. A significant proportion of Irish-medium education is conducted in streams within the Catholic sector, but most of the pupils attend schools that are outside the Catholic system, even though the

vast majority of their pupils, even today, come from a Catholic background.

The channelling of the community's energies into the school did, however, take its attention away from some of its other concerns. In the early days of our involvement, the meetings at which issues relating to the community were discussed were conducted in Irish. The influx of a large number of new families changed the dynamic completely. Instead of relatively informal meetings among a small number of closely knit families, attendance expanded to the point where more than 100 families were entitled to attend, and the meetings were conducted in English. For a long time the monthly meetings were open to all parents and all major decisions were made in an open forum. This was so unwieldy that eventually a more streamlined forum was necessary for the school. Once funding from the public purse was made available, the school began to be run by a statutory board of governors in which the community had no input by right. Although the community still has a legal entity, regular meetings ceased entirely, and it comes together now only at rare intervals. This involved a considerable loss of the kind of social cohesion which had marked the community at the time of our original involvement, and we now tend to meet our neighbours only on a casual basis in the street or over the garden fence.

To some extent, this was inevitable. The extremely high level of interaction that we encountered in the early years was partly due to the fact that the school was in a permanent state of crisis, a crisis that lasted for 13 years. It is not surprising that people would be delighted to pass responsibility for the school on to other people, and the enormous, sustained effort had left many people exhausted.

A relative decline in community cohesion – indeed in community coherence – may have been unavoidable, but the actual decline was surprising. To some extent, it may have been due to a tension between two of the community's primary aims: the wish to develop a sustainable language community in a sea of English, and the wish to expand the use of Irish in the wider community, which meant involving English speakers directly in running the school. The second of these took precedence. I should perhaps add at this point that I was surprised at the time that the transition from Irish to English was accomplished with so little debate, and so early. It actually took place early in 1978, a few

months after the establishment of the bilingual preschool. At that time, the preschool – with only a handful of parents – had a separate committee, whose business was conducted in English. Because of some overlap in fund-raising activities, a proposal was made by one of the school's founders that the two committees should be amalgamated. In my memory, I was the only person to question this proposal, which was passed within a quarter of an hour. In hindsight, this decision, which involved monoglot English speakers directly in the running of the school, which their children were not even attending at this stage, was of tremendous importance in giving them a stake in the school, and in maintaining their commitment – many of them made an enormous contribution to its success, and this success has been a vital element in fuelling a vibrant language movement in Northern Ireland. The decision also persuaded them that the Irish speakers genuinely welcomed their input, and were not acting as an arrogant elite. However, it is also possible that the community, as a language community, may have lost some of its own dynamism as a result of this decision.

I have spoken above about the campaign to have Irish-medium education recognised. By the time I took over the correspondence (along with my brother-in-law), the authorities no longer felt able to argue that Irish was an unsuitable medium of instruction and had had fallen back on the argument that, because of its small numbers, the school was not economically viable. This stand, which looked safe enough when first formulated, was overtaken by events. To our own surprise, demand for Irish-medium education became so strong that the school began to expand at an astonishing rate. This presented us with another dilemma. While children in an immersion setting are learning the other language, they build up relationships in the language they know best – in our case, in English. In the first few years of the immersion programme, only a small number of children from English-speaking backgrounds were absorbed into the school, and in classes in which they were the minority, they adapted to the pattern that was already established and spoke Irish to the other children. The expansion of the school was so rapid that it became impossible to control the linguistic dynamic – some classes had only one or two native speakers of Irish among up to 30 children, and the language of informal communication between children often shifted to English. This in its turn sometimes affected the language of informal

communication between children brought up with Irish as their first language.

I had already known about this possibility through my family. My mother, like all her brothers and sisters, was educated entirely through the medium of Irish in the 1920s and 1930s. But she was the only one of the siblings who made an effort to use the language after leaving school. Language immersion education is the most efficient way of passing knowledge of the language to the next generation. On its own, however, it does not guarantee a new generation of active speakers. We identified this issue early on, and tried to establish after-school activities, but the burden of fund-raising was so great that our energies became dispersed. It was obvious that too rapid an expansion could weaken the linguistic ethos of the school. On the other hand, without rapid expansion, the school would never qualify for government funding and would, in fact, collapse under the weight of a moderate success. It was decided to go for expansion. That dilemma between building an active language community, on the one hand, and increasing the number of speakers on the other (two strategic issues), as well as the financial necessity to achieve numerical viability in a short period (a purely pragmatic issue), has bedevilled the movement for Irish-medium education ever since.

I would like to turn now to the expansion of the community from the original nine houses described above. The expansion came in three phases. Our own home and that of my wife's brother were built in 1975–76. To some extent, our two families fall between the original group and those that followed, but for the purpose of this analysis they will be lumped with the newer arrivals. It is worth noting that all four individuals had third-level education before they joined the community. After a long delay, five new houses were built during the 1990s, two of which had a relatively rapid turnover of owners, some families staying for only a few years. Many of the new families also had a connection with Cumann Chluain Ard, and two families included children from Pobal Feirste's first generation. The final phase was developed when the school was transferred from the Pobal Feirste site to adjoining land, freeing up land for a further six houses. These sites were offered first to children from the original families, five of whom took up the offer. The

sixth was offered to the cousin of one of the children. As a result, the network of blood relationships was extended even further. Eighteen of the 22 families now living in the community have family ties with at least one other family; one group comprises five related families, and there are two groups of four.

The socio-economic profile of the new arrivals was different to that of the original group. More often than not, they are professionals, working in the public sector, mainly in education. Of the 29 adults involved (including those who have since moved on), 19 have at least a university degree, and most of these have postgraduate qualifications, including a handful with master's degrees and four with doctorates.

The linguistic dynamic has also changed. Of the families who began to live in the community over the past 20 years, in only a minority of cases could both partners speak Irish fluently. This means that in these families there are at least two languages of habitual communication. In fact, the situation is even more complex. One of the two families from 1974–6 uses both Welsh and Irish at home; among the newer families are two in which Irish, English and, respectively, Spanish and Portuguese are used.

To some extent, while such bilingualism and multilingualism might tend to waken the linguistic dynamic among the families, this is partially offset by the fact that most of the very young children have grandparents – not to mention grand-uncles and grand-aunts who also live in the community. However, the linguistic dynamic has also been influenced by another, possibly more significant factor. Twenty or so years ago a large estate of more than 100 houses was built as an extension of the original access road. Although the estate attracted a small number of families where one or both parents spoke Irish, most of the children in this development speak only English. These children, naturally, play with the children of Pobal Feirste. As a result, whatever language or languages are used in the home of the Pobal Feirste children, their default language on the street tends to be English.

The current language patterns within the community vary enormously from family to family. In a few cases the children appear to prefer to use English within the home. In most cases they tend to associate a particular language with particular people, and to switch

easily between their languages (although there is usually a short period, when the children are very young, when one language – usually Irish – predominates).

This is a rather sketchy overview of a complex subject, and I have not touched at all on a number of issues, including the development of a specifically urban demotic which is very different to that of the Irish of the historic Gaeltacht. Nor have I dealt with those who grew up on Shaw's Road and are now adults but live elsewhere – whether they have passed the language on to their own children, or even if they are still active speakers of Irish. About the issues with which I have dealt, there is no doubt that Pobal Feirste had an enormous influence on the language movement in Northern Ireland, but whether or not the linguistic dynamic created by Pobal Feirste in the 1970s can survive into the future, or whether or not it can survive its founders as a linguistic community in any meaningful sense of the word, none of us can know at this time. Nor do we know whether or not it could provide a model for others to follow.

For me, on a personal level, while it has involved a lifestyle that has often had its difficulties, participation in this community, spitting in the eye of a seemingly irreversible trend of language decline, has been among the most rewarding things I have ever been involved in, both on a personal level and as a language activist. When our daughter decided to raise her family in the Shaw's Road Gaeltacht I asked her why she chose to do so. She replied, only half-jokingly, that it would be handy to have babysitters on her doorstep. But she also said that as an adult she had felt it to be a great privilege to have had the opportunity to be brought up in a bilingual community, and that she wanted to pass on that privilege to her own children. For Áine and myself this brought us another, totally unforeseen, piece of good fortune – daily contact with our grandchildren, who are now, in September 2011, approaching their sixth and third birthdays.

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Irish language television in Northern Ireland

This essay recounts the attempts to get the Irish language onto the airwaves in Northern Ireland. It discusses the paltry service from the BBC up to the end of the 1990s, noting the disparity in service between Northern Ireland and Scotland and Wales. The failure of the BBC to meet its public service remit to the Irish language community is also explored, as is the role of the Ultach Trust in lobbying for improved access and the establishment of a broadcast fund.

Irish language television in Northern Ireland[1]

I've always believed that the survival of a minority language depends more on its community of speakers than on legal entitlements. However, no language exists in a vacuum. In the modern world, it is unlikely that any fragile linguistic community can survive without a supportive environment to nurture the self-esteem of its speakers, and, even more importantly, allow the community to express itself to itself. In Finlay MacLeod's words, a minority culture must be able to 'live in its own light' rather than 'in the shadow of another language'.[2]

There is a debate about how best to achieve and sustain such a supportive environment, and the question of legal status is central to this debate. Can the authorities be trusted to provide support on a grace-and-favour basis or should we seek legal measures – or legal principles – obliging them to provide at least a minimal level of support? Given that the authorities, even when well intentioned, tend not to understand the needs of minority language communities – are more often indifferent, and occasionally hostile – it is obvious that the long-term survival of most minority languages will depend on legislative protection.

There is also the question of prioritising issues of legal protection. Given that those who hold the purse-strings are almost certain to provide only limited resources, what are the key elements that should be fought for, what is absolutely essential for the survival of the language, what is desirable but of secondary importance, and what is just plain silly? My worst nightmare would be to spend the rest of my

time on this earth as a language activist on the grinding, debilitating, demoralising task of ensuring that Official Circular SX201B, written in English in an almost incomprehensible gobbledygook, was available in gobbledygook Irish. On the other hand, support for minority language education is central, minority language arts are critical and minority language broadcasting – in the modern world – is indispensable.

This chapter will give an account of the attempts to get Irish onto the airwaves in Northern Ireland over the past 70 years. To summarise: for most of this period, in the context of a hostile political regime, Irish had no legal protection. This translated neatly into no service. The 1980s saw the beginnings of a period of tokenistic, unfocused, uncomprehending and penny-pinching goodwill, in which the (radio) service provided hovered somewhere between minimalist and undetectable. The 1990s brought in a blink-and-you've-missed-it television service from the BBC, some of which was of a very high standard, as well as a dedicated television station in the Republic of Ireland to which most viewers in the north had no access, and two so far unfulfilled promises in the Good Friday Agreement. July 2003 witnessed the promise of a modest television production fund that the BBC wants to snaffle for online language learning.

Since the 1920s, the BBC has been the prime public service broadcaster serving Northern Ireland. One would expect that its remit would have included the Irish language, given that there was an Irish-speaking minority in this society, and a high level of interest in learning the language. Indeed, the BBC had broadcast programmes in Scottish Gaelic and Welsh since its inception. This fact was not lost on Irish language activists, and in the 1930s, the Ulster branch of the Gaelic League, Comhaltas Uladh, appealed for programmes in Irish, especially lessons in the language. The request was rejected by the Northern Ireland Regional Director of the BBC, George Marshall, a morose and humourless Scot.

In 1940, at a time when the war was going badly, the British Government considered initiating a charm offensive on southern Ireland, which was then still a member of the Commonwealth. The Dominions Office proposed to the BBC with an agreeable cynicism that the Irish be charmed by a 'Gaelic period' to be broadcast on the network 'ostensibly for the benefit of Gaelic speaking people in Northern Ireland

and among the Irish population of English and Scottish cities'. Marshall, in the time-honoured tradition of BBC independence, consulted the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, J.M. Andrews, for whom 'Erse' was 'a language expressive of separatism'.[3] Marshall responded frostily to the proposal:

> I do not quite understand what the Dominions Office means by the introduction of a Gaelic period into the programmes broadcast from the Belfast station. ... you might point out that there are no Gaelic speakers in Northern Ireland, by which I assume is meant Erse or Irish ... it would be most unwise to introduce the Irish language into programmes from the transmitter in Northern Ireland, as this would certainly bring a great deal of criticism from listeners in this Region.[4]

At this time, there was not only a sizeable community of fluent Gaelic-speakers in Northern Ireland who had learned the language, but several residual communities of native speakers. The last native speakers in Tyrone and Armagh died in 1969 and 1977 respectively; that of the Glens of Antrim in the 1980s, and there is still a native speaker of Rathlin Gaelic alive in the year 2003. Fifteen years after Marshall's claim that there were no Gaelic-speakers in Northern Ireland, Raidió Éireann broadcast a fascinating radio programme from the surviving Gaeltachts in the Sperrins and Rathlin Island.

The hostility of the heich heid-yins of the BBC to Irish was endemic, and carried to quite extraordinary lengths. In 1952, when a schoolgirl spoke a few words of Irish at the end of a radio schools' quiz programme, *Top of the Form*, the phrase was erased from the broadcast. The Corporation was still immovable in 1969, when a group of students picketed Broadcasting House on the issue, and it rejected another approach from Comhaltas Uladh the following year.[5]

Things began to improve in the 1970s. Sean O'Boyle was allowed to use some Irish in a series broadcast in 1971. In 1976 Comhaltas Uladh was given a 25 minute programme in English about the work of the Gaelic League. A sustained campaign began the same year, which culminated, in 1981, in a radio series – 15 minutes per week. The sky didn't fall. In 1985 the BBC appointed a producer with responsibility for Irish language educational programmes, and in 1991 this producer made the first ever television programme in Irish to be broadcast by the

BBC. By 1992, the BBC was broadcasting three hours a week of Irish language radio, and three and a half hours a year of television.[6] It continues to broadcast at this level, even after the Belfast Agreement of 1998. There are a few upward blips in the graph; one year they managed to broadcast 26 hours of Irish language television, 22 hours of which consisted of a self-teaching language course (repeated), and latterly we got considerable exposure to an Irish language version of *Teletubbies*.

The BBC can no longer be accused of overt hostility to the Irish language. However, nor can it be accused of fulfilling its public service remit with regard to the language, particularly in comparison to its treatment of the other Celtic languages in the UK. This point is made, forcibly, by Liz Fawcett of the University of Ulster in her 2002 study of this issue:

> In the year 2000–1, BBC Wales produced 514 hours of Welsh language television programming which was broadcast on the Welsh language channel, S4C; it has a statutory obligation to provide 10 hours a week for that particular outlet. BBC Scotland broadcast 77 hours of Gaelic language television in the same period, while, in 2001, BBC Northern Ireland broadcast just 17 hours of Irish language television programmes. Moreover, most of BBC Northern Ireland's Irish language programme hours for that year related to a dubbed Irish version of the children's television programme, *Teletubbies*.
>
> When I asked the Controller of BBC Northern Ireland, Anna Carragher, about this disparity, she maintained that BBC Wales and BBC Scotland were assisted by Government subsidies for their Celtic language output. However, BBC Wales says it receives no subsidy from the Government for either its Welsh language radio output or the 10 hours of weekly television programming which it produces for S4C; all of the Government's funding for Welsh language broadcasting goes directly to S4C via the Welsh Fourth Channel Authority.
>
> BBC Scotland, on the other hand, is undoubtedly supported in its efforts by the Government subsidy it receives through the Gaelic Television Fund; in all, it estimated that it would get some £3.5 million from the Fund for the year 2002–3. However, BBC Scotland is still contributing a considerable sum from its own funds towards Gaelic language radio and

television programmes; for 2002–3, the projected sum was £4.2 million.

One might have thought that devolution would provide the perfect opportunity for both the Government and the BBC to revisit the provision of Irish language broadcasting. Indeed, it was referred to in the Good Friday Agreement which paved the way for devolution in Northern Ireland; this document commits the Government to seek 'more effective ways to encourage and provide support for Irish language film and television production in Northern Ireland' ...

In common with BBC Scotland and BBC Wales, BBC Northern Ireland has received significant additional funding from central BBC funds to enhance its general programme output in the light of devolution. In 2001–2, this amounted to an annual sum of £8 million for general programmes and £5 million for news and current affairs. Yet, none of this additional funding has been spent on Irish language programmes. (A small portion has gone towards Irish language provision on BBC Northern Ireland's website.)[7]

There is no shortage of suggestions as to how the BBC could begin to do something useful for the language. One option favoured by many Irish-speakers reflects the BBC's wish to avoid what it calls the 'displacement factor' and the Government's desire to provide enhanced Irish language television production 'without adversely affecting English language broadcasting provision'.[8] They propose an adaptation of the Welsh model to Irish circumstances. This approach would both allow and compel BBC NI to fulfil its public service broadcasting remit by producing an adequate output of Irish language programmes – as in Scotland and Wales – from its own resources. These programmes could, of course, be broadcast on the new digital channels, but would also be made available free of charge to TG4, the dedicated Irish language station broadcasting from the Republic of Ireland. Specifically, they recommend that the BBC initially produces an hour of original programming per week, and that this would rise to up to three hours a week over a period of years. The initial recommended provision is less than a third of what BBC Scotland provides for the Gaelic community in Scotland from its own resources, and one tenth of what it produces for Welsh-speakers in Wales.

Another proposal for improving the broadcasting service to Irish-speakers in Northern Ireland would be to allow programme-makers intending to broadcast on TG4 free access to the BBC's archive. These measures would go some way to redressing the historic neglect of the language by the Corporation. The first proposal is comparatively cheap, and the second would cost little or nothing.

The BBC has also evaded its responsibilities with regard to Irish-medium education and the teaching of Irish in English-medium schools (Irish is the second most popular language in English-medium secondary schools, after French). In 2000, the Corporation published a consultation document on its proposed digital curriculum, a new online resource for schools. This resource promised 'Material on every main subject for schoolchildren of all ages and abilities in every part of the UK', and claimed to have 'commissioned research into the curricular variations in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and would provide separate material where areas differ markedly or adapt material where the differences are less marked'. It further notes that: 'the *full* range of *main* primary and secondary school subjects should be covered, not just the most popular subjects' (emphasis added).

The Ultach Trust wrote to the Chairman of BBC NI in 2000, pointing out that the Northern Ireland curriculum had a number of unique features relating to the Irish language and that this should be taken into account by the BBC:

- Irish, along with English, Mathematics and Science, is a statutory core curriculum subject in Irish-medium primary schools
- Two other primary core curriculum subjects, Mathematics and Science, are taught through Irish in Irish-medium primary schools
- Up to 12 subjects are taught through the medium of Irish at secondary level in Irish-medium schools
- In the English-medium education sector, Northern Ireland is the only area in the UK which sets GCSE and 'A' Level exams in the Irish language. Irish is the second most widely taught language in Northern Ireland (more than 26,000 children in Northern Ireland were studying Irish at secondary level in 1989, the date of the latest research figures).

The Trust argued that it was essential that Irish language versions of the material on these subjects should be planned for inclusion in the digital service from the outset. This proposal was ignored, and we received no response from the Corporation.

In a recent development, Aled Eirug of BBC Wales was commissioned to produce a report for the BBC on broadcasting issues relating to Irish and Ulster Scots in Northern Ireland in 2002. Unfortunately, this document is not available to the public. However, the BBC Charter is up for renewal soon, which will give activists an opportunity to lobby for Irish language provision that reflects the BBC's public service remit, and to have that provision protected by law.

We will be returning briefly to the role of the BBC towards the end of this chapter, as Mr Eirug's report appears to have inspired the Corporation to discover a significant public service commitment to Irish language television broadcasting. Unfortunately, this commitment coincided closely with both the announcement of the new fund and the BBC's own intention to apply to the fund for its planned online activities. This timing has been unfortunate – cynics would see it as an exercise in blatant opportunism, and indeed Irish-speaking homes throughout Northern Ireland echo hollowly to the sound of derisive laughter when the subject is raised.

The BBC is not the only institution to have shirked its public service responsibilities towards Irish-speakers in Northern Ireland. Government has been equally negligent. The government referred to here is that of Westminster, as, even with a devolved parliament in Belfast, broadcasting has remained a reserved matter. The 1978 White Paper, *Broadcasting*, ignored the Irish language, but noted that 'Broadcasting has an important role to play in the preservation of [Scottish] Gaelic and Welsh as living tongues and in sustaining the distinctive cultures based upon them'.[9] By 1982, the Welsh language channel, with a current budget of £80 million, plus 500 free hours of BBC produced programming, had been established. Provision for Scottish Gaelic television broadcasting was also integrated into the BBC's charter in this period.

My own involvement with the issue of Irish language broadcasting in Northern Ireland began in 1990. Almost the first act of the newly formed Ultach Trust was to produce a consultation paper on Irish-

medium television written by our chairman.[10] This was aimed at the 1990 Broadcasting Act, and had no effect whatsoever on the legislation, although the same Act did establish the Gaelic Television Committee, with an annual budget of £10 million (now sadly reduced to £8.5 million). Somebody must have noticed the Ultach report, however, as the 1992 White Paper, *The Future of the BBC, a Consultation Document*, noted that 'arrangements should continue to be made for broadcasting in Welsh, Scots Gaelic and Irish'.[11] However, the BBC showed genuine independence on this occasion, and ignored Irish in its own report, although it did state that 'The BBC ... should play an active role in nurturing and promoting the languages that have such a special place in the lives and traditions of Scotland and Wales'.[12]

At about the same time, a campaign had begun in the Republic for a dedicated Irish language television service. This was eventually successful, and Teilifís na Gaeilge, later renamed TG4, was established in 1996. This changed the dynamic of Irish language television broadcasting, and provided an extraordinary opportunity for the British Government to facilitate a comprehensive service for the Irish-speakers of Northern Ireland. The argument goes something like this. There are only two places in the world with Scottish Gaelic speaking communities, Scotland and a small aging population in Nova Scotia. The only Welsh-speaking community outside Wales consists of a handful of octogenarians in Patagonia. In other words, Welsh language and Scottish Gaelic television can be made only in the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland, on the other hand, has a considerable linguistic hinterland in a neighbouring state. A comprehensive service could therefore be provided at minimum cost to the British Exchequer through co-operation with the southern state.

In the build-up to the new station, the Trust published in 1993 an analysis of the BBC's failure to provide an Irish language service. The purpose of this report was to encourage the BBC to acknowledge that it could not provide a comprehensive television service for the Irish speaking community in Northern Ireland, and to open the door for an accommodation with the new channel. This was another failure. Several highly placed individuals within the BBC told me privately – on the understanding that they would not be identified – that the BBC would not publicly admit its failure, or inability, to fulfil its public service remit.

In 1994, Michael D. Higgins, the Minister in the Dublin Government with responsibility for setting up the new Irish language channel, gave a remarkable keynote address at the Celtic Film and Television Festival in Derry. In this speech, he offered an all-Ireland television service 'with the agreement and involvement of all the authorities involved, the Northern Ireland broadcasters as well as the independent sector here'.[13] No one took a blind bit of notice.

In 1997, the Trust published a third report which outlined the options for providing a television service for Irish-speakers in Northern Ireland. This included the arguments for cross-border funding of the new station, and a summary of the findings of the Culture, Education and Environment Committee of the British–Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body in its *Report on North–South Co-operation in the Arts, Culture and Sport*, April 1996:

> When Teilifís na Gaeilge begins transmissions it will be received in parts of Northern Ireland. The improvement of reception of this channel is a project the Committee has already recommended, and is one of the positive things the Government in Northern Ireland can do, in a low key manner, to improve the situation ... without being seen as forcing Irish on the unionist community. The British Government should also encourage the production of programmes in the Irish language for the new service and/or existing broadcasters by companies and groups within Northern Ireland. Consideration should be given to the possibility of providing financial support for Irish language broadcasting similar to that provided for the Celtic languages in Wales and Scotland.[14]

The issue of a fund was then raised in Westminster in June 1996. The response of the then Minister was that the issue had already been considered and rejected: 'The Government consciously took the decision in 1990 not to include similar provision for the Irish language as that for Gaelic because there was not the same extent of proven demand for the Irish language as there was for Gaelic in Scotland'.[15]

The real breakthrough took place in 1998 with the Belfast Agreement. We had a small role in this. About a week before the Agreement was signed, members of the Trust had met Tony Worthington, the Minister of State in the Northern Ireland Office

responsible for education and community relations, to discuss Irish language issues. He was positive about Irish-medium education, enthusiastic about cross-community language promotion, neutral about the Irish language arts, and downright hostile about Irish language broadcasting. He had obviously been comprehensively briefed on this question, and we took this to be a reflection of the government's position. We lobbied everyone we thought could have an influence on the pending Agreement. Whether or not this lobbying had any effect, the final document, hammered out between the two Governments and the participating parties, had a clause promising financial support for Irish language broadcasting. The importance of this measure is that the Agreement has the legal force of an international treaty, and cannot be rescinded without the consent of the Government of the Republic of Ireland. It is interesting that the commitment is made only by the British Government. In the context of broadcasting, a reserved matter, it is particularly significant.

It should have been plain sailing after that. Ultach Trust published a report by Don Anderson in 1999 recommending a training and production fund for Irish language television in Northern Ireland based on the Agreement's broadcasting commitments, modelled loosely on the structure already existing in Scotland, and suggesting a framework for administering the fund.[16] Following the recommendations of this report, and a separate internal report on training issues prepared by Don Anderson for Northern Ireland's Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), some progress was made on training. A pilot initiative to develop a fast-track training programme for the Irish-medium sector, modelled on that pioneered by Údarás na Gaeltachta (the Gaeltacht Authority) in the Republic of Ireland, was initiated by DCAL in Belfast in February 2002.

However, progress on the establishment of the fund proved much more difficult to achieve. In 2000, the Government had produced yet another consultative paper on communications. Once again, as in 1992, Irish got on the White Paper agenda:

> Irish language broadcasting in Northern Ireland is less developed than Celtic language broadcasting in Scotland and Wales. The Government has made several commitments in the Belfast Agreement, reaffirmed in a Joint Statement with the

Republic of Ireland Government on 5th May 2000, in relation to promoting and facilitating the use of the Irish language.[17]

The White Paper included an explanatory note which outlined the then Government thinking on the issue. This is useful in that not only does it summarise the relevant legislative base, it also, in the last sentence, identifies the Government's determination that enhanced provision for Irish will not have any impact on English language broadcasting in Northern Ireland:

> **The Belfast Agreement** [explanatory note]
>
> On broadcasting, the Agreement states that the Government will: (a) explore urgently with the relevant British authorities, and in co-operation with the Irish broadcasting authorities, the scope for achieving more widespread availability of Teilifís na Gaeilge [an Irish-medium television station based in the Republic of Ireland, now known as TG4] in Northern Ireland; and (b) seek more effective ways to encourage and provide financial support for Irish film and television production in Northern Ireland. ... Our aim is to give effect to these commitments without adversely affecting English language broadcast provision.[18]

However, when the Communications Bill was published in May 2002, although it promised enhanced provision for Welsh television, and a new structure was promised for Gaelic broadcasting, Irish was not mentioned. This drew a protest from Lady Sylvia Hermon, a Unionist MP, which in its turn elicited an extraordinarily incoherent response from the Minister for Culture, Media and Sport:

> **Lady Hermon (North Down):** I am sure that the Secretary of State is aware of the broadcasting obligations set out in the Belfast agreement of 1998. Do the Government intend to implement those obligations in the Bill? If so, what discussions has the right hon. Lady had with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland?
>
> **Tessa Jowell:** It is important to be clear that broadcasting is a reserved not a devolved matter. As the hon. Lady noted, provisions in the Belfast agreement give certain powers to

> Ministers in the Assembly. In recognition of the fact that broadcasting is a reserved matter, it is not our intention that these powers should be represented in the main Bill. I have discussed the matter with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.[19]

There followed an intense period of lobbying. During the consultation period, more than two thirds of all responses to the Draft Communications Bill related to the issue of an Irish language television fund in Northern Ireland. This was mentioned by the Putnam Report in a passing reference to the section on Scottish Gaelic broadcasting:

> We received some written evidence and many contributions to our online forum from people in Northern Ireland about Irish language broadcasting. Contributors pointed to the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in support of their arguments for explicit provision in the Bill for Irish language programming and the establishment of a training and production fund for Irish language television in Northern Ireland.[20]

No recommendation was made by the Putnam Joint Scrutiny Committee regarding Irish language broadcasting. However, Foras na Gaeilge, the Irish language agency of the Cross-Border Language Body, which has a statutory responsibility for advising both governments on Irish language issues, had by this stage become involved. Foras submitted an eloquent paper to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), and succeeded in persuading Dublin's Department of Foreign Affairs to make the issue a priority. The British Government became rather less dismissive of the need for a production fund, and began – in the opaque, circuitous way favoured by Whitehall – to acknowledge that Westminster rather than the Northern Ireland Assembly had a responsibility in this area.

The final stage in the campaign to either get a legislative basis for Irish language television in Northern Ireland, or at least extract a promise that a production and training fund would be established by the Westminster Government, involved writing an amendment to the Bill for the Committee Stage. This amendment, drafted by the Trust and developed by a loose group of advisers, including Pádhraic Ó Ciardha

of TG4, was sponsored by Simon Thomas, a Welsh MP and a member of the Standing Committee. The Amendment was finally discussed on the last day of the Standing Committee's work, on 6 February 2003. The previous day, Mr Thomas, supported by Eddie McGrady of the SDLP, had raised the issue during Northern Ireland Question Time, and extracted a commitment from Angela Smith, a Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office, that a production fund would be established. After a lively debate at the Committee Stage, Mr Thomas withdrew his amendment, but not before extracting a second government commitment that a production fund would be established, this time from Kim Howells, Secretary of State at DCMS. The legislative campaign had failed, but the prospect of a fund was assured.

A joint declaration by the British and Irish Governments, prepared in April 2003 and released some time later, indicated that the issue was being treated as a matter of urgency. It also indicated that the two governments were willing to tackle one of the blocks to broadcasting TG4 within Northern Ireland, the issue of broadcasting rights:

> Par. 30. The British Government will continue to discharge all its commitments under the Agreement in respect of the Irish language. Specifically, in relation to broadcasting, the British Government will take all the necessary steps to secure the establishment as soon as possible, following receipt of the final business case in April, of a fund for financial support for Irish language film and television production. It will also take steps to encourage support to be made available for relevant regulators and broadcasting authorities to address the technical and other barriers with a view to increasing substantially the reception of TG4 in Northern Ireland.[21]

The business case was still not ready on 23 July, when the Secretary of State made a more specific announcement:

> I am pleased to announce that proposals to provide for Irish language film and television are currently being developed. Subject to a satisfactory business case, a fund, which will be in the region of £12m over 3 years, will be confirmed during the summer months.[22]

At the time of writing (autumn 2003), it is not yet clear what structure will be used to administer this fund or what range of responsibilities will be given to the body set up to administer it. However, it is clear that the Government has, finally, decided to make a substantial investment in Irish-medium broadcasting, a development which, if handled properly, could enable a significant new Irish language television sector to emerge in the region.

This is where one of the problems arises. The Irish-medium production sector in Northern Ireland is a very new one, with a narrow skill-base and few experienced programme-makers. A rapid expansion in capacity will require a sophisticated development policy involving the identification of potential talent, fast-track training and a coherent, nurturing environment. There has been experience of this kind of work in the past few decades; the Republic coped well with the setting up of TG4, but it learned from a similar pattern of expansion when the Welsh-medium channel, S4C, burst on the scene (although it must be noted that both services drew on existing sectors which, though small, were far larger than that currently existing in Northern Ireland). The greatest potential threat to the new sector finding its own personality and voice lies in the very strength of the alternatives.

The major danger is that, without careful management, the new sector could be swamped by any one of a number of established structures. The independent Irish-medium sector in the Republic, for example, is relatively strong, and a pattern of north–south co-productions could either enhance the northern sector or, if this process is mismanaged, drown it. The independent English-medium sector in Northern Ireland offers a similar set of opportunities and threats. The most obvious potential threat, however, if only because it has begun to articulate its designs on the production fund, is the BBC. On 18 September 2003, during a presentation on the issue in Belfast, Aled Eirug of BBC Wales outlined the Corporation's plans for Irish language broadcasting. This presentation included a well-argued case for a policy of linguistic diversity:

> a deep and abiding commitment to reflect the diversity of its audience and [the BBC's] responsibility to reflect the richness of the languages and identities of Northern Ireland … Language

> services are not provided solely because it is in the interest of Irish or Welsh or Ulster Scots speakers to do so. It is because we as a society feel that it is a valuable part of our heritage, whether we speak that language or not.[23]

I would like to make clear at this point that any reservations expressed here are directed at BBC Northern Ireland rather than at Mr Eirug, a man who is passionate and knowledgeable about minority language broadcasting, but who will not be here when the policy is implemented. Nor are the reservations directed at the highly effective team in the Irish Language Unit within BBC Northern Ireland, who have produced programmes of a very high standard.

This criticism is aimed at the record of those within the institution who have been responsible for making – or not making – language broadcasting policy for our society. Frankly, the pattern of spineless caution and neglected opportunities which underlies the BBC's failure to provide a service to the Irish language community is such that no one in that community trusts it. The overwhelming instinct of Irish-speakers in Northern Ireland is that the Corporation should not be allowed within an ass's bawl of any new fund until it has proved its commitment, from within its own considerable resources, by at least equalling the Gaelic service of BBC Scotland. While certain aspects of the proposed programme of action are welcome – in particular the promise to work in collaboration with TG4 and to ensure access to TG4 throughout Northern Ireland – others are less attractive. The production fund is designed for film and television, but the BBC wishes it to be available for online and radio services. It is perhaps no coincidence that the BBC's radio service and its proposed online learning service could not only benefit directly from the fund, but also avoid the problematic 'displacement factor, by which [television] viewers would be deprived of English language programmes which they would expect to see'. No-one in the Irish language community wishes to see a fund primarily aimed at a television service being diverted to such other sources. Irish speaking licence-payers have a legitimate expectation that their online and radio services should come from that fee. They would also like a fair proportion of their television service to come from the licence fee, but are not particularly concerned whether or not these programmes

are broadcast on the BBC itself, and would be quite happy to have the BBC's Irish language television programmes broadcast on the specialist Irish-medium station – if it is available throughout the north.

All is not yet lost. The BBC Charter is up for renewal soon, which will provide an opportunity to lobby for Irish language provision that reflects the BBC's public service remit, and to have that provision protected by law.

In conclusion, the new fund was achieved without additional legislation beyond the vague wording of the Belfast Agreement. However, a number of difficulties must yet be overcome before the Irish language community receives the fully comprehensive television service it desires and deserves. Some of these relate to areas in which legislation is either desirable or necessary. Among these, the following could be considered:

- a must-carry legal requirement for TG4 on satellite and cable networks accessible in Northern Ireland
- a legal requirement to both enable and compel BBC Northern Ireland to produce programmes for TG4 from its own resources as a reflection of its public service remit
- reciprocal legislation guaranteeing access (throughout the island of Ireland) to either TG4 alone or all terrestrial broadcasters on the island
- enabling legislation to solve the issue of broadcasting rights in the island of Ireland over a number of years.

To put it another way, we have not heard the last of the legal issues relating to Irish language broadcasting in Northern Ireland.

The BBC and the Irish language

This essay is based on a talk which was presented at Blackstaff House, BBC NI, Belfast in 2012. It is a personal and humorous take on the issue of Irish on the BBC. It traces the use of Irish, accidental or otherwise, over the first 60 years or so of BBC NI. It discusses the political nature of broadcasting in Northern Ireland and charts the gradual increase in the Corporation's Irish language output.

The BBC and the Irish language

Rex Cathcart opened his wonderful 1984 programme celebrating the 60th anniversary of the BBC with an account of the opening ceremony in September 1924. God Save the King had been played at the beginning rather than, as in the rest of the UK, the end, creating an enormous fuss among those who had tuned in late. Then the station went off the air with a technical fault. Cathcart comments:

> Was there anything distinctive about the occasion, however, to suggest that the BBC had extended its operations to a part of the UK which was going to present it with special problems for the next 60 years?[1]

Any large organisation that has status, power, wealth and a sense of moral purpose is bound to be fascinating. Look at the Vatican; in particular look at the Vatican in a crisis, when realpolitik, platonic idealism, institutional inertia, vested interests, high-minded principle, self-righteousness, dogma and grubby reality all come together in a miasma of self-delusional abstractions. The BBC has rather more in common with the Vatican than it may realise, not least because it too is a moral institution built on high and unattainable ideals. All the contradictions and tensions within the BBC can be found in the concept of public service broadcasting, which at its worst is the modern equivalent of angels dancing on the head of a pin, and at its best guards a complex value system vital to the maintenance of an advanced democracy. Like Christianity, public service broadcasting has to be defended against some of its supporters, but, like the girl in the nursery rhyme, when it is good, it is very, very good.

To an extent, the way the BBC dealt with – or did not deal with – the Irish language involved neither a complex value system nor a dance on the head of a pin. What it did represent is a failure by the organisation to uphold its own standards of public service.

Some people think that the Irish language was never broadcast by the BBC before 1981. These people, I have discovered, are wrong. In 1974 Radio Ulster broadcast a series called 'Four Centuries of Irish Music' to celebrate 50 years of broadcasting in Northern Ireland, and one of the programmes, on traditional song, included material in Irish. The presenter was the famous song collector Seán O'Boyle. He played a verse of the song 'An Bhanaltra' (The Nurse) in praise of drink, which was followed by an account of how the modes, style and techniques of traditional singing had transferred from the Irish language to English. The singer was Hiúdaí Phaidí Hiúdaí Devenny from the Ranafast Gaeltacht in Donegal, and the song and introduction lasted 80 seconds.

Some *sean-nós* – traditional – singing can be both authentic and accessible. But sometimes it's just authentic, and the ear has to become attuned to it – it's a bit like listening to John McCormack and filtering out the scratches. Seán O'Boyle notes that the singer Fial Ó Dónaill takes it very high. What he doesn't note is that the recording buzzes a bit on the very high notes. There is also, for my taste, a bit too much of a country-and-western 'nyaw' in the style. The song lasts one minute and two seconds. Later in the programme, O'Boyle illustrates the Gaelic origins of the metre of the song 'Sweet Omagh Town' by reading a poem that lasts 13 seconds.

I have not spent all this time on these clips from a single programme because I am a sean-nós nerd, although I *am* a sean-nós nerd. I did so because there isn't much more to hear. That one minute and 40 seconds represents about one third of the archive material in the Irish language from the first 57 years of the BBC's existence in Northern Ireland.

The rest consists of about three minutes from a television programme in 1972 called *The Two Minds*, presented by Lawrence Pitkethly. There are hints of other stuff that may have been broadcast but was not archived. Some of us remember a news item in Easter Week 1966 about a group of Belfast Gaeilgeoirí who went on a symbolic hunger strike against the betrayal of the Irish language by the Dublin government. They spoke Irish to the interviewer. Seán O'Boyle seems to have used some Irish in a radio series called *The Two Voices* in 1971. There is also a record, if no recording, of the Derry Gaelic choir broadcasting a song in either the late 1930s or the late 1940s.

By contrast, the BBC began to broadcast in Scottish Gaelic and Welsh in 1923 – in both cases right from the very beginning. Was the absence of Irish on the airwaves an accident or deliberate policy? Rex Cathcart – who was by no means a tubthumping Gael – thinks it was policy:

> Throughout the 1930s the BBC in NI studiously avoided not simply the overtly political, but also the covertly political. Into this latter category, came the broadcasting of GAA results, and programmes in the Irish language. Requests by the Gaelic League that programmes should be provided in the Irish language had little chance of being accepted, when unionist politicians declared it to be a foreign language. The BBC rejected the requests on the grounds that 'the number of Gaelic speakers is negligible'.[2]

However, in 1940, suddenly, an opportunity to broadcast programmes in Irish emerged. It came from a totally unexpected source, and had nothing to do with the principles of public service broadcasting. In 1940 the war was going badly, de Valera was in charge in Dublin, and Britain was isolated and needed all the friends it could get. The Dominions Office suggested to the BBC that they should initiate a charm offensive on southern Ireland. They proposed that the Irish be charmed by a 'Gaelic period' to be broadcast on the network: 'ostensibly for the benefit of Gaelic speaking people in Northern Ireland and among the Irish population of English and Scottish cities', but broadcast from Belfast and focused on the south. The Controller of BBC Northern Ireland, George Marshall, in the time-honoured tradition of BBC independence, consulted the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, J.M. Andrews, who responded that what he called 'Erse' was: 'a language expressive of separatism'. Marshall wrote back to head office:

> I do not quite understand what the Dominions Office means by the introduction of a Gaelic period into the programmes broadcast from the Belfast station. … you might point out that there are no Gaelic speakers in Northern Ireland, by which I assume is meant Erse or Irish … it would be most unwise to introduce the Irish language into programmes from the transmitter in Northern Ireland, as this would certainly bring a great deal of criticism from listeners in this Region.[3]

In 1940, there was not only a sizeable community of fluent Gaelic speakers in Northern Ireland who had learned the language, but several residual communities of native speakers. You could still find a native speaker in Tyrone in 1969, in Armagh in 1977, and in the Glens of Antrim in the 1980s. There is still a native speaker of Rathlin Gaelic alive in the year 2012. Fifteen years after Marshall's claim that there were no Gaelic speakers in Northern Ireland, Raidió Éireann broadcast a fascinating radio programme from the surviving Gaeltachts in the Sperrins and Rathlin Island.

BBC Northern Ireland could go to quite extraordinary lengths to ensure that the airwaves would not be sullied with Irish, or Gaelic, or even Erse. In 1952, St Dominic's High School in Belfast made it to the finals of the radio schools' quiz programme *Top of the Form*. When they were signing off, the St Dominic's captain spoke a few words of Irish. This was a network programme, and we have no idea if the rest of the UK was exposed to this subversion, but in Northern Ireland the words were erased – not cut – erased, and replaced with silence.

Cathcart identifies three policy stages in how the BBC dealt with Northern Ireland in the first 60 years:

> It is possible to recognise that over the past 60 years there have been three strategies adopted by the BBC for dealing with the divided society of NI. In the pre-war period, the BBC ignored the division, and sought to prevent any of its manifestations from impinging on programmes. This was an abdication of social responsibility. In the postwar period the pursuit of such a strategy proved impossible. The BBC then sought to be the means of bringing both sides of society together. The necessity felt that this should be done without provoking vociferous and possibly violent reaction from the unionist majority meant that the positive aspects of community relations were emphasised and the negative underplayed. A consensus emerged which inevitably lacked a real basis. When the civil rights movement attempted to achieve one, the BBC's strategy became irrelevant. Broadcasting House Belfast threw over the incubus of having always to placate local unionist feelings, and there emerged the third and current strategy which requires broadcasters to reflect the whole of society in NI, as it is.[4]

How different was BBC Northern Ireland to the BBC everywhere else? To deal with that question we have to run back a bit. When radio began to emerge as a mass technology in the 1920s and 1930s, society in the UK could have had any one of a number of models – a commercial free-for-all as in the United States, or, as in Stalin's USSR and Hitler's Germany, an instrument of mass propaganda.

The UK got neither. It got John Reith. Everybody knows J.M. Barrie's quote that there are few more impressive sights in the world than a Scotsman on the make. One of those sights is that of a Scotsman in pursuit of a moral imperative, and such a Scotsman was John Reith. Reith managed to both avoid overt political control and allay the fears of politicians that this revolutionary technology would lead to a revolution.

By the time the politicians woke up to the fact that they had actually agreed to a parallel moral authority, it was too late. However, this is not to say that they were beaten. They still held the purse-strings, as every so often they got to set the funding level. Through the Charter, they also got, periodically, to tell the BBC what it could and could not do. This is real power. However, the BBC counterpointed the seriously real power of the political class with a remarkable degree of soft power – loyalty, trust, influence, and a kind of exasperated affection summed up in the nickname 'Auntie', which captures the combination of moral seriousness and complacency inherited from Reith.

You could never say there was a balance of power, but since the 1920s there was a weird see-saw between two parts of a power elite – who also had much in common. The political trimming you can understand. Sometimes the BBC lay on its back and waved its legs in the air; sometimes it took a strong, principled and occasionally dangerous stand, particularly when Charter Review was not looming.

I will try to define this soft power. At its best, the BBC embodies what I earlier called a complex and sophisticated value system, which is maintained by a cohort of sophisticated and complex individuals who are not always in charge. Institutionally the only way I can describe the BBC is by a metaphor that may not be to everybody's taste. This great unwieldy blob of an institution plops itself somewhere within spitting distance of the middle of the social consensus, then squelches out all over the place. The BBC finds its direction of travel by facing in all

directions at once, but ultimately oozing untidily in the general direction of the next consensus, which it also helps to create. In rather less picturesque terms, public service broadcasting provides debate that both reflects prevailing orthodoxies and stretches them; it expresses and embodies mainstream culture while also supporting minority interests and – to a lesser extent – minority communities; it tries to cater for enormous diversity in class, in race, in political outlook, in regional and national identity, in education, in experience, in opinion, in interest, in circumstances. And diversity in language. The BBC maintains itself in a permanent state of self-contradiction – like Walt Whitman, it could proudly proclaim 'I contain multitudes'. And its multifaceted, multidirectional, multitudinous gloopy muddle often gets things more or less right, and it sometimes gets things wrong.

So what went wrong in Northern Ireland? One answer is its relationship with the Stormont regime, even though the Northern Ireland government had no power over it – none at all. As early as 1926 the station's Director Gerald Beadle said 'I am sure our position here will be strengthened immensely if we can persuade the Northern Government to look upon us as their mouthpiece'.[5] While Reith was fighting for the survival of BBC independence during the General Strike, Gerald Beadle was rolling over on his back and waiting for his belly to be scratched. One of the problems with being the mouthpiece of the Northern Ireland Government was that it was moving into its Ulsterisation stage – it petitioned Westminster twice to get the name changed to 'Ulster' in order to take the 'Ireland' out of 'Northern Ireland'. The Irish language, which, in fairness at that stage was more or less entirely associated with the Catholic and nationalist community, was a red rag to any self-respecting uber-Ulster, Ireland-rejecting unionist, and was an obvious casualty.

So much for the first stage. Even in what Cathcart described as the second stage, the new Controller appointed in 1948 was given the following advice:

> When Andrew Stewart became Controller of Northern Ireland, he received instructions from the BBC's Director General: 'Try to extend the areas of discussion, try to get people talking about their problems in NI. But remember, only do so within the bounds of political acceptability.'[6]

Or to put it another way, 'don't rock the boat'.

In the third phase, the BBC in Northern Ireland finally began to assert some form of genuine independence, at least where political reporting and analysis were concerned. I haven't been able to find any reasonably succinct accounts from the participants in this process in the archives. However, Colin Morris, who was Controller from 1987 to 1990 – after the battle had been largely won – summarises his own perspective of how it had been before his own time. Note the word 'mouthpiece' echoing down more than six decades:

> Historically, BBC NI, way back, was regarded, very much, as the mouthpiece either of the Unionist Party or of Stormont. And it's greatly to the credit of my predecessors, as Controllers, or as National Governors, that they, as it were, won for the BBC a position of independence, where, no longer did the Catholic community look at the BBC and say 'Of course, you know, this is just the voice of the Protestant majority'.[7]

I think we should note that he was talking here mainly about political reporting and political analysis. Cultural and representational issues – another key area of the public service broadcasting ethos – come under the heading of regional cultural diversity. This is how Pat Loughrey put it:

> Regional broadcasting is an important fulfilment of the BBC's mandate. The BBC would not merit the title British Broadcasting Corporation if it didn't provide a platform for the diversity of all that is in the UK. I hope that BBC television and Radio Ulster is a means of celebrating that which is unique, the defining characteristics of this place, and in a divided community, our diversity is ultimately our strength.[8]

I don't think that it necessarily follows that diversity is a strength in a divided society. But it is definitely true that the recognition and celebration of diversity is a strength in a healthy civil society. What the BBC was very slow to recognise, or accept, or act upon, was that the Irish language was, and is, one of the unique, defining characteristics of this place – at least this place in the UK context. Kieran Hegarty, BBC's first Irish language producer, identifies one of the arguments why the BBC should support that form of diversity which is the Irish language:

> The BBC are the only ones who have the obligation. We are a public service broadcaster, and people pay, or in some cases don't pay, their licence. If they pay their licence, they feel that the BBC should deliver them a service. And Irish language speakers, of right, complain to the BBC.[9]

Personally, I think that there are other compelling arguments. It is not just that we pay the licence fee. I have one acquaintance who not only did not pay his licence fee; he declared from the rooftops that he did not and would not pay his licence fee until there was a decent Irish language service. I think he hoped to be jailed and get even more publicity for his stand. And his stand was that there was an important cultural issue here. I fully support that stand. An indigenous minority language in the UK is more than a mode of communication, and is more than a bit of attractive provincial colour to titillate the jaded metropolitan appetite or satisfy a local audience. It is the repository of a unique and irreplaceable culture, and the vehicle for the transmission of that culture. It is a critical part of our heritage. It is an essential strand in the cultural ecology of our society. Irish is the language of the oldest literature in western Europe, and there are places on this island and even in this jurisdiction which are alive with legend, myth and echoes of older faiths going back thousands of years. The Irish language named the landscape and if you know the language, the landscape talks back. And Irish is still alive. Fragile, but still alive. Something to celebrate, you would think. In fact, any healthy society would be delighted that a bunch of people had dedicated their lives to keeping a civilisation alive.

But even if you can't personally work up much enthusiasm for the Irish language, for a cultural institution to have ignored its existence for so long seems to me to be appallingly negligent – at best a kind of self-inflicted cultural lobotomy, at worst an act of inexcusable cultural delinquency.

I could never understand why – once the political controls were rejected – the BBC remained complicit in what amounted to a betrayal of the principles of cultural diversity, of cultural inclusivity: other key principles of public service broadcasting. This seemed to me at the time to be extraordinarily cowardly. It also seemed to me to be extraordinarily stupid. If the Irish language became polarised in our society, it was partly because it was dismissed and ignored by the

institutions of the state – which includes the state-endorsed and state-sponsored broadcasters. Pat Loughrey edged towards an understanding of this point, well after the act:

> I doubt if many people living in NI would have any opportunity to come into contact with the Irish language other than through Radio Ulster.[10]

There is truth in this remark. But a much greater truth would have been that the imprimatur of the BBC – with which most of the unionist community identify – could have opened the doors to the language for people well outside its traditional constituency. Politics and politicians tended to narrow and polarise the language movement. The BBC had within its gift the opportunity to counteract that tendency and fluffed it for far too long.

Over the years, the outlying bit of gloop that is BBC Northern Ireland inched its way towards an Irish language service. Fifteen minutes of radio per week for 14 weeks in 1981. They sky didn't fall. Kieran Hegarty was appointed as the first Irish language producer in 1983. They sky still didn't fall. We got educational programmes in Irish. The sky didn't fall. We got our first Irish language television programme in 1991. The sky didn't fall, and the programme – which was a very fine, memorable portrait of one of the giants of 20th-century Irish literature – won a prestigious award at the Celtic Film Festival. A couple of years later the BBC broadcast a series of 30 half-hour television programmes aimed at adult learners of Irish. Not only did the sky not fall, the series was greeted with massive enthusiasm. Every week on radio we got a half an hour per weekday and a substantial programme of very weird music at the weekend. After a shaky start and a lot of lobbying, not to mention a Broadcasting Fund – brought to you courtesy of the Irish language lobby – we now have about 40 hours a year of television, some very good online material, a policy for indigenous minority languages and a commitment to an 'incremental' extension of the service. The sky still hasn't fallen.

Quite aside from providing a modest service to the Irish language community, these initiatives had a salutary effect on the community as a whole. I firmly believe that the increasing acceptability of the Irish language in this society – I'm not talking about the politicians, I'm

talking about real people – the increasing acceptability of the Irish language is in a very large measure due to its presence on the BBC. The implicit endorsement of the language by the *British* Broadcasting Corporation, which is generally trusted by small-u unionists, has gone a long way towards normalising the Irish language in this fraught society. That too is part of the public service ethos, and should have been done generations ago.

I was asked to take a personal approach to this theme, and intended to talk about the campaigns to get the language on the airwaves – an account of the time when the BBC blob met a problem it didn't want to deal with, when the loudest thing you would hear (aside from the yelling of the dispossessed outside the gates) was the dull but insistent sound of heels being dragged, the gentle hum of obfuscation, the low respectful murmur of a dissembling bureaucracy.

I started out to produce such a talk, but in filling in the background I'm afraid I got lost in a rather bigger issue. I don't entirely regret this. If the public service ethos had been functioning properly in the past, our campaigns would not have been needed; they would certainly not have been as bitter. If the public service ethos functions properly in the future, the service, which is still scant enough, could develop into an adequate service without major campaigns. However, the public service ethos is by no means safe, as David Millar notes:

> there were mounting pressures from successive governments, Labour and Tory, but especially conservative governments since 1979, on broadcasters, especially on the BBC, in an attempt to move them away from public service broadcasting really. The conservative government from 1979 really did not like the concept of public service broadcasting, which smacked to them of socialism.[11]

We live in an era where politicians seek to gradually erode the independence of the BBC. If you value democracy, support the blob.

Irish and other origins of surnames

This essay gives us a sense of the complexity of the process of tracing the origins of surnames. It provides a brief summary of the development of Gaelic surnames, explores the difficulties of transcribing Gaelic names into English orthography and outlines the main processes that were employed. The answer to 'What's in a name?' is often not as straightforward as we may think.

Irish and other origins of surnames[1]

The answer to the question of whether your surname can tell you where your ancestors came from is a complicated one.

We could begin by looking at the five most common surnames in Northern Ireland: Wilson, Johnson or Johnston, Campbell, Thomson or Thompson, and Kelly. Two of these are definitely Gaelic. Campbell is an old Scottish Gaelic surname: 'cam-béal = crooked mouth', the modern spelling being 'caim beul'. Kelly is the Irish Gaelic name 'Ó Ceallaigh'. The other three appear to be from England or the lowlands of Scotland and mean the son of William, John and Thomas, although Johnston can also refer to someone who hails from a town called Johnston, or John's town. It is, however, more complicated than that. In Ulster, Campbell is at least as likely to be of Irish Gaelic origin: most people descended from the Irish family Mac Cathmhaoil, 'descendant of the battle chieftain', have used Campbell as the English form of the name rather than the less common MacCawell or MacCamphill or MacCall. The complications do not end there, as the Scottish Campbells claim to have come to Scotland from Ireland in the year 404, and trace their ancestry to Diarmuid Ó Duibhne, the hero of the story of Diarmuid and Gráinne.

The English-seeming names can also disguise a Gaelic origin. In the past, Thompson has been used as a translation of the Scottish Gaelic names Mac Thomais or Mac Thom, which can appear in English as MacTavish, MacComish, MacComb or Holmes. The surname Johnston is even more complicated: it could come from the Scottish Gaelic names Mac Iain or Mac Giolla Sheáin, the Irish or Scottish Gaelic Mac Eoin, or the Irish Gaelic MacShane, 'Mac Seáin', a branch of the O'Neills. Up

to 300 names from England, Wales and the lowlands of Scotland have been used for Irish Gaelic surnames alone. Some of these are surprising:

> Abraham, Armstrong, Bird, Bishop, Black, Caldwell, Carpenter, Clarke, Duck, English(!), Farmer, Flood, Foote, Fox, Gray, Green, Graham, Hand, Hood, Ingoldsby, Judge, King, Kirk, Leech, Lord, Martin, Monks, Montague, Owens, Patterson, Rabbitte, Rice, Rodgers, Small, Smith, Waters, White, Woods.

No one has ever tried to calculate the number of Scottish Gaelic surnames that have been disguised, but we know that some of the above names, such as Black, King, Patterson, Smith and White, sometimes have a Scottish Gaelic origin. Other names spring to mind such as Archibald, Brown, Cook, Currie, Dunlop, Fullerton, Greer, Harper, Livingstone, Simpson, Walker, Weaver, Wright.

We could perhaps look at one name, Houston, which is normally regarded as deriving from a place called 'Hugh's Town'. In Lanarkshire in Scotland, for example, it can refer to a descendant of the 12th century Norman Hugh de Paduinan, part of whose property became known as Huston, and whose descendants called themselves de Hustone and then Houston. It can also refer to someone from that town who wasn't related to the family. But there are other Scottish Houstons. The French name Hugh also has a pet form 'Hutchin', which was borrowed into Scottish Gaelic as Uisdean. On the Isle of Skye the descendants of Hugh MacDonald became known as Mac Uisdin, which was sometimes rendered Houston – not to mention Hutchinson, Hutcheson, Hewson, MacCutcheon, MacQuiston, MacWhisten, MacQuestion, Kitchen, Kitson and MacHugh. To complicate matters further, Houston is also used for a Donegal Gaelic family, Mac an tSeachlainn. Sometimes the last of these became MacTaghlin in English, but some members of the family thought it came from 'teach', the Irish word for 'house', which was pronounced 'hoose' by their Ulster Scots speaking neighbours, so they mistranslated the name as Houston.

Any Houston, then, could be descended from a Norman, a Scottish lowlander, a Scottish Gaelic Mac Uisdin who is really a MacDonald, or an Irish Mac an tSeachlainn from Donegal. As you can see, the entire area of Gaelic surnames and their forms in English is extremely complex. The following is a very brief summary of the development of

Gaelic surnames that tries to identify the most important mechanisms in the process of anglicisation.

The Irish are thought to be among the earliest of peoples in Europe to use hereditary surnames. It is thought that the practice began in the early 11th century. The usual process was to take the name of a significant ancestor and prefix it with Ó (Ua) or Mac. The literal meaning of Ó is 'grandson', and Mac means 'son', but, through time, both came to mean 'descendant of'. The Ulster O'Neills were named after a High King of Ireland who was killed fighting the Vikings in 919. O'Neills and O'Briens, along with O'Clearys, can claim to have the oldest hereditary surnames in Europe.

How did the anglicisation of Gaelic names come about? For centuries, English has been the language of centralised administration in Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man, where Gaelic was widely spoken until this century, and often the English version was the only one recognised by law. Sometimes Gaelic surnames were even banned. The MacGregors were so disliked by the Scottish government that a law was passed in 1603 to disperse the clan 'by fire and sword', saying: 'They nor nane of thair posteritie suld call thame selffis Gregor or mcGregoure thairafter vnder payne of deade'. The law lasted for 180 years with a short break of 30 years. A MacGregor signature was not recognised in law, and no agreement entered into with a MacGregor was legal. It was no crime to kill a man of that name. The MacGregors adopted a bewildering number of variant names: Greer, Grierson, Gregg, Gregory, Gregson, Grigson, colours (Black and White, possibly Reid [red]), the names of various other clans, Ramsay, Stewart, Grant, Dougall, Cunninghame, Drummond, Gordon, Graham, Murray, Lecky, Mallagh and Campbell. They took patronymics – MacPeter, MacAdam – and the names of places like Dochart and Comrie. The Mac-an-Righ branch of the MacGregors became Macanee, MacNee, MacAra and by translation, King (rí is king in modern Irish).

Irish Gaelic surnames were actually forbidden by the Statutes of Kilkenny in English-controlled areas as early as 1367:

> it is ordained and established, that every Englishman do use the English language, and be named by an English name, leaving off entirely the manner of naming used by the Irish; and that every Englishman use the English custom, fashion, mode of

> riding and apparel, according to his estate; and if any English, or Irish living amongst the English, use the Irish language ... his lands and tenements ... shall be seized.[2]

In the following centuries, Irish became increasingly marginalised; by the 18th and 19th centuries it had lost all its status and a great deal of its traditional learning. Gradually, and then with increasing momentum, the English language began to define, influence and eventually control all things Irish. The Irish form of a name was not recognised by law, and in the end the English form became the norm.

It is necessary therefore to say something about the difficulties of transcribing Gaelic names into English orthography. Many sounds in Gaelic simply cannot be reproduced in English spelling. Although a number of English versions of Irish surnames come quite close to the original (O'Docherty, Cameron), they are more often a distortion of the original, and it can be difficult to identify the original Gaelic root of the surname. As one Scottish commentator puts it, non-Gaelic-speakers 'fell upon the Highlanders by lip and pen until they hardly know their own address'. This haphazard process yielded some strange results. There are 35 versions of the name MacEnaney, including, by mistranslation, Bird.

The English forms of the surnames then took on a life and dynamic of their own as the language lost its social status. The name Mac Taidhg (son of Teague) has up to 14 forms, including MacKeague and MacTague. In Tyrone, upwardly mobile MacTagues (written M'Tague) adopted the Norman and aristocratic looking Montague by a slight change in spelling and a major change in pronunciation. If they had been aware that they were actually a branch of the O'Neills of Tyrone, one of the oldest and most aristocratic families in Europe, they might have kept the original MacTague.

The next stage involved simplifying the names. Longer names tended to become shorter. Prefixes and suffixes were dropped. The most common strategy here was to drop the Os and Macs from surnames. Other bits were then lopped off or mangled so that the original version is not always easy to restore. A name like Downey could come from either Mac Giolla Domhnaigh (MacIldowney) or Ó Maoldomhnaigh (Muldowney). Another adaptation often involved finding an English name with a similar sound, and using that as the official name. In this

way Ó Coileáin became Collins, Ó hUiginn became Higgens, Ó Baoill became Boyle, Ó hUid became Hood, and Ó Gnímh became Agnew. Sometimes the English form of the name can be quite different from the Gaelic. There is no particular reason why Ó Brollacháin is usually Bradley in Ireland and Brodie in Scotland. The particular form that a Gaelic surname takes often appears to be quite arbitrary. It is impossible to know, for example, why in County Down some of the MacGiverns changed to Montgomery or Biggar, or why Mulcreevy (Ó Maolchraoibhe) became Rice.

A single Gaelic name can have a large number of English forms. Take Mac an Bhreitheamhan, a name found throughout the Gaelic-speaking world. The last word means 'judge' and if you say it quickly enough, sounds a bit like 'brehon', as in the Brehon laws. It became Brown, MacBrayne and MacBrew in Scotland, Bree and Breen on the Isle of Man and in Ireland it was sometimes translated to Judge or was written Brohoon or Brehony. An earlier spelling in Ireland was MacAbrehon, which was copied as MacAbraham and finally Abraham.

On the other hand, a plethora of Gaelic names can coagulate into a single English version. Leonard is one version of names which also can be anglicised as Lennon (Ó Leannáin, Ó Luinín), Linnane or Linneen (Ó Linneáin, Ó Lionnáin), Lunny (Ó Luinigh), Gilsenan (Mac Giolla Seanáin), MacAlindon (Mac Giolla Fhiondáin) and Nannany (Mac Conaonaigh). This, of course, complicates any attempt to restore the original form of the surname. Basically you can enter this maze at any point and find that you can spend the rest of your life tracing the variations, permutations, cross-overs and complications involved, not least of which is the fact that some names that look as if they are from England or lowland Scotland actually do come from England or lowland Scotland.

A common surname serves to illustrate the complexity. In the last region-wide Northern Ireland telephone directory there were about 60 entries for the name 'Goodwin', which derives from Old English and means 'good friend'. In Mayo it can come from Ó Goidín, which sounds similar, or from Ó Dea by mistranslation. In Tyrone it can be derived from Mac Ualghairg (MacGoldrick, which can also become Golden or Goulding). In Tyrone Goodwin can also be derived from Mac Uiginn, which is usually MacGuigan, but can also be anglicised as MacGuckian

(which can also derive from a different name entirely – Mac Eochaidín), or MacGoogan, MacGookin, MacQuiggan, MacWiggin, or as Goodfellow or Goodman. In Monaghan, Mac Uiginn can also become Fidgeon or Pidgeon.

Some translations are fairly accurate. You can be fairly sure that someone called Rabbitte is descended from someone called Mac Coinín. The MacEnookerys of County Down all call themselves Fuller now: Mac an Úcaire means the son of the fuller, or waulker, a trade involving the use of stale urine to thicken cloth. That name has other variants in Scotland, where many of the Macnucators translated themselves as Walker (there must have been even more pressure on the MacFuctors to call themselves Walker once they had learned English). The MacGirrs of south Armagh often called themselves Short by translating the word gearr.

In parts of Fermanagh, some MacAteers accurately translated their name as Wright, as the name Mac an tSaoir means son of the saor or craftsman, and in other places it became Carpenter. However, the word saor also means 'free', and in the past some MacAteers have called themselves Freeman. Many other translations are, like 'Freeman', completely off the beam. O'Loan has been mistranslated Lambe because the word for lamb is uan. The Gaelic word lámh (the 'mh' is pronounced as a v or a w) means 'hand' or 'arm'. A branch of the family usually anglicised as Lowry or Lavery (Ó Tréan-Labhraidh = the strong O'Lowrys) called itself Armstrong, and some of the MacGlaves, Glavins and Lavins call themselves Hand. The rare surname Gallogly (Ó Gallóglaigh = descendant of the foreign – or Viking –warrior) refers to the gallowglasses, Gaelicised Norsemen from the Western isles of Scotland who were hired as mercenaries by the MacDonnells of Antrim. When the Antrim Galloglys came to translate their name, they picked one which disguises an ancestry that is ultimately Scandinavian, spent several centuries in Scotland, and came to Ireland in the 13th century. They based their translation of the name on the word 'gall', which by that time meant a person from England rather than a foreigner or a Viking, and called themselves English.

To summarise, the main processes at work are:

- a rough transcription into English of the sound of a Gaelic name
- an English equivalent is sought based on sound

- a name is translated into English to disguise its Gaelic origin
- a name is badly translated.

The most dramatic multiple example I have come across of an English surname showing all these processes is Green or Greene. There are two words for green in Irish, 'glas' and 'uaithne'. By translation, we get the name Greene from the surnames Ó hUaithnín and Ó hUaithne, and in Ulster Mac Glasáin and Ó Glaisnigh. The Glasses of Roscommon also translated their name, while the MacAleshers of Fermanagh mistranslated theirs. Because they sound roughly like 'green', we have Mac Grianna from Donegal, Ó Grianáin from Sligo and Cavan, Ó Gréine in Meath and the French Huguenot Guerins in Athlone all becoming Greene. The oddest pseudo-translation is from the surname Fahy. The origin of the name Ó Fathaigh is obscure, but it certainly does not come from 'faiche' which means 'a lawn or green'. Some Fahys decided that it did, and called themselves Green.

The problem here, of course, is that the range of options is so wide, and the evidence often so scanty, that it is often impossible to identify which form is authentic. The process is complicated by the fact that so many Ulster names are Gaelic names from Scotland and their derivatives, which are just as confusing as those of Ireland. I hope this account serves to give some notion of the complexity of the subject, as well as an insight into how enriching the study of surnames we have inherited can be.

Endnotes

TAIG TALK

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6 Ibid., Interview No. 4.
7 *Belfast Telegraph*, 5 April 2000.

OUR TANGLED SPEECH

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SOMETHING OF A CULTURAL WAR

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PLUS ÇA CHANGE

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IRISH LANGUAGE TELEVISION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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THE BBC AND THE IRISH LANGUAGE

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Index

Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 220, 225, 227
Act of Supremacy (1560), 110
Adams, Gerry, 32, 36, 49
Adams, Brendan (G.B.), 149, 165
Adamson, Dr Ian, 61–4, 76
Ahern, Bertie, 50
Aiken, A.J., 56
Ancient Order of Hibernians, 225
Andersonstown, Belfast, 251
Andrews, Áine, viii, xii, 240, 257, 258, 264
Andrews, Liam, 200, 204, 205
Andrews, J.M., 271, 291
Anglicisation, 111, 114, 161, 180, 305
Anglophone, 85, 108, 167
Annals of the Four Masters, 164
Anti-Home Rule Convention (1892), 134, 184
Ard-Scoil, Castle Street, Belfast, 205–06, 224–5
Ark of the Covenant, 67
Art Society Rooms, Queen Street, Belfast, 190

Ballymascanlon (Dundalk), Co. Louth, 148, 152
Banner of Ulster, 181
Bard of Dunseverick *see* John McKinley
Battle of the Farset (665 AD), 162
BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), x, 206–07, 266, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 282–4, 286, 289–98
Irish Language Unit BBC Northern Ireland, 283
BBC Charter, 284, 293
BBC Northern Ireland, xii, 48, 94, 206, 272–3, 283–4, 286, 291, 292, 293, 297
BBC Scotland, 208, 272–3, 283
BBC Wales, 272–3, 275 282–3
Béal Feirste *see* Belfast
Bedell, William, 111, 147
Beersbridge Road, Belfast, 190, 223
Belfast, Co. Antrim, xi, xiv, xv, xvi, 7, 29, 35, 62, 94, 117, 130, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 158–84, 186–213, 217–38, 243–264, 290
Belfast (Royal) Academy, 169, 172, 175
Belfast Agreement, 1998 (Good Friday Agreement), x, 46, 49, 50–51, 52–3, 56–7, 270, 272, 277, 278, 279, 280, 284
Belfast Dispensary, 151, 170
Belfast District Committee, 196, 197
Belfast Gaelic Choir, 207
[Belfast] Harmonic Society, 155
Belfast Harp Festival (1792), 151, 169
Belfast Literary Society, 151, 153, 155, 170
Belfast Medical School, 151, 170
Belfast Museum, 175, 184
[Belfast] Natural History [and Philosophical] Society, 151, 153, 155, 156, 170, 184, 189, 190
Belfast Naturalists' Field Club, 189–90, 191
Belfast News Letter, 22, 25, 171
Belfast Telegraph, 12, 76
Bell, Sam Hanna, 207
Biggar, Francis Joseph, 190, 192, 307
Birmingham, George A. *see* Rev. James Hannay
Blair, Tony, 49–50
Blow, James, 168
Blythe, Ernest *see* Earnán de Blaghd
Bogle, Joe, 235
Book of Armagh, 167
Book of Clandeboye, 166–7
Book of Common Order, 147
Book of Common Prayer, 110
Book of Genealogies, 105
'Book of Invasions' see *Lebor Gabhála*
'Book of Judges, The', 66
Book of Rights (11th century), 163
Boyd, Dr John St Clair, 190–91, 192
Bradley, Eleanor, 181
Brian Boru, 149
British Association for the Advancement of Science, 155, 175
British Cultural and Equality Unit, 25–6
British identity, 25–6, 32
British Israelites/Israelitism, 64–9, 70, 71, 75, 79
Britishness, 25, 31–4
Broadcasting Act (1990), 276
Brooke, Sir Basil, 94
Brooke, Charlotte, 117
Brown, Terence, 38–9
Brownlow, William, 150
Brownlow (alias Chamberlain, alias Mac Artúir), Arthur, 150, 167
'Brutus of Belfast' *see* James McDonnell
Bryce, Rev. Ruben J., 175
Bryson, Samuel, 130, 153, 182
Bryson, Rev. Andrew, 153, 169

Buchanan, Sammy Joe, 222
Buckley, Anthony, 68
Bunscoil Phobal Feirste, viii
Bunting, Edward, 151, 169
Burns, Robert, 226

Cambrensis, Giraldus, 106, 107, 109–10
Cant (Gammon or Shelta), 20
Carragher, Anna, 272
Carson, Ciarán, 235
Castle Street, Belfast, 225
Castlereagh, Barony of, 165
Cathcart, Rex, 207, 289, 291–2, 294
Catholic communalism, 203, 252
Catholic Confederacy, 60, 108
Catholic emancipation, 152, 173
Catholic nationalism, 203, 203
Catholic Truth Society, 204–05
Celt(s), 62, 66, 78
Celtic Film and Television Festival (1994), Derry city, 277
Celtic Film Festival, 297
Celtic language(s), 4, 50, 174, 272, 276
census returns, Irish language in, 19–20, 21, 28–9, 83, 86, 155, 177, 246
Charlemont, Lord, 200, 201, 202
Charlemont Street, Belfast, 176
Chichester, Sir Arthur, 161, 165, 175
Chichester-Clark, Major James, 154
Chosen People, 60, 64, 66, 75, 109
Claidheamh Solius, An, 135, 136
Clandeboye, Co. Down, 163,164, 165, 166
College Square North, Belfast, 175, 184, 189, 190, 228
Comhaltas Uladh (The Gaelic League), 186, 201–02, 203–04, 205–08, 209, 210, 212, 213, 270, 271
Communications Bill (2002), 279–80
Community Relations Council for Northern Ireland (CRC), x, 46–7, 63
'Contention of the Bards', 39–40
Cooke, Rev. Dr Henry, 180, 182
Coronation Stone, 67, 68
Counter-Reformation, 108, 110, 111, 178
Craig, Sir James, 198
Craobh Ruadh, Belfast, 196
Crozier, Rev. Canon John, 192
Cruithin, the, 42, 60, 61–3, 64, 68–70, 71–9, 162, 163
Crumlin Road Jail, Belfast, 210, 211, 230
Gaelic Society, 211
Cultural ecology, 15, 95, 296
Cumann Chluain Ard, 186, 189, 208, 209–10, 212, 252, 262

Dál Riata *see* Dalriada
Dalriada (Dál Riata), 76, 102, 148
de Blaghd, Earnán, 214, 225–7
de Valera, Éamon, xv, 206, 224–5
Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), 25–6, 47
Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), 279, 280, 281
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), x, 77, 278
Devlin, Joseph, 204, 225
dialect(s), 50, 54 – 56, 147, 174, 194, 200, 212, 219–22, 226
Dominions Office (of British Government), 291–2
Donaldson, Drew, 212–13
Donegal Irish, 13, 15, 18, 179, 191, 194, 212, 218, 234, 304, 309
Donegall Street Meeting House, Belfast, 152, 153, 169, 173
Downtown Women's Centre, ix
Drennan, William, 152
Drumcrun (fictionalised placename), 70, 72, 73, 74
Dublin, 118, 134, 164, 168, 194, 211, 212, 218–19, 226, 228, 235, 246, 247–9, 257
Duffy, Gavin, 153, 171
Dundalk, Co. Louth, 137, 148, 152, 153, 169, 209

Easter Rising, 1916, 29, 191, 212, 224
Eirug, Aled, 275, 282–3
Elizabeth I, 110, 163
'Érin go bragh', 130, 184, 192
'Erse', 87, 207, 271, 291, 292
Essex, Earl of, 163, 164, 171
European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, 56, 280

Falls Road, Belfast, 52, 200, 210, 211
Famine, the, 114, 154, 155, 182
Fenians *see* Irish Republican Brotherhood
Ferguson, Samuel, 173
Fishman, Joshua, 80, 89–90
Foras na Gaeilge, 280

Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), 133, 135, 291
Gaelic Fellowship, 212–13
Gaelic Journal, 190–91
Gaelic League, 83, 115, 117–2, 126, 130–40, 156, 184, 186, 189–6, 200–01, 205, 206, 208, 209, 211, 212, 221, 224, 228, 235, 259, 270–71, 291

Belfast branch, 190–91, 192, 194, 195–6, 198, 206, 223, 224, 225, 235
McHale Branch, 137–8
London Gaelic League, 228
Gaels, 61, 62, 78, 79, 98, 101, 104–07, 108, 110, 112, 123, 124, 148, 166, 291
'Images of the Gael', 101–21
Gaeltacht Authority *see* Údarás na Gaeltachta
Gaeltacht *see also* Shaw's Road Gaeltacht, 80, 83, 85–6, 87, 89–91, 93–4, 97, 118–19, 123, 171, 189, 191, 201, 209–10, 214, 218–20, 222, 228, 230, 240, 243, 245–8, 249–50, 251, 255, 256, 264, 271, 290, 292
Donegal Gaeltacht, 18, 222, 228, 230, 251, 256, 290
Omeath Gaeltacht, 191, 222
Galltacht, 249–50
General Ulster Synod, 152, 180
Glasgow University, 152, 173
Glens of Antrim, 113, 151, 154, 170, 179, 181, 191, 195, 220, 271, 292
Goidel (Gwyddel), 101–04, 106, 112
Good Friday Agreement *see* Belfast Agreement, 1998
Greenshirt Movement for Social Credit, 210, 217–18

Hannay, Rev. James, 134, 135
Hardiman, James, 173
Harp Society [Irish/Belfast?], 151, 153, 155, 170
Hawthorne, James, 46–7
Hayden, Prof. Mary, 118
Hegan, Stephen, 71, 73
Hegarty, Kieran, 295–6, 297
Henry, Prof. R.M., 192–3
Herder, Johann Gottfried, 120–2, 132
Hermon, Lady Sylvia, 279
Hiberno-English, 14, 218
Higgins, Michael D., 25, 277
Hill, Sir Moses, 165, 175
Hindley, Reg, 85
Hine, Edward, 65, 66, 68, 70, 72, 74
Hobson, Bulmer, 191, 192, 226, 227
Hutchinson, Bishop John, 168
Hutton, Mary Helen, 191
Hyde, Douglas, xv, 115, 119–20, 131–4, 135–6, 137, 138, 139, 140–41, 142, 197, 220, 223

Indo-European, 61–2
Inter-generational transmission, 90
Introduction to the Irish Language, 152, 173, 174
Ireland, Republic of, 5, 25, 27, 28–31, 34, 94–5
Irish Folklore Commission, 141
Irish identity, 106–07, 109, 172–3, 198
Irish in Northern Ireland, 92–7
Irish Language Act, 32, 94
Irish Parliament, 161
Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), 136
Irish Republican Army (IRA, Provisionals, Provos), 3, 6, 32, 204, 210, 211, 224, 228, 229, 230, 232
Second Donegal Battalion, 228
Protestant IRA activist, 231–2
Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), 121, 131, 133, 135, 136, 137–8, 191, 197, 202, 225, 226, 227
Irish speaking in Ireland, xiv–xv, xvi, 18–19, 20–21, 28–31, 83, 84–5, 86, 87, 89, 90, 91–2, 93–4, 113, 114–15, 116, 118–19, 129, 141, 147, 148–9, 151, 165, 167–70, 171, 176, 191, 194, 201, 207–08, 211, 213, 219, 222, 225, 230, 235–6, 245–7, 249, 250, 252, 255, 256, 261–2, 264, 270, 271, 291–2
Co. Antrim, xv, 141, 170, 191, 222, 271, 292
Rathlin Island, xv, 18, 168, 191, 271, 292
Co. Armagh, xv, 18, 170, 222, 225, 271, 292
Co. Derry, xv, 170, 257, 290
Co. Down, xi, xv, 141, 151, 152, 166, 170, 171, 191, 225
Co. Louth, 179, 148, 191, 201, 225
Co Meath, 85
Co. Tyrone, xv, 18, 141, 170, 191, 271, 292
Irish Volunteers, 136, 137, 224, 226
Irish-medium education, 52, 94, 189, 257–9, 261–2, 278
Irishness, 37–8, 51, 77, 116, 132, 140, 142, 196
Isle of Man, 149, 165, 166

Jacob's Pillow' *see* Coronation Stone
James I, 69, 165
James II, 150, 227

Kane, Rev. Richard, 134, 184, 190, 192
Keating, Geoffrey, 104, 109, 110, 111, 116
Kelly, Michael, 113
Kilkenny, Co. Kilkenny, 60
Killaig, Coleraine, Co. Londonderry, 175
Killeavey, Co. Armagh, 222
Knights of the Danite Pass, 74
Knights of the Gibraltar Pass, 72, 74, 75
Knox, John, 147
Koch, John T., 62

Lallans (Scots), 48, 148
Language maintenance, 84, 86, 89, 210, 246

Language revival in southern Ireland, 86–92
Language shift, 85, 112
Larne, Co. Antrim, 163, 167
Larne gun-running, 191
Lebor Gabhála ('The Book of Invasions'), 73, 102, 103, 105, 73, 102, 103, 105
Leerssen, Joep, 108, 116, 172, 177
Lhyud, Edward, 167
Linen Hall Library, Belfast, ix, 8, 151, 153, 155, 170
Linguistic diversity, 14, 17–18, 36, 53, 282,
Logue, Cardinal Michael, 121
Lombard, Peter, 111
Londonderry, Lord, 198–9, 200
Lorimer, William, 58
Lost Tribes (of Israel), 60, 64–9, 72
Loughrey, Pat, 295, 297
Louvain (Leuven), Belgium, 108
Loyalism, 36, 76–7
Loyalists, 141, 224
Lurgan, Lord, 150
Luther, Martin, 205
Lynch, Diarmuid, 137
Lynch, Patrick, 169, 171, 172

Mac Arttúr *see* Arthur Brownlow
Mac Diarmada, Sean, 137
Mac Donnagáin, Pádraig, 166
Mac Firbisigh, Dubhaltach, 105, 115
Mac Giolla Rua, Seoirse (George McElroy), 233, 234–5
Mac Gréagóir, Aoidhminn, 191
Mac Grianna, Seosamh, 15, 123
Mac Lochlainn, Gearóid, xv–xvi, 214, 235, 236–7
Mac Lochlainn, Muircheartach, 107
Mac Maoláin, Seán, 186, 191, 196, 198, 200, 201, 205–06, 214, 220, 221–5, 235
MacAingil, Aodh, 108, 109
MacArthur, Lt-Gen. Sir William, 192–3
MacDonald, Hugh, 304
Mackin, Simon, 179
MacLeod, Prof. Donald, 97
MacNeill (Mac Néill), Eoin, 61, 105, 136, 139–40, 154, 224
MacPherson, James, 116, 171
MacRory, Cardinal Joseph, 204
Maguire, Gabrielle, 253
Mallory, J.P., 62, 64
Marshall, George, 207–08, 270–71, 291–2
Mason, H.J.M., 113–14
Maximally differentiated (Ulster Scots), 19, 57–9, 75
Maynooth, Co. Kildare, 118
McAdam, Robert, 130, 154–5, 175–9, 180, 182, 183, 184, 228
'McAlpine's Fusiliers', 13
McAteer, Eddie, 94, 198
McCambridge, John, 154
McCausland, Nelson, 77
McCloskey, James, 16, 17, 45
McClure, Derrick, 55
McCracken, Henry Joy, 151, 173, 231
McCrystal, Cathal, 212
McDiarmid, Hugh, 58
McDonnell, Dr James, 130, 151–2, 153, 169–70, 171, 172–3, 175, 179, 182, 184
McDonnell, Hugh, 153, 155, 179–80, 181, 182, 183, 221
McGeogh, Patrick, 179
McGinley, P.T., 186, 190, 194, 196–7, 220, 223
McKeague, Fr, 181
McKeague/McTeague surname, 306
McKinley, John, 173–4
McKnight, James, 153–4, 171, 173
McMillen, Hugh, 191
McNarry, David, 22, 31–3
McNeill, T.E., 62, 64
McNeill, John, 179
Meek, Harold, 213
Milesians (Míl Espáne), 103, 104, 105
Milligan, Alice, 191, 192
Ministry of Education (NI), 198–9, 200, 201–02, 258
Mitchel, John, 211, 228
Moore, George, 117–18

Neilson, Rev. William, 130, 152, 153, 154, 173, 174–5, 180
Neilson, Moses, 152
New Testament (by William Lorimer), 58
Ní Phóilin, Aoife, xii, 244, 255, 264
Nialll of the Nine Hostages, 107, 164
Niseirath, Co. Louth, 150
Northern Ireland Assembly, 25, 28, 47, 48, 58–9
Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT), 30, 37
Northern Star, 172

Ó Brolchain, Pádraig (Patrick Bradley), 181
Ó Cadhain, Máirtín, xvi, 210, 248–9
Ó Caireallain, Gearóid, 140
Ó Catháin, Seán, 194–5
Ó Ceallaigh, Sean T., 135, 137, 138
Ó Ceallaigh, Séamus, 191

Ó Ciardha, Pádhraic, 280
Ó Duibhne, Diarmuid, 303
Ó Gealacháin, Peadar, 180–81, 183
Ó Gnímh, Brian, 163–4
Ó Gnímh, Fearflatha, 165–6, 167
Ó Grianna, Séamus, 218–20
Ó hUid, Tarlach, 186, 210–11, 212, 214, 227–32, 235
Ó hUiginn, Sergeant Pádraig, 179
Ó hUllacháin, Colmán, 88, 93, 137, 248
Ó Maoil Chonaire, Flaithrí, 39–40
Ó Muilleoir, Máirtín, 35–6, 235
Ó Muireadhaigh, Fr Lorcan, 200–01, 204–05
Ó Néill, Séamus, 214, 233–5
Ó Raghallaigh, Mícheál, 114–15
Ó Seagha, P.S., 189–90, 192
Ó Seanáin, Cathal, 191
Ó Searcaigh, Brian, 179
Ó Snodaigh, Pádraig, 115
Ó Tuathail, Éamonn, 191
Ó Tuathail, Fr Dónall, 195
O'Boyle, Cathal, 191
O'Boyle, Seán, 191, 271, 290
O'Brien, Flann, xv
O'Brien, William Smith, 182
O'Brien, Flann *see* Brian O'Nolan
O'Connell, F.B., 193–4, 195
O'Conor, Charles, 117
O'Doherty, Elinor, 150
O'Donovan, John, 155, 181, 183, 193
O'Flaherty, Liam, 219
O'Laverty, Monsignor James, 192
Omeath, Co. Louth, 176, 191, 222
O'Neill, Owen Roe, 150
O'Neill, Sir Brian, 163–4, 166, 171
O'Neill, Felim Bacagh, 164
O'Neill, Hugh Boy, 164
O'Neill, Conn, 165
O'Neill, Cormac, 166, 167
O'Neill, Art Óg, 167
O'Neill, Earl, of Shane's Castle, 170–71
O'Neill Crowley GAA club, 208
O'Rahilly, T.F., 61–2, 73, 102, 103
Orange Order (Orangeism), ix, 31, 32, 63 68, 134, 184, 190, 202, 222, 225, 232, 233, 234

Páirc na Gaeltachta (Gaeltacht Park), Co. Dublin, 247–8
Parsons, Lawrence, 116
Pasker, Seán, 212–13
P-Celtic languages, 61, 79
Picts, 61, 70, 73, 74, 75, 76
Plantation of Ulster, 53, 61, 68, 76, 148
Pobal Feirste *see also* Shaw's Road Gaeltacht, 243, 245, 249, 251, 253–57, 262–4
Porter, Hugh, 12–13
Praeger, Rosamund, 191, 192
Presbyterian Home Mission, 181
Pretani *see* Cruithin

Queen's Island, Belfast, 155
  Gaelic Society, 192–3
Queen's University Belfast (previously College), 155–6, 169, 183, 192, 193

Radio Ulster, 290, 297
Ranafast, Co. Donegal, 220, 222, 290
Rathlin Gaelic, 18, 168, 271, 292
Rathlin Island, Co. Antrim, 191, 271
Rawnsley, H.D., 14
Redmond, John, 136, 137
Reform Club, Ulster, 207
Reformation, the, 107, 108, 167, 180, 205
Reith, John, 293, 294
Robinson, Peter, 22, 25, 26, 31, 33
Robinson, Philip, 60–61, 69–75
Rosemary Street (Presbyterian Church), Belfast, 153
Royal Belfast Academical Institution, 151, 152, 154, 170, 173, 180, 183
RTÉ (Raidió Telefis Éireann formerly Raidió Éireann), x, 271, 292
Russell, Thomas, 152, 172, 173

Scottish Gaelic, 5, 12, 18, 33, 94, 116, 147, 195, 206, 226, 245, 270, 275–6, 280, 291, 303–04
Scottish Picts, 61, 70, 73–6
Scrabo (Greek geographer first century AD), 98, 101
Second World War, 208, 210, 211, 220, 228, 270
Shankill (Road), Belfast, 163, 233
Shannon, Jim, 36, 47–8
Shaw's Road Gaeltacht *see also* Pobal Feirste, Belfast, viii, xii, xvi, 94, 189, 210, 245, 247, 149, 255, 264
Sinn Féin, 25, 29–30, 32, 34–7, 49, 135–6, 138, 226
  Cultural Department, 35–6
Soho Foundry, Townsend Street, Belfast, 154–5, 175, 179, 183
Sperrins, 191, 271, 292
St Dominic's High School, Belfast, 292
St George's Church, High Street, Belfast, 164

Stanyhurst, Richard, 107
Stapleton, Theobold, 111
Statutes of Kilkenny, 305–06

Táin Bó Cuailnge, 114, 191
Tara, hill of, Co. Meath, 67
Tara (loyalist group), 67–8, 205
Teilifís na Gaeilge, 276–7, 279
TG4 (previously Teilifís na Gaeilge), x, 273–4, 279, 281–4
The Hackler's Well, Belfast, 221
Thuente, Mary Helen, 172
Tone, Theobold Wolfe, 134–5, 151, 172, 231
Tribe of Dan, 65, 67–8, 70, 72–3, 75
Tribes of Dan, The, 42
Trimble, David, 22, 34, 38, 48, 49, 50, 51, 53
Trinity College, Dublin (TCD), 133, 149, 191, 192, 193
'Druidical Society', 193–4
Tuatha Dé Danann, 103, 105

Ulaidh, 61, 162, 163
Ullans, 45, 48–50, 69
Ullans, 48
Ullans Press, 69
Ulster Gaelic Society, 151, 155, 170, 175, 189
Ulster Hall, Belfast, 184, 223–4
Ulster Journal of Archaeology, 155, 175
Ulster People, The, 63
Ulster Scots (Ullans), 8, 12, 14, 19, 21, 31, 36, 39, 41, 42, 45, 47–60, 61–64, 68–71, 74–9, 275, 283, 304
Ulster Society for the Promotion of Ulster-British Heritage and Culture (Ulster Society), 51, 150
Ulster Unionist Convention (1891), 192
Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), 48, 51–2, 94, 140, 199, 279
Ulster-British, 31, 38, 49, 51
Ulster-Scots Heritage Council, 51, 77
Ulster-Scots Language Society, 48, 63
Ultach Trust, viii, ix, x, 63, 266, 274–8, 280–81
UNESCO report of Vernacular Languages (1951), 56
Unionist Academy, 25–6
United Irishmen, 152, 172–3, 203, 211, 228
Ussher, Archbishop James, 111, 115

Vannais, Judy, 77
'Varieties of Irishness' conference, 51
Victoria, Queen, 69, 130, 155, 177–8
Vindicator, 181
von Clausewitz, Carl, 26

Wake the Tribe o' Dan, 60–61, 69–75
Walsh, Fr Luke, 181–2
War News, 211, 227, 228, 229
War of Independence, 225
Ware, Sir James, 115
Wellington, Duke of, 34
West Belfast, viii, xii, 251, 252
Whitehall, Westminster, London (British government), 280, 294
Whitman, Walt, 294
Whorter, John, 16
Wilde, Oscar, 15
William III, King, 227
Williamite Wars, 167, 171
Wilson, Bryan, 64
Wilson, John, 65
Wilson, Terry *see* Tarlach Ó hUid
Woodman, Peter, 61
Worthington, Tony, 277–8

Yeats, W.B., 34, 135, 227
YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association), ix, 186, 212–13
Young, Rose Maud, 191
Young Ireland, 117, 182

Zimmer and Rhys, 61