



WATCH
YOUR
LANGUAGE

an bata scór

the insidious silence

contents

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The bata scóir or tally stick was usually a piece of wood which Irish-speaking children were forced to wear around their necks. Anybody who heard the child speaking Irish was expected to mark the stick with a notch. At the end of the day the marks were counted and the child was punished for each offence.

introduction

THIS booklet is being published in response to a widespread demand for a printed version of the television series "Watch Your Language". The series' aim was to give the ordinary viewer some thoughts about the place of the Irish language in the rebuilding of our national life, and to show that the idea of having a fully bilingual community here at some future time can be both feasible and advantageous.

The programmes were not aimed at the converted; rather, at that great majority of our people who are sufficiently well-disposed to use, as often as they can and with a little encouragement, the bit of half-forgotten Irish they learnt at school. Seán de Fréine, in his moving account of the death of Irish in the country at large in Part 4, tells of the blundering speech our near-forebears were willing to use in their first faltering efforts to get to grips with English. Should it be a matter of surprise if, in the course of restoring our own language to its full stature, we must first go through a stage which would be roughly the same?

Both series and booklet were launched in the belief that there is no such thing as an enemy of the Irish language. Resentment of particular points in language policy there may be, but of the language itself, no. Indeed, such a thing would be an absurdity—much as if one were to say there could be enemies of good music, or sunlight, or a civilised way of life. All these are positive things, things of delight, but we must sometimes be taught to appreciate them. Over the past generation or so, it is possible that, while emphasis was laid on the learning of Irish, equal attention was not given to helping people appreciate the underlying reasons why they should take on this task. This booklet will, we hope, serve as some small contribution towards filling that gap. And out of a developing awareness of the part the language can play in enriching our national life may grow a more practical-minded impetus to put it into spoken use.

A brief word about the text. Pictures make television but words make a book. Adapting a television series to the written form requires many changes. What follows is not, therefore, in all respects what viewers saw and heard on television. The material is, however, substantially the same. For their excellence, credit goes to the distinguished writers and consulting editors: Professors David Greene and Seán Ó Tuama, Dr. Eileen Kane, Dr. Meis Gertner and Seán de Fréine; and to the television staff who put them together in the first place: Gerry Murray, Dr. Máire de Paor and Jim Sherwin.

For their defects—since I was the one foolhardy enough to take on the job of reshaping them—censure, alas, must fall on me!

LIAM Ó MURCHÚ.

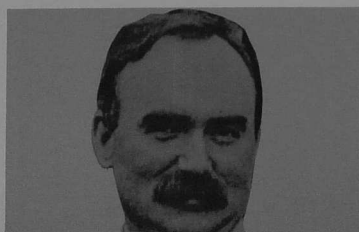
Head of Irish and Children's Programmes, (Television), RTÉ.

Emglev An Tiegezhioù

30, leurgê; al Lisoù - ROAZHON

what the people say

Ireland, at the time she lost her ancient social system, also lost her language as the vehicle of thought of those who guided as her leaders. As a result of this twofold loss, the nation suffered socially, nationally and intellectually from a prolonged arrested development." — JAMES CONNOLLY.



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MENTION the Irish language in an average company in Ireland today and you're likely to start an argument. Few are indifferent, sides are taken one way or another. The sides are many; some, a minority, would drop the language altogether; others, also a minority, are so fervently for it that they will have no other; still others—the majority this time—are for it, but will make little or no effort to do anything about it.

The first thing to be said about the Irish language is that it is not the language of the country at the present time; further, that complete bilingualism seems far from attainable in the immediate future. What we will do here is present some of the current thinking about Irish; and, in addition, show that Irish is a modern language which can fit into everyday life. First, some examples of the kind of comment one picks up talking to people at random around the country:

"I just don't think it has anything to offer the country. If I went to England, how am I going to get on speaking Irish? It's best to speak English, so you can go round the world. Irish won't get you anywhere, apart from a Government job."

"Do we remain more Irish by having a language? Not necessarily. The Scottish aren't less Scottish because they don't speak Scottish nor the Welsh Welsh. I do not feel I am a lesser Irishman because I do not speak the Irish language."

"It's a waste of time in this day and age. There's too much time spent on it in the schools when you could be doing more useful subjects."

"I teach languages but I prefer modern languages in this day and age. Irish is a modern language only in the Gaeltachts. Go into a shop anywhere else in Ireland, start speaking Irish, and people will just laugh at you."

"What good is it going to be to us in the Common Market? It has never been much good to me. I learnt it at school, it was kind of drummed into me."

"I like it. I would love to be able to speak it, but I can't. As for the people who can speak it and

don't, I say they should speak it!"

"If we go abroad, we want to be known as Irish. Yet, speaking English, people straightaway say to you—'Oh, you're from England!'"

"I like to be able to speak Irish because I am an Irishman."

"My experience is that it is like knocking your head against the wall telling people how valuable it is to have their own language."

"We all like to think we're in favour of Irish, but when the chips are down we're not prepared to do anything about it. There's a great deal of dishonesty in the national attitude. We're not prepared to take the necessary steps at all."

Some of these comments are good; others, while superficially true, require a great deal more said about them. For one thing—and this is not widely appreciated—it is only very recently that, as a whole people, we began to abandon Irish. In this, we are unenviably unique among the nations. On the other hand, we are by no means unique in the basic reasons we have for trying to keep our language, to restore and develop it. We will come to that in due course.

Meanwhile, the simple fact is that all of us readily admit to being Irish, we absolutely insist we are Irish when we're abroad, people will even tell you that the only time they speak Irish at all is when they are abroad—if only to avoid being called English. How do we let other people know we're a nation if we haven't a language of our own?

We're a small country with powerful neighbours to the east and west; it would be foolish to pretend that we haven't been influenced by them. Their style of living and their sophistication appeals to us; we sing their songs, read their books; we have little option but to look at their films. Is it any wonder then that we are shaped to a greater or lesser extent by the good and bad things in their way of life? There is no wish to be insular but there is a real danger, under these strong, attractive influences, that we will lose sight of our own way of life.

What has language to do with this? We know what the patriots have said:

"How can we express our most subtle thoughts and finest feelings in a foreign tongue? Irish will scarcely be our language in this generation, not even perhaps in the next, but until we have it

what the people say

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again on our tongues and in our minds we are not free".—MICHAEL COLLINS

"Ireland, at the time she lost her ancient social system, also lost her language as the vehicle of thought of those who acted as her leaders. As a result of this twofold loss, the nation suffered socially, nationally and intellectually from a prolonged arrested development".—JAMES CONNOLLY

"In subtle ways we cannot wholly understand the language gives the Irish mind a defence against every other mind, taking in comradeship whatever good the others have to offer, while retaining its own power and place. The Irish mind can do itself justice only in Irish".—TERENCE MCSWINEY

And a view from outside Ireland:

"A language is to a large degree the nation. Without the language there is no nation. In Ireland you should educate your children that part of their being Irish means that they have a language of their own and they speak it. Of course, they ought also know another language, and the second language in almost every country now is English. But they can't be fully Irish unless they speak the Irish language which they have. You must tell them certain things which will make them love it, that this is what preserved their existence, what made them independent. They don't want to be British, they have a language of their own which makes them Irish, they must speak it".

—DAVID BEN GURION, first Prime Minister of Israel.

So why don't we speak it? Some time ago, a Government White Paper on the Irish language stated clearly that official policy was for a bilingual people. There was no question of English being discarded; merely that the use of Irish should be progressively extended. Few people doubt the good sense of this intention—but how seriously is it taken? Some public organisations make an effort to spread the language by prominent displays of information, but how far does that go? Telephone calls to Government offices may be answered in Irish—but the conversation rarely continues that way. The language of the Dail and Senate is largely English—though it is by these very politicians that we are adjured to follow the policy of bilingualism, to which they all generally subscribe.

So it has to be said that there is a measure of pretence all round; those more deeply concerned will call it by the harsher name of hypocrisy. But is it all necessarily pretence? The T.D. is faulted for not giving good example by speaking Irish in the Dail, but how many would understand him if he did? Would you risk saying in Irish to an average Irish audience something really important, something which it was vital to you should be clearly and fully understood?

So it is essential that the language be widely understood before it can really begin to be spoken. A common view is that it will not be spoken until it is loved. But which comes first, loving or knowing? Or, to use a more homely analogy—how can you love the girl before you know her?

So we're down to the question of knowledge. And it's fair to ask who ever learns a language unless he really has to? (There is always, of course, the odd one

who does so out of special interest—a few phrases to help him on a visit abroad, an interest in its literature, possibly an interest in a good newspaper.) And this leads us to the thorny conclusion that, if we want to see the Irish language widely spoken, we must put up with measures to ensure that the average boy or girl leaving school is in fact able to speak it. And is there a realistic alternative in taking these measures to the much-resented "compulsion"?

Teachers are unanimous in the view that the attitude of parents is of fundamental importance. If parents like the idea of their child being taught Irish, the child will also have goodwill. If the parents dislike Irish, so also will the child. This is how one teacher put it:

"You do find an odd one who will say—'Oh, I hate Irish'—and then you'll hear them saying they've heard that at home. It's in Secondary you notice most of all the attitude of parents. If this is hostile, the child will feel as his parents; as he hears his parents talk, he will repeat the same sort of outlook. If the parents are indifferent, he too will be indifferent. If the parents are favourable, so is he. A child from England came to our school a month after the term began. She's only eight; we start Irish at seven. So the other children have been doing Irish for a little over a year. Then this little girl came, she sat in the class. I didn't ask her any questions or anything, I just talked, she listened, she was attentive, and then about a month later we had a little test, and she came out top of the class. Naturally I was surprised. I feel her parents must have wanted her to learn this language, it was something new, she hadn't got any of the inbred feelings a lot of Irish people have. Her parents probably said—'Oh, well, there she is in Ireland, this is a feature of the Irish educational system, we are here in Ireland, so we accept it'."

"The work of teachers of Irish in schools would be made easier if parents who were hostile to the language at least refrained from communicating their hostility to their children. This puts the child at an awful disadvantage; it makes the teacher's work far harder; it renders twice as difficult an already difficult job."

If parents are "hostile" to Irish, it is quite likely not to be hostility to the language itself, but rather to what is popularly known as "compulsion". What is this compulsion? Is it having to learn Irish? Or to pass exams in Irish? Or is it to do with having to learn other subjects through Irish? Or yet being debarred from certain jobs without Irish? All or any of these points are likely to come up when the word "compulsion" is mentioned:

"The whole thing has to do with compulsion. With children, you say, you *must* wash your teeth, you *must* wash your ears and they say, no, I don't want to, just because they have to! The very same way, they come home in the evening, they have to do their homework, they do any other subject but Irish, and why? Because they *must* learn Irish, if they do not have Irish they can't pass their exams!"

"Being debarred from jobs, people feel strongly about that. And the rather hypocritical attitude towards Irish that that kind of thing breeds".

But is what is popularly known as "compulsion" really the kernel of this problem at all? Is it rather a question of people not being convinced of the importance of the thing they are being "compelled" to do? And, indeed, might it not be true that, if they were so convinced, they might be willing to take on a good deal more than is now being asked of them, in order the more rapidly to achieve it? The fact is that compulsion is something with which we are familiar in other areas of our lives. Leaving aside the field of education—and you never hear objections to children *having* to learn Mathematics or English or Christian Doctrine—do we not have other compulsions all around us in our ordinary everyday lives? No one objects to the compulsory rule which says we *must* drive on the left-hand side of the road; we accept the speed limits which are laid down; when a child is born, we accept the compulsion which says *he must* be registered; in a national epidemic, we will not object to the compulsory rule which says *he must* be vaccinated. In all these cases we accept compulsion, because we see it as necessary for the good of the child and of the community in which he lives.

Equally, it could be shown that Irish was necessary for the good of the child and for the solidarity of the community in which he is going to live, would we perhaps be willing to accept the degree of compulsion needed here?

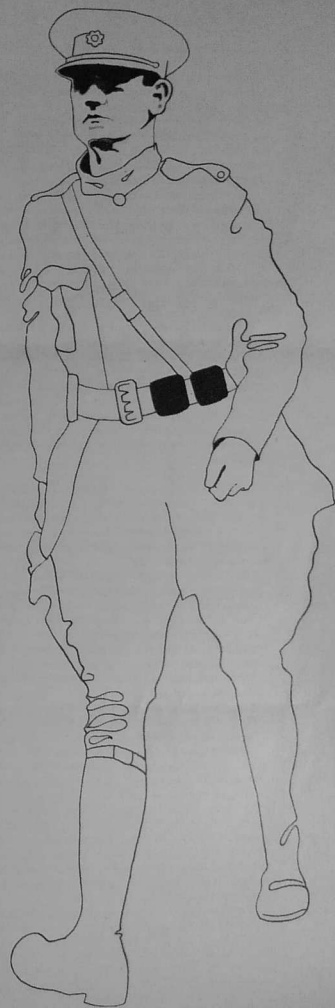
These are merely questions and it would not be easy in a short space to give final answers to them. But perhaps it will help if we set the problem in a world context. For the fact is that the Irish language situation at the present time is in many respects but one of many such situations throughout the world.

In the U.S.S.R. now, there are 120 languages; in India, over 100. Coming to Europe, in Poland there are 6; in France at least 5, other than French; in Great Britain, 3—English, Welsh, Scots Gaelic. In all these countries and in scores of others, there is compulsory teaching of at least one second language—either the native language or the language of the controlling Government. Here at home—a fact not commonly recognised—English is compulsory even in the Gaeltachts. And it is accepted without protest because it is seen to be a necessary part of the modern life.

In most European countries, language and nationality go hand in hand. Where languages died, it was because the speakers of these languages lost their sense of national identity. We are a small country, we have been under almost constant assault over the centuries, and our language has inevitably suffered. Let's look for a moment at two other small nations whose languages, despite their size and numerical strength, *have* managed to survive.

Finland is now an independent republic. But,

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before now, she had been dominated in turn by two powerful neighbours, Sweden and Russia. Up to 1809, it was the Swedes; from then on, Russia. While the Swedes were in control, only 20% of the people spoke Swedish—yet it had been made, and continued, as the official language of the State. Finnish nationalists resented this. They expressed their feelings in the slogan: "We are not Swedes anymore, we do not want to be Russians—let us therefore be Finns". After the Russian Revolution in 1917, Finland became independent, with Finnish now joining Swedish as one of the two official languages.

All through these years of pressure from outside, the constant feature of Finnish national life was their determination to persevere with the restoration of their language. Finnish is now the dominant language, spoken by more than 90% of the population, and the country has a healthy thriving economy, by no means held back by what was thought by some as the disadvantage of having a minority language as its national vernacular.

The second small country which has managed to hold onto its language is Iceland. With a population now of only 200,000, Iceland is an independent republic, with a university, an international airline, and everything else a modern State has, except an army. Icelandic is the only language of the country—yet, to take one example of activity within that language, they publish twice as many books in Icelandic each year as we in Ireland publish in Irish and English put together!

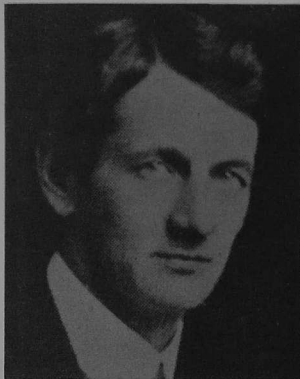
All of this would seem to suggest that, putting it at its lowest, it will do us no harm if we bring the Irish language back to a point where it is commonly spoken by the whole people once again, side by side with English. Can this be achieved? This is one view that was expressed:

"There isn't enough appreciation of the best techniques all the way through. People have been conditioned to think that it can't be done, rather than that it can be done. I would like to see people accepting that it can be done. It's easier to learn a language, it's easier to go to the Gaeltachis, easier to realise that today, in Ireland, not very far from people say living in Dublin, there are hundreds, there are whole countryside and villages, where everything is done through Irish—people living and loving, quarrelling and fighting, playing cards, playing football, doing everything else people do, and doing it all through Irish. This is part of us. This is what made us. This has been going on for thousands of years. Why can't we latch onto it?"

Why indeed? Perhaps part of the reason is that people don't rightly know why they should. And, though we will try with this series to tell them, it's not going to be too easy. How do you tell people who are apathetic about it why religion should be important to them? Or a particular political allegiance? Or something beautiful but useless, in practical terms, like literature or painting or music? All one can do is help point the way. We are not alone in our pre-occupation. Scarcely a hundred miles away, across the Channel, there are neighbours with the same problem. In the next chapter we will look at them.

"In subtle ways we cannot wholly understand the language gives the Irish mind a defence against every other mind, talking in comradeship whatever good the others have to offer, while retaining its own power and place. The Irish mind can do itself justice only in Irish."

—TERENCE MCSWINEY

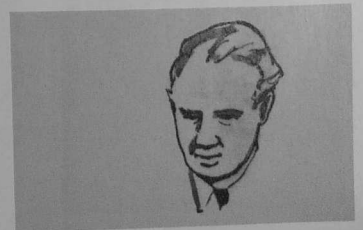


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a problem for Wales

"The history of Wales is the history of the Welsh language very largely. It is the great distinctive mark, the greatest of our traditions. My own nationalism, as well as that of most of my fellows in the Party, is bound up entirely with the language. We would not be in politics if it were not for that."

—GWYNFOR EVANS



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ALWYN REES

JAC L. WILLIAMS

AS has been said, Wales, our closest neighbour, has a language problem as serious as our own. Even though, today, there are more native Welsh than native Irish speakers, it is not overstating the case to say that Welsh, like Irish, could be in grave danger of dying out.

When we think of Wales, we think of a country of miners, community-hymn-singers, rugby-footballers; a country of hills and valleys, mountains and rivers; a country steeped in the traditions of bard and prince and poet. Though it is true that the "Let's Back Britain" tag of some years ago belonged to Wales as much as it did to England itself, yet the fact is that there are few countries in which there is such determination to fight for national identity.

As in Ireland, the common link with Welsh traditional culture down through the ages has been the language. But the language has not been prospering. The 1961 Census showed a drastic drop in the number of native Welsh speakers—from 50% in 1901 to 26% in 1961. The number now is about 650,000.

It may seem surprising to us that these people do not need English in order to live in a society so close to the social, industrial and cultural influences of England; yet this is so. Over a very sizeable area, Welsh is the living everyday language. English influences become fused into this Welsh-language way of life. A farmer or an industrialist orders his English-made equipment in Welsh; his wife does her shopping in Welsh; his children play games and have pop-sessions in Welsh.

He can read Welsh-language papers, he can bank his English pound-note in Welsh, he can play, pray, drink, cheer and joke in Welsh. If, in this part of Wales, Welsh were to become the official language tomorrow, it would cause little or no inconvenience.

But no language community in these times can be totally isolated and these people are not alone. Like ourselves in Ireland, many Welshmen see no reason for learning their ancestral language. One of them joining a Welsh-speaking group, however large, can make them, from politeness, turn to English. One English-speaking family has been known to change the language in which local church services were held.



The main point, however, is that the Welsh-speaking territory, though large in area, is small in influence, compared to the rich, industrial, densely-populated, and English-speaking south. In this small south-eastern corner, three-quarters of the population live. In towns like Newport, Cardiff, Swansea and Port Talbot, Welsh is very much a secondary language; native speakers, having no outlet for it outside the family, either transfer to English, or by insisting on their right to use their language become second-class citizens in their own country. This is how Alwyn Rees, Director of Extra-Mural Studies, University of Aberystwyth, puts it:

"You have those who do not speak Welsh and are afraid that, if the Welsh language gets more official recognition, they will become second-class citizens by being shut out from official jobs and ostracized in their own country. Secondly, there are those who do speak Welsh, hundreds of thousands of them, who have already experienced this feeling of an attempt to turn them into Englishmen, so they must either fit the official mould or become second-class citizens in their own country".

To some in Wales, it is more important that Welsh be given official status than that Wales be given independence; others argue that Home Rule should come first, that only with a government of its own can Welsh be made a fully official language, and a conscientious programme of development implemented.

Again Alwyn Rees's comment sums up the case for giving the language priority:

"The language comes first, there is no doubt at all about this. Of course, there is an economic case for Welsh self-government. I think we would be far better off economically. But the motive which impels us all, in the leadership at any rate of Plaid Cymru, is the desire to create conditions in which the language can flourish and become the language of the whole people once again.

"We must get our priorities right here. The Welsh language is declining; when a language is lost, it is a tremendous task to resuscitate it. Whereas Home Rule is something you can get at any time, provided you are determined enough to get it".

Welsh political nationalism springs directly from the desire to save the language, in the belief that without the Welsh language there can be no Welsh nation. Gwynfor Evans, leader of Plaid Cymru, the Welsh Nationalist Party, puts it trenchantly:

"The history of Wales is the history of the Welsh language very largely. It is the great distinctive mark, the greatest of our traditions. My own nationalism, as well as that of most of my fellows in the Party, is bound up entirely with the language. We would not be in politics if it were not for that."

Nevertheless, despite the ardour of the few, there has been this drastic drop in the number of Welsh speakers. And while some concessions are made, many people believe that, to the central government—which is, of course in London—Welsh is an irrelevancy.

Not that the decline itself did not have some salutary side-effects. For one thing, there appears to be a new motivation towards learning the language on the part of English-speaking Welshmen. How has this come about? Jac L. Williams, Professor of Education in the University of Aberystwyth, has an interesting answer:

"I think it develops with a growth in national consciousness. There was a time when many of us were almost ashamed of being Welsh; now we are not. The Welsh language is part of our whole Welshness; parents are more anxious than ever before that their children should learn it. It is used more in the schools—not enough, but still it is on the increase. There is a growing determination among young people, many of them educated in these schools, to ensure that it is officially recognised. I would not ignore the fact that these are a minority and many of them are Welsh-speaking to begin with; but there are many others who are not Welsh-speaking and who are equally enthusiastic about the language.

"What we want, therefore, is an educational system which gives the opportunity to learn Welsh to everyone. This precious heritage should not be confined to a handful of people, but rather should profit the whole nation."

Is the educational system doing this? To take one example—the primary level—the position is that, up to recently, Welsh was taught in primary schools only to children whose home language it was; now, the idea of having Welsh on an equal status with English is generally accepted. There are two examination standards, one for native speakers and one for learners. Over the past few years, there has been an increased demand for Welsh in all schools, and local authority policy now favours this demand. To take another example—that of higher education—the position is that, in the University of Wales in Aberystwyth until the 1920s, most lectures in the department of Welsh were given in English. Since then, the language has been given official recognition by the University. But there is still very little teaching in Welsh outside the Department of Welsh itself.

Perhaps the strongest sustaining link down through the years between the people of Wales and their ancestral language were the non-Conformist Churches which represent the majority of worshippers. Chapel services, even in English-speaking areas, have for the most part always been in Welsh. There are places where the Roman Catholic as well as the Protestant Churches use as much Welsh as English. This has been a vital support in the struggle to save Welsh—in passing, let it be said, an enviable contrast with the situation with Irish where, as a later chapter will show, the majority church (with notable exceptions), particularly since the founding of Maynooth in 1795, did little to encourage the language.

Latterly, too, there have been at work other influences not altogether unfavourable to the language. Radio and television have played a not unimportant role. Wynfor Vaughan Thomas of Harlech Television spoke of this:

"The Authority insist that we do $5\frac{1}{2}$ hours' programming a week in the Welsh language and this we follow. If you are going to give them something

that is vital to them, their own language everyday, then you are really making an effort. If, that is, you can use the language, as we are trying to do, to entertain people, to make them feel that it is the language of their leisure and entertainment". But, of course, television and radio are not the only means of communication and entertainment, there are also magazines, newspapers, books. There are some hopeful signs in these areas: increased sales of books, magazines and records; more Welsh language sections in major book stores; here and there, a shop solely for books in the Welsh language, or books written by Welsh authors.

Again, at the popular level, a fillip was given to the language in 1969 when Prince Charles, at his investiture as Prince of Wales, spoke in Welsh, having first taken the trouble to learn it. This kind of thing has an appeal to the popular mind, particularly in the English-speaking south-east, and does help to engender, however superficially, the impression that an ability to speak the ancestral Welsh language is an aim to which every Welshman wishing to continue to be called by that name should aspire.

But "superficial" is the word and, if the Welsh language is to have a future, then that future must be secured by more fundamental and substantial steps.

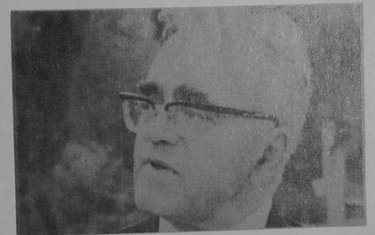
Will these steps be taken? Are the Welsh-speaking Welsh sufficiently concerned about their language to take them? Ask the man in the street, or in the field, and you'll get a variety of answers, just as you will in the Gaeltachts here; amongst the professional classes, especially clergymen and school-teachers, you will probably find more concern. They know about those statistics, and want to turn the tide.

But the conclusion is inescapable; the Welsh language will not survive unless it is the language of government and has the full and conscientious force of government behind it. A Welsh crowd may sound impressive singing their national anthem, with its references to the survival of the language, and the shedding of their blood for freedom. But what are the realities? It's often sung in English now, and the shedding of blood, if it is done at all, happens in the service of the queen of England. Will this pleasant-sounding nostalgia save the Welsh language from eventual, though perhaps slow, extinction? Hardly. But even if, by some miracle, the political situation were to change, and the Welsh people were to succeed in building a Welsh-speaking state, would their 25% of native speakers be a sufficient base for the job? Each language situation is unique and only time can answer that question. But, in an attempt to provide some clues to an answer, we will next take a look at Israel, a small but successful state on the other side of Europe, which speaks a language that was as dead as a doornail a hundred years ago and was still spoken by only a handful of enthusiasts when Douglas Hyde founded the Gaelic League here in 1893. A question that must be asked by any community concerned as to whether its gradually-fading ancestral language can be restored is this: how was the dead Israeli language, Hebrew, brought to life?

Success in Israel

"So in a way we all feel, although we may not personally participate, that we are drying the swamps, making this country fertile again. In this way, we feel we are creating the language. I don't know whether this common co-operation in reviving an ancient language is not one of the things which has given Israel its bounce."

—DR. RABIN



If, as we have seen, the last half-century has shown a decline in the use of Welsh, the reverse is true of Hebrew, the language of Israel. Fifty years ago, *their* language revival programme was in full swing; by now, it is clearly a success. More so than any other community with a language restoration problem, they really did start from scratch. They gradually overcame opposition, and persuaded disbelievers that Hebrew should be the language of common life and commerce in modern Israel. As long as Jews continue to return to Israel, this process continues. Their case therefore makes an interesting study and one that has some relevant pointers for us in Ireland.

While it is a fact that Hebrew never quite died out—Jews always read the Bible in Hebrew—a great task of modernisation nevertheless faced them when the language restoration movement began. Has this task been accomplished? Professor Rabin of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, when asked if it was a truly modern language, replied:

"I should say as modern as English. That is, a completely modern language in which you can say everything. This was achieved partly by adapting the ancient vocabulary to the modern language. I'll give you an example. A garage has since 1940 been called by the Hebrew word 'wusac'. Now this was a word discovered in the Bible as the place where King Solomon kept his chariots. That is to say we use really ancient words with modern meanings—as indeed you do in English, where many words had ancient meanings quite different from what they now have.

"Hebrew to us means our national language. During the Mandate period, from 1922 to 1948, the Jewish population of Palestine carried on a tremendous fight against the influence of English. This was one of the ways in which Hebrew became what it is today. It was in a way *forced* to become modernised, in order to hold its own against English".

success
in
Israel

So, the position is that today in Israel it is quite unthinkable that anything but Hebrew should be the language of the State. Asking an Israeli-born Jew if he speaks Hebrew is like asking a Frenchman if he speaks French. Yet almost all such native speakers are the children of non-native speakers; nearly everybody over the age of fifty had to *learn* Hebrew.

How was this achieved—the near-miracle of turning what was virtually a dead language into a language as modern as French or German or English?

It all began with one man, Eliezer Ben Yehuda. On his way to Palestine from Marseilles in 1881, he resolved that he would speak nothing but Hebrew in his new-found home; he helped his wife learn Hebrew so that it could become the mother-tongue of his first-born son, Ehub Ben Yehuda, a member of that first family to speak Hebrew as a home language for over two thousand years, has memories of its difficulties:

"Before speaking, you hear a language, and father prohibited us from hearing any language but Hebrew. We had no friends. When we grew up, we went into the street, or rather my father sent us into the street, just to speak Hebrew. First, between ourselves—he had eleven children—then to other Jewish children. When we were out playing in Hebrew and talking to each other, my brothers and sisters, we had a hail of stones coming at us. But it didn't antagonise us because, you see, we knew we were doing it for the return of the people of Israel to their own land. We were outside, but what we had and what you apparently don't have is men with such will-power and such a purpose. Your language was a living tongue, ours was a dead tongue".

The Jewish people returned, enough of them to make a State, and now it is a thoroughly modern State, with thriving industry in its fields and factories, and kibbutzim—but retaining all the colour and character of ancient Jewish life. The sense of nationalism based on survival is deeply rooted. Young Israelis may not seem as idealistic as their fathers, but the reality is that, when their country needs them, they are there and willing, to a man. No one, literally no one, wanted to be left out when it came to the call-up for the Six-Day War; men actually wept at the recruiting booths when, on health grounds, they were refused.

But the war is over for three years now and, though such peace as they have may be an uneasy one, the fact is that the whole face of the country and its towns bears signs of work still going on to build the State of Israel as a good place in which to live, for themselves and for the Jews of the world who wish to come and make their home here. Hand in hand with this goes a tenacity to retain for Israel a language of its own. Dr. Geoffrey Wigoder, an Irish-born Jew now living in Jerusalem, had this to say:

"In the early days in this country, it was a matter of pride. It was not only a question of coming back here and setting up our own culture in our country once again, there was also the rivalry with Arabic, but more especially with the British at that time. The fact that the British were here in the Mandate period—some twenty-five years—only helped the revival of Hebrew; there was tremendous tension

with the British at that time, and the Jews were determined that the British weren't going to put their language upon them, as they have done in so many other countries, including Ireland. In fact there was a Hebrew League, similar to the Gaelic League; people were determined, the whole feeling was not to let the side down. They weren't going to sell out, each one was going to play his part—in the home, in the street, everywhere. This was perhaps the turning point; by the time the State was founded in 1948, the battle had been won. That's the difference perhaps between here and Ireland. In Ireland, when the State was founded, the battle had not been won. Tension dropped to a large extent, once independence had been achieved. There was no longer the same nationalist motivation".

It must of course be said that any general comparison of other language situations with that of Israel is, *prima facie*, invalid. For when the Jews of the world moved into Israel to find expression for their nation in a separate State, they had neither common background, culture nor vernacular language.

The one language that was common to all of them was spoken by none; yet this was to be restored to become the language of the Jews once again. With new immigrants continuing to arrive in Israel every year, this is a process which must continue. Its continuance is achieved in the Ulpanim, adult educational schools for the teaching of Hebrew and Jewish culture and life generally. Dr. Mordechai Kamrat, head of the Jerusalem Ulpanization, had this to say about his work:

"It's a crash course, five months, twice a year, thirty hours a week. It's a lot, but what we are doing really is not just teaching a language, we try to teach culture by the vehicle of language, and therefore we use different ways in teaching the usage. We have conversations and lectures, we see pictures and walk around, we travel, sing, dance and live together. We discuss things. Sometimes, I want a pupil to say something, but it can be very difficult for him to open his mouth, especially if he's a very educated person who's afraid of making mistakes. So I come to the class and say: 'It's night now—it's dark'; and he says: 'No, it's not, it's bright, it's day'. And I say: 'Bless God, he openly said this first sentence!'"

But why, in the first place, undertake this great burden of restoring to common speech a language which was thought dead beyond hope? Was there no alternative? Dr. Geoffrey Wigoder spoke about this:

"There was a certain number of people who thought that Yiddish should become the language of the country. This was the language spoken by most of the Jews in Europe, a very rich language descended from German and already used by millions of Jews. But this didn't work out, because the Jews were coming here from so many other parts of the world as well. They were coming here from Middle Eastern countries where they didn't know Yiddish; a Jew who spoke Arabic was not willing to speak Yiddish; a Jew who spoke Yiddish was not willing to speak Ladino (a Mediterranean-based Jewish dialect). Then there was the group of people who opposed the revival of Hebrew, those



ELIEZER BEN YEHUDA

who thought that a European language, English or German or French, should be adopted here for commercial and educational purposes, and should be spoken by the people, in order not to cut them off from the civilisation of the western world. But Hebrew was a sort of lowest common language, it was bound up with the whole of Jewish history, it was the language of prayer, it was part of the revival of Jewish culture in its own country".

Among the more interesting sources of opposition was that advanced on religious grounds by the Orthodox Jews who were descendants of the 50,000-odd people who had lived in the Holy Land for centuries. Their point was that Hebrew was too *sacred* a language for use in everyday life; they have never come to terms with the modern realities of either the State of Israel or the Hebrew language and remain in a real sense ghettoed within their own community.

But they are the exception; for the remainder, the restoration of Hebrew as a modern spoken tongue was a matter of deep individual concern. Typical of this determination was the student revolt in the Haifa Technion in 1913, when it was planned that, in future, science subjects be taught in German—German being then the main language of science. Feeling ran so high that the plan had to be abandoned. That kind of determination is no longer necessary, but it is clearly as a result of it that there have now been two generations of Israelis for whom Hebrew has been an intrinsic part of their lives. Films, television, pop-songs, books, magazines, newspapers, all the paraphernalia of modern life are in a language "as modern as English", a language which had already been dead for over a thousand years when English first came to be written! What has this meant apart from a new spoken language? Professor Rabin comments, with special reference to our own situation in Ireland:

"What it meant was Jewish history, the great Jewish past, the Bible. In the same way that Irish means Irish history to you, the great period of Ireland before she was beaten down. If, for example, we as a people were to speak English we would be pseudo-Englishmen, we wouldn't be any more Israelis, because our Israeli culture is today based on a Hebrew past, on Hebrew values. The words we use for our own ideas are Hebrew words. Many of them are quite untranslatable into English. Through reviving Hebrew, we live our own history; today, it means more to us, it means our recent history as well, the creation of Israel as it is now. Besides this, it means our culture. We can express ourselves properly only in Hebrew. It took us some time to learn it, but by now it's the only language which fits our culture exactly."

This did not happen all at once. In the case of the new immigrants, it doesn't happen all that rapidly even yet. Dr. Kanrat has plenty of experience of the kind of bad Hebrew that is a necessary feature of every developing language situation:

"Parents are interested in how the children study in school; they are very unhappy if they have no idea about what is going on with their children. They are motivated by the fact that children bring home certain information and they *have* to under-

stand it. If they don't understand it, they are not interested. Therefore, sometimes, we have to open special courses for parents *after* they have been motivated by their children.

"Then the children become open to the parents dynamics. I think I would accuse parents who wouldn't be outright in this; parents can easily have direct influence on their children. If somebody says he hates a language, it doesn't mean he hates the language itself, rather the laborious study of the language. It's most important for parents to be aware of the great possibilities for opening new bases for education with language. They should not tie back their own children with themselves. Of course, we have many people who speak bad Hebrew. They're recent emigrants, we hope they will learn better Hebrew. We also have many people who speak an unconventional Hebrew, especially the young who use slang and are proud of it! Of course, we have the usual rows between teachers and the younger generation, young poets and so on. Who's going to win? We don't know. I think both are doing good work. I see in it one of the proofs that Hebrew is really alive".

Difficulties, embarrassment, the compulsion to learn—they are all features of our situation in Ireland. But, in Israel, it appears to give so much more healthy results. Professor Rabin was emphatic that it did:

"I should say something of the compulsion atmosphere in this country about Hebrew. There is a high-pressure school for adults, especially for professional adults; we give large numbers of hours, we try to make them speak Hebrew to each other. The results have been excellent. Within four or five years, almost half the population of this country was Hebrewised. Hebrew is now part of the homeland. The immigrant, and of course the child immigrant especially, is excited by this. We have found that the children, after picking up some Hebrew in school, *force* their parents to speak Hebrew at home, because they are ashamed when their parents cannot speak Hebrew! They are our best apostles!

"There is, of course, a tremendous sense of adventure in participating in reviving a language. When a new word is created, we all take it up with joy. The Academy of Hebrew to which I belong is often criticised for not getting rid of foreign words fast enough! People stop me in the street and say, why do you still use this foreign word? So in a way we all feel, although we may not personally participate, that we are drying the swamps, making this country fertile again. In this way, we feel we are creating the language. I don't know whether this common co-operation in reviving an ancient language is not one of the things which has given Israel its bounce".

Is this borne out at the receiving end by the immigrant Hebrew learner—someone struggling to express all the needs of his life in a complex and "archaic" tongue, often in adult years and with a perfect knowledge of another language against which to measure his painful progress? Larry Elyan, born and brought up in Dublin, had this to say:



DR. GEOFFREY WIGODER

"I had been here a few times on visits and what I'd seen here fascinated me. I didn't know what made the country tick. I decided to spend some months here to find out. I was told that the best thing for me to do was to learn Hebrew, and for that purpose I was recommended an Ulpan—an intensive study course—in a town halfway between Tel Aviv and Haifa. It was voluntary as far as I was concerned, but I kept on thinking all the time I was there about compulsory Irish, and I began to realise, by the way they taught there, that compulsory Irish was a feeble effort, compared to the way they battered Hebrew into you there. You worked from eight in the morning till one o'clock with short breaks of a few minutes between each hour. It was all done with terrific passion, terrific enthusiasm. I think that, if it has to be compulsory Irish, then it's got to be a much stronger effort at compulsion than there is at present in Ireland. In the Ulpan we were told—I want to do this, *we* want to do this, *we* will learn, *we* will do, *we* will build! And all these things had a positive psychological effect even in your learning the language. Maybe the same kind of thing could help with Irish."

The primary emphasis is always on speech: Eli Cohen, another Dublin-born Jew who came to Israel in 1953, accorded the highest priority to this:

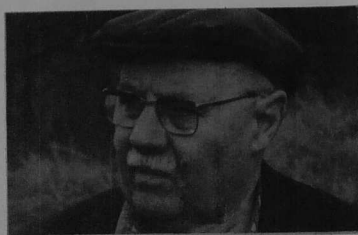
"I learnt both Irish and Hebrew in Dublin approximately the same way. I knew approximately the same amount of both when I came here in 1958. I went straight into high school, I knew just the bare essentials of Hebrew—the alphabet, approximately how to read. Just being in high school, I picked it up speaking the language every day. Inside two or three months, I was speaking relatively fluently. This is why I often say that, in Ireland, if more students went to the Gaeltacht, they'd probably find it easier to learn the language by actually using it. Using the language is one of the most important parts of learning it. I would get people to speak it, I would hold special evenings when students would come together and speak the language, and only the language. I'd get them to visit areas where the language is spoken, where they're going to have no option but to speak it. That's the best way to get people to learn a language, if it isn't spoken in the vicinity where they live".

But to begin with, the commitment must be there. It doesn't appear to matter greatly if it's only in the mind of the few: this few can be what Maritain calls "the prophetic minority"; upon them the fate and future of nations rests. From being the dream in the mind of one man sailing across the Mediterranean to his new home in Palestine eighty years ago, Hebrew has now become the living language of one of the most dynamic small nations on earth. That is a proof of what commitment can do. The example gives proof of one further fact: that there is no such thing as a language so dead that it cannot be revived. What it requires is dedication, action, an unswerving sense of purpose. In the case of Hebrew, it might be said that the patient was beyond hope; it can scarcely be suggested, despite many genuinely discouraging features, that the same is true of the Irish language today.

the vanishing Irish

In the court, in the schools, in the church, in every other place, they heard nothing but English. So Irish was beneath them. It wasn't class enough, do you see?

MICHAEL GÉTTINN



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ONE of the most curious events in the history of any country occurred in Ireland in the 19th century. This was the virtual disappearance in about two generations of a language which had been spoken throughout the length and breadth of the land for at least fifteen hundred years. Suddenly, it was as though it had no more vitality than a flower without a root.

In the year 1800, more people spoke Irish than spoke Dutch, Portuguese, Swedish, Danish, Finnish and Norwegian. Then it slumped. Four million people still spoke Irish in 1840; but it was down to less than a million by 1870. Yet this phenomenon has been virtually ignored by historians.

Some time ago we asked three historians to name the most notable events in Irish history in the last century. Their lists included the Great Famine, Catholic Emancipation, the Fenians, the Land League. Not one of them mentioned the decline of the language. Yet how can this "death" of a language have happened without causing profound social and psychological effects?

There are people still living who remember the language disappearing from areas we might never have thought were so recently Gaeltachts. Patrick Corrigan talks about such an area near Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan:

"The people who spoke it died off. Their families emigrated to England and America, they had to learn English, they wrote home in English. That was an influence. Then the merchants of Carrickmacross were English-speaking people, they had to know English to deal with them.

The priests were enthusiastic about the language, yet they did not preach a sermon in Irish in Listolee in the parish of Dunemoyne, that I know of. Though I know a priest that loved the language and talked it privately".

Another such area was in Co. Sligo where Joseph Neilan recalled Gaeltacht areas which have since died:

"There was Slieve Rua. All the old people there spoke Irish up until about seventy years ago. I remember the Macaire Rua being a Gaeltacht area, the whole townland of Macaire Rua was like Connemara. In my own time, I remember, every house in Macaire Rua you went into, Irish was the language, though they had English as well.

There wasn't much Irish in Sligo itself. It was a garrison town, there were a lot of old shoneens in it. I remember my grandfather hitting one. He put him across the counter for jibing at him for talking Irish. He gave him an awful belt".

The next area we hear about was near Clonmel. Michael Géttinn talks about it as it was fifty years ago.

"Oh, it was an Irish-speaking area. Around Newcastle, ten miles out, all the old people spoke Irish. They were grand Irish speakers, as good as you had in Rinn, even better . . . What happened? They didn't speak it at home. They didn't speak it to their children. The children knew no Irish from them. Their families didn't even know 'Dia's Muire dhuit'. They couldn't even reply to that. I think they got that in the schools. I would say it

was driven into them in the schools to kill the language. It's very difficult to answer why they did it, but they did. They beat them. You see, that was driven into them. They thought it was much beneath them. In the court, in the schools, in the church, in every other place, they heard nothing but English. So Irish was beneath them. It wasn't class enough, do you see. Of course, if you knew English, you were away with it. In Clonmel if the policemen, the RIC, heard two fellows speaking Irish they'd tell them shut up. So what is the situation in Clonmel now? Not good, not good at all. It was fairly good one time, very good. But I'm afraid it's very blue-looking now, very blue as far as the language is concerned".

And now to County Tyrone in the Six Counties, where Michael McAleer remembers Irish being spoken in the Sperrin Mountains district:

"I would say fifty years ago, 50% of the people of this district were quite fluent in Irish, in fact they were native speakers. Now I am very sorry to say that the numbers of Irish speakers hardly make up 5%. But, actually, those 5% have not got an opportunity to speak it because there is nobody to speak to.

I wouldn't say I spoke Irish growing up. I learnt most of my Irish at school. But I do remember distinctly after Mass on Sunday, it was a very common thing for the older people at the church gates to speak in groups in Irish. They were mostly older people and I found there was a spirit of mockery among the younger people for them, they thought it wasn't the thing to speak Irish. It was a feeling of ashamedness, maybe because their parents were speaking Irish. I'm afraid this self-conscious attitude spread to young people.

I'm afraid that self-consciousness or that inferiority complex was instilled into the younger generation".

Why did the language die over the greater part of Ireland? The popular explanations are: the influence of Daniel O'Connell, the Catholic clergy and the National Schools; the effects of the Great Famine; the inability of the language to cope with the requirements of the age. These explanations cannot be accepted uncritically. It is rather as though we explained the Great Famine by saying that it was

the vanishing Irish

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caused by a shortage of food. Why, for instance, should Daniel O'Connell have turned his face against his native language? And why did the Irish people accept his advice?

Similarly, it is not enough to say that the Catholic clergy turned against Irish without knowing why. And, if we acknowledge that the National Schools killed Irish we ought to remember that these schools were taught and managed by Irishmen, many of them native speakers of Irish themselves. Why were the National Schools accepted in their anti-national form? There was no law obliging people to accept them.

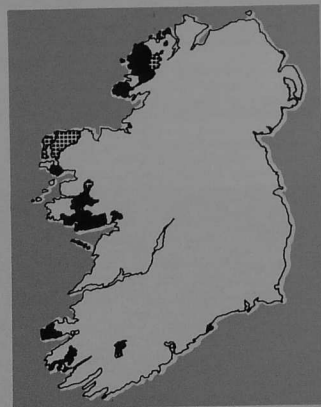
The first serious attempt to have Irish introduced into the national schools was made in 1878, as an extra subject in senior classes, some fifty years after these schools were first established. By then it was too late. If the National Schools were given as the reason for the decline of the language, we ought to ask why they were allowed to achieve this without any objection from the people.

The Great Famine, and the fall in population which followed, are also given as a reason for the drop in the numbers speaking Irish. But again, a comparison with Scots Gaelic shows how superficial this explanation is. The Great Famine struck just as hard at parts of the Gaelic-speaking Highlands as in Ireland. And the population there has fallen just as drastically since then. But, while the Gaelic language has suffered in consequence, the loss has been nothing like the losses suffered by the Irish language. So neither is the Famine the only reason for the decline of Irish.

Finally, there is the notion that somehow Irish was a language which was incapable of being developed for business, trade and the affairs of modern life. This is an unscientific view. Many of the national languages of modern Europe, such as Finnish, Bulgarian, Slovene, Lithuanian, suffered even more than Irish from neglect as written tongues in the early years of the last century. But they did not decay as a result. On the contrary, all of them developed into modern, national, cultivated languages and there never has been a suggestion of hindrance to trade or commerce.

So, in order to understand what happened to the Irish language, it must be considered from two different aspects: first, from the point of view of aggression by the English authorities and the Ascendancy class; and second, from the point of view of suppression by the Irish people themselves. This second point, and what it involved, are most important for an understanding of what happened.

But first—the aggression. This consisted basically of a certain attitude towards other cultures, which is a recognised characteristic of the colonial Englishman. He refuses to recognise or to tolerate other cultures readily. This "traditional Anglo-Saxon intolerance", as it has been described by a prominent American scientist, has regularly rejected the cultures which it found in its path. Thus, the English, possibly more than any other colonial power, sought to wipe out the native languages in any country they dominated. They tried to justify this on the grounds that English was a superior language and that it conferred an inestimable boon on those who spoke it. This attitude is revealed by a crude jingle which survived in our National Schools until 1852:



1851

1961

"I thank the fortune and the grace
Which on my birth has smiled,
And made me in these Christian days
A happy English child".

The English were no fools. They long realised the value of language as an implement of political expansion. Thus, the policy of uprooting Irish was aimed at destroying Irishness, Irish being the bulwark of a separate nation. This was expressed thus by the poet Spenser: "The speech being Irish, the heart must needs be Irish". This view was re-echoed by one of the victorious British generals in South Africa after the defeat of the Boers:

"English must be the language in South Africa. It may seem hard to kill, so to speak, a nation by making another language compulsory, but it is a sure way and the best way. Nothing but English should be taught, and then the children would think in English and act as English children".

This attitude dominated English rule in Ireland almost from the start. Just as the Penal Laws refused to recognise the existence of the Irish Papist, so did all civil law virtually outlaw the Irish Papist's language. So much so, that the Reformation repudiated one of its fundamental principles in Ireland. This principle laid it down that in all church services the native language should be used instead of Latin. But, in Ireland, it was decreed that, where the people did not understand English, Latin was to be used in preference to Irish.

So, in Ireland, from the 16th to the 19th centuries, the instruments of Government, the Law Courts, the professions, trade, business, the newspapers, and formal education were all conducted through the medium of English—a language then unknown to the majority of the people. There developed an all-pervading intolerance towards Irish and this produced its own myths or pishogues. It was widely believed that to speak Irish would destroy one's chance of learning to speak English with the fashionable London accent. It was even thought that to write Irish would injure one's handwriting in English.

Thus, as the Penal times drew to a close towards the end of the 18th century, the Irish-speaking majority was confronted not merely with an English-speaking Ascendancy class who held all the power, but with a culture which was positively antagonistic to their own culture and language. This Irish-speaking majority was a small remnant of Catholic leaders and landlords who somehow had managed to hold on to some of their former possessions; the Catholic merchants in the towns; the clergy; and then the ordinary masses of Irish people.

The Catholic leaders and landlords survived because of their ability to act discreetly and to avoid doing anything which might cause offence to the authorities; they used English in all their business and other dealings.

Some of the second group—the Catholic merchants—had become surprisingly wealthy. Like the old Catholic landlords, they too owed their prosperity to their ability to avoid giving offence. They grew rapidly in power and importance from 1760 onwards. Their leaders were the forerunners of Daniel O'Connell in the fight for Catholic Emancipation. They succeeded the old Catholic landlords as patrons of

the Church. As traders, their interest lay in the present and future prospects of business. They were among the earliest of the native stock to adopt English speech, in the interests of business, and were always ready to offer loyalty to the authorities in return for economic and religious freedom. They were not prepared to sacrifice their prospects by fostering national distinctiveness. They were the first people to ask the question: "What use is Irish?" In their position, the question is understandable. Nevertheless, they must take a large share of the responsibility for what happened to the language because of their glib attitude and because of their inevitable influence on the poorer people.

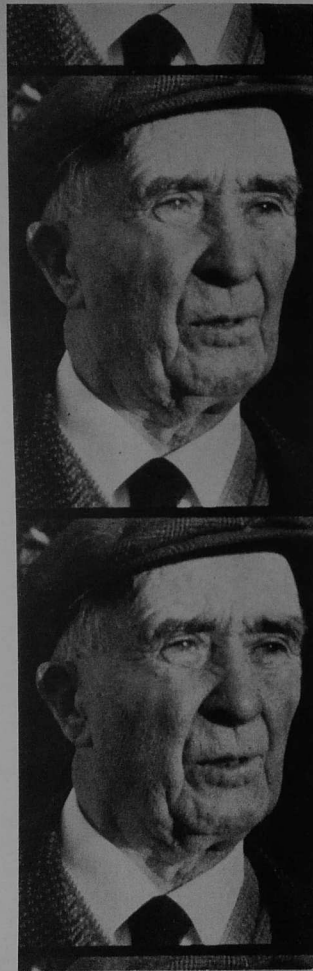
Then there was the church—the Catholic Church that had now successfully weathered the dreadful Penal days in retaining the loyalty of its members. But, like the other groups, it did not come through the experience unscarred. It, too, was extremely concerned to be discreet and to demonstrate loyalty to the ruling classes. This is not surprising, having regard to the times. Its patrons and, to a large extent, its personnel (its priests and bishops) were drawn, first, from the old Catholic landed classes, and later from the Catholic tradesmen and businessmen of the town.

The Church saw its role as the guardian of the Faith, not as the champion of anything which might jeopardise that role. After 1782, when Catholic colleges were allowed, English became the language of higher education. Maynooth College was founded in 1795 and was English-speaking from the start.

Finally, there was the great mass of the people, the great majority of whom lived in utter poverty. Virtually all of them, except in some areas of Leinster, were Irish-speaking. Irish and poverty and ignorance became synonymous. The Irish tenant tried his smattering of English in his dealings with his landlord; he spoke Irish to his pig.

This was not the fault of the language. It demonstrated the truth of the dictum that power corrupts. The real tragedy of absolute power is that it does more than corrupt those who wield it; it corrupts, in time, the dignity and manhood of those who suffer under it.

It resulted in the people themselves suppressing the Irish language by every means at their disposal, including the brutal system of the tally, a system the people unbelievably accepted. The tally stick or bata scóir, also known as the signum, signal, cipín and capall bán, was usually a piece of wood which Irish-speaking children were forced to wear around their necks. It was used all over the country in slightly varying forms. Parents, neighbours, in fact anybody at all who chanced to hear the child speak in Irish, was expected to mark the tally stick with a notch. At the end of the day the marks were counted and the child was punished for each offence by the teacher or parent. The system of the tally stick had been introduced by the old hedge-school masters with the co-operation of the parents. It was taken over by the National Schools, and reached its peak in popularity about the middle of the 19th century. Children were taught to spy on each other, brother on brother, family on family. It was often used vindictively; a favourite technique was for one child to taunt or



JOSEPH NEILAN

attack another until he was forced to speak in Irish and then the teacher was told about it. If this seems unbelievable, we should remember the conditions of the times. This account published in 1853 describes its use:

"While supper was preparing and the potatoes laughing and steaming in the skieh, the children gathered round to have a look at the stranger and one of them, a little boy about eight years of age, addressed a short sentence in Irish to his sister but, meeting the father's eye, he immediately covered back, having to all appearance committed some heinous fault. The man called the child to him, said nothing, but drawing forth from his dress a little stick, commonly called a screen or tally, which was suspended by a string round the neck, put an additional notch in it with his penknife".

Joseph Neilan and Micheál Céitinn can talk of more recent use of the bata scóir or tally stick and of the brutal suppression of the language in schools. Micheál Céitinn talks about what he heard from his mother:

"She said the teacher—this was a man, I won't call him a gentleman—would make you stand on your legs and hold six slates in each hand and he would get at every part of the anatomy. He thought with the stick he could kill it. Now that didn't happen in all the schools, but it did in some. My mother knew it well, sure she knew the teacher, in fact the teacher's name was Cronin. That was near Waterville, about five miles from Waterville. It's hard to believe, but it happened. She often told me about it".

Joseph Neilan of Sligo had similar memories: "In the Inishmurry area, they spoke nothing but Irish all the time. Then they put in a teacher, she was an English-speaking teacher, to kill the Irish language. That was done by the British sixty-four years ago. How did she do it? She'd put one little boy up on the other boy's back and she'd flog him with a cane for talking Irish. These people are still living. There's a man below in the hospital, Mickey Heilily, he's an islandman, he's one of the men who got up on the other boy's back, and Dan Mick Rua, Dan Heilily. Dan and he were hit with the cane for speaking Irish. This was done by the teacher in the national school on the island sixty-

four or sixty-five years ago.

"Why did she do it? To beat Irish out of the children. Parents had no English, they could not speak English, she beat them and murdered them for speaking Irish. She wanted to terrorise them so that they would speak nothing but English".

In the last century all the national leaders used English. Daniel O'Connell conducted his great campaigns almost entirely through English. The reading rooms of the Young Irelanders were stocked with books in English, and their newspaper, *The Nation*, which was widely read, was in English. To speak English was no longer an indication of being anti-Irish and it was now used by patriotic Irishmen. So the people accepted it. Even those who mourned the loss of Irish were prepared to write about it in fine flowery words—in English:

"'Tis fading, oh, 'tis fading, like leaves upon the trees
In murmuring tone 'tis dying, like the wail upon the breeze!
'Tis swiftly disappearing, as footprints on the shore
Where the Barrow, and the Erne, and Loch Swilly's waters roar.

"Ah! magic Tongue, that round us wove its spells so soft and dear!
Ah! pleasant Tongue, whose murmurs were as music to the ear
Ah! glorious Tongue whose accents could each Celtic heart enthrall!
Ah! rushing Tongue, that sounded like the swollen torrent's fall.
That Tongue, which once in chieftain's hall poured loud the minstrel lay,
As chieftain, serf, or minstrel old is silent there today!"

Emigration gave an added reason for learning English because the masses emigrated to English-speaking countries; there was also justification in a popular fancy of 19th century Ireland that Irish emigration was destined by providence to be the means of converting the English-speaking world to Catholicism. Even for those who remained at home, English was becoming more important.

They might join the newly-established Royal Irish Constabulary or qualify as national teachers. If they were fortunate enough, they might aspire to posts in the British Civil Service, or even rise in the ranks of the Army. It was necessary in the Courts, for example, where judges tended to deal more favourably with English speakers. One judge made a point of always refusing expenses to witnesses who gave evidence in Irish, even when they were incapable of testifying in English. At least one young Irishman, Myles Joyce, went to his death, although probably innocent, for his alleged part in the famous Maam Trasná murders on the 1880s. He constantly averred his own innocence, and he was declared to have had no part in the affair by the others who were found guilty. But he and they could only speak Irish and the lawyers knew no Irish, so he was hanged. Any kind of English, no matter how crude or broken, became a prized possession. Strange meaningless words, like "eucaninative", "sepludation", "confumptious", were used as evidence of a good knowledge of English. The

English learnt at school was often little more than gibberish. Here is a verse which was recorded in a Mayo national school:

“How Klapansh together
How Klapansh today
How Klapansh together
Am shildren naf the day.”

As English began to take over, a curious mixture of Irish and English was spoken—people were so eager to show off their bit of English. We spoke to Joseph Neilan about this:

“I remember my aunt coming to live near us. This day, the parish priest came along the way. Fr. Crowe was his name, and he heard this woman and my auntspeaking. ‘Bhríd’, he said, ‘cá bhíúil tú ag dul minn, a Bhríd.’ ‘Ó, taim ag dul suas go Baile Shligigh amárach, Dé Céadaoin’, she said, ‘to buy ribbons for the drifúir. And the drifúir will bring a buachaill óg home to the muintir. And the buachaill óg and the drifúir will go a codlath in the one leaba and have páistes!’”

In the space of little more than a hundred years the Irish language disappeared from over the greater part of Ireland. We can reconstruct some idea of the language picture over that period from various language maps. (See maps page 18).

In 1850 there was widespread use of Irish; in 1890, a drastic erosion as the language began to disappear towards the South and West; today, five or six small areas scattered around the country are all that remain.

What happened to Irish has nothing to do with any lack or inadequacy in it as a language. It was one of the first written languages of Europe. It contains, down to the 17th century, besides a great amount of secular and devotional literature, serious works on subjects such as theology, philosophy, medicine and history. The late Canice Mooney, an authority on Irish literature, said that the Irish literary activity of the 17th century was so great and varied that Irish might well have become, if events had turned out differently, one of the important languages of the modern world.

It is a fact of history that the written records of some of the other national languages of present-day Europe to which we have already referred, barely exist as far back as the 17th century at all.

Irish happened to be the first and longest-suffering victim of a determined effort to impose English culture on a subject people. The decline of the language was due to the set of circumstances which were imposed on the Irish people. And it is known that the behaviour of one generation affects succeeding generations.

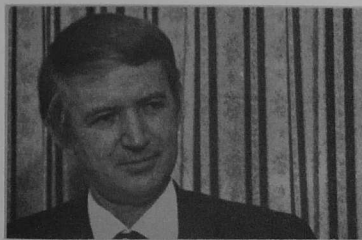
So it seems clear that our many complexes about the Irish language have been influenced by the attitude of our ancestors. Only now is there a generation of Irishmen who are free from the pressures which led them to abandon the language, and who are also sufficiently far removed from the experience to begin to examine it in a truly independent manner. In the next chapter, we will discuss the possibilities as they now exist.

PATRICK CORRIGAN



22

a better chance



“If the language is liked at home, the child is likely to like it as well. If, on the other hand, there are pressures at home—if, for instance, for some reason the father is against it—then the child is likely to be against it too.”

—PROFESSOR PETER STEVENS

23

THE decline of Irish as a spoken language has been explained; the attitude of the past three or four generations to it and the effect this has left on ourselves have been touched on. The question now is—how can we reverse this process and get people generally to speak Irish naturally and fluently once again? In some schools far removed from the Gaeltachts, it seems to happen with remarkable success. Most of the children in Scoil Lorcáin in Dun Laoghaire are from English-speaking homes, yet any of them would find themselves at ease with children from the Gaeltachts north, south and west. They speak Irish as un-self-consciously as they speak English. Wouldn't most of us be happy if every Irish child could do the same? . . . Waja Tsuji, a Japanese American girl, after only four months learning Irish, spoke fluently to an RTE interviewer on a television programme. This demonstrates the practicability of the idea, once the will is there. Is there any reason, given proper teaching, why most Irish people shouldn't be able to do the same—after twelve years of Irish-learning at school?

The crux of the situation, however, seems to be that there is little opportunity to hear and speak Irish after school. The burden of comment among those interviewed on this topic was that they would be quite willing to speak Irish if only they could have this opportunity.

As for the teaching, the general view among educationalists now is that, in order to master a second language, it is necessary for pupils to have experience of that language in another subject or activity outside the actual language class. This has been a source of concern to some parents in Ireland—that their children will be retarded by having to learn other subjects through Irish. Here is the view of Peter Strevens, Professor of Applied Linguistics in the University of Essex, Colchester:

"As to disadvantages, I would say there were none. On the contrary, it nearly always gives advantages. It depends entirely on the circumstances in which the child is brought up and is going to live. The idea that people used to have perhaps ten or twenty years ago that the child who is taught an additional language has some kind of psychological impairment done to him is no longer believed. There is no evidence to support it. Learning subjects through a language—in fact, doing any kind of activity and using the learnt language for doing it—is thought generally a very good way of learning the language. For the child, the problems evaporate. These problems are related to all sorts of things—the attitude in the home, for instance. If the language is liked at home, the child is likely to like it as well. If, on the other hand, there are pressures at home—if, for instance, for some reason the father is against it—then the child is likely to be against it too".

The approach to teaching second languages generally up to recently meant that, while pupils on leaving secondary school could read or write the language, they quite often couldn't speak it. Since the war, however, especially in America and France, there has been a good deal of new thinking about this. The stress now is on having the language spoken;

and, to this end, new techniques have come into being. We in Ireland have been keeping pace with these developments. In schools such as Gormanstown, not only Irish but Continental languages are now taught by those new techniques. The language laboratory becomes an adjunct to the classroom; but, first, the teacher himself must learn it and, in the case of Irish, the language laboratory is doubly important in that it provides an opportunity for the language teacher who is not a native speaker to attune himself to the proper sounds of the language, before he goes in to class to communicate them.

Grants for tape recorders for teaching language in this new way are now available for secondary schools; tapes, pictures and books for the courses are available free from the Department of Education. A high percentage of schools—primary and post primary—are using them. There are, of course, the inevitable teething troubles—some schools, it is claimed, are misusing the audio-visual equipment because the teachers are not adequately trained or supervised; books, tapes and pictures are not available, in some cases, to keep in step with classroom requirements; books and tapes in Irish are not up to the standard of those available for foreign languages.

But, even if all of these things were right, none of them could ever replace the good teacher who places proper emphasis on the living speech, rather than on the formalities of grammar, writing and reading.

Language experts are more and more coming round to the view that learning to speak a second language is mostly a skill which any normal person can pick up. Like playing the piano, or hitting a ball with a hurley or racquet—they are best learned by repetition. And the earlier one begins the better. Professor Strevens was very clear about this:

"Children have a built-in ability to acquire languages. They begin with their mother-tongue but, given reasonable circumstances, they can acquire other languages as well. On the whole, the younger a person starts the easier the job is, the less self-conscious the child is, the more easily he's able to make it with things like sounds".

The question of attitude, what is most frequently called "motivation", is of fundamental importance. A child—or an adult for that matter—will learn a language, or any other skill, if he has a reason for doing so. On the other hand, he will not learn at all—or will learn only with great difficulty—if he feels he has not that reason, or if he has been antagonised against it.

In our case, the simplest things can motivate him—hearing the odd word of Irish at home, or one of the parents helping with his Irish homework. On the other hand, if parents suggest to their child that Irish is a difficult language to learn, the child may be correspondingly slow to learn it. More serious still, if a child is made to feel that learning Irish will not get him anywhere in life, he will be doubly reluctant to learn. Perhaps the surest anti-motivatory force of all is to say that it is compulsory, therefore a hateful imposition, something-he-must-do-or-else!

The effect of motivation on the child's performance is commented on by Professor Strevens:

"There was a famous study done on the Ordinary.

Level examination in French in England. The outcome was that it was held that the great majority of kids who reached bare pass level at the age of 16 could neither understand the language nor speak nor write it. Therefore they have not achieved take-off velocity in the language, and the whole of their time in learning it, and that of their teachers, has been wasted. As far as the effort on the part of the learner, whether child or adult, is concerned, it is very much affected by whether or not he wants to do it.

"Social pressures on motivation also have an enormous effect; in fact, I should have thought the biggest single effect. Look at places like Wales, for example, and then at places like Israel, and contrast the two, and you get an idea. There is not enough social pressure to make the non-Welsh-speakers feel committed to learning the language, to feel assured that they or the community of which they are part will gain something by it. In Israel, on the other hand, there was so much to be gained and everybody agreed in advance that there was so much to be gained, that Hebrew became the automatic choice. In neither case was it what's sometimes wrongly called an "inferior" language.

"There is no such thing as one language having advantages over another. As a language, that is; as carriers of people's lives, yes; it is an operational thing, you see. But it is not true that some languages are superior as languages to others, it just isn't true".

Since the founding of the State, the teaching of Irish has not been the total failure that is sometimes

pessimistically suggested. For one thing, the level of comprehension of simple, straightforward Irish is quite high—it would be a rash man indeed who would shout an important secret from the roof-tops in Irish and expect it not to be generally understood! A whole new literature in Irish has come up: novels, poetry, plays, popular and critical journalism which is up to the standards of anything in English in this country.

Irish has got into the pop world—who hasn't heard "Báidín Fheidhlimidh" when it was top of the pops a few years ago? Progress at this popular level encourages younger people to learn. The more it is heard and spoken thus, the greater the desire to be in on the enjoyment by being able to understand.

It would, however, be dishonest to pretend that we are not still far from having Irish as a commonly-spoken language in our daily lives. No community speaks Irish regularly, apart from the small Gaeltacht areas which are dwindling. They will undoubtedly continue to dwindle until the rest of the country makes plain that it is serious about restoration plans. Every newspaper sent in in English, every programme in English on radio and television, every tourist or public official who talks in English—all these things help kill Irish in the Gaeltachts in the most deadly, practical way. At the present rate of decline, it is by no means inconceivable that there would be no Irish in Gaeltacht areas twenty years from now. If that were so, we would be the first generation on Irish soil for 2,000 years to see Ireland without an Irish-speaking community.

What is the alternative to this? Bilingualism over the whole community is the desired aim; if there is sufficient determination, it can be achieved. Is it worth achieving? Can it work? Professor Strevens's view is this:

"It can, indeed usually does. It depends on the particular circumstances. If you have a situation where the learnt language is highly-valued in the community, then it will. There is no reason why there should not be a very long period of two languages co-existing side by side. But one has to remember that it is in the nature of language to change. It depends on the length of the time-scale you are thinking about. If we think in terms of a century, there is no reason at all why they should not co-exist. If you are thinking in terms of 10,000 years, then I cannot predict".

Will the steps needed to achieve this bilingualism be taken? One factor which would move people generally in that direction would be the realisation that Irish culture, a distinctive Irish identity as we know it, would be doomed if Irish-speaking communities were to die out. Would the present generation—indeed any generation—like to be the one which allowed this to happen? In the final chapter of this booklet, we will look at how language is central to this, how it fits with our culture and way of life, how one complements the other so that each is essential to the other's life. If it is a question of retaining and developing a distinctive Irish identity, is this something that would be regarded as so desirable that it would be unanimously agreed to by us all? And, once this basic agreement is reached, will the course needed to achieve it not be easier to follow?



to see ourselves

WHEN we use the word "culture", some of us are inclined to think of it as having to do only with art—museums, symphony concerts, poetry, the speaking of French. It has, of course, to do with these things—but with so much else as well. Culture is a whole way of life of a nation or community. It's something acquired, mostly unconsciously, from one's own people, past and present. Town, country, male, female, married, single, big family or small, whatever one's origin or station in life, there is a complete culture available to us all. We in Ireland, being Irish, share a certain wavelength, we have certain understandings and feelings in common, things we don't share with Russian, or German or French, or for that matter, with our near neighbours across the Irish Sea. This is due to our being part of an Irish culture, or what's left of an Irish culture.

At this point it is relevant to say why in this series it is of importance that people think about culture rather than just language, in the first place. For the proposition put forward here is that, without the Irish language, commonly spoken in our midst, a special Irish culture as we know, and have known, it will eventually disappear. We have already touched on the linguistic history of other nations: Israel, which has revived virtually a dead language; Finland, which managed to hold onto and develop her language despite two major conquests; Wales which, at the present time, is endeavouring to restore Welsh. There is an instinctive feeling in these countries

that, if their languages go, so also does their indigenous culture, their way of life.

This brings us back to a consideration of what culture really is. Well then, what is it? Look in the mirror and see for yourself: *your* face is culture. The lines are Irish lines; the broken wrinkles across your forehead are something you have in common with most Irish people—indeed, with most other Western Europeans. At 45, if you aren't already that old, you may have slight peaks on your eyelids. This is an Irish characteristic: the late President Kennedy had them.

Suppose you were to have the good fortune to have an identical twin who, for some reason, had been raised in Eastern Europe, by now he would *not* be identical. He would have *unbroken* forehead wrinkles; his weight, due to a different diet and different posture, would be distributed in other ways.

Music, dress, the appearance of people living in the same community, all relate together—and they all relate as well to one special culture, one way of life. That way of life is reflected in the music they play, the dress they wear, how they look, talk, eat, gesture, and behave generally.

It is not easy for a member of any community to change basically from what he has been brought up to feel, do or think. A common culture regulates our life continually. From our earliest days, we are led into certain types of feelings of religious and social behaviour which others—our parents, friends and fellow countrymen, living *and* dead—have created for us.

Consciously or unconsciously, the son is impressed by his father's behaviour—how he gets on with people,

how well disposed he is to his family, the work he does and how he does it, what words he uses, what he considers important or unimportant in life. It is the sum of these influences which leaves the indelible mark upon us all which we call "Culture".

Any culture is, therefore, a community's design for living. It includes everything that can be communicated from one generation to another. Each culture is a world of its own, whose inhabitants feel and think more or less differently to others about everything in life. It's revealed in matters as diverse as the lines on your face, what colours you have names for; how you behave to strangers or to your mother; how you feel about love or work; what you consider courageous or cowardly. There is no right or wrong way of feeling about all these things. There are just different ways, an English way, a French way, a Russian way, an Irish way.

So, each separate culture enriches mankind. It is because of all these different ways of thinking and feeling that mankind has been able to produce such an infinite amount of ideas and inventions, of creative work of all kinds all over the world. This diversity is one of the glories of mankind. Each culture—whether there are features in it you like or dislike—is of equal worth, because each culture develops to the highest degree those aspects of life it considers most important. Contravise, the world would be a dull place if we all spoke and behaved and thought in the same way.

What makes your Irish identity is your culture, the special wavelength you enjoy with the other members of your community, the shared feelings, values, history, behaviour, and way of expressing them. This is what makes a community, what binds people together within it, inspires them to co-operate, to plan the future together. Irish identity is not a matter of living in Galway or Wicklow, or even in an Irish State under an Irish flag. Living in an isolated geographical location, an island for instance, doesn't in itself give you a special identity: Japan consists of four islands with the wide sea between them; yet they share the same culture, the same Japanese identity; they are all Japanese. It could happen that the people of this island and the one next door to us would, in time, be the same—would, in fact, share a common identity. In such a case, every citizen is

deprived. Patterns of thought and feeling which are hereditary are no longer capable of being developed, foreign models must be followed. And this forced imitation breeds the provincial, the unimaginative, the uncreative, the second-rate.

A community's language, because it is the sole means of clearly intelligible expression, is the principal way of transmitting a particular culture, its basic values, from one generation to the next. If one language supplants another, it is virtually certain that in time a change of culture will accompany it.

All languages have highly-developed systems of sounds and grammar; they also possess an adequate vocabulary for their current purposes, a vocabulary capable of being developed as the needs of life require. So, if one sometimes hears that the Irish language does not have an adequate vocabulary for dealing with the needs of modern technology and science while English does, this does not mean that English is superior, rather that English happened to be a vernacular in currency when much of modern technology and science was being developed. Place Irish in the same circumstances and the vocabulary would develop too. It did with Hebrew—which was twenty centuries more out of date! Language, then, being the salient means of transmitting an individual culture, the loss of Irish in the continuance of the distinctive traditionally-known Irish culture through which our forebears transmitted their experience for the greater part of our country's history, will be seen to be relevant. Up to comparatively recently, little interfered with its constant daily use over most of Ireland. So, while it may be a fact that Irish is not at present a language of modern technology, it is bound up with the experience and history, the patterns of thought and feeling, the values and characteristics, of the Irish people. Thus, if Irish goes, the whole personality of the people is threatened. The process may be slow, not readily detectable perhaps over the comparatively short period of one life-span; but the supplanting language, in this case English, will bring with it a new system of thinking, feeling, behaving—a whole new culture, in fact. Language, like the glaze in a piece of pottery, holds together the myriad grains of sand that go to make the piece. Hiberno-English, the kind of English we have been speaking in Ireland over the past

to see
ourselves

clusion of his programmes, Dr. Gertner had this to say:

"You have heard all these people say they like the language, some say they even love it. But it is not enough to love the language, you must materialise the vision, realise the dream. Otherwise, there is a split through the nation's mind. And in the words of the prophet: 'their mind is divided, they will be weakened'

"Bilingualism is stated to be the national aim. This is the way it should be in this country, nobody should think of eliminating either one language or the other. But it is more difficult to achieve this aim than to achieve the dominance of one single language as was done in Israel. They revived one language, you must keep two.

"You must not think that the opponents of the restoration of Irish are wrong, or that they have no valid arguments. They may be right—as far as reason and cold logic are concerned. But, as with individuals, the life of nations is made up of more things than reason and logic: there are also the dreams and ideals, the emotions and sentiments that make for a fuller life; it is things like these that determine whether the destiny of a nation will be negligible or great. The restoration of the Irish language—of any national language—is a matter for the nation's emotions, its hopes, its dreams. If the Irish nation wants to preserve its cultural heritage, then it must restore the language, not in bits and pieces, but to the full.

"You are not the only nation in the world aiming at bilingualism. There are many others, most of them highly civilised and with great, rich cultures: Canada, India, Belgium, Yugoslavia. In Ireland, as with them, it can succeed, if you really want it to. As things stand, there is a lack of faith, and the kind of action that goes with faith; your people seem to lack the energy for practical action in this matter.

"There is a Hebrew saying which goes like this: 'where there is no material basis, there is no spiritual activity; where there is no spiritual inspiration, material activity is weakened as well'. You should ponder on this. It may well apply to you".

a view
from
outside

