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# Not Gaelic, But Free. Not Free, But Gaelic: The Role of the Irish Language in Cultural and Political Nationalism in Ireland

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Not Gaelic but Free. Not Free, but Gaelic:

The Role of the Irish Language in Cultural and Political Nationalism in Ireland

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### Abstract

The title of this paper paraphrases a quote by Patrick Pearse, an Irish poet, writer, nationalist and political activist who was killed by the British for his participation in the Easter 1916 uprising. These words seem fitting for a discussion on the connection between politics and the Irish language in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland, which this paper addresses.

The Irish language and Ireland's creation as a nation are intricately linked. After the Great Famine of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the rise of cultural nationalism within Ireland, fueled by its writers, convinced the Irish that they existed within a country that was separate from England, and one deserving of independence from centuries of British control. The Irish language became a rallying call for those seeking sovereignty. Prior to the establishment of the Republic of Ireland (1937), the state (England) did nothing to support the acquisition and practice of the Irish language by its people; in fact, England saw the speaking of Irish as a sign of disloyalty and outlawed it in any nationally-run schools. The Irish Literary Revival, began in the late 1800's, helped established the Irish language as a necessary component of a free-Irish state, and recent reports by the Irish government indicate strong support for increasing the number of Irish-speaking individuals by 2020. Indeed, the Government of Ireland recently published a planning document: *20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language: 2010-2030*. In it, they assert "the Government's aim is to ensure that as many citizens as possible are bilingual in both Irish and English."

Not Gaelic but Free. Not Free, but Gaelic:

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*In one way or another, life was passing us by and we were suffering misery,  
sometimes having a potato and at other times having nothing in our mouths  
but sweet words of Gaelic” (Power, The Poor Mouth).*

The demand for language rights on the part of non-dominant groups has played a prominent part in the history of nationalist movements in modern Europe (Hepburn, 2001). National identity, the sense of belonging to one state or nation, rather than another, does not arise naturally, but requires the presence of a number of symbols that a country’s people can claim. These can include flags, songs, colors, the nation’s history (particularly the national creation myth), culture, food, etc. A common language can be a very potent such symbol. For that reason, nations, particularly emerging ones, have often tried to encourage or even enforce use of the national language, with varying degrees of success. This was true of Ireland as it struggled in its decades-long fight to win independence from Great Britain, which heightened after the Great Famine of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Irish society emerged deeply traumatized from the Famine. Hundreds of thousands of families had been affected by disease, by death, by dislocation, or by economic ruin. The census of 1851 showed that the population had fallen by 20% since 1841. Almost one million people had died in the previous few years, and almost one million had emigrated (“Week One: Irish History 1850-1914,” n.d.). This population decline paralleled the decline in use of the Irish language. In the early decades of the century, pockets of rural peasantry pushed to the West of Ireland by Cromwell centuries before continued to speak Ireland’s mother tongue. But by the century’s end, only 13 percent of the population spoke Irish (Filppula 1999). While the language

continued to serve as a nostalgic symbol of Irish cultural purity, was rendered virtually useless in the wake of British imperialism, it became a language affiliated with poverty, ignorance and desolation.

Many Irish believed that Great Britain had done little to support Ireland as its potato crop failed for several years and its people either died, or emigrated, and many became angry about the attitudes of the English landlords. These people were frequently absent landlords who paid little attention to the state of their land. Their only concern was rent. Those who could not pay were evicted and there was no safety net in place for these people when this happened, as it frequently did. Irish workers had no rights, the power rested solely in the hands of the landlords and those who upheld law and order were frequently in league with landlords. Violence often broke out when landlords attempted to obtain rent from their tenants, and conflict between the two opposing groups became common and often deadly.

Irish Nationalists saw the “land question” as an opportunity to politicize agrarian discontent and enlist Irish farmers in a nationalist movement leading to Ireland’s independence from Britain. Linking the issue of land control and ownership to the concept of an Ireland that could govern itself was a brilliant strategy that several individuals devised. These individuals included Fenian revolutionary John Devoy, agrarian agitator Michael Davitt, and most importantly, MP Charles Stewart Parnell. These three nationalists linked land issues to questions of national identity in a strategy coined as the “New Departure of 1879,” which attempted to find a common ground for cooperation with groups committed to Irish Home Rule through constitutional means. It was so named because it ‘departed’ from the normal strategies used by Devoy, Davitt and Parnell. Previously, each leader wanted different results: Parnell wanted to move from margins

into the center of political life; Devoy hoped to radicalize the poor farmers; and Davitt wanted to improve the poor living conditions of tenant farmers.

Of these three, Charles Parnell emerged as a true political animal. His tactics were not particularly original nor were his analyses greatly insightful. However, he understood the “minimum that would arouse and unite the country and the maximum concession that could be extracted from government” (Lee, p.77.) Despite being ejected from the House of Commons in 1881 for protesting Davitt’s arrest, he nevertheless rallied the country behind a major Land Act, which included the three F’s: fair rent, fixity of tenure and free sale.

Lee (1973) argues that the emergence of the Land League was a pivotal point in the modernization of Irish society. The movement did eventually achieve many of its goals, such that by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century many tenants were able to purchase their holdings on reasonable terms. The Land League also fostered self-empowerment of the Irish people, as it grew into the largest popular movement in Irish history. Newspaper readership increased, and women became directly involved in the resistance. As more individuals saw the value in active participation in their country’s social and political affairs, these energies of self-confidence and higher expectations were ultimately directed toward national independence (Marshall, 2013).

As nationalist political sentiment grew strength in Ireland, there were concurrent developments in the cultural sphere. These included sports, literature and drama, as well as the revival of the Irish language; in this manner they served to emphasize Irish cultural distinctiveness in what was then a United Kingdom political context. Language and culture provided the driving force behind claims to nation status (Pierce 2002).

It is generally accepted that the Irish Literary Revival (or Anglo-Irish Literary Revival) lasted from about 1880 to the 1920s. Its most obvious in starting point is the foundation in 1892 of the

Irish Literary Society in London, and of the National Literary Society in Dublin in the same year. The roots of this revival are clearly to be seen in the early cultural nationalism of the 1830s and 1840s, of which it is an extension and continued development.

Douglas Hyde's (the Gaelic League's first president) 1892 lecture, 'The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland', is often regarded as the key statement of the cultural nationalist project. The year following Hyde's essay, an Irish language organization, the Gaelic League was founded to foster the growth of the Irish language, and language classes assembled throughout the country (Pierce 2002). The League worked to revive Gaelic as a spoken and literary language, successfully campaigned for envelopes addressed in Irish to be accepted by post offices and for street names to be written in both English and Gaelic. In seeking to revive Irish as a living language, the Gaelic League followed the aims of its immediate precursors, the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language of 1876, and the Gaelic Union of 1880.

The Irish Literary Revival encouraged the creation, or translation of works written in the spirit of Irish culture, as distinct from English culture. This was, in part, due to the political need for an individual and authentic Irish identity. A key player in the Literary Revival was The Abbey Theater established in 1897 by W.B. Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory and Edward Martyn. Its role was to create a "literary theatre" that would be of a uniquely Irish character. The Abbey Theatre enjoyed great popular success, and large crowds attended many of its productions. The theatre staged many plays by important or rising authors, including Yeats, Lady Gregory, Moore, Martyn, Padraic Colum, George Bernard Shaw, Oliver St John Gogarty, F. R. Higgins, Thomas MacDonagh, Lord Dunsany, T. C. Murray, James Cousins and Lennox Robinson (The Abbey Theater, 2013).

It is important to note that the Irish writers of the Literary Revival were writing in English, or translating Irish works into English, but lesser-known authors had been writing in their native language for many years. Pádraic Ó Conaire is probably the most significant Irish language writer of the Irish language revival. He wrote simple stories that were suited to children and learners of the Irish language. Another writer was Tomás Ó Criomhthain, born on Blasket Island, the largest of a small cluster of islands two miles off the Dingle Peninsula in southwestern Ireland. He wrote about the harsh life of people who lived on that island in his work *An tOileánach*, which depicted the island as an idyllic local community despite its harsh climate. Máirtín Ó Cadhain is probably the most prominent figure in 20th century Irish language prose and his novel *Cré na Cille* is considered one of the greatest works of 20th century Irish language literature.

Contemporary writing in Irish exists in a healthy state despite a small readership. Novelists such as Bréandán Ó hEithir, Pádraig Ó Siadhail, Pádraig Standún, and Pádraig Ó Cíobháin regularly produce novels in Irish. The short story has been one the most stable forms of Irish writing in the twentieth century, given its suitability for publication in journals and magazines. Writers such as Pádraic Breathnach, Michál Ó Conghaile, Dara Ó Conaola, Alan Titley and Mícheál Ó Conghaile regularly produce collections of short stories (Contemporary Prose Writing in the Irish Language, n.d.).

For more than six centuries, British policy in Ireland focused on the destruction of the Irish Gaelic language. By and large, from 1366 through the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, British colonial rules argued for the extermination of the Irish language as part of a larger political project (Cahill 2007). Following the establishment of the Irish Free State (1922), the Irish government made it a national priority to help sustain existing Irish-speaking regions to prevent further decline of the

language. Unfortunately, despite the attempts to make Irish the everyday language, the methods and resources were ineffectual. For one, those who worked for the revival of the language relied too heavily on the government to restore Irish as a national language. Two, the attitudes about the language played a role. Irish became associated with ignorance, backwardness and poverty and those with middle class aspirations strove to disassociate themselves from the Irish language and its culture. English was considered the language of advancement, progress, commerce, nationalism and Government administration (Marshall 2013).

However, more recently the Irish government has played a major role in the resurgence of the Irish Language. Recent planning activity has shown an increased awareness by the State of its responsibility for the linguistic, as well as the physical environment. Indeed, the Government of Ireland recently published a document: *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language: 2010-2030*. In it, they assert “the Government’s aim is to ensure that as many citizens as possible are bilingual in both Irish and English.” The document also states “Languages are humankind’s principal tools for interacting and for expressing ideas, emotions, knowledge, memories and values. Languages are also primary vehicles of cultural expression and intangible cultural heritage, essential to the identity of individuals and groups” (Government of Ireland, 2010).

In closing, the contemporary Irish poet, Eavan Boland, may have described the relationship between the Irish Language and its country’s identity most accurately (and poignantly):

This is what language is:  
a habitable grief. A turn of speech  
for the everyday and ordinary abrasion  
of losses such as this:

which hurts  
just enough to be a scar.

and heals just enough to be a nation.

Eavan Bolan “Habitable Grief” *The Lost Land*.

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