

THE LIMITATIONS OF THE LANGUAGE MOVEMENT.

By William Rooney.

From *The United Irishman*, September 23, 1899.

The recent lecture of Father Yorke has raised issues that need discussion, instant and calm, for the progress of the language movement has reached so far that something less academic than the mere reading and writing of Irish has become necessary. "The movement," as one of its advocates has aptly put it, "is no longer in leading strings." It has a party behind it, and needs a public policy and an active membership to make it a permanent power. In six short years it has wrought an all but incredible change in the people, it has rehabilitated the old things in their minds and restored reverence to matters long looked upon with indifference, but it is still far from the accomplishment of its object – the de-Anglicisation of Ireland.

It may seem judicious for the members of the journalistic profession to endeavour to deepen and widen whatever separation there may exist between the educational and political movements in this country, but no reasoning man will see the justification. If, as both profess, they are seeking the same goal, though by different paths, surely there is no reason why they cannot support each other, or why they could not become one great movement, embracing all interests and working along the same broad road. If the language is, as it certainly is, the incarnation of the highest ideal of national individuality, surely it must look with respect and friendship on anything tending to foster the same ideal. If an Irish-speaking Ireland is a desideratum, surely a Free Ireland is not less so, seeing that it embraces all that by any possibility the other can bestow on us.

I am not one of those who believe that we must leave off the pursuit of an Irish-speaking Ireland until we have obtained, but I am of the view that we should not sacrifice one iota of our prospects of freedom to secure the speaking of Gaelic. The differences between both these movements are entirely artificial. They are the result of fear

on one side, and ignorance on the other, and we need to get shut of both if we are really determined to be free. The journalists have affected to patronise this Irish language movement, as if it were some Castle-bred plan for forcing Irish Industries or the brilliant idea of some noble "Irish" peer for foisting himself into prominence. They have mistaken it; whatever its original *raison d'être*, it has become, and is daily becoming, more an agent for the subversion of what has so long masqueraded as Irish opinion. Insensibly we have all within the last few years been affected by it, and as the years go on we shall be influenced still more. It is the force of the coming century, the new bond that comes to re-unite the people weary of the squabbles and squalor of committee rooms and registration associations.

The Gaelic League has up to the present eschewed politics. Now the idea of a non-political organisation for the promotion of a charity, or some such work, is decidedly necessary, but it is a mistake for such an organisation as that which has charged itself with the promotion of Irish Nationality. Besides politics can be construed into anything bearing on the relations between us and Britain, and the Gaelic League, carrying out this view, by refusing to take part in the commemoration of the anniversary of '98, took up a position occupied by every anti-Irish and West British individual in the country. Politics in Ireland are in no sense to be compared with politics elsewhere. In France or Germany every group of politicians is Nationalist before anything else, in England it is the same; but in Ireland the lines may roughly be divided between those who believe in an Irish Nation and those who do not. From the former will come the bulk of support for anything National, a few thinking individuals on the other side may, while denying the necessity for separate existence, favour the development of National characteristics, but the bulk of their company will always follow the bread-cart. Among other matters, over which popular conception is somewhat clouded, is this question of politics, for with most of us politics has begun and ended with parliamentarianism, but it surely needs but little thought to see that "politics," even in Ireland, is broader than its supposed synonym – yet the projectors of the language movement refuse to allow the branches of their organisation to take part in any public Nationalist propaganda.

They are thus actually playing into the hands of those people who have lead, and seek still to lead people to believe that the question of the language is a mere academic affair, a perfectly sentimental business, suitable enough for a free people to bother their heads about, but for us a side issue designed to draw off attention from the main question. The present position of the language is primarily due to two things – its discouragement by the Catholic Episcopate, and its discarding by the parliamentary politicians. It has been cursed in a double sense, its natural protectors contemned it, and those who sought to spread it were interested in it only as a means of proselytising the Irish people. Such organisations as Theophilus O’Flanagan’s “Gaelic Society,” Edward O’Reilly’s “Hiberno-Celtic Society,” the Archaeological and Ossianic Societies, never appealed to the people, their concern was the literature of the Gael, and they affected the most archaic specimens they could find. It is a fact that the first attempt made to teach the Irish masses to read and write Irish was made by the Irish Mission Society, through the books specially written for the purpose by Tadhg Connellan and Dr. Neilson. They were intended to pervert the people, they failed, for the people refused to come near them, but the Catholic leaders, clerical and lay, took no steps to meet them on their own ground. Emancipation came, the “National Schools” followed. Dr. MacHale alone protested against them, no effort was made to have the tongue of five-sixths of the population taught in these schools; the fact is there was no Catholic on the Board sufficiently astute for “Shovel-Hat” Whateley. The Penal Code had crushed the spirit out of the leaders of the Catholic Party, they were glad to accept anything, and the fruit of compromise is only too apparent now. The Famine helped on the ruin, and fifty years of indifference has all but wrought the consummation. I say fifty years of indifference, not that I am unaware that during that time O’Curry, O’Donovan, Hennessy, Stokes, Standish O’Grady, O’Daly, and all the great Continental Celtologists have been labouring, but their work never appealed to the nation, they were preserving the dry bones, not perpetuating the living soul of the language.

Anything of a popular nature for the tongue was due to politicians, not parliamentary politicians merely, but such thinkers on

public affairs as Davis, Michael Doheny, John O'Mahony and O'Donovan Rossa. I dealt some time ago with the reasons which persuaded Young Ireland to write for Ireland in English. No reader of the "Spirit of the Nation" can fail to be convinced that the men behind it had the Irish tongue at heart; every page is eloquent towards the fact. Similarly, John O'Mahony's translation of Keating, his christening of the revolutionary organisation, his whole life in fact is testimony of his interest in and advocacy of the old ideals. O'Donovan Rossa's life and actions are equally proof of his attachment to the language, for he has never lost an opportunity of using Irish wherever it was possible to use it effectively. This present uprising of interest in the matter is the first great general move in any direction for its resuscitation. It came upon the people at a favourable time, when their eyes had been opened, more or less, to the chasm whither a union with British ideas was leading them. They paused, almost on the brink, and they have receded considerably towards the old path. The men who sought to lead them back towards that path in the past, were mainly men uninterested in the pressing questions of the hour, men who revered the past for its majesty, but despaired of ever emulating it in the future. The Gaelic League also reverences the past, but we must not live wholly on its reputation, or bury ourselves entirely in the contemplation of it. If Gaelic is to become the power of the Ireland of to-morrow, if it is to take, even moderately, the place of English, we must make Gaelic the medium for the discussion of all the questions of the day. We must make the peasants of the West and South review their grievances in it; we must make the markets and the fairs be conducted in it; we must make it more than a holiday language, something more than the medium of drawing applause from a multitude. We must make it *the* language of the country, else it will only fill the place of the ornamental, where its natural position should be the necessary. This will mean such an agitation as has secured in Buda-Pesth the state of affairs so abhorred of Professor Mahaffy, but agitation means politics, more or less, and the movement has got to face it, if it is not to come to a standstill.

Let us examine the arguments against such a scheme. If we take part in public affairs we may, not unlikely, sacrifice the assistance of

all who may happen to be on the other side; for we shall have to assail the system of education, and that being a Government creation, subsidised by the State, will be defended as such by all loyal subjects. We shall lose the help of all those enjoying Government positions; we shall possibly be regarded as incendiaries by a section of the clergy, and without a doubt lose what little support is already accorded by the Press. Yet we can never force this question to its conclusion by meetings, however monster or classes however earnest. The system must be attacked and disrupted. The shame of knowing Irish has, to a great extent, become a thing of the past, but the pride of knowing English, and perpetually showing it, is as strong as ever. Something more drastic than night-schools or resolutions will be necessary to make shopkeepers of the various towns to do their duty by the language. Most of us remember how obsequious the merchant used to be twenty-five years ago to the landlord and his agent. The Land League was not immaculate, but it did one good thing in scotching shoneenism. Something of the same nature is needed again; for the country people take their manners, in a great measure, from the towns and villages, and we must make these as Irish as possible to secure a firm grip of the people outside them. This will be no easy task; for your ordinary "merchant" cares very little for anything unless he sees a "return" in it for the energy he expends. He has no time, he will tell you, to bother about reading or writing Irish. We must force him, and we cannot do that by allowing the movement to remain a question merely for the young and the enthusiastic. We must lay bare the inconsistency of affecting an interest in the matter and speaking nothing but English. We must, in short, take off our coats and prove that this is a progressive movement; that it has come to stay, and come to carry the indifferents along, whether they like it or not.

To do this needs resolve, needs determination, needs a fearless appeal to the people on the broad grounds of Ireland versus England. The people will rise to such a programme, and the Gaelic League will be well advised to consider it.