

# THE LANGUAGE OF THE OUTLAW.

By Roger Casement.

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One of the arguments most frequently used by those who oppose or are indifferent to the Irish language, and its claims on the interest and support of Irishmen and women, is that of its 'usefulness' in the environment of our day. Many who in other respects claim to be, and are patriotic enough, confess themselves unable to follow those language enthusiasts who would regain for the tongue of Ireland widespread use and general recognition throughout Ireland.

'Home Rule,' they say, 'fostering of Irish industries, control of the public revenue, self-government in its most extended form – all these we will strive for, but surely it is a waste of vitally needed energy to seek to revive an obsolete language, already out of general use for well-nigh a hundred years, and which, for two centuries, has sunk to be a mere peasant dialect, incapable of giving expression to the activities of modern life.'

That argument is not of yesterday. It is coeval with the first war of English institutions upon the native life of this land. The language of a people is the fortress which the enemy first assails; and once that fortress is captured and its stones levelled with the ground, every other stronghold of nationality must inevitably fall.

In the days of Henry VIII, and Elizabeth, those who sought to destroy the national life of the Irish people employed this very argument.

It is true that then they could not denounce Irish as an uncultivated, rude, peasant speech; but its use was nonetheless incompatible with the adoption of those English customs and rules of conduct which were being introduced at the point of the sword to mould the Irish people to 'virtuous labour, and to leave off robbing and killing of another.'

Hollinshed, one of the English chroniclers of those days, said of it, the Irish language:

‘If it be as sacred as the Hebrew, as learned as the Greek, as fluent as the Latin, as courteous as the Spanish, as Court-like as the French, yet do I not see that it may very well be spared in the English Pale.’

What Hollinshed propounded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century is the keynote of the opposition raised to the Irish language in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – ‘It may very well be spared.’ Well, if all Ireland has indeed become today the English Pale, and there is nothing in life worth fighting for save money, then is there nothing for it but to bury the Irish language, and when the Irish language is quite dead, our patriots and publicists, our economists and politicians will realise, in that silencing of worldly cares and strivings which the awful moment of death brings, that a Race has passed away from the family of men, and that an ancient Nation has ceased to exist.

One of the most eloquent of modern Irishmen, the late Mr. J. F. Taylor, K.C., pleaded the cause of the Irish language against these friendly critics of our own land that opine that ‘it might well be spared,’ in such terms as all workers in the cause of Irish nationality should lay close to their hearts.

The only record available of Mr. Taylor’s speech is contained in a letter signed “X,” which was addressed to the *Manchester Guardian* some time ago; but this letter puts the sense of his address with such telling clearness that it may very well be quoted as it stands. Here it is:

‘Sir – May I venture to send you a few words as to a speech made by Mr. J. F. Taylor last November at the University College Debating Society? Mr. Taylor’s gifts as an orator were of a very remarkable order – and a most learned judge on the Irish Bench has remarked that he had never heard at the Bar a more remarkable speech than that given by Mr. Taylor at a certain trial. I myself only once heard him speak – at this meeting – and the memory of it is very distinct with me.

The discussion was on the question whether the Irish people might be allowed to know or take an active interest in their own language. Lord Justice Fitzgibbon had made a dialectical discourse of a kind with which we are all familiar on platforms; only, as might be expected of his ability, he surpassed the

ordinary advocate in the skilful irrelevance of his argument and in the covering vehemence (no less skilful) of his manner of delivery.

After his conventional fireworks, Mr. Taylor rose. He had been very ill, and had come straight from his bed, and without food.

He began with some difficulty, but his power increased as he went on to repudiate the test of commercial success as being the final end of a nation's life, or of long misfortune as being any reason for abandoning faith and loyalty to one's own people.

He compared, in one passage, the position of the Irish language under English rule to the position of the Hebrew language under Egyptian rule. He set out the arguments which a fashionable professor with an attachment to the Egyptian Court might have addressed to Moses:

'Your prejudices are very antiquated and sentimental,' he would have said. 'Do just look at the matter in a reasonable light, like a man of the world. Here your people have been now for hundreds of years in the brickfields. The fact is patent that they have never been able to rise out of this miserable position. They have no education; the mass of them are poor, demoralised, and despised. They have no history outside their brickfields, and within them they are the foolish prey of agitators who set them clamouring for straw. Instead of adopting the enlightened and philosophic religion of Egypt, they still cling through all these generations to a superstitious and obscurantist faith, mischievous and altogether behind the times. Their language is rude and provincial. It is incapable of expressing philosophic thought. It is, of course, useless for commercial purposes. As for literature, the fragments that remain are well known to be either superstitious or indecent – in any case quite unfit for ordinary people. You must recognise that the interest your race attaches to it is derived from mere ignorance and obstinacy; it would be quite unworthy of a man of culture, and certainly impossible in a man of the world, or moving in society. Consider, on the other hand, the Empire to which you now, happily for you, belong – its centuries of civilisation, its ancient history, its buildings, its arts, its literature. Observe the splendid Imperial organisation, its world-wide fame, its ever-increasing dominions, its satisfactory foreign relations with the Great Powers, the lustre of its achievements, which must put it for ever in the rank of one of the greatest Empires which the world can know to the end of time. Why, then, do you not frankly throw in your lot with this magnificent and successful organisation? A handful of obscure peasants as you are, you would at once share in its renown and its prosperity. Of course you could depend on being generously treated by rulers of such standing. Something would doubtless be done for those poor labourers of the brickfields. More favourable terms could be made for them – who knows? A supply of straw at a reasonable price; security of tenure of their mud huts; lower rents even. The deserving could enter the

Egyptian service, or make a start in commerce, or learn industry from this great and progressive country. Only get rid of those brickfield agitators. Give up your outlandish and useless language. Reconsider your superstitious sort of religion. Put an end to all this nonsense, quite out of place in good society – to local dialects, out of date provincial patriotisms, and illiterate sentimentalities which Providence itself condemns by casting them out into the mud huts and brickfields and acre holdings.’

‘And,’ broke out the speaker, ‘if Moses had listened to these arguments, what would have been the end? Would he ever have come down from the Mount with the light of God shining on his face and carrying in his hand the Tables of the Law written in the language of the outlaw?’

Let all of us who are striving to do something for the language of our race remember these words.

The language of the outlaw gave the Law of God to man; the tongue of those who made bricks without straw was chosen for the shrine of Divine utterance on Earth while the speech of Pharoah lies smitten, silent as the stones of his Pyramids.

In Ireland we are building schools without bricks; a treasure-house of thought without a Treasury – our Taskmaster the enduring will of our race.

Our rulers reiterate the old, weary ‘No!’ that Imperialism has ever opposed to the progress of free men; but the ardent heart of the Gael is stronger than the cold purpose of the Gall.

Ours is still,

The might to mould  
By thrilling tongue a Nation’s ire,  
To such stern stuff as beats for aye  
The life out of a tyrant’s Nay,  
With Celtic claymore’s stroke of fire.

The language that to-day no Irishman may employ in any public service without fine, or penalty, or loss of some kind shall, in God’s good time, become again – ‘as sacred as the Hebrew, as learned as the Greek, as fluent as the Latin, as courteous as the Spanish, as courtlike as the French.’

**X.**