

IS IRISH A LIVING LANGUAGE?

By Pádraig Pearse.

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If you mention the name of An tAthair Risteard de Hindeberg to anyone who is in any degree intimate with that brilliant but erratic Gael, you will invariably observe a smile stealing across the countenance before you. The smile is not altogether one of amusement. There is in it a subtle suggestion of affection.

It would seem that this Doctor of Philology, whose appearances in print are uniformly so mirth-provoking, is in private life a being to love. We see him, as he has often been described to us, sitting “with his fiddle under his chin” (this is his phrase) making weird and astonishing music. We see him laying hands on the fiddle of a friend and ruining it for life by tuning it in accordance with some amazing “old Irish scale” of his own invention; much to the disgust of his friend, who, fond as he is of “Dick” (so An tAthair Risteard is lovingly called in the Deise) and enthusiastic as he is over Irish music, would much prefer “Dick” to experiment on his own fiddle.

We see him manufacturing an old Irish harp and allowing his nails to grow long that he may play it in the old Irish fashion. We see him forcing people who have rashly strayed into his parlour and who take about as much interest in the laws of Old Irish syntax as they do in the laws of the First Egyptian Dynasty, - we see him forcing these unfortunates to listen to him by the hour as he discourses in American-English on the sins of the writers of “revival Irish” in falling away from the magnificent standard of the ancients, and on the irreparable calamity to Irish civilisation involved in the loss of the infixed pronoun.

In truth, An Dochtuir Risteard and the tales told of him add much to the gaiety of life in the Deise. But, as we have hinted, he is not wholly a comic personage. We have heard stories of kindly deeds done furtively, of a great human sympathy, of a boundless generosity; so that, although our knowledge of him is gained chiefly from hearsay, we have grown to love the man as if he were an

intimate personal friend and would not for worlds wish him otherwise than he is. It is because we regard him thus affectionately that we shall be as tender as possible in exposing the foolishness of his most recent contribution (in American-English as usual) to Anglo-Irish journalism. We are still awaiting his contributions to Irish literature.

The first question that presents itself is why should anyone, and why Dr. Henebry above all others, start a discussion on Irish literature *in English*. We can understand reviewing an Irish book in English, since one purpose of a review is to make the book known to as large a public as possible. But there can be no excuse for inaugurating what (it appears) is to be a wholesale attack on the Irish of the revival in the language of the enemies of the revival. No one ignorant of Irish is competent to take part in or even to follow such a discussion.

Why, then, did not Dr. Henebry address himself to Irish speakers, the only people who are really concerned with what he has to say? Is it that he mistrusts his mastery of Irish? Is it that he fears (and here his fears would have some ground) that his Irish would not be understood? Or is it that he wants to advertise to the mere Bearloir – to the *Irish Times*, to Trinity College, to the enemies of Irish in the new Universities – the alleged fact that no real Irish is being written at the present day except by one writer?

We reject all three hypotheses and assume in charity to Dr. Henebry that he writes in English out of pure eccentricity. But it is an eccentricity which those who are concerned for the welfare of the movement should resent. It is strange friendship to the Irish language to select the moment when its position in the new Universities is about to be determined to tell the English-speaking world that the art of writing Irish has for all practical purposes been lost – that all our writers (always with one exception) write only English-Irish. Of course, those who know Dr. Henebry will receive his opinion with their usual indulgent smile; but everyone does not know Dr. Henebry and there are those to whom his magisterial tone and the formidable “Richard Henebry, Ph.D.” on his title-pages may convey a false impression of authority.

The real question raised by Dr. Henebry's article in the *Leader* is this: Is the Irish language a living language or a dead language? Dr. Henebry insists in substance that it is a dead language. He asserts that we must write it exactly as it was written three hundreds year ago. He refuses to recognise any changes in spelling, any changes in inflexion, any changes in syntactical *ordo*, that have since made their appearance in the language and been generally accepted by those who speak and read it. We can understand a heroic zeal against Bearlachas, though we cannot sympathise with that zeal in all its extremer manifestations. But Dr. Henebry is not animated merely by a zeal against Bearlachas. He is animated by a passionate hatred of change of any sort.

In other words, he will not allow growth in the language. He will not allow the development of new grammatical forms, the acceptance of new conventions in style. He takes his stand (quite arbitrarily) at the year 1600 or thereabouts and calls every change that has come into the language since then a "corruption," and "un-Irish", and "base." As well might we say that Ruskin's English is not English because it is cast in a totally different mould – differing in orthography, accidence, syntax, and above all "style" – from, say Sir Thomas North's English; or that Balzac's French is not French because it accepts different standards from the French of Calvin.

Literature must be based on living speech. We thought that this had been long ago accepted by everyone in the language movement. In some quarters, indeed, there has been a tendency to push the principle to an absurd extreme and to lay down that literature and the spoken language should accept precisely the same canons. Now Dr. Henebry comes along and would divorce literature from the spoken language altogether. Similar attempts in other countries have either failed miserably, or else have partially succeeded with disastrous results. Modern Greece should be an example and a warning. There, owing to the creation of an artificial literary standard, a complete divorce has arisen between the language of the people and the language of the *litterateurs*, - with the result that the majority of Greeks cannot read what their writers write.

Dr. Henebry would bring about a similar state of things in Ireland. His “Irish translation” of Seamus Ua Dubhghaill’s Irish preface to his “Cathair Conroi,” would not be intelligible to any ordinary Irish speaker. We have just read it to five native speakers in succession – two of them young lads recently come to Dublin from Western homes in which no English is ever spoken. The passage, in Dr. Henebry’s version, was unintelligible to them, one and all. They could only dimly guess at its general drift. Some sentences they could not guess at even remotely. They were as Greek to them. We then read Seamus Ua Dubhghaill’s original passage in *living* Irish. Needless to say every word was understood. “Is *Gaedhilge* í sin,” was the significant comment of one of our native speakers. Dr. Henebry may retort that the speakers in question do not themselves speak or understand “Irish Irish.” Well, if there is not “Irish Irish” in Iar-Chonnachta then “Irish Irish” is dead and we must put up with such Irish as we have left.

But “Irish Irish” is not dead. It lives in every Irish-speaking district to-day. For all its differences in “form, grammar, and idiom” from the Irish of three centuries ago, it is none the less Irish. And “Irish Irish” is being written by scores of our writers, Seamus Ua Dubhghaill foremost amongst the number. It is high time to protest against the oft-reiterated parrot-cry of his personal friends and exploiters that the Irish of An tAthair Peadar is the only “Irish Irish” that is being written at the present day.

We believe (though there are competent judges who would not agree with us) that An tAthair Peadar’s Irish is the most vivid and vigorous Irish that is being written today. But there are dozens of people who write, and thousands of people who speak, Irish quite as *Irish* as An tAthair Peadar’s. Its distinguishing quality is not “Irishness,” but vividness and vigour, - a quality personal to An tAthair Peadar, innate in him, and not at all due to any exceptional mastery of the language on his part. The same quality marks his English, and if he could write French and German would doubtless mark his French and German. There is Irish not characterised to the same degree by this quality, and as unlike An tAthair Peadar’s in style as it is possible to imagine, which is yet quite as “Irish” as his, -

nay, more “Irish,” if by being “Irish” we mean being near the traditional model. Such Irish, for instance, is the Irish of Micheal Mhag Ruaidhri. No one who has read “Beatha Aodha Ui Neill” can fail to see that Micheal’s style approaches far more nearly to Ceitinn’s than does An tAthair Peadar’s.

If Dr. Henebry thinks he is going to impose dead linguistic and literary forms on a living language he is mistaken. Irish literature has taken its path – the path of the living speech. It would require a stronger man than Dr. Henebry to turn it back now. We have heard the fear expressed that such articles as his in the *Leader* may deter people from writing Irish. We do not think so. Seamus Ua Dubhghaill and the others who like him are writing a simple vigorous living Irish are doing the most thoroughly useful piece of work that is being done in Ireland today. They may not be producing very exalted literature, but at any rate they are answering the cry of the awakening thousands of Irish speakers for something to read in their own language, - something that they can understand, something that is pleasant and familiar and homely, something that is capable of filling a place in their daily lives. Are we to answer this cry by giving our people books that they cannot understand? Are we to answer the cry of those hungry for bread by giving them stones?