

THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE



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The death of Cardinal Newman brings to mind various events in his chequered life. It reminds the present writer of one characteristic incident, mentioned by O'Curry in the preface to those Lectures delivered by him to the students of the Catholic University, of which Newman was then rector. O'Curry had spent his life labouring in the neglected field of Irish literature. He had searched the piles of manuscripts mouldering on the shelves of libraries, public and private, throughout Ireland; he had visited the great English collection; he had visited the great English collections; manuscripts had been sent from abroad, from Belgium and from Rome, for his inspection; he had studied volumes unopened for centuries; and he had thus attained a knowledge of the native language, literature and archaeology never before approached and very probably unrivalled since.

Chiefly at the instance of Newman, a Celtic chair was established in the new Catholic University; and the appointment of O'Curry as the first professor, and the constant encouragement which that great scholar received from the rector, were all characteristic of the late Cardinal. The Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Irish History, in reality sketches of Irish literature, were the outcome of O'Curry's connection with the University. Of the circumstances attending their delivery and publication we read in the preface: -

"Little did it occur to me on the occasion of my first timid appearance in that chair, that the efforts of my feeble pen would pass beyond the walls within which those lectures were delivered. There was, however, amongst my varying audiences one constant attendant, whose presence was both embarrassing and encouraging to me...whose kindly sympathy practically showed itself... At the conclusion of the course, this great scholar and pious priest (for to whom can I allude but our late illustrious lecture, the Rev. Dr. Newman?) astonished me by announcing to me, on the part of the University, that my poor lectures were deemed worthy to be published at its expense."

The lectures were published in due course, and no one who has ever even glanced through them will assert that Irish literature is either non-existent, or scanty, or worthless. One object of Newman and of O'Curry has been gained.

But they had another object in view, as O'Curry plainly states. It was to convince the Irish Catholic public, and more especially the educated class, that to them first and of all belonged the duty of becoming acquainted with, and of learning to appreciate at their proper value, the language and literature of their ancestors. Has that end been reached? Do Irish Catholics to any extent know their native language today, or are they at all acquainted with the character of their native literature? Thirty-five years have passed since those lectures were delivered. In that time Irish Catholic education has made great strides. Yet, the number of those who can write our native language passably, or who have the slightest knowledge of our literature, is shamefully small. In whose hands do we now find those lectures, delivered in the National Catholic University, and treating of the most Catholic literature in the world? Chiefly in the hands of foreigners, and almost exclusively in the hands of non-Catholics. Those precious ecclesiastical manuscripts, first studied by O'Curry, have been published in facsimile after great toil and labour, mostly by the exertions of Dr. Atkinson of Trinity College, an Englishman and a Protestant. Two centuries ago a Tipperary priest, a fugitive in the glen of Aherlow, with a price on his head, composed valuable and beautiful works—some ascetical, others historical. After that lapse of time, the most important of these has just been set forth, not by a priest, nor by an Irishman, nor by a Catholic, but by the same Dr. Atkinson. An immense body of medieval sermons, Catholic of course to the core, have been given to Celtic students, again by Dr. Atkinson. The calendar of saints composed by the monk Aengus has been printed by Whitley Stokes, an Irishman indeed, and of distinguished family, but not a Catholic. To him, too, has been left the honour of preparing the first edition of the famous

Irish life of St. Patrick, and of publishing the lives of the early saints from *The Book of Lismore*, writings which throw so much light on the faith and usages of the old Irish Church. We find a Protestant clergyman preparing a dictionary of the words used by the monks who in a Donegal convent arranged the old Irish annals. We see Max Nettlau, a German, preparing the text of our great epic, the *Táin Bó*. Dr. Kuno Meyer and others spend year studying the glowing, romantic, and poetic literature of ancient Erin, and of the early Christian period— a literature which carries us back thousands of years, giving us charming glimpses of old Celtic life. Even the organ of workers [i.e., scholars] in the old and middle Irish is published and supported at Paris; articles on Gaelic subjects are frequent in foreign periodicals, far more so than in papers written for Irishmen; and our standard grammars are drawn up by German scholars. Again, it is a German and Dr. Stokes who are prepared to print, at their own expense, that great collection of words collected by O'Curry, and thought to have been lost until recently discovered among the manuscripts in Clonliffe College.

It was, therefore, with a feeling of shame that a distinguished Irish-American noted, the other day,

“Two puzzling *facts* in recent Irish history. First, the interest that Protestants and foreigners take in the language and literature of that country; a language and a literature not only full of the spirit and teachings of Irish Catholicity, but which contain in themselves the seeds of the strongest and most aggressive Catholic tradition in the world. The other *fact*, no less puzzling, is the callous indifference or open hostility of the clergy and politicians to the native speech and literature.”

These are, indeed, puzzling facts, and bitter to think on; but we do not think on them, and so we avoid their bitterness. They are facts, certainly; for what are the great names among Celtic scholars of today? In addition to those already mentioned, those of Ascoli, Ebel, Gaidoz, de Jubainville, Nigra, Rhys, Thurneysen, Windisch, Zimmer, Zimmerman, occur to anyone interested in

Celtic research. All these are foreigners; and nearly all non-Catholics. On the other hand, if we search among Irish Catholics, we find no layman of eminence, no one able to fill the place of Sullivan or Hennessy. Dr. Joyce and Mr. Flannery of London appear but seldom. Then in the clergy, we shall meet with very few Irish scholars. There are eight or nine in the regular orders. The secular clergy are represented by Dr. McCarthy, and one or two others rarely *en evidence*, and by a handful of the younger priests, willing, it may be, and earnest, but without influences or opportunities. Now, many of the priests in Irish-speaking districts are fine speakers. It was often my privilege to listen to eloquent sermons in beautiful Gaelic, almost rivalling the language of Keating himself, and as often had I to regret that those speakers could not, through want of some acquaintance with the written language, contribute, as they were otherwise qualified to do, to our modern Gaelic literature, as our brother Celts, the Welsh clergy, do for their own prose and poetry.

It is in a humbler class of society that the lovers of our ancient speech are to be looked for— among the ranks of the school-teachers. Some of those devote their evenings, after their hard day's works, and their well-earned leisure time, to committing to writing, as well as they can teach themselves to do, some of that great body of folk-lore handed down orally from one generation to another, which is yet to be met with in those parts of Ireland where the vernacular is the language chiefly used. Better still, some, with the encouragement of their managers, qualify themselves to teach the native language to their pupils, with the happy result that the children speak, read, and write, both English and Irish. And, as the Bishop of Waterford noticed, the children who were thus taught their own language first, and through it learned other things, had a far better knowledge, of their religious duties especially, than the children sent to schools where Irish is not recognised as not worth teaching.

It must be confessed, however, that the number of Irish-teaching schools, although increasing, is very small. Out of the thousands of schools in which the children of the nation are educated, but forty-five encourage the national language; out of the tens of thousands of Irish boys and girls growing up in those schools, only eight hundred and twenty-six were examined last year in Irish. Only about three or four hundred people in Ireland have a respectable knowledge of the written language. In those days of education we are forced, then, to ask ourselves does education mean Anglicisation? Can education, which ought to be a development of the power of the mind, have anything in common with a system which neglects and practically scorns that great power of speaking a magnificent language which children have in the Irish-speaking counties— a power which our foreign friends, after years of study, are glad to obtain even imperfectly? Besides, it is not right to encourage a regard for national characteristics? If so, let me set down some of the many anomalies which present themselves to anyone, especially a foreigner, interested in the Irish language.

I. As to the position of the language in the elementary schools of the country, something has been already said. The school-teachers cannot be blamed so much as the system which forbids Irish to be taught to children until they have reached the fifth class, just when many other eligible extra subjects present themselves, and when youth, the proper time for learning a language, is to a great extent passed. Moreover, it insists that Irish, if taught at all, shall be taught outside schools hours. Now, who could expect that children would like to learn anything, when doing so would mean spending even a short time extra in school? And as for the teachers, they have no inducement to teach Irish when they can more easily present pupils for examination in other extra subjects which will procure equally great, or grater, results fees. And, in fact, it is not the slight fees held out by the National system that attract teachers to establish

Irish classes, so much as the prizes offered by a generous Protestant clergyman living in Wales, the Rev. E. Cleaver.

II. Looking round the higher schools and colleges we find the native language practically ignored. In all Ireland, only two hundred and seventy-four passed in Irish at the late Intermediate Examinations; of these two hundred and thirty-four came from the Christian Brothers' schools, leaving forty to all the seminaries and colleges of the country. In none of the Irish-speaking counties is the vernacular recognized in the local colleges, except in two. And at the same time French and German pupils are brought over to teach Irish boys and girls the intricacies of foreign languages. Granted that there are, as I believe there are, more today than there have been for the last two centuries who can write and read Irish, there are surely far more who can write and read French, German and Italian—languages almost useless after four years to the vast majority; while a magnificent language, which it ought to be our pride, as it is our duty, to foster and cultivate, is despised and allowed to die.

III. Few of us have been taught to look upon the loss of a language linked with the fate of this country for three thousand years, as a sudden calamity, or to regard its preservation as a national duty. And so even private students, with rare exceptions, see it decay with indifference. In the periodicals we read articles over Irish names, upon all subjects except history, language and literature of Ireland.

IV. It cannot be denied that the trusted political leaders of the people, and many priests in Irish-speaking districts, are unable or unwilling to speak to their audiences in the language the latter best understand, and which the speakers, if consistent, should encourage.

V. Foreign scholars— German, French, English, Danish—become enamoured of our language— peculiar in itself, valuable to the ethnologist and philologist, powerful, and delicate as a medium for conveying thought, sweet, and musical when

correctly spoken- and of our rich and varied literature. They come from Paris, Berlin, and Leipzig to spend their leisure time working in the Dublin libraries, or in Oxford, or the British Museum, studying dusty scrolls and envying us our better opportunities of seeing the manuscripts which are, they assure us, most precious, and which we in our ignorance look upon as waste paper. Naturally, they are surprised that the learned of the Island of Saints and Scholars, of which they have heard so much, should be blind to the treasures which lie at their own doors; and then, they say, where is the much-vaunted patriotism of Ireland, when they ignore the greatest proof of their nationhood?

And here is a question we may put ourselves. Granted that many of the richest and subtlest Irish Catholic minds are engrossed with professional studies and duties, with political questions, with those great social problems which now-a-days present themselves at every turn, or with special studies for which there may be a *special* aptitude that one should encourage; granted all this, do there not still remain many who intend to read or study *something*, and who can choose their subject? And if so, have not the native language and literature, a claim prior to that of foreign studies?

At the Welsh Eistedfood [cultural festival], held in Bangor a few weeks ago, Canon Farrar made use of the following eloquent words:-

“When a language has such a history and such a literature as the Welsh, it is a possession which men ought not readily to let die; and when God has created a nationality, and has surrounded it with rivers, with hills, and with the sea of its rampart and its girdle, the world is all the poorer when such nationality disappears.”

The words, coming from a distinguished English scholar, may be applied, and with tenfold force, in favour of our own language, literature and nationality. Are the thoughts of generations of Irishmen, enshrined in their own natural language, to be forgotten? or is Ireland, after three thousand

years, to throw away her ancient tongue, a bond which connects her with such a past history as hers is, and which would be for aye [forever] a proof of her distinct nationhood?

“But what use is the Irish? This wailing over the language is all sentimentality.”

This is a common objection. Well, it is sentimentality, and patriotism is but a sentiment also, and the two sentimentalities are closely connected. Yes, it is sentimentality to long for the revival of the national language, and to wish to see the national history and literature in their due place of honour; but it is true patriotism as well. Witness Archbishop MacHale, a great and consistent patriot, who during his life did all he could to encourage his people to use their native language, and who understood the translation into Irish of a considerable portion of Holy Scripture (the only authorized Catholic portion of Scripture we have), of Moore’s *National Melodies*, and even of half of the *Iliad*. Witness again Henry Flood, Grattan’s contemporary, who left his large fortune for the encouragement of the native tongue. Again, we can point to Petrie, Todd, Hudson, and to many others.

And yet it is not all sentimentality. Many a mind which might make a stir in Ireland is being left dark and uneducated in the Irish-speaking districts today, as the school inspectors can testify. And not a few people are left without religious instruction through want of one who will teach them in the language they understand. I could mention instances of this myself.

It surely stands to reason that the history, language, and literature of a country are sacred national trusts. It is evident, too, that much of the most interesting portion of Irish history, the earlier part, is as yet only a skeleton, which must be filled up from the study of early literature. Again, take our antiquities. To preserve our historical monuments, and to record their

connection with historic events, is a good work; but I cannot help thinking that much labour and energy are uselessly thrown away by the dry-as-dust school of antiquarians in maintaining baseless or doubtful theories, while the great national monuments, our language and literature, are neglected and allowed to perish. Not that the modern Gaelic is a ruin, by any means, in itself; it is sound and vigorous; but it is being sapped from without.

The language has no literature. This ridiculous objection has been met a hundred times, but I suppose it will continue to be brought forward as long as people neglect to inquire into the facts before pronouncing their judgement. No one who has read O'Curry's book, or De Jubainville's catalogue of our epic literature, or even O'Reilly's meagre list of writers, or who has seen those tomes in the Royal Irish Academy, which contains but an index to the one thousand four hundred volumes of manuscripts preserved there, can deny the extent, at least, of Gaelic literature. As for the character of this literature, we find Mr. Alfred Nutt, a recognised authority on ethnology and early history, record his opinion -

"That except the Hellenic, the Irish sagas are the only considerable mass of Aryan epic tradition. As evidence of the most archaic side of Aryan civilization, the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* [*Cattle Raid of Cooley*] is inferior only to the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*."

And we may be sure that there is something valuable in the literature, to study which foreign scholars come to the Dublin libraries, collate various manuscripts with much toil, and rough it in the coast villages and islands, as we see them do, in order to acquire a better insight into the structure of the spoken Gaelic, and so obtain a key to the difficulties of the older language. Those scholars, who are acquainted with all European literatures, assure us that the Irish medieval and earlier literature stands unrivalled, except by a portion of the classics.

One reason why so little is generally known of Irish literature is found in the fact that much of it is anonymous—copied by scribes from older manuscripts. There are some prominent names, however, but these are seldom heard of; whilst the names and works of even obscure English and Continental writers are familiar to Irish boys and girls. It is to be regretted that we have no handy manual of Irish literature, Dr. Windisch's article ("Keltische Sprachen") in the new German encyclopaedia would make an excellent little book, if translated and printed separately, as it gives in a small compass a reliable account of all the Celtic languages and literatures.

Upon the Irish Catholics the study of Irish literature has a special claim. We maintain that the faith we hold is identical with that taught by St. Patrick and his successors; that they were, as we are, Roman Catholic. It has been the aim of Protestant Irishmen to persuade their co-religionists that they alone hold the pure patrician teaching, now, as always uninfluenced by Rome. Strong articles by good writers have appeared quite recently in support of their contention, and, very probably this historic-religious question will be discussed warmly in a short time, when present burning questions shall have been settled. If this discussion were put upon us tomorrow, how many have we competent to support our claim by arguments drawn from our extensive ecclesiastical literature? Newman had experience of the value of such arguments, and no wonder he was so much interested in O'Curry's works. The study of Irish literature is but in its infancy; many things must occur in a literature so extensive and so thoroughly Catholic to throw light on the exact belief of the early Celtic Church. It has been shown that those who study the literature are practically non-Catholics, and such men might not see, or might be tempted to slur over, a point in favour of our position.

So that even if Irish were to perish as a spoken language, the literature would remain valuable from the pure literature point of view, and still more valuable from the Catholic

standpoint. And now we come to the question; Is the national language really fated to perish? According to the last census, eight hundred thousand people in Ireland can speak Irish; sixty thousand can speak no other language. More than two million in America can speak in Irish. And yet, if things do not change, it is certain that in another century the spoken language will have disappeared for ever. Things are changing. For the last five centuries the history of the language has been a history, first of active repression by penal laws, then of a more fatal and more shameful neglect, and until very recently, ill-concealed adversity to the language, on the part of influential Irishmen. Not one Irishman having control or influence in the education of the country has ever spoken or done anything worth mentioning for the national language. And when the Irish has lived through all this, when better days are dawning, public opinion becoming more and more national, and prominent Irishmen beginning to take an active interest in the old tongue, have we not every reason to hope and to look forward to its revival, to some extent, at least? Already it is creeping into the schools, if not into the colleges. No one is found to disparage it, as it used to be disparaged a few years ago; and even this is something. A century since, the Welsh was in as bad a state as our language is in at present, until by the exertions of a few patriotic clergymen, public opinion was aroused in its favour. The result is, that Welsh is now a popular, say, a fashionable language, as is evidenced from the fact that at the last Eisteddfod the Bishop of Bangor opened the proceedings by reciting a Welsh ode composed by himself for the occasion, and that other eminent Welshmen, lay and clerical, recited various compositions in prose and poetry. I wonder shall we ever see the like in Ireland. Another result is that the children are taught the two languages concurrently; the schoolbooks have Welsh and English on opposite pages, and the children know English better than those in the neighbouring English schools. They have twenty-four

newspapers – daily, weekly, and monthly, and a vigorous, living and racy literature.

This, too, is what those interested in Irish aim at. It is not to banish English– that would be, first of all, impossible, and also absurd. Listen, again, to the words of Canon Farrar: –

“Neither I, nor any man in his senses, dream for a moment of doing anything to hinder the universal prevalence of English. But the prevalence of English is something very different from the exclusive dominance of it. We wish that every child should speak English perfectly, and should also speak...its native language perfectly.”

That this state of education is a possible one is proved by its success in Wales and in other countries. That it is desirable is evident, if the only aim of education be not to make us more English than the English themselves. It is clear, too, that if the language is to be saved, immediate steps must be resolutely taken by those who have control of educational establishments of all kinds.

E. GROWNEY.