

THE POPULARISATION OF GAELIC.

By William Rooney.

Article assumedly written in the journal of the Celtic Literary Society, *An Seanachuidhe*, circa 1898. Republished in *Sinn Féin*, January 11, 1913.

We print this week a hitherto unpublished article by William Rooney on the Popularising of the Language Movement. It was written fifteen years in connection with the first Oireachtas, and it will be noticed that in many important points the recommendations of Rooney who knew the country and its people more thoroughly and intimately than any other man connected with the foundation of the Gaelic League still remain – after fifteen years – uncarried out and with little or no attempt being made to have them carried into effect by the League of which he was one of the founders, and during its lifetime its chief brain, stoutest champion, and best worker. It is surely time, after seven years of the standstill policy, that they should be given effect to now.

The popularising of a matter may mean two things – it may mean the growth of an academic appreciation of the merits of a matter, - the creation of an abstract interest in it; or it may mean that practical acceptance of its worth which goes the distance of mastering its intricacies for the purpose of permanent use. Many things can be made popular, many things can be made useful; many both, and the creation of that popularity which would take the latter form is, I take it, the object of the present Gaelic movement. To prove its uses is to go far towards popularising it, for the acknowledgment of its practical benefits will dispose of the contentions of those who lead the superficial. Most of our educated, or so-called educated, classes, do not study a matter for themselves – they study its critics, base their arguments on their assumptions and quote hypotheses as established facts. If we can demolish the theories they depend upon, if we can show their authorities to be worthless, if we can show their opinions to be based principally upon ignorance and prejudice, we shall have gone

some distance towards popularising our tongue, for we shall have destroyed the source of the indifference of our commercial, professional and artisan classes.

That the language can never become a power unless its existence in the present haunts be strengthened, and secured is beyond dispute. It is not within the region of this article to consider the terrible decline shown by each succeeding Census in the number of Gaelic speakers. Whether it has at all kept pace with the decrease in our population is equally outside our province. What we have got to recognise is that for all practical purposes the Shannon, the Comeragh Mountains, Kerry, West Cork, and Donegal form the limits beyond which there is little Gaelic-speaking population. This, of course, takes no account of the isolated Irish-speaking districts in other counties, or of the various circles in cities and towns throughout the land where Gaelic is in high esteem, well understood and more or less generally spoken. These latter we shall return to again, for the moment let us consider these Gaelic-speaking places; the possibility of making them permanently so, and the means that might be adopted. These speakers number considerably over half a million, and if they and their children be taught to read and write in Gaelic, even if the spoken language never spread to other parts of the land, its existence would be as secure as that of our island itself. To find the means of doing so we should remember what it is that, has contributed in the greatest degree to banish the language from the plains of Leinster, Ulster and Munster, and endeavour to discover if that very means cannot be used in the opposite direction. The veriest tyro in the subject knows the 'National' schools have been the grave of the language. These schools, unfortunately, have penetrated everywhere, carrying with them and practically forcing on the people the idiom and ideas of the stranger. It is necessary that our people should be educated, and it should be our care that they are. We must prove that a system which forces foreign thought on children's minds is absurd; we must show that a master incapable of conveying instruction in the everyday accents of the student might as well demonstrate in Greek. We must make it plain that the texts which run in the same lines are equally useless. Are we able to do this? Most certainly. A very slight examination will show

that though most people even in the Irish districts understand English, the vast majority of them have but the most meagre command of it in conversation. They can not read in it even to their own satisfaction, they cannot consequently write in it, and to all intents and purposes are, as far as English is concerned, - utterly illiterate. This is not their fault; their circumstances have not allowed them to go beyond elementary rules, which would suffice if given in their own tongue, but which are utterly inadequate to even a moderate comprehension of another language. To substitute the teaching in their own tongue for the present mode should form a first task with us. If the language is to be preserved it must be taught as a living tongue from the first class upwards in all the schools in the Gaelic districts. To do this it will be necessary to have: -

- (1) Irish Chairs in the various Teachers' Training Colleges.
- (2) Teachers with a command of vernacular Irish.
- (3) Compulsory teaching of Gaelic in all existing Irish-speaking districts as *the* language of the district.
- (4) Gaelic primers and texts on the plan of any modern school-book in other languages.

This is, perhaps, rather a revolutionary programme; yet it is a necessary and essential reform *if Irish is to remain spoken in Ireland*. That the home has great influence in inculcating esteem and pride in the old tongue is undoubtedly true; but the exigencies of our position give scant room for sentiment; the average father and mother in Ireland nowadays has little time to devote to the teaching of their children to read and write either Irish or English. By making the study of Irish compulsory in the schools we do not weaken the home influence; we rather strengthen it than otherwise. We give the parent an interest in the perpetuation of the language of his childhood, we make the pupil retentive of the accents of his household. We have a continuity of instruction, for the atmosphere of thought would remain the same in school or at home. At present the unfortunate child has to burden his brain with a jargon at school, and to resume his natural mode of expression from the moment three o'clock strikes. This latter of course in the purely Irish-speaking districts; in the places where

Gaelic is the general tongue of the people between twenty and fifty years of age, matters are even better. One generation does not suffice to eradicate national thought; the means of expression may be foreign, but the manner being native, the result is a barbarous provincialism which is neither one thing nor the other. To restore the natural vehicle of thought, to give the peasant a full form of expression, we must go back to the language in which he thinks and to do that he must be taught to read and write in that vehicle of thought in school. It is undoubtedly a fact, notwithstanding many things to the contrary, that our people are intensely patriotic; but patriotism has to a very large extent to take a second place when the cares of life and the securing of a living have got to be considered. For all practical purposes, outside of actual daily labour, our people have but little time and less money. Their sympathy is with all national undertakings, but they possess not that sufficiency of means or time to allow them, generally, to take up the mastering of a language in the few leisure hours they can snatch from busy lives. All they can do is to sympathise, influence, and to a very slight degree financially support a movement such as ours. To their children we must look, then, for the practical results which shall secure the language to their posterity, and we must give the fathers and mothers of those children reason for supporting us. Appeals to the culture and learning locked up in untranslated manuscripts can influence them little, and will tend but to keep the question in an academic area – an advanced national one, no doubt – but still one that can appeal only to scholars and to antiquaries. We must give the people other reasons. We must show them that the Irish nation was practically independent until English came into use in the provincial towns. We must teach them that the general prevalence of Irish thought and Irish ideas means the eventual complete freedom of Ireland. *We must make it known that the Irish peasantry were a cultured and widely-informed people till they began to speak English.* We must force on their minds the facts that all the memories of their fathers and mothers, all the stories, songs, thoughts, traditions and beliefs of their neighbourhood must perish and pass for ever out of their minds if they allow Gaelic to become extinct. We must call on them by the sacred dead sleeping in the silent churchyards, by the lonely cairns and

cromleacs on hill and in glen to refuse to allow those memories stretching back beyond the ken of history to become forgotten. We must show them that the ideas of the stranger, his stories, his songs, and his ambitions, are entirely antagonistic to all they have known and believed. That his very nature is the opposite of theirs, and that his own firm and abiding belief is that all weaker peoples must subordinate their tongue and thoughts, their hopes, their history and their future to him. We must waken their manhood; we must stir their blood, we must call into action all their feelings whether of hate or love, for this question has got to be fought out by all means and at all times. Every weapon is used against us; we must protect ourselves by any and every means we may. These are some of the forces we should call into action to bring the compulsory teaching of Irish to the forefront. If the people are determined to have it taught, they shall succeed. This, of course, will mean agitation – nor should we fear to engage in it because many whom we have regarded as our friends or the friends of Ireland stand in the way of its realisation. It is a consummation, perhaps, far off, but still eminently possible and essentially necessary. Matters nearer hand, easier of attainment, and contributory towards it, would be the demanding of the use of Gaelic by railway companies, public boards and newspapers, circulating in the Irish-speaking districts. Thus, as in Wales, the railway stations in Connemara, Mayo, Donegal, West Cork, Kerry, and elsewhere where the tongue is general should have their names printed in the two languages. The station-masters should be Irish speakers, the officers of the various public institutions should be acquainted with Irish, and the newspapers could well afford a column or two of the week's news in Irish.

A little thought will show how comparatively easy of attainment those matters are, the traders using a railway can certainly influence it. That they are national we need not doubt; that they are sufficiently so to study Irish we may question; that they have quite enough nationality notwithstanding to lend us their support in forcing this matter, the naming of the stations in Irish, let us at least hope. Similarly, the appointment of the officers of the various unions, etc., is more or less in their hands, and the same influence would thus work

both points. The newspapers are not quite so wholly under their control, still no journalist, with any pretensions to the name of businessman, can afford or will think of treating with contempt any well-expressed wish of his patrons.

There is one other auxiliary which ought not to be neglected; the local ballads and songs should be printed in ballad-sheets and circulated amongst the itinerant minstrels who frequent fair and market, thus at least giving them greater chance of becoming popular than by merely collecting them from the lips of the peasantry and reading them to a sympathetic coterie in Belfast, Cork, or Dublin. This printing and circulating of them would be practical evidence to the peasant of their value, and make him more careful of anything of a similar nature that might have come down to him. In the districts where Irish was the tongue of the last generation these ballads might be accompanied by free renderings into English, as was the fashion half a century or more since.

Thus far the Gaelic districts. As the National school should be one of our strongest arms for the present there, so in the cities and towns the Intermediate schools and Colleges can be made of supreme importance. This, of course, will also mean agitation, perhaps long, ceaseless, and severe, but the end is worth the trouble. At present Irish, or as it is somewhat ambiguously labelled, 'Celtic,' gets 600 marks in the Senior, Middle, and Junior Grades, and 500 in the Preparatory. French and German get 700 each; English, Latin, and Greek 1,200 respectively. Now, there is no reason on earth why Irish should not be put on a level with these three latter. It is perhaps a debatable subject whether Irish literature have had as much effect on modern literature as either Greek or Latin; whether as much of what we vaguely call 'culture' is possible from its study; but there can be little doubt that on either head it is equal to English. Granting that Irish possesses but a scant modern literature, still there exists sufficient to serve as models for composition, the real end of the study of letters. Besides, there exists no such modern literature either in Greek or Latin, and yet the fact does not militate against them. The non-existence of popular, or in fact any editions of the bulk of this native writing is no comment, and ought not to be a hindrance to the

elevation of Irish into the front ranks, for a demand for the books will readily create a supply of them. But if the quality or quantity of Gaelic be deemed insufficient, a part of the programme could be given to Irish history, Anglo-Irish literature, that is, the writings of men like Ferguson, Callanan, Walsh, Mangan, the Joyces, etc., and to an oral knowledge of the tongue. The 1,200 marks might be divided: -

Gaelic Composition	200
Irish Grammar	200
An Irish Author	150
Irish History	200
Anglo-Irish Literature (some fixed book)	100
Oral Text (reading in Irish, selected by Examiner, and Conversation)	850
TOTAL	1,200

Of course, the Irish history could be arranged in periods of two or three hundred years, but the early history ought to be only taught to senior students, for it could not be perfectly appreciated by the younger.

This, like the programme outlined earlier, is more or less revolutionary; but the oral test is imperative, if the teachings of Irish in the towns and cities is to be anything more than a means of securing results fees. This method of examination would be undoubtedly a great departure from the present style, and necessitate a large increase in the number of examiners, but as the examination would be only for one day and nothing more than the methods at present pursued by the National Board in the examination of candidates for teachers' certificates, it is perhaps not too practical or radical for the consideration of the Commissioners of Intermediate Education. The effect this increasing of marks would have need not be specified. When we consider that the present Irish movement has raised the number of candidates in Gaelic almost 300 per cent, we may surmise the result the doubling of the marks would have, even amongst those who might never be amongst the competitors. It is not our province to give any reasons for this increasing, they will become manifest to anyone who thinks on the subject; and the ordinary individual will possibly concur that the fact of the language being the tongue of the nation ought alone be sufficient reason for its place in the forefront of Intermediate

subjects. In this domain, also, the parents of the children whom we may not expect to learn Gaelic themselves, can effectually assist us. The Chief Secretary for Ireland alleged last year that the decreasing of the marks in the Preparatory Grade had called forth no protest from the managers of the schools interested. Every parent can press these managers, or at least influence them, and there is sufficient patriotism amongst our citizens and townsmen to enlist them to our side if they are assured they can be of any assistance. Let every father *demand* that his child shall be taught *Irish* before French, German, Italian, or Spanish, and the managers will readily find it their interest to aid us in demanding the placing of Gaelic beside Greek, Latin, and English. The local papers and national organisations can also assist materially the growth and strength of this demand, and the former keep the student's knowledge always green by the publication of stories or poetry in the language. Many journals have recognised their duty in this respect, but there exist plenty still which could do much work in this direction, and which ought to be induced to see their way to it.

There remains still to be considered the provincial districts where Irish has not been spoken for some considerable time. For these perhaps the best thing to be done would be the facilitating of the teaching of the tongue in the National Schools. We cannot make its learning compulsory in those places, for no useful purpose could be served by such a proceeding – but we can and should make its acquirement easier of accomplishing than at present. The teacher should be given increased facilities, he should be enabled to teach it during school hours and to all grades, and he should have some recompense for his labour. This latter the Board very possibly will not give, but our men and women at home and abroad may not impossibly be ready to subscribe to a fund that shall serve that purpose. The nation which voluntarily has placed an Irish chair in a foreign University will scarcely refuse to subsidise their brothers at home who desire to do the work of an Irish professor though in a humbler fashion. For these places the best encouragement would be the example of the large towns and cities, whose esteem of Gaelic eventually would rouse the surrounding neighbourhoods to something like interest in the matter.

So far much of what might be done lies, of course, rather in the region of possibility than probability, rather by the people than of them; but a great factor of influence remains to them, that is example. If the people who have recognised the value of Gaelic will but use it on all possible occasions, if they will urge its use and study on friends of theirs in walks similar to their own; if they will keep the needs of its existence persistently before the readers of the daily and weekly Press, they must, as they have, continue to create interest, and eventually enthusiasm, for the language. The Oireachtas must have a wide effect, for the mere fact of an assemblage in Dublin for the sole reason of awarding prizes for *new* work in Irish is sufficient to attract the attention even of the most listless peasant. Hitherto we have been working too academically; the work has looked well enough on paper – but the Gaelic thinker in the Hills of Connemara, on the Mayo moors, in far off Donegal, or amid the Kerry mountains, has paid but little attention to us. We have been asking him to preserve the tongue without offering him any incentive to do so. But now matters are different – he is given something to work for, something to look forward to. He is asked to assist in continuing the line of Irish singers and writers; he is asked to sing for Ireland, and though the actual awards may be slight, he has the possibility of having his name ring in every corner of the land – a matter that will awaken all the pride and energy within him. The poet, however humble, is not without his power in Ireland yet, and if we once wake the local bards to interest in the Oireachtas we shall soon have the audience who look up to them with us also. If the people once become convinced that the possession of folk tales, proverbs, songs or riddles gives their owner increased interest in the eyes of the educated, then we need not fear the future. Pending the permanency which the teaching of Irish in the schools would establish we should call, as I have said, every means in our power to the aid of the movement. Our National Corporators in all the towns should secure that the names of the leading streets, at least, be set forth in Irish as well as English. Letters going to Irish districts should be addressed in Irish only, and the authorities forced to provide an interpreter in the General Post Office, and Irish-speaking postmasters in the various post towns. Irish sermons should be

delivered monthly in certain of the churches, and the papers should familiarise their readers with the letters by having their titles printed in Gaelic type. Gaelic songs ought to be put on as many concert programmes as possible, and the members of the various National Societies accustom themselves to address each other by their Gaelic names alone. The titles of all such societies should be translated and the Gaelic name popularised amongst the public, and the positions held by their various officers also rendered into Irish and known thereby. These latter, of course, are minor matters, but they would make the organisations national in more than object and intention.

Finally there is a matter which ought not to be neglected, that is *the providing of advanced books for the study of the language*. At present, outside of Canon Bourke's 'Easy Lessons' there is no book to bring a student beyond the most primary study, and that has long since been out of print. We have, of course, Joyce's 'Grammar,' and, let us hope, soon shall have in permanent form the fourth book of the Gaelic League Lessons. But a phrase book and a series of Easy Reading Lessons are urgently needed and ought not to be delayed. The enthusiasm of teachers has preserved many scholars to the tongue, who might otherwise have drifted back into indifference after finishing the third book of the Society for the Preservation. For the daily-increasing band of *Gaedhilgeoiri* these two books must be had if we desire to give them more than a smattering.

Thus, in the opinion of the writer, might the old tongue of the Gaedheal be still fostered in the haunts sacred to its accents; thus might it grow in esteem and use in every corner of Éire, and thus to future ages it might be handed down undimmed and unaffected to link us to the past and preserve the continuity of nationhood. Let it go forth amongst our people that the reality of Independence, Independence in thought and tongue, manner, idea and tradition, as well as independence of action, are only possible from its perpetuation. Let us not be West British in tongue while fondly imagining ourselves Irish at heart. The Irishman, however we may deplore it, is still only a 'Britisher' to the ordinary foreigner. Till he can utter the instincts of his mind in the language of his fathers he must remain so. Let us teach our people that Gaeldom means individuality, respect, and eventually

complete redemption from all the shackles of the stranger. Convince them of those facts and the issue of our labour, though perhaps delayed, will not be altogether uncertain.