

THE CASE FOR IRISH.

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Certain friendly discussions in which we have recently been engaged suggest the fact that very many, not merely of those who would describe themselves simply as 'sympathisers' with the language movement, but of those who fully accept the Gaelic League's programme and are actual workers within the organisation, have nevertheless no adequate, accurate, coherent idea of the philosophy of the movement. They have faith, but they are either unable to attempt a justification of their faith, or else seek to justify it by arguments which are untenable. It may be asked, 'What matter? Why bother about a man's theories if in practice he is sound?' We answer: If people who in practice are sound, whilst hazy in their theories, were content to work ahead and hold their tongues, we should be the last to complain; but when we find well-meaning but loosely-thinking and ill-informed Gaelic Leaguers attempting to justify the movement by arguments which no sane thinker could endorse, and by propositions which assert either too little or too much, it becomes desirable that there should be a clear statement of what the League does really hold, and as to why exactly it holds it.

In our attempt to offer such a statement we may inadvertently hurt the feelings of certain readers, for we shall have incidentally to point out that propositions which they have been in the habit of maintaining on Gaelic League platforms, and in disputations public and private, are either untenable or irrelevant, perhaps both. It is better, however, that such things should be pointed out here than that the task should be left to ruder and less sympathetic critics.

As an instance of the sort of 'argument' on behalf of the language movement which we would deprecate, we may refer to the indiscriminate abuse of English as 'an unmelodious jargon,' 'a mere conglomeration of other tongues,' 'a worn-out garment,' and so on, which we frequently hear. Such 'arguments' may or may not be

tenable, but they are irrelevant. The English language is not *our* language; in stating that fact we have stated our whole case against it.

On the other hand, some Gaelic Leaguers have allowed shallow sneerers to ridicule them out of the employment of an argument which is really the very argument of arguments on which the whole Gaelic League case rests,—we mean the argument summed up in the phrase, ‘Teanga Phádraic.’ This is not a mere catch-cry; but a genuine and legitimate argument; for what is but a compendious statement of the proposition that Irish is the language of our traditions? In the phrase, ‘Pádraic’ stands, as he does in the mind of every Irish speaker, as the embodiment of the whole Gaelic past, the prototype of native civilisation. ‘*Ó aimsir Phádraic*’ is the Irish speaker’s equivalent to ‘immemorial antiquity’; the phrase to him does not connote merely the fourteen hundred odd years which have elapsed since Patrick came on his mission ‘ad Scotos credentes in Christum,’—it connotes the whole past of the Gaelic race ever since there was a Gaelic race.

From this reference to an argument which, as we say, summarises the whole Gaelic League case, we naturally pass to a more explicit statement of that case. The case is simply this, that Irish is the language of Ireland. It is because it is the language of Ireland, and not because it happens to be a rich and beautiful language, a strong and flexible language, a subtle and delicate language, that we would fain preserve it. If it were a sterile and unlovely speech, weak and unadaptable, rigid and colourless, it would equally be our duty to preserve it, for it is ours, it is the speech we have ourselves fashioned from our inner consciousness for the purpose of expressing our thought, and to disown it, for that it were unlovely, would be to disown ourselves. The fact that Irish is really one of the most wondrous instruments of speech ever moulded by the minds and vocal organs of men, that its past has been glorious, that it contains the seeds of an equally glorious future, are, of course, powerful subsidiary arguments, but they are insignificant when compared with the great central argument that Irish is the language of Ireland. On that argument the Gaelic League stakes its case.

But what exactly does the statement ‘Irish is the language of Ireland’ imply? Does it imply merely that Irish is the language which,

up to a short time ago, Ireland was in the habit of employing for the transaction of her daily business, just as she employed spades and ploughs and rakes and spinning wheels and looms, that it was a mere implement made use of by Ireland,—does it mean only this, and nothing more? Obviously, it means vastly more, else it were no argument. This leads us to the threshold of a large subject—what is a national language, and what its functions?—which will occupy us for the next few weeks. In dealing with the problem we shall be going over ground which has been well trodden before, but which is yet none too familiar to the average Gaelic Leaguer who has occasion to speak or write.