

# LANGUAGE AND ECONOMICS.

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Ṗocla Ṗnóca Δsur Δ ṖCoṖa Cainte. By T. Concannon. Dublin: The Gaelic League. Price 3d.

When our Internationalists were appealing for the support of the Irish people for their proposed exhibition of foreign goods, a friend placed in my hands a book in English published in Japan as a guide to the fifth Japanese National Exhibition which was held last year in the city of Osaka. My friend's object was to show me that the Japanese, the most progressive nation of our times in commerce and industry, had deliberately and against the advice of their own special commissioners rejected the idea of international exhibitions and adopted instead the policy of holding a series of national exhibitions. But the book conveyed an additional lesson. It told a great part of the modern industrial history of Japan. It showed that up to the accession of the present emperor, Japan was a stranger to the industrial development of western countries. It showed, and this is the point that now concerns us, that within the last thirty years or so the Japanese have built up, chiefly from the resources of their own language and only to a slight extent by the help of other languages, a complete vocabulary of industry and commerce. I possess another publication showing that the same has been done in recent years in the Czech language. Why can it not be done in Irish?

Possibly some of us who look most to the literary side, and others who look most to the domestic side of a language, may not think a business vocabulary to be a pressing need. But all one-sided views are deceptive. Looking back through history, we cannot but be impressed by observing how one language has spread and another has faded away, and we cannot avoid looking for the principles that underlie these changes. A French writer has solved the question by laying down the law that the language of a higher civilisation always tends to drive out the language of a lower civilisation. But this law is

not borne out by the facts. The Normans, for example, failed to supplant the English language, while the Latins drove the Greek language out of Southern Italy and Sicily. It is evident that some sounder explanation is required.

In different ages and countries, the main business in people's minds is of different kinds. At one time it is affairs of state, government, politics and municipal institutions. At another time it is religion. At another time it is commerce. Under the Roman Empire, political affairs were the all-absorbing concern. Wherever the eagles of Caesar made good their ground, all eyes were riveted on the majestic scheme of Roman administration. And the language of Roman administration began forthwith to supplant the languages of the conquered. When Columcille led the vanguard of Christianity into Scotland, he found the Pictish language in occupation. In that age and place the spread of religion was the great concern before all men's eyes. Bye and bye the Pictish language disappeared and the language of the Irish monks took its place. When in the 18<sup>th</sup> century England took the lead in the world of industry and commerce, and the development of industry and commerce became the great thought of peoples, the Irish language began rapidly to give way. From these and other facts it may be inferred that it is not the language of all round civilisation that tends to wipe out rivals in touch with it, but the language which for the time being is best equipped with regard to the predominant human concern of the time and locality.

The age we live in is still predominately an economic age, an age of commerce and industry. It is far more so than in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and its economic character is growing, not decreasing. The policy of the statesman is ever more and more guided by the aims of the merchant and the manufacturer. Countries that are economically backward feel the pressure of this economic spirit even more than countries that are in the forefront of trade, just as the least Anglicised parts of Ireland exhibit the pressure of Anglicisation in the highest degree, and for a like reason. Ireland has been living for some time in a fever of economics. The language, therefore, in which economic matters are discussed is the language that will be listened to. Produce the finest literature in the world in the Irish language, and the Irish

people will, in their present frame of mind, turn from it to discuss rents, creameries, industries, in whatever language they find them discussed in, provided they are in touch with that language.

For this reason, Irish writers ought to study and write about the economic concerns of Ireland. If they write clearly, thoughtfully, and to the point, they need not have the least fear that people will get tired of them—not till the economic fever gives place to some more pressing concern. At present we are in the middle of an economic discussion on the worship of the Almighty, and the question of the day is what kind of religion pays the best dividend.

For the same reason, we may offer a welcome and twenty to the little mercantile dictionary in Irish by Tomas Bán. Tomas takes no narrow view of business. A refreshing sequence to an invoice for grass-seed and mackerel is ‘dearest and only treasure,’ ‘you are all the world to me.’ But on the whole his vocabulary is just as dry and methodical as it ought to be. It would be idle to discuss all his terms on the grounds of abstract fitness. If we consider any language as spoken, we shall find that many of the commonest technical words are from a purist’s standpoint nothing short of ridiculous. The word that fits the sense may not meet the sense of fitness. The proof of a pudding is in the eating, and the proof of mercantile terms is in the use of them. This booklet contains many ingenious and well-considered terms, and a few that appear a trifle cranky. But their crankiness would soon disappear if we were in the habit of reading them in our interesting correspondence with ‘sundry creditors.’ The word ‘ledger’ means a light book, but the ledgers that some of us have to deal with are not light in any sense.

In short, this little book, price threepence, is a blossom that promises rich fruit. It will encourage people to make a freer use of Irish in their economic affairs, and that is just what is wanted.

eóin mac néill.