

THE IRISH LANGUAGE—THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE OF IRELAND.

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When we consider the circumscribed area in which Irish is a vernacular speech, and the slight hold it has on the public bodies of the country, and how sadly it is neglected by the State and by State institutions, it requires some courage, some confidence in our cause, to claim for that language the distinction of being the national language of Ireland. Nevertheless it is a claim whose justice it is impossible to deny. As the old Cyclopiian and Pelasgic structures represent the ancient civilization of the race of people that we now call the historic Irish, as the ancient and ruined shrines and crosses and carved windows represent the form of worship that became national in Ireland, and held its ground in the teeth of State establishments, of persecution, of the zealous fostering of a rich rival; as the Irish peasant, despised and crushed and ostracised, as he has been for centuries, represents to-day the historic Irish race, so the Irish language, crushed, broken, trampled on, jeered at in the streets, scarcely finding a congenial home under the roof tree of the poorest fisherman of Connemara or Iveragh, is the only language that represents human thought as it has grown and developed in the minds of the Irish race. It is the only language that can express in full the passionate yearnings for what is true and beautiful, the ardent and enthusiastic spirit, the live wit, the melting pathos, the keen satire that characterize our old-world people; it is the only language in which their native fervour can have full play, in which full justice can be done to their imaginative and artistic instincts; it is the only language that deserves to be styled the national language of Ireland. A national language must not be a thing of yesterday; it is the language that has moulded

the thought and expressed the aspirations of a nation for a long period of time; it is the language that has enshrined itself in a nation's memory, and that is indissolubly linked with its traditions; it is the language of its most thrilling songs, of its wisest precepts, of its warmest affection, of its most glowing ardour; it has come down the slope of time laden with many a wise saying, with many a tuneful lay, rich with thrilling memories of the battle field and the chase, glowing like a furnace with the fire of a nation's enthusiasm. The simplest words in such a language that the infant learns at its mother's knee have an influence in moulding its character that all the learning of the schools could not give. If it disappear, its place cannot be supplied even by the most renowned language in the world. If Irish were to be wiped out to-morrow as a living speech, English could not supply its place as our national language. We should have no national language in any important sense of the word.

Up to the opening years of the eighteenth century, English had made little headway in Ireland, there was practically no literature in English, either written by Irishmen or circulating in any very considerable portion of this island. The Irish language and Irish literature were everywhere; they had captured the minds and the imaginations of the people. During the eighteenth century the English colony in Ireland, and the native Irish who were brought up to English, cultivated the English language to such good purpose that they outshone their English rivals during the same period in the excellence of their literary productions. Men like Goldsmith, Parnell, Swift, Burke, and Sheridan, have shed lasting glory both on the country of their birth and on English letters. Nevertheless, writers such as these, with all their excellences, did not express the heart and mind of the historic Irish race. Their works have, undoubtedly, an Irish flavour, but their souls did not drink in Irish traditional lore; they had, in a manner, cut themselves adrift from the historic current of Irish life. They spoke for the Pale and for the Ascendancy, for the strengthening and consolidating of British power, for the glory of the British flag. The traditions they served to perpetuate were English or Anglo-Irish, rather than Irish traditions. The masses of the people toiled on in slavery, in hardship, in poverty, leading their own

traditional lives and giving vent to their emotions in their old-world language. They suffered a fiendish persecution, their religion was banned, and they were subjected to inhuman civil disabilities. The more gifted among them gave vent to their feelings in their own way. The true expression of Irish feeling during these years of pain and sorrow is to be found not in the pages of Swift or Parnell, of Burke or Sheridan, but in the burning lines of O'Rahilly, MacDonnell, and Eoghan Ruadh. Their poetry, and such poetry as theirs, and that poetry alone, is the true Irish literature of that period. The language in which they gave vent to their emotions, and that language alone, was at that age the national language of Ireland. The historian of the painful era of persecution that succeeded the Revolution, if he wishes to reach the true inwardness of Irish feeling, will study these poems rather than the speeches of Burke, or the pamphlets of Swift.

From the dawn of the nineteenth century onward, the Irish language was steadily starved out, and its place taken by English. The great famine and the subsequent stream of emigration that set in across the Atlantic, helped to root the language of the stranger in the greater portion of the island. English monopolised the schools and all the public offices, it took hold of the press, and the pulpit, and forced its way into the homesteads in the most distant and inaccessible regions. One might have thought that English literature would thrive and prosper with the growth and extension of the English language. But, no. From the early years of the nineteenth century onward, the quality of English literature in England steadily declined, and has been declining to this hour. Anglo-Irish literature during the same period, in so far as it was an imitation literature, declined no less. In so far as it drew its inspirations from Irish traditions it attained a certain mediocrity; but, on the whole, the literature written in English by Irishmen during the nineteenth century does not reach a high level, and never succeeded in capturing the imagination or enlisting the sympathy of the bulk of the people. I have no desire to undervalue the poetry of Moore, or Mangan, or Ferguson, or the Young Ireland writers. I wish to do full justice to the oratorical genius of Grattan, Shiel, O'Connell, and Plunkett. I appreciate, too, as highly as any man, the novels of Banim, of Lever, and of Carleton. But after full justice is

meted out to the literary power of these great Irishmen, it must be admitted that Anglo-Irish literature in the nineteenth century has not struck deep roots, has failed to touch the heart of the nation, has failed to express the true undertones of Irish emotion, has failed to touch the chords whose vibrations reach the heart of the nation.

English literature in Ireland during the past century has been a failure, it has left a craving and a void in the national mind. Whatever successes it has obtained are derivable from the ancient language and literature of Erin rather than from its imitation of English models. At the present moment the prospect is no brighter. The English language is overrun with the weeds of triteness and vulgarity. Its vocabulary is being daily increased in all directions. Science, art, history, economies, industries, athletics, horse racing, gambling, and the rest are claiming to be heard. The quality of poetry has declined; the quality of the drama has declined. Prose in its richest domains has declined; the novel, a plant of recent growth, has lost its strength and flavour and lives on sensation, pruriency or mawkishness. I see little prospect of improvement for English literature in Ireland. The traditional English drama is played out. Few now cultivate English poetry, and fewer still with any semblance of success. English oratory is almost unknown amongst us. Perhaps the bar and the pulpit were never so sterile in great orators as at this moment. The novel in Ireland is well nigh extinct. There is little of characteristic, racy prose to be had. Large sums are expended on primary and secondary education, all in English, but neither system has produced votaries of the Muses, or even respectable worshippers at humbler shrines. The voice of the muse of history is hushed by the death of Lecky. Whether educated or illiterate, the common people have lost their wit, their vivacity, their humour, to a large extent; these qualities do not seem capable of full infusion into the English language. The countryman, whose father and grandfather revelled in the Irish language, composed extempore verses, and flashed off sprightly repartees in that language, now speaks only English, and has lost his vigour of mind. His most inspiring lays are, mayhap, the refuse of a foreign music hall; the literature that delights him is the weekly serial that comes across the Channel. There has been in his case a sudden snapping of traditional

life; a sudden chasm has been created, in which the manliness and simplicity of our ancestors have gone down. A darkening of the understanding, a weakness of the will have come upon us, clouded our souls, blunted our energies, and left this generation incapable of the vigorous and simple thought of which their ancestors could boast. A language then, which has become so widespread in the country, which has been fostered with such care, which has had a monopoly of education, but which has, nevertheless, produced fruit so meagre, or lapsed into barrenness so wholesale, has not made good its claim to be considered the national language, as long as her more ancient rival is alive and strong enough to dispute the title.

Alive, certainly, that rival is, though suffering from starvation and confinement. The Irish language is some sixty or seventy years behindhand considered as a cultivated living speech. The area in which it is used is reduced to small dimensions; nevertheless, as a medium of literary expression, it has several advantages over its rival. It has never been vulgarized, it possesses very little slang, its vocabulary is rich and copious in words and turns of phrase that express the emotions of the soul, its allusions are mainly to the deeds performed in the heroic ages of Irish history, it has been tuned to exquisite melody by long ages of poetic cultivation. The pressman, the reviewer, the sketchy writer, the penny-a-liner, have not yet laid unholy hands upon it. It is the language of simple, direct thought, of domestic affection, of sincerity; of loyalty, of faith; it is the language of pathos, of human sympathy, of 'fierce wars and faithful love.' It is the language of simple, earnest devotion, of the deep-seated virtues of a gifted race; it is the language of courage and heroism, of wit and humour. The areas over which it is spoken represent the Irish race in their natural development, unspoiled by a corrupting and imported civilization. The people in these districts have passed through the Red Sea of bitter persecution; they have been long deprived of the benefits of education; they have their faults and weaknesses, but they retain unspoiled all the best qualities of the traditional Irish race, and these qualities find their most natural expression in their native language. In proportion as that language is cultivated, and its empire extended, will these qualities take deeper root and exercise wider influence, and produce more

lasting effects that will tend to the development of Irish ideals and Irish character. The battle is beginning to be fought between Irish and English on the soil of Ireland. Each language has its legitimate place and its own proper functions, but there is a sense in which they are struggling at this moment for supremacy.

The struggle between the languages is a deeper, a more far-reaching struggle that appears on the surface, it is a struggle between the civilizations which these languages represent, and of which they are the most natural channels of expression. The extinction of Irish as a living speech, would mean the predominance of foreign civilization, of foreign ideals, of foreign customs, of foreign vices. I shall not now say anything hard of what English civilization was in its prime. Let us grant that it was excellent. But it is no longer in its prime, it is fast breaking up and giving place to vulgarity. It is a mighty wreck that threatens to submerge the smaller crafts that are battling with the waves. It is a ruin that is fast debasing the minds and enfeebling the bodies of the people, it is wiping out the great landmarks of morals, it is creating difficulties that may become insurmountable for the ruler and statesman. The civilization that moulded England to greatness is fast becoming a corrupt system of life and a positive national danger. A civilization, no matter what may have been its triumphs in the past, must be judged by its present fruits. The extension of the domain of science, the growth of wealth, the spread of commerce, the progress of manufactures may co-exist in a country with the rapid physical and moral deterioration of the people. It is the simple, old-world virtues of our ancestors that alone can save us from the ruin with which we are threatened, and these virtues grow up and flourish wherever our language exists. The Irish language is their natural guardian, it is the natural medium for their expression. Remove it from the scene, and the virtues are certain to droop and die.

Irish then, should, other things being equal, be preferred to English. It will obviously take a long time and much hard work to repair the ravages that long neglect and positive ill-treatment have made upon it. It will take more serious efforts than have yet been made in any part of Ireland to lift it out of the slough of despond in which it has been allowed to settle. It is, as we saw, some sixty or seventy years

behindhand as a cultivated speech. It has been 3,000 years amongst us, and are we to abandon it now because it is a little behind in scientific terminology, and in sensational literature? All that requires to be done in order to put our language on a par with other languages in up-to-date use, is to stimulate the rising talent and energy of the country to devote themselves to its cultivation with even half the vigour they expend on many of the worthless items on our modern programmes of education. As is the education of its rising race, so will be the nation. If the youth of the country have their energies wasted on a host of useless subjects during the best part of their school career, then the nation will in time be unable to concentrate its energy on the great problems of national life. If in our leading educational establishments, the rising youths are not taught to attach first importance to the things that pertain to the nation's honour and self-respect, they will necessarily grow up degraded Irishmen and fit subjects for becoming the victims of all the evil effects of foreign civilization.

We must not take a short-sighted view of our history or of our national aspirations. We must not forget that there are numerous generations of Irishmen to live after us, we must not do anything to shut out from them the natural tradition of the historic speech of their ancestors. Woe to that Irishman who is not proud of his ancestors, of their history, of their vigorous spirit, of the glorious heritage of heroism and faith that is enshrined in their language. Woe to the Irishman who is not proud of that ancient language, and who will not make sacrifices to hand it down in its living warmth to future ages. Sixty or seventy years of a blank disfigure the pages of its literature. But what are 60 or 70 years when compared with the countless ages of a nation's life. Is the thread of continuity of perhaps the oldest civilization in Europe, to be snapped asunder forever on that account, and is this crime against a nation's honour and self-respect to be perpetrated in an age when the peoples of the earth are endeavouring to rescue from oblivion every fragment of antiquity that the corroding touch of time has spared them; at a time when millions of money are expended in striving to drag into the light of day every record, every footprint of *primaeval* man? Is our nation alone, just at the moment that it is emerging from the storm-cloud of persecution and

oppression, just at the time that it is beginning to find a voice that will ring through the world, to permit the language that has been the instrument of its thought for ages, to be torn up by its living roots and flung by the wayside to wither and to die. That living speech is the fosterer of genius, of self-reliance, of national pride; it gilds our history, it illumines our traditions and legends, it stamps us with the unmistakable stigma of individual nationhood, it is a truer claim to national greatness than giant navies or mines of gold. Navies and gold may be wrenched from us by a stronger force, but our own language may, if we will it, be as perennial amongst us as the verdure of our meadows, as the cliffs of our foam-washed coasts.

The argument of material advancement is often raised against the pretensions of our national language. But the time seems at hand when a nation's material advancement will follow in the wake of national dignity and self-respect, and will be commanded by title-deeds to antiquity and past greatness. In these latter ages the world is scrutinizing closely the history of nations, examining into their pedigree, and their claim to nobility and renown. Juster ideas of the science of history are beginning to prevail. The blood-stained crest of the conqueror will not save from execration, a mean, a blood-thirsty and a grasping race. A people that have ever stood on the side of truth, of honour, of high ideals, even though worsted in battle, will win the admiration and respect of future ages. The peoples of the earth are looking back across the centuries for traces of kinship with one another, are gathering together every vestige of their ancient traditions, and this is the time that we choose wantonly to cast from us the living speech that is our truest passport to antiquity, the greatest of the monuments of our ancient civilization and our ancient fame. It is a mad, rash act for which our children and children's children will weep unavailing tears.

Since, then, Irish is the national language of Ireland, and since the country is beginning to awaken to a sense of that fact, it behoves the public bodies throughout the country and the scholastic institutions to treat that language with the reverence due to its dignity, to serve it with the zeal which genuine patriotism inspires. The institutions to which I refer are the accredited mouthpiece of the

nation's will; to them it looks for guidance and assistance in moments of crisis. Shall it be said that when certain classes of the community are banding themselves together in one supreme effort to preserve in its purity the ancient speech of their motherland, when they are endeavouring to preserve the golden traditions of 3,000 years—those traditions that stamp their country with the sign of characteristic, distinct nationhood—to preserve them from being swallowed up in the vortex of a decaying and degenerate civilization, shall it be said that these public bodies folded their arms and looked on with indifference. If the supreme struggle which our venerable language is now making to regain its lost dominions, arouse not one feeling of national sentiment, excite not one spark of national honour in the hearts of our public bodies, if it induce them not to come to its aid, armed with their representative power, let them sink unmolested into the degradation to which they are hastening, a degradation national in its extent and irreparable in its evil; let them freely lavish public money on the English language; that language, an excellent speech in the mouths of Englishmen, will become on their lips and on the lips of their children the despicable jargon of helots and slaves.