

# ON LANGUAGE AND POLITICAL IDEALS.

By Frederick Ryan.

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## I.

As was perhaps to be expected, I have been favoured with several criticisms of my article on the Gaelic League published in the November number of this review. And though one critic wondered how I could have fallen into the 'obvious error' of regarding the League as popular, it is yet the fact that all the comments I have seen are pro-Gaelic League. Before, however, dealing with any, let me explain a point which Mr. Gwynn and the Editor of *An Claidheamh Soluis* have both somewhat misunderstood. When I commented on the fact that the Gaelic League was praised by opposite types of politicians and publicists, I did not mean that it was curious or suspicious to obtain a consensus of opinion as to the merits of noncontentious proposals. But the League propaganda can hardly be reduced to the dispassionate level of a theorem in geometry. It is advocated on the ground that it will have this and that effect on the national course, that it will make Ireland more self-contained, more intellectual, less 'modern,' or more religious, that it will stimulate industry and sobriety, and many other things. Whether it will accomplish these ends or some of them, and whether some of them are desirable ends at all, are debatable questions. And when, therefore, Cardinal Logue, for instance, supports the League because it will tend to make Ireland less amenable to modern thought, and Sir Horace Plunkett supports it because it will strengthen modern influences, either or both must be miscalculating. The League may possibly have no effect on the matter, but it cannot have both of two opposite effects. If one man tells me he thinks that the speaking of Gaelic will reconcile Ireland to 'the Empire' by stimulating a local patriotism which does not necessarily clash with Imperial interests, and another tells me he supports it

because the speaking of Irish will further the desire for Irish independence, then one or other must be wrong. These are truisms, but they explain my phrase and my criticism that a movement which is all things to all men is curious, to say the least.

## II.

Perhaps, however, the best way of beginning in a somewhat complex discussion is to define our terms and our starting-points. Until we realise our ends we cannot measure how far a certain policy will bring such ends nearer. Now, one standard of judgment is brought out vividly in an able article in *An Claidheamh Soluis*, which I venture to put first. Dealing with my article the *United Irishman* had said: 'We do not believe there is any but an insignificant minority of Gaelic Leaguers who would hesitate to sacrifice the language if the impossible could take place, and the choice were between the language and freedom.' By way of answer as much to the *United Irishman* as to me, the *Claidheamh Soluis* lays down the following doctrine:—

'There is here an opposition of two things which are on totally different planes—nationality and political autonomy. The Irish language is an essential of Irish nationality. It is more, it is its chief depository and safeguard. When the Irish language disappears, Irish nationality will *ipso facto* disappear, and for ever. Political autonomy, on the other hand, can be lost and recovered, and lost again and recovered again. It is an accidental and external thing—necessary, indeed, to the complete working out of a national destiny, necessary, in many cases, to the continued existence of a people, but not in itself an essential of nationality. There is such a thing as a nation in bondage. Ireland is such, the Boers are such, Poland is such. Now, if Ireland were to lose her language—which is, remember, an essential of her nationality—there might conceivably be a free state in Ireland at some future date; but that state would not be the Irish nation, for it would have parted from the body of traditions which constitute Irish nationality. The people which would give up its language in exchange for political autonomy would be like the prisoner who would sell his soul to the Evil One that he might be freed from his bodily chains.'

That is to say, a nation, miserably poor, without political status, without education, oppressed by another nation, taxed to extinction-point, is to be preferred to a free nation, politically mistress of her own destinies, educated and prosperous, speaking a language not 'her own'

only in the sense that it is spoken by the great majority of her people at a later date than the previous one. The theorem crystallises that metaphysical habit of regarding politics which I am afraid is one of our constitutional vices in this country. If the loss of language be the crucial loss which nothing can ever repair, then Ireland is hopelessly gone, sold to the Evil One, whatever that phrase, capital letters and all, may exactly mean. For the great majority of Irishmen *have* given up the language which Ireland at one time spoke; unless, indeed, the theorem before mentioned be modified to the extent of positing that the Irish people who are now re-learning Gaelic would be engaged in a useless task if there were not in the country a remnant of native Gaelic speakers. If that remnant disappeared, then Irish 'nationality' would *ipso facto* have disappeared, and the efforts of the rest would be futile.

It is possibly my limitation, but these speculations transport me to a region where the foothold is so slippery that one is not sure of a step, and the propositions are often so vague and indefinite as to be negligible. As to the kind of nation that is desirable I have a very clear notion; but as to the 'spirit of nationality,' and whether a distinctive language is an essential or accidental part of that spirit, whether political autonomy is or is not an essential of nationality, all this is a species of speculation in which you arrive at any desired conclusion by first giving your terms and phrases the required meaning. One could easily so define nationality as to make it *include* political autonomy as an essential and *exclude* language as accidental.

A nation which has its laws, its finance, its educational system, its administrative habits, and its civil service shaped by the ideas of another nation, would certainly appear to have lost some of the most effective means of moulding character. And as an example, the United States is developing a local patriotism, evidenced in the war with Spain, as strong as exists anywhere, and has as definitely marked habits of industry (whether admirable or otherwise) and as distinctive manners as any nation in Europe, though it has not a separate language.

### III.

Much more profitable, however, it seems to me, than such theorising is the problem of how to create in Ireland a people, healthy, educated, cultured in the best sense, with sufficient material comfort, developing their minds and their bodies to the end of maximising life, sensitive to intellectual and moral values, and conducting their national life on lines of justice, and freedom, and good faith. That is, in outline, the standard by which, I submit, we should judge proposals and policies. Had we the political power in Ireland, there are a hundred things we should strive for so as to attain that standard. For instance (and I merely take these as examples), we should set up the best system of primary and secondary instruction that the total experience of other countries suggests, with a system of popular university education, free of access to every boy and girl who could reasonably profit by it. We should endeavour to throw the burden of taxation on the wealthy and landlord classes, with a heavy income tax on unearned wealth; and out of such revenues we should provide sufficient old-age pensions for those who need them, and in that way extinguish the abominable workhouse system. We should set our faces against anything like protective duties on food or manufactured articles by which the cost of living is raised on the many for the benefit of the landlord or the capitalist, as the case may be. But we should have an efficient system of factory laws by which the health of the workers would be safeguarded, and we should further raise the position of the farm labourers, perhaps the most neglected class in all Ireland to-day. We should immediately nationalise the railways and canals as monopolies that pressingly need control, and out of the profits of such administration we might well build harbours round the coast for the proper development of the fisheries; indeed the fishing industry itself might well be nationalised and put on a stable basis.

Now in all this, which is but outline and beginning, I do not exactly know whether we should be stimulating the spirit of nationality or not, and I do not really see that it matters. We should be doing something finer and better—we should be making a strong, and cultivated, and self-reliant people. And the reason, I confess, why I stand for Irish independence is because by it alone can we obtain the machinery to produce this. No alien administration can possibly

produce it. When we have the control of our own affairs we may perhaps leave undone many of the things mentioned, and do many foolish things into the bargain. But then at least the responsibility will be ours alone, and responsibility is the beginning of wisdom. Then, those of us who desire democratic progress must fight for our view as best we can, and, if defeated, accept defeat for the time as best we may, recognising that in a civilised nation the decision of the majority is the final court of appeal.

#### IV.

In the frank statement of this view of Irish progress I trust I may be pardoned any apparent egotism, inseparable from a personal exposition of opinion. As, however, was remarked at the beginning, such a definition of aims is essential in a discussion of policies. How then does Gaelic stand with regard to the building up of a state as outlined? And here it may be well to correct some error on Mr. Gwynn's part, I was not arguing previously about any subsidiary propaganda of the Gaelic League, such as the study of Irish history, the stimulating of local spirit, of interest in local industries, and so forth. Nor was I disparaging the study of Gaelic as a proper and honoured study in any Irish university. I was merely dealing with the policy of making Gaelic the spoken language again of Ireland at the cost of much trouble and infinite loss.

Here, then, I turn to Mr. Gwynn. And much of his paper, I must say, seems to me not quite relevant. Thus I can hardly suppose that Mr. Gwynn imagines me to be an admirer of the cult of Kipling, or to wish the shoddy ideals of England transplanted to Irish soil. One may exaggerate even the importance of Mr. Kipling, for I do not think his ideals are admired by many really cultured men in England itself. But why should any Irishman choose Mr. Kipling as his literary hero? If he insists on reading contemporary English poetry he can, for instance, take Mr. William Watson, a finer poet and a finer mind. But I do not even want him solely to feed himself on English literature. He has Moore, and Mangan, and Davis, and Speranza, and a score of others. There are even contemporary Irish poets and Irish writers, including, if I may add, Mr. Gwynn himself. What is the subtle virus,

only apparently recently discovered, of those (including virtually all Irish authors for the last century and a half) often contemptuously dubbed 'Anglo-Irish?' And how long will we have to wait before there is a corresponding body of literature in Gaelic? Mr. Gwynn argues, if I understand him aright, that English in itself has a debasing effect and that an Irishman will tend to spontaneously choose bad or trashy literature in English, but in Gaelic will spontaneously become a 'lover and critic of fine literature.' It is a curious thesis, that a mere set of nouns and verbs should so fundamentally change a man's mental preferences. But I do not know how it can be demonstrated until there is a much larger literature than at present, easily accessible in Gaelic. The very Gaelic movement itself seems a proof of the opposite. For if it represents a desire for high ideals, as in large part it admittedly does, it is mainly the work of men and women who were nourished, nine out of ten of them, on 'Anglo-Irish' literature; *their* love for Ireland and things Irish not having been perverted by such a training. Some of the best workers and most enthusiastic advocates of the Gaelic revival are themselves but imperfect speakers of Gaelic. No; the doctrine that character is to be built up by a change of externals, and with all respect, language is an external, is surely a fallacy. Character is only to be built up slowly, principally by opportunities of physical, mental, and moral improvement, better material surroundings, more leisure, greater encouragement to fresh and individual thinking, and a deeper inculcation in the young of intellectual sincerity and moral courage. In so far as the Gaelic League helps these methods it is doing good work; my only contention is that that work is not necessarily connected with getting people in general to talk a new language, or at least a language hitherto unfamiliar to them.

## V.

Let me, however, in taking leave of this discussion endeavour to sum up. In the Gaelic League are some of the best and most enthusiastic workers in Ireland, and it would be strange if their magnetism had not affected many other good movements. All that goes without saying, and nothing that I have written, I hope, suggests the contrary. And these workers love Ireland, and strive to the best of their belief for her

welfare. I claim also to be a lover of Ireland. Though by 'Ireland' I do not mean any 'literary' or mystic entity or any 'nationality' divorced from the real life of the people. By Ireland I mean the peasants in the fields, the workers in the factories, the teachers in the schools, the professors in the colleges, and all others who labour in Ireland and desire to make this people a great people, an intellectual people, a noble people. But in building up that people we must, I submit, keep our eyes fixed on the permanent standards of right and wrong, of good politics and bad, and less and less on the mere ebb and flow of national impulse. Our desire should be not to copy England or any other nation, still less to aimlessly differentiate ourselves from other nations, but to choose the best from all nations. It is an ignoble thing to be a sycophant; it is a foolish thing to be a factious antagonist. If we possess a good method or a useful custom it is unwise to abandon it merely because another nation which we dislike has it too. When the hurricanes of national and racial antagonism die away we must always come back to equity, to utility, and to righteousness. And having at present in our possession, through the operation of many causes, for some of which we are ourselves responsible, a language which unlocks the temples of vast knowledge, and provides a means of world-wide intercourse, we should scrupulously survey our course before parting with it, and critically ask ourselves whether any permanent good we wish to achieve could not as easily be achieved without such sacrifice.