

The Social History and People behind the Living Communities



Treasa Ní Ghearraidh and Uinsíonn Mac Graith

The Beginning

In June of 1999, the ‘Irish Times’ newspaper carried a half-page article on the outstandingly beautiful Dún Chaocháin district in Northwest Mayo. It is home to an Irish-speaking community. A team of local people, including Treasa Ní Ghearraidh, Uinsíonn Mac Graith and Mícheál Ó Cuirleáin, had produced a bilingual CD (in Irish and English), on the unique set of Irish placenames in the area. Treasa’s contact details were given so that the CD could be ordered.

Such efforts on behalf of a community in one of the most remote areas of the country were to be admired. Some time later, I telephoned Treasa. She said she was trying to underpin local employment by advertising the area in order to bring in tourists. She wanted to see an end to the haemorrhage of young people from the area.

Some eighteen months later, I visited Treasa in Ceathrú Thaidhg, a townland in Dún Chaocháin. We spoke about the place and its chequered history. Later, I went walking down by the beach, only to meet a German family enjoying the fresh air and scenery. We spoke for some minutes. A thought struck me.

Years beforehand, I had come to the view that minority languages, such as Irish, seemed to survive better in an environment where there was more than one strong culture. If many more German- and indeed French-speaking tourists could come here, not only they would benefit. I went back to Treasa’s office, to see what she might think.

Treasa and I discussed what the area had to offer tourists and whether there might be any special attraction to emphasise. An industry would already have developed if the usual commercial conditions existed. However, there was one feature which was not usual: the Irish language. If anything stood for the ‘real Ireland’, it was the language, in the Irish Constitution our first national language. To possess a threatened community of Irish-

speakers and a pristine landscape made Northwest Mayo the perfect destination for ecotourism. The impact of Gaelic Ireland had been greatest on the European mainland. Our connections there had to be brought back into focus.

Treasa and I agreed that we should embark on an ecotourism business, in the niche markets of France and Germany. After all, there were not too many viable options for business from which to choose. Treasa introduced me to Marianne Odendahl, originally from Germany, who joined in our efforts. **Arising from our common interests, Treasa and Uinsíonn, who is now her husband, Marianne Odendahl and myself, Liam, together set up The Living Communities.** Mathew Hamilton, a website designer with the Wheel (www.wheel.ie), of which we became a member, gave us our first website, working for free in his own time.

It is true to say that we did not know how to establish or run a tourism business, much less an ecotourism business in a niche market. As volunteers to the cause of European culture and of the environment, we were willing to find out what we should do, by trial and error. There is one main tourism season every year. We could essentially make one error per year. If we have been in difficulty taking tourists away from the Dublin-Galway-Killarney circuit or from the lesser Shannon-Galway-Dublin trail, we have been in good company. Many others, with various sources of support, have tried to do likewise, also unsuccessfully.

The Fortunes of our Gaelic Culture

Irish ties with Europe go back a long way. Celts had once lived in temperate Europe, speaking a language the closest to which today is Irish. With the Germans, we reinvigorated Europe after the fall of Rome. With the advent of the horse, some of us ventured on, to end up at the **edge of the habitable world – Hibernia to the Romans.**

We called the island after a goddess – Éire. We built a civilisation here, in Scotland and on the Isle of Man, based on learning, culture and law. This was the greater Gaeltacht of yesteryear. After the Dark Ages, while the pagan tribes of Northern Europe were still causing havoc across continental Europe, Saints and Scholars left our shores in great numbers, going to France, Germany, Italy (centering on Rome, of course) and eastwards, through [Galatia](#) in Turkey – helping to restore the Christian culture, learning and Latin-based literacy.

Learning could not defend Éire, however...

Éire came under attack from the Vikings, around 800 A.D. Their descendents in France, the Normans, invaded us from England 1169. We absorbed these attacks. With Anglo-Saxon influence returning in England however, Henry VIII began, in 1541, the English military and legislative onslaught against everything for which we stood.

From then on, indomitable courage and immolation of self animated the Irish fight for survival. Procuring armaments in a country without a steel industry and, to a degree, the Celtic trait of choosing personal honour and glory over coordinated military action, prevented final success against the English. **The Gaelic economy, which supported the native nobility, slowly contracted.**

In the early 1700s, the Penal Laws in Ireland excluded Catholics from political power and public employment. Land purchase was forbidden. The few remaining gentry had the choice of becoming Protestant or facing the break-up of their estates. Education was forbidden and voting rights withdrawn. Extreme religious persecution became a policy for subjugation. Ordinary Irish people were hunted down in their own land.

Throughout the 17th century, much of the surviving Gaelic nobility joined European armies and integrated into European society. Gaelic lords, of well established, high-ranking social class, fought with distinction for their new hosts – often against the author of their destruction in Ireland.

By 1778, only 5% of the land remained in native hands. Tenant farmers on Anglo-Irish estates lived in abject conditions. But the people still retained respect for learning.

Travelling schoolmasters taught the Gaelic culture and language, as well as Greek and Latin, in unofficial ‘Hedge Schools’.

Cultural expression was stifled. We have inherited no architecture (except in majestic ruins), no great paintings nor store of classical music. However, manuscripts of a new vernacular literature were carefully guarded and copied, as in earlier days the monks had done with their magnificent, ornate leather volumes. The Poets and Bards, reduced from courtiers to paupers, continued to serve a leaderless, impoverished though yet unbowed people. Revolution was never far away, though the Gaelic Order had been dismantled.

An Gorta Mór - The great Famine: a cultured Race falls

The great Famine finally broke the spirit of the Irish Race. Variations between different sources of statistics would suggest that historians have further scope to study this human ecological disaster.

In 1841, our population had reached c8.2m. However, the potato crop failed from 1845-9. Some 1.5m people perished from famine, from related disease (such as typhus and yellow fever) and from the cold. Other foodstuffs sufficient to feed 20m, were taken and sold, to meet the high rent payments of English landlords. Wheat, oats, barley, butter, eggs, beef and pork were all exported in large quantities.

In 1854, the British Scientific Commission belatedly prepared advice for Irish ‘peasants’ on ways to eat rotten potatoes. The instructions, in English, were both invalid - and very complicated. The description of one particular procedure concluded: “If you do not understand this, ask your landlord or clergyman to explain its meaning.” – a useful instruction to those who spoke Gaelic, whose indifferent landlords frequently resided in England and who, as Catholics, had no clergyman either. These ‘peasants’, of course, were renting their own land. Land had always belonged to the freemen of a Clan.

The emigration of 4m people began in 1845. Those bound for North America were treated as cargo (‘paying ballast’) on ‘coffin ships’. Some 70% sailed to the USA. One-to two-fifths of the emigrants perished at sea from hunger and disease.

For those who could raise the fare of around £4-5, the ‘coffin ships’ to America seemed to offer a ray of hope. However, the reality was different. A man who sailed to America in 1847 wrote: “Hundreds of poor people, men, women and children of all ages huddled together without light, without air, wallowing in filth and breathing a fetid atmosphere, sick in body, dispirited in heart...” **This was not the stuff of legends. This was not us.**

Under the American Passenger Acts, some emigrants were refused entry into the US, usually for reasons of weakness or ill-health. They often just remained on the quayside until they died. Successful emigrants still faced new and unrelenting miseries and anti-Irish, anti-Catholic bigotry from established Anglo-American settlers.

Denigration and Destitution

Back in Éire, the Irish language had become associated with poverty and despair and was finally abandoned by large numbers. Only about one-quarter of the race spoke the language after the Famine. Alcohol became a final refuge from a shattered culture.

The English provided insignificant relief, through payments, for carrying out economically worthless public works. In any event, food – not money - was the problem. Soup was provided occasionally - if the recipient would convert to Protestantism. Temporary entry could be gained into refuges for the destitute, called workhouses. But these were few and often provided no more than for starvation to run its course.

Our people entered their darkest hour under the most callous régime to which Man has ever given position. The English press extolled the need for us to shed ‘surplus population’. In 1861, John Mitchell (an iconoclastic Protestant solicitor from County Down and publisher of the ‘United Irishman’ newspaper) wrote: “A million and half men, women and children... died of hunger in the midst of abundance which their own hands created.” In 1904, Michael Davitt, founder of the Irish Land League, effectively regarded the events of 1845-50 as a holocaust. His view was repeated in 1989 by Ireland’s ambassador to Canada, Dr Edward J Brennan, during an address on Grosse Île.

The London ‘Times’ celebrated the disaster in these unbelievable terms: “They are going! They are going! The Irish are going with a vengeance. Soon a Celt will be as rare in Ireland as a red Indian on the shores of Manhattan.” The great British writer, **William Makepiece Thackeray**, wrote around this time of British colonialism in Ireland, as follows: “It is... one of the most melancholy stories in the whole world of insolence, rapine, brutal, endless slaughter and persecution... There is no crime ever invented by eastern or western barbarians, no torture... no tyranny of Nero... but can be matched by the history of England in Ireland.” The passage of time and history has not altered the awful truth of this.



Idunna and the Apples of Youth
J. Penrose, 1890

Tomorrow is always bright

Taking the broad sweep of history, Ireland may be seen to have reasserted itself to no small degree, latterly with the generous help and goodwill of our old European friends. Under the new order of the EU, there are now greater freedoms, prosperity and understanding (despite the odd peak or trough).

Catholic and Protestant traditions now, more than ever before, work together for the common good. Going as far back as the foundation of the State, it must be said that the Church of Ireland has given us two Presidents and a number of prelates with a scholarly knowledge of Irish.

Occasionally over the years, I had the great honour to meet the late and much respected **George Otto Simms**. He took his BA, MA, BD, PdD and DD degrees at Trinity College, Dublin. He was Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, until his retirement in 1980. He lectured and wrote extensively. Any time we met, he always chose to speak Irish to me. He had a solid command of the Donegal *canúint*. He was a respected scholar and historian and an internationally recognised expert on the Book of Kells. Amongst his most important works are the following:

- 1) Exploring the Book of Kells (The O'Brien Press, 1988);
- 2) Saint Patrick, Ireland's Patron Saint (The O'Brien Press, 2004); and
- 3) Brendan the Navigator (The O'Brien Press, 2006).

By some felicitous chance of fate, the late **Canon Cosslett William Charles Quin** was once my next-door neighbour in Donnybrook Village, in Dublin. He was undoubtedly the greatest scholar of Irish amongst twentieth century Church of Ireland clergy. Born in Antrim, in the North East corner of Ireland, Canon Quin was educated in St Columba's

College Dublin. His academic career was unparalleled and in 1961 he became Professor of Biblical Greek in Trinity College, Dublin. He had a magnificent grasp of many languages, including Latin, Greek (ancient and modern), Hebrew, Aramaic, Italian, German, French and Spanish. However, it is for his love of the Irish language and culture that he is most remembered. He was an outstanding symbol of the common bond between the peoples of this island.

A fundamental aim of the Living Communities is to act towards stabilising the weakening position of the Gaelic culture. We intend to encourage Gaelic economic activities through the promotion of ecotourism tourism and associated activities.

Gaelic people would wish, in turn, go to France and Germany to visit places of cultural and historic interest. This is a unique expression of the will to be relevant by one of Europe's smallest communities. We Irish generally, no matter what the circumstances, are always tremendously proud of our country and regret the near loss of our culture. A well known community leader from the Rath Carn Gaeltacht once said: "It's not speaking Irish which is most important but rather having your heart in the right place."

On the world stage, few people do not know where Irish hearts lie. The Living Communities would wish effectively to show its commitment to the values and mission it has adopted and to be an example for people who, in their own lives, are looking for the courage to persevere. *Possunt quia posse videndur.*

An Dr Liam SS Réamonn

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