

Learning Irish in Late-Eighteenth – and Nineteenth-Century Belfast: the Antiquarian Influence

Ciaran McDonough

Abstract

While learned societies and individuals in the rest of Ireland were interested in Old and Middle Irish literature and creating translations of them, individuals and institutions in nineteenth-century Belfast differed by being interested in Modern Irish and attempts to keep it as a living vernacular. It was home to the first organisations to promote Irish learning and saw the publication of materials and aids for Irish language education. Despite the efforts made by Belfast based scholars to keep the language alive, they were all done in the spirit of antiquarian enterprise. Irish was seen as a suitable subject for antiquarian investigation as it was on the decline and there was a sense of recording things for posterity and also as the non-sectarian, inclusive nature of antiquarian societies could be applied to language classes. This article looks at why Belfast differed from the rest of the country and how efforts to learn the language can be equated with antiquarian research.

The Celtic Revival, which took place in the late-eighteenth-century, is more commonly associated, in Ireland at least, with an interest in “Celtic” literature, places, and the older forms of the Celtic languages than it is with the modern forms.¹ It was, arguably, inspired by the publication of James MacPherson’s Ossian poems, later proven to be forgeries, and it led members of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy to become interested in the literatures in translation. (Leerssen 1996b, 40) One only has to look at the numerous Celtic, archaeological, Gaelic, and literary societies which emerged in its wake² to see the effort which went into studying this culture and the extent to which the subject dominated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiquarian research. It was the Gaelic Revival at the end of the nineteenth century that took the study of Irish from a solely antiquarian/philological domain and made it accessible to the general populace, which was, naturally, Anglophone and consisting of Ascendancy members.

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2 For example, the Royal Irish Academy, founded 1785; the Gaelic Society, founded 1806; the Ibero-Celtic Society, founded 1818; the Irish Archaeological Society, founded 1840, amongst others.

In the North of Ireland, however, great importance was placed on Irish as a living, but dying, language throughout the nineteenth century, which inspired people to learn it, to form societies for the promotion of Irish as a spoken and living language, and to publish materials to aid others in learning the language. This differed greatly from the way the language was treated further south, where, as already stated, Old and Middle Irish were the primary concerns of learned societies—most definitely not the general public—and Modern Irish was casually mentioned, normally in conjunction with the older forms. As the translations from Old and Middle Irish into English were done for the most part by native Irish speakers, and as the medieval forms of the language only became languages to be learnt towards the very end of the nineteenth century, it can be assumed that Modern Irish did not greatly feature in people's consciousness as a topic for study.

Looking at the reasons why Anglophones had learnt Irish previously, it is perhaps no surprise that Irish had limited appeal to a wide audience. The Irish had frequently been linked to barbarity by English-speaking commentators both in Ireland and in Britain, particularly with the use of native law, commonly referred to as "Brehon".³ Naturally, when such views are expressed about a culture, they are normally also applied to the language and this would explain why there was a lack of interest in Irish among Anglophones at that time. This, however, changed in the seventeenth century, though it was not due to an interest in the language for its own sake. A surge in proselytising and missionary activities in the seventeenth century meant that religious figures saw the benefit in learning Irish. They began translating the Bible and various Protestant (usually Presbyterian) tracts; this took place all over Ireland, though the Presbyterian focus was mainly in the North (Ó Snodaigh 1995, 41; Blaney 1996, 7). This had been influenced by successful missions in the Highlands and Islands, where tracts and the Bible had been translated into Gàidhlig (Ó Snodaigh 1995, 34). Despite a lack of literacy among the Catholic, Irish-speaking population, it was believed that being able to read religious scripts in their own language would make them more amenable to conversion (Blaney 1996,

3 See, for example, a sixteenth-century account in the State Paper Office, which refers to the native Irish in these terms:

The fourste of them is called the Brehounde, whiche in English is called the judge; and before they will geave judgement they will have pawnes of both the parties, the which is called in Irish, Ulliege; and then they will geave judgement according to their own dischresions. Theis men be neauters, and the Irishmen will not prairie them; they have great pleantie of cattell, and they harbour manye vacabons and ydell parsons, and if their be anye rebell that moves anye rebellion against the prince, of theis people they ar chiflie mantayned; and if the English armye fortune to travell in that parties wheir they be, they will fle into mountains and woodes, bycause they wold not sucker them with vitals and other; - and further, they will take upon them to judge matters and redresse causes, as well of inherytans as of other matters, although they are ignoraunt; the which is a greatte hinderans to the Quenes Majestie's laws, and hurtfull to the whole English Pale. (Hore 1857, 41)

14). This, however, created an atmosphere of distrust towards the printed word and meant that Catholic priests were reluctant to encourage people to use their native tongue (Ó Snodaigh 1995, 58). It was also believed that teaching people literacy in their own language meant that it would be easier to teach them literacy in English (Blaney 1996, 120).

As already mentioned, the learning of Irish in Belfast had originally been linked with proselytising missions, but at the end of the eighteenth century, this changed and people began to become interested in the language itself. This is not to say that there were no politics involved, but they were not sectarian. Learning Irish forged a link to the land for those of British descent and also a link between people—Protestant, Presbyterian, and Catholic. This shows the change in the mentality of the Anglo-Irish, who had identified themselves as English until the end of the eighteenth century, when they began to see themselves as Irish (Leerssen 1996a, 382). Possibly part of the motivation for people to learn Irish was the identification of Ireland as being Gaelic Irish. Joep Leerssen writes that:

In all these new manifestations of Ireland's national conflict, one trend had however been firmly fixed in the course of the eighteenth century, and was to remain an operative force in later ideological developments: the implicit notion that Ireland was fundamentally a Gaelic country, that the true Ireland looked back to a Gaelic past, and that the presence of English-derived culture within the Irish shores was a matter of cultural adulteration. (1996a, 376)

Leerssen goes on to describe the origins of this reflection back to the past as coming from the nationalists' (who emerged in the nineteenth-century from the patriots) references to Gaelic culture and antiquity in the first person and by their identification with it, which eventually led to its centralisation in the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy's sense of national identity (*ibid*).

Naturally, the emphasis that eighteenth-century Irish antiquarianism placed on the notion that Ireland was a Gaelic Ireland with a Gaelic past led some to look at the modern language via the older forms, for example, Charles Vallancey, who was interested in Irish's (alleged) relationship to Phoenician and Sanskrit (O'Halloran 2004, 42-3). Indeed, it could be argued that the antiquarian societies helped to give Modern Irish the status of being worthy of antiquarian investigation. In 1792 the organisers of the Belfast Harp Festival set up Irish language classes as part of the Festival. The organisers were largely loyalist in their own views, yet they tried to keep Irish and politics separate. Dr James McDonnell is said to have timed the Harp Festival—taking place from 11 to 14 July—to provide a counter-attraction to Bastille Day commemorations (Blaney 1996, 41). As an antiquarian subject, Irish would have been subject to the apolitical stance of those researching it, particularly when undertaken through organisations—much as the learned societies enforced neutral political standpoints. Leerssen writes that:

We must, therefore, come to terms with the fact that movements which we see primarily as instances of cultural nationalism were considered, by the people involved, to be apolitical, and that the pursuit of Irish culture and Irish antiquity was considered a sanctuary where men of different religious or political persuasions could meet. In all the succession of antiquarian and revivalist Gaelic initiatives in the course of the nineteenth century the common injunction is always that ‘politics is to be kept out of our business.’[...] The Gaelic Society and the Ibero-Celtic Society, founded in the bitterly antagonistic pre-Emancipation years, set the tone with this identical formula: “No religious or political debates whatsoever shall be permitted at any of the meetings of the Society; such objects being foreign to the objects of the institution.” (1996b, 157-8)

Given the mixture of people involved in learned societies, it is understandable why it was imperative that they be apolitical. The archaeological, antiquarian, and literary societies which were formed during the nineteenth century had members from all echelons of society and, therefore, differing political backgrounds. Take, for example, the Irish Archaeological Society, formed in 1840. Its patron was the Prince Consort; there were two archbishops and three dukes, amongst many other titled aristocrats; and yet it also had scholars such as O’Donovan and O’Curry (Leerssen 1996b, 158), who were both Catholics and who lived just above the poverty line. It is not inconceivable that groups of people, of the likes as those outlined above, could come together in the pursuit of historical and antiquarian knowledge, simply because they enjoyed it.

Whilst it may seem, at face value, that the lessons provided were to dissuade people from Republican activity, in light of the instruction given above they were meant as an apolitical, unifying pastime; the same as medieval Irish history and literature were to the antiquarian societies. Those taking part in the Irish classes were on a level playing field—regardless of religion or social standing, they all had the status of learner. This echoed the antiquarian societies, where people from all social strata mixed with each other (see, for example, the list of members of the societies in the quote above,) and carried the title of antiquarian.

One of the places where Irish was taught in Belfast was the Belfast Academy, established in 1785 with the following aims:

[...] [T]o diffuse as widely as possible throughout the province and population of Ulster the benefits of education both useful and liberal [...]. The Directors in their choice of master and admission of scholars are perfectly unbiassed [sic] by religious distinctions. [...] Of nothing are the boards more desirous than that pupils of all religious denominations should communicate by frequent and friendly intercourse, in the common business of education, by which means a new turn might be given to the national character and habits, and all the children of Ireland should know and love each other. [...] (Fisher and Robb 1913, 203-205 cited in Ó Buachalla 1968, 47)

It is with this lack of sectarianism in mind that the Irish lessons were publicised, emphasis being placed on how Irish was useful so that all could communicate and come together in the study of Ireland's historic language. An advertisement in the *Northern Star*, the publication of the United Irishmen, on 16-20 April 1794 for Pádraig Ó Loingsigh's (Patrick Lynch) services in the Academy states that:

An attempt to revive the grammatical and critical knowledge of the Irish language in this town is generously made by Mr Lynch: he teaches publically in the Academy and privately in several families. This language recommends itself to us, by the advantages it affords the students of Irish and Eastern Antiquities, especially to those who wish to acquire the knowledge of Druidical Theology and worship, as sketched by Cæsar and Tacitus.

It is particularly interesting to all who wish for the improvement and Union of this neglected and divided Kingdom. By our understanding and speaking it we could more easily and effectually communicate our sentiments and instructions to all our Countrymen; and thus mutually improve and conciliate each other's affections.

The merchant and artist would reap great benefit from the knowledge of it. They would then be qualified for carrying on Trade and Manufactures in every part of their native country.

Such knowledge, we understand, could easily be acquired in three or four months by the assistance of Mr Lynch. (Cited in Hughes 2006, 54)

The advertisement in *Northern Star* seems optimistic about Irish continuing as a living language, but another of their publications a year later, *Bolg an tSoláir* reveals a different view and shows just how Irish has now become an antiquarian subject. The 'Preface' states that:

[...] [A]n acquaintance with Gaelic, as being the mother tongue of all the languages in the West, is necessary to every antiquary who would study the affinity of languages, or trace the migrations of different races of mankind; of late it has attracted the attention of the learned in different parts of Europe—SHALL IRISHMEN ALONE REMAIN INSENSIBLE?—Shall its beauties be lost to those who have had opportunities from their infancy, of understanding it?

Notwithstanding that Ireland had been subject to England from the time of Henry II and that English colonies had remained for centuries in this country, no attempt was made to change the national language, nor to force foreign jargon on the natives. The Irish enjoyed their own laws and language, till the reigns of Elizabeth, and James I when the English laws were universally established, and English schools were erected, with strict injunctions that the vernacular tongue should no longer be spoken in the seminaries; yet under all these difficulties, many valuable manuscripts have been transcribed, and several books of morality printed in the Irish type in foreign countries; and even to this day, the Irish is spoken by a great many inhabitants of the kingdom.

There are several Irish manuscripts now lying dormant and unheeded, in many obscure parts of this count[r]y, many of them transcribed above forty years ago. About that time they were read, and listened to with pleasure, even by the common people; there was scarce any neighbourhood wherein there was not some Irish scholar to be found, who could entertain his neighbours, by reading some ancient poems or stories of the achievements of their heroic ancestors.

At present, there are but few who can read, and fewer that can write the Irish characters; and it appears, that in a short time, there will be none found who will understand an Irish manuscript, so as to be able to transcribe or translate it.

It is chiefly with a view to prevent in some measure the total neglect, and to diffuse the beauties of this ancient and once-admired language, that the following compilation is offered to the public;—hoping to afford a pleasing retrospect to every Irishman who respects the traditions, or considers the language and compositions of our early ancestors, as a matter of curiosity or importance. (Lynch & Brooke 1785, 10-11)

From the reasons above for why one should learn Irish, it is easy to see how opinion has changed from the reasons why given in Ó Loingsigh's advertisement. Then the reasoning was that it would be easier to communicate with those who had Irish as a mother tongue; in the above extract this seems to have changed and the learning of Irish has become an antiquarian study, not into the distant past, but into what will probably become something relegated to history and will possibly, one day, join the ranks of Old Irish in the learned societies. This view did not change during the nineteenth century. William Neilson's *Introduction to the Irish Language* was published in 1808 and in his 'Introduction', Neilson writes:

That the Irish is the best preserved dialect of the ancient and extensive Celtic language, is, allowed by the most liberal and enlightened antiquarians. To the general scholar, therefore, a knowledge of it is of great importance; as it will enable him to trace the origin of names and customs, which he would seek in vain in any other tongue. To the inhabitant of Ireland it is doubly interesting. In this language are preserved the venerable annals of our country, with as much fidelity, as is usually found in the primitive records of any nation [...]. (cited in Hughes 2006, 52)

Here, Irish is seen as a useful tool in helping scholars with research into older Irish linguistic forms; in short, antiquarian research. This view had not changed when the antiquarian John O'Donovan's grammar was published in 1845. Writing to his fellow antiquarian, William Reeves, O'Donovan states that 'my grammar is published but I have not yet seen it. I fear that very few will buy it. It is too heavy a work for any but antiquaries; it will remain as a monument of the language and I trust the preface or introduction to it will teach future Irish scholars to be less wild and extravagant in their notions' (26 July 1845 IE/UCD/SC/JO'D/5). It is a

frequent criticism of O'Donovan that his own grammar contained examples taken only from the period between the seventh century and 1587 (Blaney 1996, 61). This is most likely due to O'Donovan's views on the state of Irish and how he saw it dying out.⁴ For O'Donovan, Modern Irish would soon be in the same state as Old Irish with a similar number of people able to read it as those who could read Old Irish. He wrote to Reeves in 1848 stating that 'I fear the Gaelic world is likely to die of sheer *inanitation*. Societies gone to pot! No chance of any more works for us as I understand. The failure of the potatoes and the fear of Mitchel have among the *Gaedhil* frightened literature of existence' (13 May 1848 IE/UCD/SC/JO'D/32).⁵

O'Donovan may have been pessimistic about Irish down in Dublin, but up in Belfast, things were looking to be a little more positive. The Ulster Gaelic Society (*Cuideachta Ghaeilge Uladh*) was formed in 1828 to promote the language for learners and, for the first time, for native speakers. In their aims and objectives, published in the *Newry Examiner* of 7 April 1830, the Society addresses the lack of schools and books for Irish speakers, declaring that:

At different times, the idea of supplying these wants has been fully started by patriotic men, but, from various causes, has never been fully carried into execution. Influenced by the wish of affording two millions of their countrymen the blessings of education and encouraged by the success of similar undertakings in Scotland and Wales, a few persons in Belfast have formed themselves into a Society, for the purpose of promoting the diffusion of elementary education and useful knowledge, through the medium of the Irish language. Their intentions are,-

- I To establish schools, where reading, writing and arithmetic may be taught by means of the Irish language.
- II To publish useful books in that tongue for the benefit of the lower classes.
- III To collect books and manuscripts, for an Irish library, with a view of promoting the last mentioned subject.
- IV To maintain a teacher of the Irish language in Belfast, that the educated classes in this town may be enabled to take an interest in the operations of the Society and to judge of its performances. [...] (Blaney 1996, 119-120)

Their aims and objectives suggest the Ulster Gaelic Society only viewed Irish as a living language and that the decline could be reversed by educating the native Irish speakers in their own language. The Society had revivalist aims rather than antiquarian, as shown by its plan to educate Irish speakers through the medium of Irish and to greatly improve the number of materials available for the teaching, learning, and promotion of Irish. Despite the Society's focus on the contemporary language and despite its revivalist aims, a slight influence of antiquarianism can be seen. One is the founding of a society. In a period which had seen the beginnings

4 See, for example, Ó Buachalla 1968, 239.

5 Italic emphasis O'Donovan's own.

of numerous antiquarian societies, it is highly likely that the founding of one of the first societies to deal with Irish as a living language was inspired by this. Another is the inclusive nature of the society, reflecting the inclusive nature of the antiquarian societies with their ban on political and sectarian matters. One of its key members was an antiquarian; however, unlike O'Donovan and his membership of antiquarian societies which solely focused on Old Irish and despite his belief that Irish was nearly dead and gone, Robert Shipboy MacAdam had a much more positive attitude towards Irish and its future. Mac Adam had asked O'Donovan to contribute to a monthly journal in Irish, but was turned down (Blaney 1996, 61). This did not seem to dishearten MacAdam greatly, as he would later found a journal, *The Ulster Journal of Archaeology* (1852) and in this journal, between the years 1858 and 1862, publish a great collection of Gaelic proverbs. (Hughes 1998, 51, 65) O'Donovan had published a small collection in the *Dublin Penny Journal* in 1832, (Hughes 1988, 66) but this collection is a lot smaller than MacAdam's. After the foundation of the Ulster Gaelic Society, it would be another forty-seven years before the foundation of another Irish society which focused on Irish as a living language. This was the Society for the Promotion of the Irish Language (SPIL) in 1877, followed by the Gaelic League in 1893.

Looking at the various attempts to keep Irish as a living language in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Belfast, it is easy to see just how this differed from Dublin, being the other largely Anglophone city to compare it with. It is also puzzling as to why this amount of effort should have taken place. Belfast was a large town with a variety of people living there: there were the Gaelic Irish, those descended from Scottish planters, and those descended from English planters. It is largely because there was that mix of people that the interest occurred. While the rest of Ireland was taken up with the antiquarian movement and working on translations of medieval Irish texts, those in Belfast focused on Irish as spoken at the time. Whilst this might seem as though it were something different, it is also based on the same antiquarian movement, albeit translated in a different way. This is based on two grounds. Firstly, that Irish as a decaying language is a subject suitable for antiquarian study. Learning it was a form of preserving it. In more optimistic times it could be described as maintaining it, but, looking at the way the grammarians viewed it, it seems to be recording for posterity; after that, it would become akin to the Old Irish manuscripts they were also trying to preserve. Secondly, as an antiquarian subject, it could be studied in specially founded societies. As has been shown, these societies were inclusive in nature with rules about sectarianism and an enforced apolitical stance. In a town such as Belfast, it is easy to see why this would have been attractive, especially when there was distance between the scholars and the subject. Medieval Ireland and medieval Irish literature had been attractive subjects for the antiquarians because they were apolitical and neutral. They were

so remote in the past, that they had no consequence on contemporary society. Irish also performed that role; it was a unifying subject for those interested, no matter the religious denomination. It meant that, as Charles Gavan Duffy put it, ‘on the neutral ground of “ancient history and native art”, Unionist and nationalist would meet without alarm’ (cited in Leerssen 1996b, 157). Irish was the contemporary neutral ground.

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