

# 20 Month Strategy for the Irish Language

## Part One - How the Irish Language Declined

The Philo-Celtic Society

August 31, 2013

*It's the economy, stupid.*

James Carville, 1992

*It's the lack of jobs done in Irish, friend.*

The Philo-Celtic Society, 2013

Why should we look at how Irish declined and English advanced in the past when talking about the revival of the Irish Language today? That's not difficult to say. If we can understand how English advanced, we can see clearly how to strengthen Irish and its communities, not in theory, but in Ireland itself.

### A. The Gaelic Population, 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries

It is estimated that Ireland's population at the end of the reign of Charles II (1685) was nearly 2,000,000 of whom roughly three-quarters were Catholic. (1) It is estimated that the Irish population at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was roughly 5,000,000. (2) "From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century the population of Ireland began to increase substantially. This increase occurred primarily among the poorer rural classes and, since a large proportion of that sector was still Irish-speaking, there was a disproportionate increase in the number of Irish speakers. There are no exact

figures available, but in 1820 the number of Irish speakers was estimated at 3,500,000 and in 1835 was estimated at 4,000,000.” (3)

## B. Power, Violence and Coercion

In the 17<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Irish was removed by violence or coercion as the primary language from the four elite domains of that period:

### 1. religion

In 1785, the Roman Catholic hierarchy in Ireland abandoned the Irish Language, Irish culture, and Irish nationalism so that they could get permission from the British Government to open chapels and to train priests (through English only) at Carlow and Maynooth. (4) Anxious to preserve this ‘Treaty of Maynooth’, the Catholic hierarchy made sure that no more priests would come, secretly or openly, from the Continent because Ireland's freedom was almost always in their thoughts and Irish on their tongues. Henceforth, for Ireland’s millions of Irish-speaking Roman Catholics, the road to Heaven required English.

This Treaty of Maynooth had an economic aspect as well. To make a living as a priest, you needed to speak English.

### 2. government

Irish was removed from government in Ireland by the Battle of Kinsale (1601), the Treaty of Mellifont (1603), the Flight of the Earls (1607), the Cromwellian Conquest (1649-1653), Aughrim’s Great Disaster (1691), and the Treaty of Limerick (1692). Irish was removed from the Irish courts by the outlawing of Brehon Law (1605-1607). (5) Thereafter, making a living in government or the courts required English.

### 3. ownership & management in the commercial sector

In an agrarian society, land is wealth. The confiscation of land by the British Government went forward without pause since 1603. At the end of the 17th century, roughly three-quarters of the population were Catholic (6) and typically Irish-speaking. The Penal Laws (1692) barred Catholics from buying land, from obtaining use of land by lease longer than 30 years, from any government office, from holding commissions in the army and navy, from owning a horse worth more than £5, from earning a living as a lawyer, from establishing a school or earning a living as a teacher, and from receiving education overseas.

These are primarily economic penalties. Under Mercantilism, trade was the only path left to the Irish Catholic to earn wealth. And trade was to be only with England and its English-speakers, not with the Continent or other countries overseas.

By 1778, “scarcely 5% of Irish land was left in Catholic hands.” (7) In other words, Ireland’s wealth had been confiscated from Irish-speakers and transferred to the new English-speaking landlords (i.e., the Ascendancy). Also, Catholics were not permitted to vote or sit either Parliament, in Dublin or London. (8) Therefore, it was almost certain that Ireland’s wealth would remain in English-speaking hands for as long as the Ascendancy wanted to keep that wealth.

### 4. education

After the establishment of the National Board of Education in 1832, “they witnessed the passing of the old Hedge Schools, slowly giving way to the schools under the National Board. Parents were sending their children to them, because the fees were lower than in the Hedge Schools.” (9) In other words, the prices of the National Schools (in which only English was spoken) put the hedge schools (in which Irish was typically spoken) out of business.

It was not by accident that the National Schools were transmitters of English language and culture. Pádraig Mac Piarais called them “the Murder Machine.”

Úna Nic Éinrí wrote in her book *Stair na Teanga Gaeilge*: “It was their aim to kill the Irish Language. This following verse proves that:

*“I thank the goodness and the grace  
Which on my birth has smiled,  
And made me in these Christian days  
A happy English child.”* (10)

This kind of sentiment was still included in Irish textbooks into the 1960s, when phrases like “Oh what a good little English child am I” were a regular feature of primary school textbooks in Ireland. (12)

### C. choice

As we see, the Irish Language had been removed from the four most elite domains of the nation by 1840. For the most part, Irish was made a language of the rural poor, spoken by the ‘ignorant peasant’ according to English-speakers, and it was stigmatized as such. (To make clear this mental process of stigmatization, it was perceived as used by unimportant people for unimportant purposes and so was unimportant and unnecessary. In contrast, English was perceived as used by important people for important purposes and so was important and necessary.)

The Great Hunger convinced millions of the remaining Irish-speakers that English was necessary for a secure future, even for mere physical survival. As noted by De Fréine, “the older generation instilled the importance of economic considerations into the young.” (13) In fear, many parents refused to speak Irish to their children, even though they had only an imperfect command or no command of English. (From this fact comes the title of De Fréine’s book, *The Great Silence*). As reported by Father Tomás Ó Ceallaigh in *The Catholic Bulletin*, April 1911:

*“They had been brought up to believe that English was the top-notch of respectability, the key that opened Sesame, and they were determined that their children should not be left without a boon so precious.”* (14)

## CONCLUSION OF PART ONE

In contrast to the prevailing Irish-American opinion that English law stopped the speaking of Irish in Ireland, the Irish people themselves voluntarily abandoned the Irish Language primarily for economic reasons. Of course, a choice can be made again. There would not be anything to stop the people of Ireland from choosing Irish again if the conditions were right (which will be the subject of subsequent sections of this strategy).

## REFERENCES:

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2. Moody, p. 266
3. Ó Murchú, Máirtín. *The Irish Language*. Dublin: Government of Ireland, 1985. p.26
4. Ó Tuathaigh, Gearóid. *Ireland before the Famine 1798-1848*. The Gill History of Ireland, Volume 9. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972. pps. 46-47
5. This was done by means of the law cases *Gavelkind* (1605) Davies 49 and *Tanistry* (1607) Davies 28. See <http://www.courts.ie/courts.ie/library3.nsf/pagecurrent/3CBAE4FE856E917B80256DF800494ED9?opendocument&l=en>
6. Moody, p. 206
7. Moody, p. 220
8. Collins, M.E. and Ó Siochrú, Mícheál. *Concas agus Coilíniú*. Baile Átha Cliath: Gill and Macmillan, 1976. pps. 191-195
9. Dowling, Patrick J. *The Hedge Schools of Ireland*. Dublin: The Mercier Press, 1968. p. 122
10. Nic Éinrí, Úna. *Stair na Teanga Gaeilge*. Baile Átha Cliath: Folens agus a Chuid, Teo. 1971. p. 31. Translated from: "... bhí sé d'aidhm acu an Ghaeilge a mharú. Cruthaíonn an véarsa seo a leanas é seo:..."

11. Nic Éinrí, p. 31

12. Based on conversations with our friend Pádraig Ó Clúmháin ('Patrick Clifford' in English) of The Philo-Celtic Society and Scoil Ghaeilge Ghearóid Tóibín, Babylon, New York, who remembered phrases like "Oh what a good little English child am I" as a regular feature of his primary school textbooks.

13. De Fréine, Seán. *The Great Silence*. Dublin: Mercier Books, 1978. p. 81

14. De Fréine, p. 74