

The Gaelic Revival in 19th Century New York

By John Ridge

There have been many languages which have immigrated to America, but their histories seem to be remarkably similar. They prosper either in isolated settlements or in compact urban settings for a while, and then the inevitable downfall begins until that transplanted part of the old world fades forever.

The story of Irish-speaking immigrants is unlike that of other non-English speaking groups. The Irish language was brought to America in the earliest days of settlement, but it was already hampered by years of English political and cultural domination in Ireland. While a majority of the immigrants could speak Irish in colonial times, the numbers dwindled with each generation. The language did not enjoy the ability to isolate itself in either rural or urban surroundings, and few Irish-speaking communities developed. Soon, Irish arrivals to America were at best bilingual, but more often English-speaking.

By the 19th century and the "Great Famine", the outlook of most new arrivals in America was decidedly pragmatic. The land of their birth had seen a monumental struggle for mere survival and coming to America was a chance to live, perhaps even to prosper. Rapid integration into American society was judged to be the requisite for success. The Irish language had declined after centuries of persecution. The only key to survival - economically and politically - was to use the English language.

In 1855, 23.2% of the Irish people could speak Gaelic and if that figure is applied to the Irish-born inhabitants of New York and Brooklyn, the number of Gaelic speakers would be 47,000 and 13,000 respectively. But emigration out of Ireland was even more Irish-speaking than that, since most of the emigrants came from the western seaboard. In such counties, the percentage of Irish speakers was high: Cork, 47%, Kerry, 61%, and Galway, 69%. It is therefore probable that closer to a third of Irish-born New York and Brooklyn residents, totaling some 86,000 people were speakers of Irish.

There are no statistics to indicate how many of the Irish used their language in America, but the lack of testimony as to its use indicates that it was not widespread. In the Famine exodus, the most common mention of the Irish language in America is the occasional reference to a priest ministering to one of the many Irish gangs of laborers engaged in various public work projects. Most of these instances took place in rural areas where these newly arrived laborers were relatively isolated from American life and could maintain the use of Gaelic amidst their own kind. It was but a temporary condition and changed when they acquired more permanent homes.

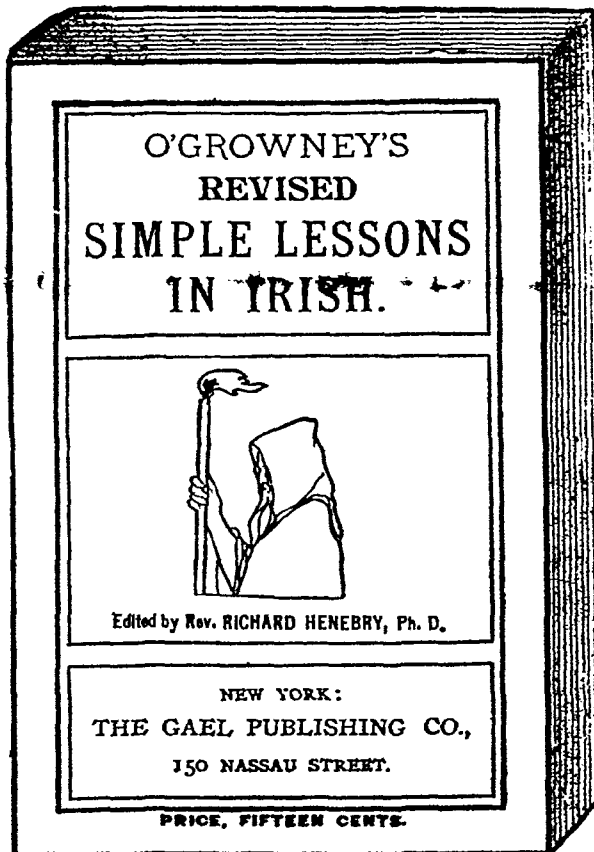
In places where the Catholic church was established, English and Latin were the languages of services. The church leadership was conscious that their congregation was regarded by the native population as foreign, and they therefore resisted the introduction of services in immigrant



languages. The first exception in New York came in the late 1830s, when the Germans were given permission to have their own church. As far as it is known, however, no thought was ever given by the hierarchy to establish facilities for Irish speakers.

It is interesting to note that a half a century before, in 1784, when the first New York congregation was founded, Father Whelan wrote to the papal nuncio to requesting priests who could speak foreign languages - including Irish. There is no evidence, however, that Gaelic was ever used in services at St. Peter's, even in post revolutionary days. It was probably confined to the confessional and so its use in unrecorded.

Circumstantial evidence suggests an anglicization process under way in the 19th century. Marriage records from the late 1700s at St. Peter's still occasionally contained distinctly Gaelic first names such as Murrough or Phelim, but by mid 19th century names of this sort are rare indeed.



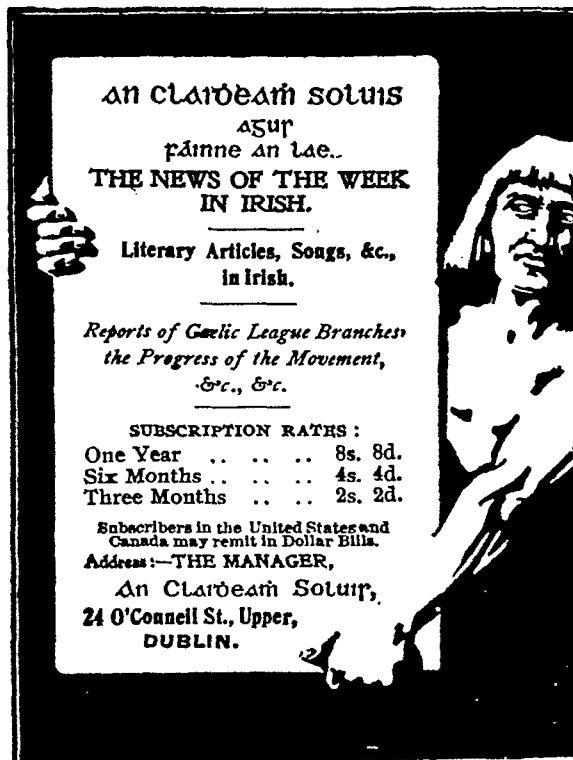
THE IRISH LANGUAGE IN NEW YORK

One of the problems with the survival of Gaelic in America, was the overall lack of literacy in the language - even among its most accomplished speakers. There was not a single periodical nor more than a handful of books available at mid 19th century. Most of the available publications were scholarly printings of classics from Gaelic literature - best suited to be pored over by academics.

In the 1850s, John O'Mahony, one of the founders of the Fenians, translated Keating's History of Ireland from Gaelic in the 1850s for a New York publisher but although he was a native speaker of the language and regarded himself more as a clan leader than a genuine political one, his attitude towards Irish was that it would be impossible to restore as a viable language.

About the same time, Archbishop Hughes of New York, afraid that Catholics would stray from the faith if removed from their churches, appeared secretly at a New York meeting of a group promoting western colonization of the Irish. The Archbishop waited for a strategic moment to rise in the audience to denounce the colonization movement and accuse the movement of trying to promote a colony similar to the Mormons in Utah. The Irish would be made distinct and separate, he said, and even though he loved the language as a young man growing up, he could not support the exclusivity that would result if the Irish spoke Gaelic in their new western settlements. Such an idea, according to Hughes, would hamper the progress of the Irish in America.

In 1858, the leading Irish-American weekly, the Irish American, began a Gaelic column that appeared in every issue. Inspired by Dublin societies such as the Ossianic Society, it was almost entirely a reprinting of old Irish poetry and seanachus. Otherwise, the only Irish in the paper were expressions such as Cead Mile Failte and Sogarth Aroon, the latter inspired by the poem of John Banim. An ad which appeared in 1863 in the missing persons column by one Eugene O'Connell from Sligo - in English and in Irish - remains one of the few exam-



GAELIC, cont'd.

ples of the practical use of the language. O'Connellan appealed in both languages for news of his missing brother.

It is probable that the Fenians had an effect on the Gaelic revival which began to show signs of life after the civil war. The name "Fenian" itself was drawn from the Gaelic name of the warriors of ancient times. An off-shoot of the Fenians, the secret revolutionary society Clan na Gael, begun in New York in 1867, actually introduced Gaelic into popular nomenclature among the Irish-Americans in choosing a Gaelic name for its society.

It was only in 1872 that the Gaelic revival in America began... in Brooklyn. A Galwayman, Michael Logan from Curraghaderry, Tuam, sent a series of letters to the Irish World urging the study of the language. He organized a class at Our Lady of Victory school on Throop Avenue and two years later he founded the Philo-Celtic Society to promote the language. [Another group had already been established in Boston in 1873]. Irish language societies soon followed in Manhattan with first a branch of the Philo-Celtic, and then the Gaelic Society in 1878.

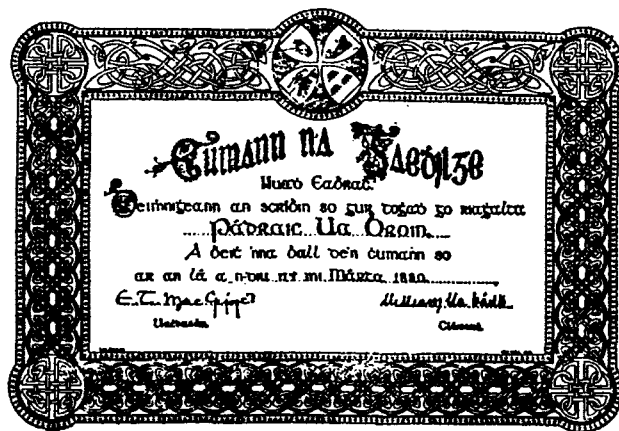
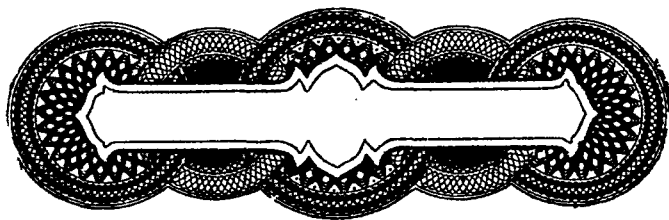
Logan's biggest achievement was the publication of the bi-lingual monthly, An Gaodhal (The Gael) which appeared for the first time in 1882 and continued to 1904, five years after his death. It was his passion, and he prided himself in 1897 that An Gaodhal never had less than "1,440 copies of Gaelic matter in any one issue for the past twelve years". His influence was even felt in one of the Brooklyn daily newspapers, the Brooklyn Citizen, which even went so far as publishing a front page article in Gaelic, using the special script every St. Patrick's Day in the 1890s.

By the late 1870s there was a move to bring Gaelic directly to the children of Irish immigrants and it was accomplished in at least two New York parishes. At St. Columba the Irish language had already had a foothold, (although a brief one) under Father Burke. Now classes were scheduled for several times a week. The St. Lawrence O'Toole parish in Yorkville, nowadays called St. Ignatius Loyala, established an "uptown Irish school". St. Lawrence's offered classes on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday for "young scholars 7 to 12 years old".

The Irish World replaced the Irish-American as the principal organ for the propagation of the Gaelic language and featured, in the last three decades of the 19th century, "The Gaelic World", a weekly column in Irish and an accompanying column in English promoting the movement.

While there was no dramatic change in all areas of Irish-American life insofar as Gaelic was concerned, the language became much more evident because of the societies promoting it. Irish newspapers occasionally had advertisements in which Gaelic words and phrases were used. The Emerald Cottage in Coney Island, for instance, used the slogan "Shin Fane, linn fane" in all its notices. Even the questionably Irish tin-pan alley stage productions took up the use of Irish titles. Bouccicault's "The Shaughraun" and Brougham's "Iascaire" came to New York stages in the 1870s.

Michael Logan died in 1899, but the Gaelic revival did not die with him. In the 2 decades that followed, Irish nationalism and the Gaelic movement grew simultaneously. Gaelic clubs appeared at the turn of the century in Yonkers, Greenpoint, the South Bronx, Jamaica, Flushing and at least two new branches in Brooklyn and New York.



THE GAELIC SOCIETY CARD OF MEMBERSHIP

Gaelic Drama

The New Heroic Play in Irish

' ' D E I R D R E ' '

With Ancient Costumes and Elaborate Scenery

will be given by

The New York Philo-Celtic Society
at

LEXINGTON OPERA HOUSE

58th Street between 3d and Lexington
Aves.

Saturday Evening, April 30, 1910.

Dancing immediately after the Play.

ADMISSION FIFTY CENTS

"The Irish in the Revolution and Civil War and Every Walk of Life," by Dr. Jeffrey C. O'Connell, 1213 Rhode Island avenue, Washington, D. C. Price seventy-five cents.

It was a time, too, for unusual opportunities for those wanting to learn Irish in a native environment without having to spend time in an Irish Gaeltacht. There was, in a sense, two Gaeltachts right in New York. In Brooklyn, the Craobh Colmcille was an organization composed exclusively of Donegal people from the Irish speaking regions. And in New York, the Craobh Brendain attempted to do the same thing for Irish speakers from Kerry. Both organizations prospered for a time until the chaos of World War I destroyed them. With them went a part of old Gaelic New York.

John Ridge is the author of The Flatbush Irish and other books on the AOH. He was recently elected president of the NYIHR.

ROLK MEMORY, CONTINUED...

enlarged as literacy and overseas experience in America magnified its common features. Irish identity broadened. Family traditions were very important to the process. It was through the family that much of this lore and consciousness was transmitted, and the immigrant experience enhanced some of the features of the underlying Irishry even while it cut off and subverted others. Thus, in the Irish-American homes of yesteryear there were three common artifacts that expressed identity and its components. One was a picture of Robert Emmet, often with his address mounted in the same frame. This stood for a memory of Ireland wronged and oppressed. The second was picture of the Sacred Heart or St. Patrick, and this stood for the religious heritage. The third was a volume of Moore's Melodies, the poems and songs of Thomas Moore - many of which were borrowed from Irish and from traditional music. This volume stood for the old past, the recollection of a golden age deep in the mists of antiquity.

It was this fund of popular culture and memory that was the elixir from which grew the mythology that sustained so many Irish people in their awareness of themselves and their tradition. Deprived of the opportunity to write their own history in any academic fashion, people substituted certain over-arching myths to satisfy their need for knowledge about their past. Every people uses this resource of mythology, and the Irish cultivated their soul dream of who they were and what had happened to them, with passionate attention. This added a further dimension to their cultural orientation. Mythology about patriotism, religion and leadership is the common man's substitute for the learning denied him, and those who rail against the distortions of Irish history due to popular myths must comprehend that it is fundamental to human psychology, though historians may revile it.

Hence, as the excellent works of scholarship concerning the Irish in Ireland and America continue to be published, documenting the organized forms of achievement and effort of the group, it is important to emphasize that there is a cultural root system beneath the formal and institutional activities in the history books. That system is the psychological legacy of the people, the intimate details of their families and memories, and the everyday consciousness that more than any formal factor shapes their consciousness of themselves.

Dr. Dennis Clark is author of The Irish in Philadelphia and The Irish Relations: Traces of an Immigrant Tradition.