

# The Hidden Gaeltacht in Old New York: Nineteenth Century Preaching in the Irish Language

by John T. Ridge

*John T. Ridge is a founding member and past president of the NYIHR. He is the author of Erin's Sons in America: The Ancient Order of Hibernians, The Flatbush Irish, The St. Patrick's Day Parade in New York, and most recently, Sligo in New York.*

*"The Hidden Gaeltacht in Old New York" is the result of the chance discovery by the author of a weathered pamphlet buried in a huge pile of unrelated documents and ephemera which was being offered for sale by a bookdealer in Hartford, CT. The pamphlet was the Fifth Annual Report of the American Protestant Association of New York printed in 1848 and details a short-lived, but historically important plan to convert the Roman Catholics of New York through the medium of the Irish language. This report and other publications of that society describe in previously unknown detail the use of the Irish language in late 1840s New York and, in combination with some other rare references from the Irish-American press, combine to suggest deeper roots in the new world for Ireland's ancient language than previously believed.*

## BACKGROUND

In many parts of Ireland at mid-nineteenth century the Irish language was still the true language of the people. The earliest national linguistic survey was published as part of the census report for 1851 and determined that 23% of the population, 1,204,684 individuals, could speak Irish and almost 5% of the population, 319,602, were in fact monoglot Irish speakers.

It was from many of the most Irish-speaking counties that the heaviest famine-time emigration occurred. Cork, Kerry, Galway and Clare placed 1st, 4th, 5th and 6th respectively in the ranking of emigration from the 32 counties for the period 1851-1855. Another heavily Irish-speaking county, Waterford, was not far behind. Famine emigration was consequently even more characteristically Irish-speaking than the population of Ireland as a whole. The majority of residents of these five high-emigration counties were Irish speakers:

County	Percentage Irish Speakers (1851)
Clare	60%
Cork	53%
Galway	70%
Kerry	61%
Mayo	66%
Waterford	63%

It is quite logical to assume that many of New York's famine era Irish were Irish-speakers, but evidence of its continued use as the vernacular is slim indeed. Most histories of the Irish in America ignore the subject completely or simply gloss over the language question. For the historian the greatest difficulty seems to have been simply that most contemporary observers of the period failed to take notice of the Irish language at all. Because most of the Irish immigrants had some English upon arrival or soon learned it in their new surroundings they blended in, at least linguistically, without too much difficulty. Nevertheless, Irish speakers were in New York in considerable numbers, as the weekly newspaper the *Irish-American* nostalgically reminisced on the occasion of the visit of the Gaelic scholar Father Eugene O'Growney's visit to the city in 1894:

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Had Father O'Growney come to New York a generation previously, he would have found that the congregations of the Catholic churches in the older parishes of the city—St. Peter's, St. Andrew's, St. James's, St. Mary's, and the old Cathedral of St. Patrick, in addressing each other, as they came from Mass, in good homely fashion, hardly ever used any other language than "the old tongue of the Gael."<sup>1</sup>

While Irish was in use outside the doors of the older churches of the city where the famine era immigrants tended to congregate, it was virtually unknown in Roman Catholic church services of the time. Few references survive of its use by the clergy. Archbishop John Hughes admitted his affection for it in a lecture he delivered in 1857 at the Tabernacle, New York, but his regard for the language was clearly something that was relegated to both his and Ireland's dim past. In opposition to the idea of organizing Irish colonies in the West, Archbishop Hughes stated that an idea such as the establishment of an Irish-speaking colony in America would separate the Irish and make them as distinct as the Mormons then were in America, something which would slow up their progress in the new land.<sup>2</sup>

Certainly, the ethnically Irish parishes of the city were not ethnic in the same way as the German and French parishes were. At the Irish parish all services were exclusively in Latin and English. Many of the leading Roman Catholic clergy at mid-nineteenth century were, however, natives of the more anglicized non Irish-speaking parts of Ireland, and there may have been something of a cultural gulf between them and their parishioners.

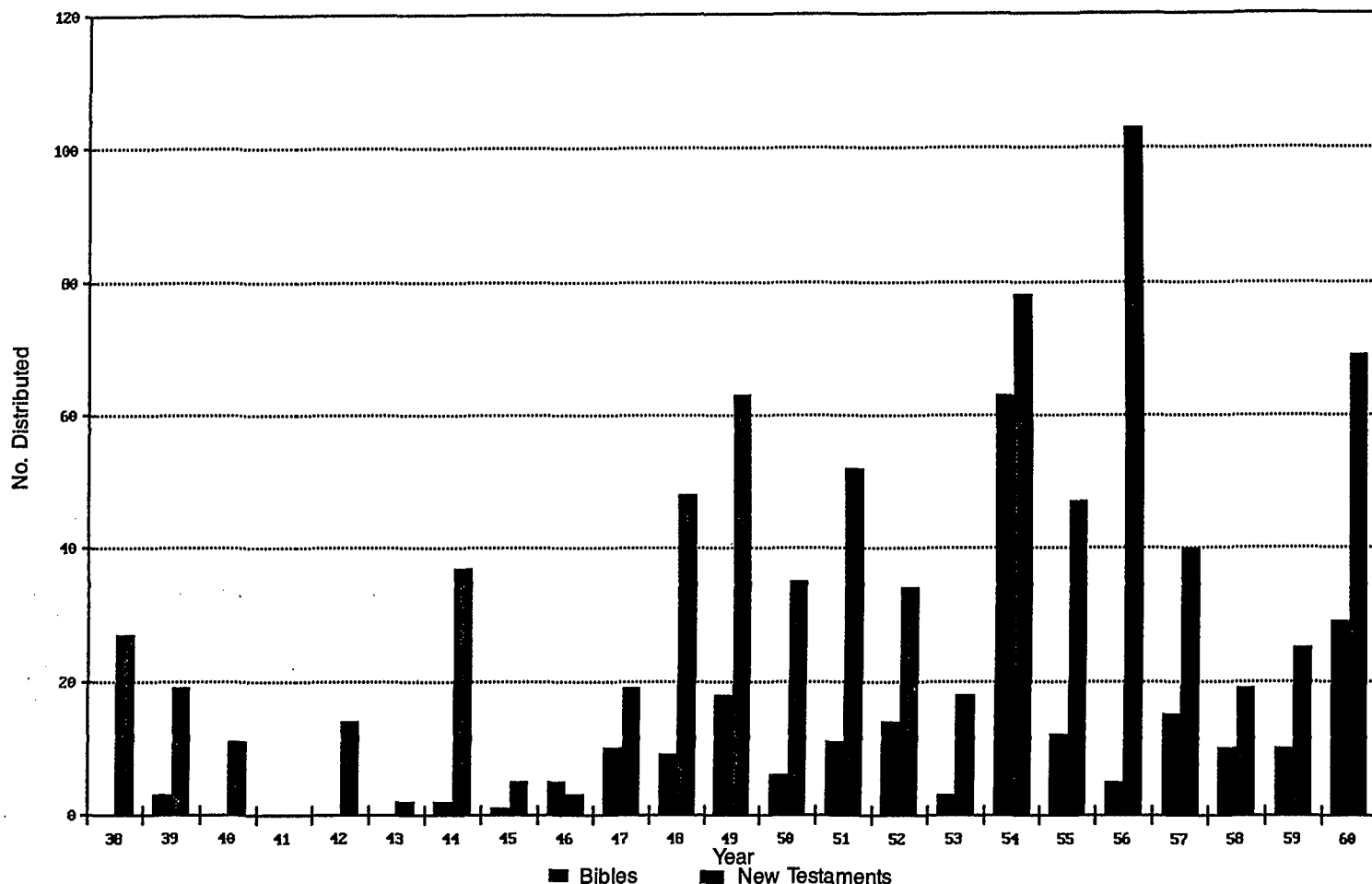
## PROTESTANT EVANGELIZATION IN IRELAND

The failure of the Roman Catholic Church to use Irish among its parishioners was something that was not new. In Ireland Protestant missions that had been established in many rural areas of the Western seaboard had recognized the possibilities of exploring the lack of Irish in Catholic services as an opportunity for them to win the hearts of the people. It became quickly apparent that in order for the Protestant missions to score any success they would have to use the vernacular. The missions set a high priority on turning the few native Irish-speaking converts at hand into full-time workers who could easily blend into the community without the suspicion accorded to Anglo-Irish and English outsiders.

The Protestant missions combined valuable practical training in agriculture, education and crafts with an active program of spiritual immersion. Use of the Irish language by the Protestant evangelizers was a tool which very often earned a sympathetic response from an otherwise unfavorably disposed peasantry. This recognition of Irish by the Ascendancy and English upper classes gave the ancient language one of the few tokens of respectability it was to receive in an increasingly anglicized Ireland, where the Gaelic tongue was being rapidly abandoned. The publication of Protestant tracts and sermons in Irish and the re-publication of the King James version of the Irish bible were often the only literature in their native language that the peasantry had very seen.

When the famine raged, the food distributed to a hungry population in mission soup kitchens was an inducement for many to at least listen to the words of the proselytizers. The resulting converts were quickly branded with the derogatory appellation of "soupers" by the increasingly resentful Roman Catholic peasantry

## Distribution of Irish Scriptures in the U.S., 1838-1860



Adapted from Parts III, IV, & V of Essay No. 14 in Eric M. North, *Distribution of Scriptures in the United States, 1831-1860* (NY: American Bible Society, 1964), pp. 49, 120, 130.

and their clergy. There were efforts in some places such as Achill Island in Mayo, in Kerry, Connemara, and other locations in mainly Irish-speaking areas to consolidate the converts into self-sufficient colonies in order to isolate them from their former neighbors and clergy. But, very few of these Protestant missions were successful, and in time many of the converts either returned to the old faith or emigrated to North America. The latter alternative seems to have been ultimately the better way to keep the converted, the idea being to get them out of their natural surroundings and away from the pressures of priest and family.

Emigration, however, proved to be of great importance in the Protestant refuge colonies, which acted almost as training and departure camps for converts from Catholicism who were leaving Ireland, because there was no room for such "caith breac" in the radically divided society.<sup>3</sup>

#### CONVERTING THE IRISH IN NEW YORK

The American Protestant Society was founded in New York in 1843 with the avowed purpose of evangelizing the large numbers of immigrant Catholics arriving in the city. From its headquarters at 150 Nassau Street in lower Manhattan, the society took up the work where the proselytizers in Ireland had left

off. It was not a project, however, that won universal acceptance among American Protestants.<sup>4</sup>

Many of our most benevolent people then said, that the whole scheme was visionary, a useless waste of talent, time and money. In their view, the idea of preaching the Gospel to Roman Catholics in our Country, and of expecting their conversion to God, or to the Protestant faith, was more ludicrous than solemn, more imaginary than real. Hence they did nothing to aid us.<sup>5</sup>

For the first couple of years the American Protestant Society stumbled along on infant feet trying to find a way to win access to the immigrants. It was led by confirmed anti-Catholics whose rhetoric was often inflammatory. The most famous of its leaders was the Presbyterian minister, the Reverend Samuel Burchard, who served for a time as the Recording Secretary of the society. It was Burchard who later delivered the famous "Rum, Romanism and Rebellion Speech" during the Blaine-Cleveland election race in 1884. The pro-Blaine speech so infuriated Irish Catholic voters that it caused just enough of them to swing their votes away from the part-Irish Blaine with the result that both the state and the presidency were won for Cleveland.<sup>6</sup>



as yet, to overlook this, above all others, the most important course of bringing them to the knowledge of the truth, while they are actually throwing away thousands of dollars, in the publication and gratuitous distribution of tracts and pamphlets, for which they have no relish, and consequently do not read. They take them, as they humorously tell me, because they find them very useful, not to read, but to light their pipes with, and for other purposes. They are not in the habit of reading. They would much rather spend their leisure hours in card-playing or telling fairy tales, than in reading books which they think will injure instead of benefiting them. Such is not their feeling towards the written Irish. They have often sat four hours without weariness, to hear me read the Irish Scriptures, a thing no Protestants will do.<sup>8</sup>

The successes of the evangelizers in reaching into the Irish and other immigrant communities stretched the resources of the American Protestant Society to the limit. It was the old question which had plagued similar efforts in Ireland. The wider their circle of contacts, the bigger the demand was for material aid. This compromised the ability of the society to pay for the printing of religious tracts. This was the case of one popular publication called "Kirkwan's Letters" which had been successfully used among the Germans when printed in their language; but there were insufficient funds in the society to print them in Irish. Indeed, the society had to borrow to meet its debts for the fiscal 1847-48 year. Nevertheless, it was with optimism that the society looked forward to 1848.<sup>9</sup>

The Old World is depopulated by emigration, and the New is filled. It is conceded by Roman Catholic Journals, that one hundred thousand Romanists arrived in New York alone, during eight months of the last year. This flood is not subject to intervals of five or ten years, but like the overflowing of the Nile, will be annual. During eight months of the last year, the population of Ireland was reduced three millions. This decrease was the result of two causes, -Death and Emigration. Most of those who escaped death, found a home upon our soil. So, [too] with regard to other portions of Europe. Already we have between three and four millions of Romanists. Their numbers double in this country once in about seven years. By natural increase and by immigration, then, we shall have an uninterrupted and large supply of material for Missionary work.<sup>10</sup>

The monthly magazine of the society kept interest in the Protestant crusade amongst the Irish at a high level as 1849 began. Minor successes were reported like the roll call of battles won, such as the distribution of between 60 to 70 Bibles and Testaments, 40 of which were in the Irish language, to receptive Roman Catholics. Distribution of bibles and testaments, unlike tracts, was not a casual thing; the recipient was considered at this stage practically converted. It was further reported that four weekly meetings were being held among the Irish in the city every week. It was again emphasized that work carried out in the Irish language was the most effective tool. Little resistance was noted when this means was undertaken.

Converts from their own faith, who are familiar with the Irish language, and experimentally acquainted with their superstitions, most readily gain access to them. Such men, moved with compassion for their brethren,

have been kindly received, and have met with little opposition.<sup>11</sup>

## PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

However, there was something of a counteroffensive underway in the Roman Catholic ranks. One of the few references to the use of Irish in New York's Roman Catholic churches is to St. Columba's on West 25th Street near Ninth Avenue. The pastor arrived at the new parish in 1846, in the midst of a raging epidemic. Although his tenure was cut short by his unexpected death within months, he had already made a deep impression.

There was the eloquent Father Joseph Burke, like Columba, himself from Donegal, who in the first months of parish life drew crowds from all over the city, addressing them even in Irish.<sup>12</sup>

Father Burke was succeeded at St. Columba's by Tyrone-born Father Michael McAleer. McAleer was a priest in the tradition of Father Burke; soon after his arrival, he was camped out in his living room for several months, answering one sick call after another during another terrible epidemic. Like Burke, his mother tongue was Irish. Curiously, he was one of the few priests actually singled out for criticism by name in the publications of the American Protestant Society. Father McAleer was a noted enthusiast for the advancement of Irish right up to his death in 1881. It was no accident that the "Downtown Irish School" was founded at St. Columba's with his backing in the late 1870s.

In the end though, it was probably the opposition of the Irish Roman Catholic laity themselves to the appearance of the proselytizers which spelled their doom. As the colporteurs became more well-known, their visits to the tenements began to be noticed with displeasure by other Irish residents. One missionary reported his work was disturbed when "rowdies" showed up outside the tenement door "making noise and playing the fiddle."

The Protestant evangelizers eventually faced a problem which was to confound the Gaelic revivalists many decades later. The reduction of the Irish nation to a state of utter poverty from penal times, and the consequent destruction of educational opportunities in the Irish language, created a population which was largely illiterate in the ancient tongue. This condition also tended to accelerate its non-standardization in the vernacular. Printed literature of all types, especially religious works, stagnated, and what was left was in many cases an outmoded classical Irish from which the dialects of Ireland had long since diverged. Profoundly, the Irish-speaking colporteurs recognized a major obstacle in achieving the Protestant aim of creating a literate bible-reading population.

Had the Irish Scriptures been in a readable condition, they would have a vast and profitable circulation. But, unfortunately, there can only be found here and there an isolated being who can read them. While there are thousands who speak and know the language, and appear very greedy to get them. But in their present state they are a sealed book for the masses, being crowded with obsolete letters and often whole syllables. Had I the least encouragement from the Bible (Society) or any other body that they would print them, I could make the New Testament readable to any man who speaks Irish and can read English, by leaving out all the ellipses and mutes, retaining only such as have sound, and giving them the power and sound of English letters, having it in English type also, making it actually less expensive to print than our ordinary English Testaments. Having the New Testa-

ment, an Irish hymn book, and the third series of Kirwan's letters thus arranged, I would consider the evangelization of the Irish among us at hand. And unless this mode is adopted I confess despair of ever seeing any reformation among them. Had we an Irish meeting-house, with Irish hymns and Bibles, you would soon see them flock from the far corners of the city to worship God in a way which would be to them at once both natural and intelligent.<sup>13</sup>

It was, however, not to be. A new emphasis was put into strengthening the already converted and the 1849 Annual Report of the American Protestant Society noted that, despite what they claimed to be opposition by the priests, "many of the children and youth who now arrive from Ireland can read."

Presumably, this would make it easier for the younger Irish to read their English language publications.

The American Protestant Society, overcome by debt and meeting competition in their fund-raising efforts from other Protestant proselytizing groups, decided at the end of 1849 to merge with the Christian Alliance. This society did not emphasize the conversion of Roman Catholics, but concentrated on "spreading the gospel by securing universal religious liberty." The new united organization, called Americans for Christian Union, soon tired of the campaign to convert Catholics using the medium of the Irish language, but didn't surrender any of its anti-Catholic rhetoric.

It was to be decades before any religious body, Protestant or Catholic, devoted much attention to the Irish language. It was only in the 1890s that the Galway-born Redemptorist Father Peter J. Cunniffe of St. Alphonsus Church gained some note as a preacher and conductor of missions in Irish. His efforts were pretty much a one-man show, however. In the regular parishes at the close of the nineteenth century, there was still no attempt to introduce the Irish language in services, despite the presence of several Gaelic League enthusiasts among the leading clergy of Manhattan, such as Father Charles McCready of Holy Cross, Father James W. Power of All Saints and Msgr. Henry A. Brann of St. Agnes. It remains to be seen why Irish as a language of devotion was largely ignored despite continuing heavy immigration from the still significant, although declining, Gaeltachts of Ireland.

Undoubtedly, more could have been done to care for the spiritual needs of the Irish-speaking community through its native language. Perhaps all that was needed would have been a more sympathetic hierarchy, but their official policy towards the Irish language, if there ever was such, has not yet been discovered. It probably had not changed much from the benign neglect of Archbishop Hughes.

## EPILOGUE

New York City in the nineteenth century was another example of one of the numerous lost opportunities for the Irish language. There was a reservoir of Irish in the city beyond the imagination of the most starry-eyed Gaelic League enthusiast and of surprising depth. Amazingly, there were a significant number of native-born New Yorkers who were fluent Irish speakers almost to the close of the century. The Comptroller of the City of New York from 1863 to 1867, Matthew T. Brennan "and all his family born here, spoke Irish and took a pride in it." Another prominent Irish-speaker was Judge Florence Fitzgerald. The weekly *Irish American* lamented in 1894:



Matthew T. Brennan successively Comptroller of the City of New York, Police Commissioner and Sheriff. Brennan was the most well-known of New York's native-born Irish speakers. (Illustration from J. Frank Korman, *Reminiscences of the Old Fire Laddies*, New York, 1885, p.53)

Today, the veteran ex-Governor P.G. Malony remains one of the last representatives of those native-born Manhattanites, who spoke the old language from their childhood, and speak it still.<sup>14</sup>

Patrick G. Malony was born in the Battery district, the old First Ward, to a family of "wealthy farmers" who had emigrated from Co. Clare. He was nicknamed the "Governor" for a term spent as Governor of the Almshouse in 1849, but he was a successful businessman as well and was once the proprietor of the well-known Irish gathering point, the North River Hotel, at the corner of Barclay and West Streets. He died at 84 in October of 1895 at his Harlem residence, one of the last speakers, if not the last, of New York's old native-born Gaeltacht.<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Irish American*, 26 November 1894.

<sup>2</sup> *Complete Works of the Most Rev. John Hughes, Archbishop of New York*. (New York: Catholic Publication House, 1864), p. 754.

<sup>3</sup> Desmond Bowen, *The Protestant Crusade in Ireland, 1800-1870* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978), p. 189.

<sup>4</sup> Coincidentally, the building which replaced the original on the same site at 150 Nassau Street housed the headquarters after 1899 of the first regular periodical ever to be published in the Irish language. The publication, *An Gaodhal*, had been founded in Brooklyn in the early 1880s. When its originator Michael J. Logan died in 1899, it continued for a time from the Nassau Street address.

<sup>5</sup> *Fifth Annual Report of the American Protestant Society* (New York: American Protestant Society, 1848), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Msgr. Florence D. Cohalan, *Popular History of the Archdiocese of New York* (New York: United States Catholic Historical Society, 1983), p. 102.

<sup>7</sup> *Fifth Annual Report*, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>9</sup> Kirwan was actually the Rev. Nicholas Murray of Elizabethtown, N.J. Murray was born a Catholic of poor circumstances in Ireland and was in 1848 about fifty years of age. He converted to Presbyterianism at about the age of eighteen. Murray provoked Archbishop Hughes into a series of responses which were published in the weekly *Freeman's Journal* and later in the *Complete Works of Archbishop John Hughes*, Vol. 1 (New York, 1866).

<sup>10</sup> *Fifth Annual Report*, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> *Sixth Annual Report of the American Protestant Society*, (New York: American Protestant Society, 1849), p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> "New York's Oldest Catholic Church," *Historical Records and Studies*, Vol. XXV (New York: United States Catholic Historical Society, 1946), p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> *American Protestant Magazine*, (New York), February 1849, pp. 279-280.

<sup>14</sup> *Irish American*, 26 November 1894.

<sup>15</sup> *Irish American*, 14 October 1895.