

THE IRISH LANGUAGE

This section gives a concise history of the Irish language down the ages to modern times. From its beginnings through its heyday when it was spoken throughout Ireland and the larger part of Scotland and the number of its speakers was probably greater than the population then speaking a variety of English to its political domination and the decimation of its speakers and onwards to its gradual restoration up to its position today in a State once more sovereign. A brief account of modern literature in Irish follows.

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

STATUS

Irish belongs to the Goidelic branch of the Celtic family of languages. It is an official language in the Republic of Ireland and in the European Union.

AFFINITIES AND NAME

The earliest attested forms of Goidelic are found in Ireland, or in parts of Britain where migrants from Ireland are known to have settled, and in effect Goidelic is the Irish language. The divergence of this form of Celtic into the autonomous forms of Modern Irish, Scottish Gaelic, and Manx is a recent development.

The word *Goidelic* derives from the Old Irish *Goídel* ‘an Irish-speaking Celt’. In Old Irish the name for the language was *Goídelc*. *Goídel* and *Goídelc* were borrowed from British Celtic, their cognates in Modern Welsh being *Gwyddel* and *Gwyddeleg*, during a prehistorical period of prolonged contact between Irish and British Celts. It has been proposed by the Indo-Europeanist E. P. Hamp that the Proto-British plural of *Gwyddel* was **wēdeloi*, and that this may be assumed to be a close cognate of a form **wēdnioi*, a conceivable Proto-Irish precursor of Old Irish *Féni*, a designation by which the early Irish aristocracy knew themselves. Both forms would have originally meant ‘woodsmen, hunters, warriors’, an honourific type of appellation among Celtic peoples. The contemporary English word Gaelic derives from a modern Irish, or Scottish Gaelic, form of Old Irish *Goídelc*, Classical Modern Irish *Gaoidhealg*; Modern Irish *Gaeilge*, Scottish Gaelic *Gàidhlig*. The word ‘Gaelic’, as a term for the language, is generally avoided in Ireland.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL HISTORY

When Ireland’s historical period begins, in the fifth century AD, Irish is already established as the predominant vernacular. At least, there are no records of any other. In this early period, Ireland’s population was establishing permanent settlements in western and northern Britain. As surviving inscriptions and later tradition testify, there were particularly extensive settlements in the area of South Wales and across the Severn estuary into Devon. These settlements were later absorbed in the consolidation of Welsh lordships and by the Anglo-Saxon advance. In northern Britain, Irish-speaking supremacy expanded gradually from settlements on the coastal area of Argyll until it had by the 11th century encompassed the whole of Scotland. By this period, Norse settlements in the coastal regions and islands of Ireland and Scotland were being assimilated to Gaeldom and the Irish-speaking area had reached its greatest extent, but decline was soon to set in.

The Anglo-Normans began to settle in Scotland during the reign of Mael Coluim (1059–93), and initiated a process by which the Irish language had within three centuries receded to the Highlands in the north and to the Galloway region in the south-west. The Anglo-Norman intervention in Ireland began in 1169 and introduced a substantial settlement of Anglo-Norman and English-speakers, mainly in urban centres. However, indigenous society regained its dominance and rural Ireland was by the end of the fourteenth century almost universally Irish-speaking again, but the principal towns appear to have evolved towards a societal bilingualism in which English was the expected language in administrative and legal affairs. Irish thus never became the language of urban administration, and the Irish-speaking population never again achieved a full political autonomy.

On the other hand, during this period from the thirteenth century to the sixteenth, powerful regional lordships emerged throughout the Gaelic world and provided an essential support for the Irish language and its institutions. Possibly the greatest of them was the Lordship of the Isles which, at the height of its power in the fifteenth century, included all of the Hebrides, the greater part of the Highland region, and much of Antrim in the north-east of Ireland, and undoubtedly played a decisive part in consolidating the Irish language and its institutions throughout the Highlands and Isles of Scotland. This lordship inevitably came into conflict with the Scottish Crown and was finally at an end by 1545 when its last ruler, Domhnall Dubh, died.

As the sixteenth century progressed, the powerful Gaelic and Gaelicised lordships of Ireland were to suffer a similar fate: the earldoms of Desmond, Kildare, Tyrconnel, Tyrone, and the lordship of Fermanagh were all in turn destroyed. The sixteenth century had brought a renewed drive to impose English rule on Ireland and, in the process, to destroy its cultural distinctiveness. The objective took some time to attain, but the suppressions and movements of population which took

place during the reigns of the Tudors and Stuarts (1534–1610), the Cromwellian settlements (1654), the Williamite campaign (1681–91), and the subsequent Penal Law, had a cumulative effect of eliminating the Irish-speaking aristocracy and their institutions. Throughout Ireland, an English-speaking ‘ascendancy’ was introduced and the mercantile and professional classes in urban areas quickly became English-speaking.

It has been reliably estimated that the population at the end of the eighteenth century comprised two million Irish-speakers, one and a half million Irish-English bilinguals, and one and a half million English-speakers. Of these, the two million monolingual Irish-speakers included almost all of the most deprived rural poor and, though this class continued to increase rapidly in number, it was unprotected against economic disaster. From the end of the eighteenth century it was repeatedly reduced by famine, epidemic and emigration, and was all but wiped out by the Great Famine of 1846–9 and its aftermath. According to the 1851 Census of Ireland, the first to include a question on language, the total number of Irish-speakers had by then declined to 1,524,286, or just 25% of the population. And a precipitant shift to English was under way: the percentage of Irish speakers in the under-10 age-group was 12.6%, against 22.23% in the 10–19 age-group, and 24.91% in the 20–29 group. So it continued. By 1891, for the whole of Ireland, the percentage of Irish-speakers in the under-10 group had declined to 3.5%, and the language appeared to be on the point of extinction.

The Irish language fared better in the twentieth century than might have been predicted. First of all, the rate of language shift slowed as it encountered the densely populated, largely coastal, regions which were known as ‘congested districts’. The impoverished communities which inhabited these districts were nearly autonomous in their subsistence economies, and had little contact with English. Broadly, they are the districts in which the contemporary *Gaeltacht* survives. Then, from the end of the nineteenth century, there was a vigorous language-restoration movement which provided one of the principal motivations for a renewed campaign for the political secession of Ireland from the United Kingdom. When the Irish Free State was established in 1922, Irish was designated the ‘national language’ in the constitution; its position in education was reinforced, and competence in it became obligatory for public-service employment. Although the position of Irish has remained weaker than many thought possible in a supportive State, there has been a continuing increase in the number of those who claim in censuses to be speakers.

As a result of the State’s language policies, the population of active Irish-speakers has constantly been renewed through the induction of school-produced bilinguals; a degree of literacy in Irish has been disseminated throughout the community, thus allowing a wider use of Irish as an official and formal medium; there has been a reasonably high level of corpus planning and publication; and the function of Irish as a symbol of ethnic identity has been sustained through a century of sweeping economic and demographic change.

RECORDS AND VARIETIES

The earliest extant records in Irish are in the script called ogham or ogam, in which letters are represented as units of strokes and notches for writing on stone. While the scholarly consensus has for long been that ogham is a deliberate codification of the Roman alphabet, the fact that it is the medium for a well-defined orthography for Proto-Irish has until recently been less clearly recognised. This orthography differed from manuscript Old Irish in a number of ways, most notably in representing voiced stops [b d g] as B D G in positions where they were later represented by the letters *p, t, c*. Vestiges of such features of ogham orthography are sometimes found in the spelling of proper names in early Hiberno-Latin texts, and in the Irish glosses written by the *prima manus* in the *Codex Wirzburgensis* (see below). But the great bulk of early Irish manuscript writing is in a revised orthography, some of the ambiguities of which reflect a British pronunciation of Latin. This later orthography must therefore have evolved through the influence of the extensive British Christian missions which were undertaken in Ireland during the fifth and sixth centuries.

In the earliest manuscripts, Irish was written in the insular style of the contemporary minuscule script used throughout Europe. Irish scribal tradition adhered conservatively to this script and in time, as fashions changed elsewhere, it came to be associated exclusively with the writing of Irish. It continued to be used as the conventional script for Irish, in manuscript and in print, until the second half of the twentieth century. For a number of reasons, mostly pragmatic, it

was then officially discarded. It had been phased out of use in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland by 1964, and in secondary schools by 1970.

The earliest writing in Irish to have survived in a contemporary manuscript is the collection of annotations, or glosses, on the epistles of St Paul in the *Codex Wirzburgensis*, now preserved in the University library in Würzburg. A small number of the Würzburg glosses are in a distinct hand, the *prima manus*, and in an earlier form of Irish than the main body of glosses in the codex. These early glosses are thought to be not later than 700. The main body of Würzburg glosses belongs to the eighth century and follows the orthographic convention which was the norm in Old Irish.

Old Irish is the medium of a substantial literature. It includes lyrical and devotional verse, prose sagas, homilies, historical and legal tracts, and commentaries on biblical and Latin grammatical texts. In modern times, the Old Irish record has widely attracted the attention of linguists and literary scholars. Because Old Irish is the earliest variety of Celtic which is so fully attested, it provides significant evidence for the comparative reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European. And its literature, though there is some disagreement on the extent to which it does, or does not, reflect an ancient pre-Christian tradition, is a distinctive and copious early mediaeval record which contains much of interest for literary scholarship.

Classical Old Irish, of the period 700–850, is known from the main body of Würzburg glosses and from other similar texts. It is highly uniform in its orthography, grammar, and lexicon, but its greater uniformity in comparison with other Irish texts may in part be due to the chance survival in contemporary manuscripts of a relatively large and highly uniform body of writings, rather than to any particular uniformity in the literary language of the period.

In Ireland, few contemporary records of Old Irish have survived. The greater part of the early record has been preserved in manuscripts which were compiled in later centuries, generally from the eleventh century and after. The record preserved in such later sources has been subjected to considerable scribal intervention, deliberate and inadvertent, and almost all extant texts exhibit variation between earlier and later forms of language. It cannot always be determined whether the variation was introduced by later scribes, or was an intrinsic part of the text. Writers of Irish were, at all periods tempted to archaism. It is nevertheless agreed that the extant record includes a corpus of texts which belong to the late sixth and seventh centuries and are in Archaic Old Irish. This corpus includes the *Amra Choluim Chille* (a lament for St Colmcille which is probably contemporary with his death in 597), archaic verse embedded in the genealogical records, and some law texts.

By the end of the ninth century Old Irish was beginning to evolve to Middle Irish, the form of language broadly associated with the period 900–1150. Formally, Middle Irish is distinguished from Old Irish by a simplification of inflection, particularly in the verbal system. In the lexicon, contact with the Norse is beginning to be reflected in borrowings of terms connected with seafaring and trade. The period was one of political turmoil for the Gaelic world, but literary continuity was maintained, and extensive records are extant. They include the long sequence of cantos on biblical themes known as *Saltair na Rann* ('The Verse Psalter'), the historical poems of Flann Mainistrech (c. AD 1000–50), the large compilations in verse and prose of legends about famous places called *Dindsheanchas*, adaptations of classical epics into the form of prose sagas, and a powerful satire on monks and literary men titled *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* (The Vision of Mac Con Glinne).

By the late eleventh century and early twelfth, the Norse settlements had been absorbed culturally, but political strife was endemic. At various periods, for example, the Ó Briain dynasty of Thomond, one of the leading contenders for the kingship of Ireland and hegemony over the Gaelic world, gained control over the Norse kingdoms of Dublin, Man, and the Hebrides. Such activity must have contributed to the full re-Gaelicisation of these regions. More generally, it must have led to a levelling of regional variation in spoken Irish and created conditions favourable to the development of a new koine. At any rate, a comparative historical analysis of the modern spoken varieties of Irish and Scottish Gaelic reveals few features of divergence which can be traced further back than this period. The hypothesised late mediaeval vernacular, to which the modern spoken varieties are testimony, is sometimes called Common Gaelic.

Coincidentally, when this greater uniformity was being established in vernacular Irish, new monastic orders were being introduced from the Continent as part of an ecclesiastical reform, and the secular learning which had been maintained in the older Celtic foundations passed to an emerging

class of hereditary lay scholars. These developments led to the emergence of a new literary norm, more consonant with the spoken Common Gaelic. This norm is known now as Classical Modern Irish. From the thirteenth century to the seventeenth, the Early Modern Irish period, it was taught and used by the literary schools throughout Ireland, Gaelic Scotland, and Man.

Verse compositions by professional poets are a substantial part of the literature of the period; they include encomiastic verse for patrons, but also devotional compositions and some personal poetry. Love poetry of the *amour courtois* genre enjoyed a vogue among the aristocracy. One of the great literary flowerings of the period was the extensive Fenian or Ossianic literature in prose and verse composed around the legendary Fionn Mac Cumhaill and his warrior band or *fian*, hence 'Fenian' and Irish *fianaíocht/fianaigheacht*; Fionn's son was Oisín, anglicised Ossian, hence Ossianic. This genre was later to become widely known through the purported translations of James Macpherson (1736–96), a native of Kingussie in the Scottish Highlands, and was a significant stimulus to the development of Romanticism.

Following the upheavals of the seventeenth century, and the destruction of native institutions of literacy and learning, the forms of written Irish became increasingly local, and the extant record to a substantial degree reflects the dialectal variation of the spoken language. Yet the literate were still familiar with the forms of Classical Modern Irish and strove to adhere to its conventions. This is the period of Post-Classical Modern Irish. Its literary record has survived in a manuscript tradition maintained in their spare time by artisans, farmers, priests, and schoolmasters. With the exception of one or two items such as Mícheál Coimín's *Laoi Oisín ar Thír na nÓg* 1750 (Ossian's Song about the Land of Youth) and Brian Merriman's *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche* 1780 (The Midnight Court), it has not attracted wider interest.

MODERN SPOKEN AND WRITTEN VARIETIES

In the twentieth century Modern Irish survives in the first instance in its spoken varieties. These varieties are distinguished principally in their phonology, but also substantially in their morphology and lexicon. Differences of syntax are few, and on the whole varieties of Modern Irish are mutually intelligible.

As happens with dialectal variation everywhere, the regions of Irish which are differentiated by any one feature of phonological, morphological or lexical variation are seldom exactly coterminous with regions differentiated by any other such feature. But regional varieties of Modern Irish may be conveniently grouped, according to provincial boundaries, into the dialects of:

- (a) Munster, now spoken by scattered communities in the south and south-west of Ireland;
- (b) Connacht, now spoken by communities in Co. Galway and Co. Mayo in the west of Ireland;
- (c) Ulster, now spoken by communities in Co. Donegal in the north-west of Ireland.

From the end of the nineteenth century, as Modern Irish began to be redeveloped as a language of public affairs and high culture, the regional diversity of its spoken form was reflected, not only in works of creative literature, but in textbooks and public documents. It became necessary to define new norms for educational and official purposes. A new spelling norm was published in 1945 and, in revised form, in 1947; a new morphological norm was published in 1953 and, in revised form, in 1958. These spelling and morphological norms, the *Caighdeán*, are fully established in official publications.

MODERN LITERATURE

In literature, the more indigenous aspects of the tradition continue to attract the greatest international attention, as, for example, the oral lore which so copiously survived in Irish into modern times. The Irish Folklore Commission was established in 1935. It is now incorporated into University College, Dublin as the UCD Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore and the National Folklore Collection within the UCD School of Irish, Celtic Studies, Irish Folklore and Linguistics. It has been instrumental in collecting an immense and valuable store of data from informants in every region as well as through a schools-based project in the early years of the Commission. The folklore heritage of Ireland includes mythic tales of the fantastic endeavours of bold warriors and stories of crossed lovers. Saints and fairies, monsters and miracles, figure. The sense of place is heightened through connections with placenames and local history and recollection. There is a vast store of songs,

anecdotes, beliefs, proverbs, riddles and tongue twisters. Traditional storytellers (*seanchaithe*) gave generously of their memorised knowledge. Ireland is fortunate that much of its rich oral folklore tradition is now available in archives, embracing every facet of life from story telling to traditional cures for every ill.

The Irish Revival produced writers who looked to Europe for their models, but were also well grounded in what remained extant of the native tradition, both in written form and in the speech of the people. This gave rise to new literary forms in Irish. Short story and novel writers appeared, some attempting to write in a European mould as *Patrick Pearse* and *Pádraic Ó Conaire*, some steeped in the native tradition as *Séamus Ó Grianna* although his brother *Seosamh Mac Grianna* developed a different style. The first Irish play staged was in 1901 in Dublin, written by Douglas Hyde, one of the founders of the Gaelic League and later first President of Ireland.

From the beginning, the new Irish State encouraged literary effort through publishing and through translation of literature and popular material in other languages. This was vital, at any rate, for the development of Irish through the educational system. By the 1940s a new generation of writers and of writing was emerging (*Seán Ó Ríordáin* being generally credited with a new movement in poetry and *Máirtín Ó Cadhain* in prose) and succeeding generations have followed them, all now part of a universal literary scene, but known only through translation abroad, and writing for a relatively small audience in Ireland. They include the playwrights *Mícheál Mac Liammóir* (born in England), *Séamas Ó Néill*, *Seán Ó Tuama*, *Eoghan Ó Tuairisc*, *Críostóir Ó Floinn*, *Brendan Behan* and *Máiréad Ní Ghráda*, from different parts of the country but not of the *Gaeltacht* originally. Novelists and short story writers are *Liam Ó Flaithearta*, *Breandán Ó hEithir* from the *Gaeltacht* Aran Islands, *Pádraig Ua Maoileoin*, *Muiris Ó Súilleabháin*, *Diarmaid Ó Súilleabháin*, *Donncha Ó Céileachair*, *Seán Mac Mathúna*, *Pádraic Breathnach*, *Dónall Mac Amhlaigh*, *Pádraig Ó Cíobháin*, *Ciarán Ó Coigligh*, *Seamas Mac Annaidh* and *Pádraig Standún*, most from a *Gaeltacht* background. The James Joyce of creative prose is the polemicist *Máirtín Ó Cadhain* from the *Cois Fharraige Gaeltacht* in the West with his intricate *Cré na Cille* which is difficult to categorise.

It is, however, in poetry that Irish today tends to be most prolific. The 1940s generation produced poets of the calibre of *Máirtín Ó Direáin* from Aran, *Seán Ó Ríordáin* originally from the *Gaeltacht* area of *Baile Bhuirne* in Cork, and *Máire Mhac an tSaoi* from Dublin but brought up partly in the Kerry *Gaeltacht*. The modern generation of writers—many of them poets, some of them writing in several genres—has been translated into several European languages. *Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill*, *Michael Hartnett*, and *Liam Ó Muirthile* (also a playwright), as well as *Michael Davitt*, *Louis de Paor*, *Colm Breathnach*, *Cathal Ó Searcaigh*, *Tomás Mac Síomóin*, *Pearse Hutchinson*, *Mícheál Ó Siadhail*, *Gabriel Rosenstock*, *Áine Ní Ghlinn*, *Biddy Jenkinson*, *Deirdre Brennan* and others are well known, some through school anthologies especially. *Gaeltacht* writers include *Johnny Cóil Maidhc Ó Coistealbha*, *Joe Steve Ó Neachtain*, and *Mícheál Ó Conghaile*. Original writing for children and teenagers as well as novellas for adult learners is gaining in popularity.

There is no small number of exponents of literary criticism in Irish, following international trends. The very recently published (December 2007) bilingual *Foclóir Litríochta agus Critice* (Dictionary of Literature and Criticism) of *An Gúm* contains an additional miscellany of the literary terminology of the native literature, e.g. storytelling genres as *fís* (vision), *eachtra* (adventure), *iomramh* (voyage), *searc* (love), *loingeas* (exile), *uath* (terror); the seven grades of the learned class of poets of Early Irish from the lowly *obhlaire* to the highest *ollamh* as well as the many categories of *bard* or those recognised as having a facility for poetry (thirteen categories are listed). The section *Sleachta Suadh* (Excerpts of the Experts) shows the breadth of contemporary literary criticism from writers as *Seán Ó Tuama*, *Breandán Ó Doibhlin*, *Breandán Ó Buachalla*, *Pádraig A. Breatnach*, *Lillis Ó Laoire* and Alan Titley. A modern generation of women critics are included: *Máire Ní Annracháin*, *Pádraigín Riggs* and *Aisling Ní Dhonnchadha*, a list to which must be added *Máirín Nic Eoin*, chair of the subcommittee which prepared this latest addition to dictionaries on specific areas of interest, *Tadhg Ó Dúshláine*, *Gearóid Denvir* and the literary biographer *Seán Ó Coileáin*. In the field of textual analysis, *Cathal Ó Háinle* has produced several stimulating works in recent years. The most well-known autobiographies all come from the Kerry *Gaeltacht*: *An tOileánach* by *Tomás Ó Criomhthain* of the Great Blasket Island (translated into English as *The Islandman*); *Fiche Bliain ag Fás* by *Muiris Ó Súilleabháin* (translated as *Twenty Years a-Growing*) and *Peig*, the life story of the islandwoman *Peig Sayers*, as taken down from her oral account.

Over the past 150 years or so, scholars and writers have ensured both erudite and popular redactions of the rich indigenous literature: sagas, historical narrative, and the successive varieties of poetry over the centuries. Contemporary expressions of *Gaeltacht* arts as storytelling and verse duologue draw large audiences at the annual *Oireachtas na Gaeilge* festival.

The literary and stylistic capacity of the Irish language to cope with all registers and topics of modern life is apparent in the non-creative sector also. Nowadays, another generation is emerging who engage with film and television script writing as well as radio, television and print journalism, including regular columnists in English language newspapers. Their linguistic background varies as does the linguistic quality of their output, as the community language changes and the second-language writers make their own of the learned language.
