

**Law, Economics and Cultural Hegemony:**  
*The triumph of English and the loss of Irish in Ireland*

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***Introduction: Language Gain and Loss***

It has been calculated that in the early eighteenth century two thirds of the Irish population spoke Gaelic as their everyday language (1,340,000 from a total of just over two million) (Ó Cuív, 1951: 19). At the end of that century Whitley Stokes claimed that ‘at least eight hundred thousand of our countrymen speak Irish only, and there are at least twice as many more who speak it in preference’ (Stokes, 1799: 45); this meant that more than half the population were by necessity or choice Irish speakers. By the mid nineteenth century, however, the figures had started to reflect a significant and quickening shift: the 1851 census reported that only 1,524,286 (less than a quarter of the population) spoke Irish, of whom only 319,602 (less than five per cent) were monoglot. Despite the achievements of the Gaelic revival in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (its success was more notable for its political consequences than its linguistic effects), the waning of Irish continued apace: the 1911 census records 582,446 Irish speakers (slightly more than thirteen per cent) with 16,973 monoglots (just less than three per cent).

Why did this extremely rapid triumph of English over Irish take place? How did a country in which, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, more than half the population spoke the native language normally or by choice, become one in which, by the start of the next century, an ever-decreasing number of speakers knew it or used it? One explanation is that for centuries the colonists imposed English upon a reluctant people; that using the instruments of the state, primarily law and control of the economy, the rulers forced Irish people to speak a foreign language in order to foster political subjecthood and cultural assimilation. This process, it is argued, was exacerbated by the inclusion of Ireland within the United Kingdom after the passing of the Acts of Union in 1800. While in outline this account is accurate, there is one aspect of the process of language shift in Ireland which is puzzling. This is the fact that not only did the Irish acquire English, the language of economic opportunity and power, which makes sense in pragmatic terms, they also lost their own native language, which seems peculiar. The issue which this article will seek to address therefore is how and why the English language triumphed in Ireland, and, indirectly, how and why the Irish language was lost.

***Colonial Contact and Infectious Irishness***

One of the great preoccupations which haunted colonialism in Ireland was how to stop the colonisers from being Gaelicised; or, to use the common trope of the time, how to

prevent the malaise of Irishness from spreading to the colonists. Powerful not least because it was sometimes realised, the fear was that Irish culture would taint the colonisers and lead them to reject their proper identity and to accept instead the norms, habits and values of the ‘mere’ (pure) Irish. An early expression of this idea was made in Irish parliamentary legislation in 1297 which referred to English inhabitants of the borderlands between Gaelic and English areas as ‘quasi degeneres’ (as if degenerate), having fallen away from their proper ‘genus’ (stock, kind) (Watt, 1987: 310). Its most trenchant articulation, however, came in the late sixteenth century in the work of the Anglo-Irish Chroniclers.

The main focus of anxiety about the disease of Irishness was the Gaelic language and this is hardly surprising. Though perceptible dissimilarities such as those of styles of dress or modes of hair would have been immediately noticeable for the colonists, the central difference which would have registered with them, not least because it made communication difficult if not impossible, was that of language. A person’s dress might strike one as odd, or unfashionable, or even barbarian, but the distinction of language was a problem of a more profound order; perceiving cultural difference was one thing, but experiencing it through the medium of words was quite another. Language would have seemed to the colonists a barrier even to the simplest forms of exchange and it is perhaps this that explains the extraordinary vehemence with which the linguistic ‘degeneration’ of some of the colonists was denounced by the Chroniclers. In light of the fact that the Gaelic language was heard and seen to be a marker of radical alterity, its adoption by significant numbers of the colonisers was evidently deeply disturbing to defenders of English rule. Identified as the source of Irishness, the Gaelic language became the central concern of those who wished to reverse the corruption of the colonists and to ensure the purity of colonial identity.

In *A Treatise Containing a Plain and Perfect Description of Ireland* (1577), one of the Chroniclers, Richard Stanihurst, made an historical observation which carried with it an important admonition:

The inhabitants of the English Pale have beene in old time so much addicted to their civility, and so farre sequestered from barbarous savagenesse, as their onlelie mother toonge was English. And trulie, so long as these impaled dwellers did sunder themselves as well in land as in language from the Irish: rudeness was daie by daie in the countrie supplanted, civilitie ingrafted, good lawes established, loyaltie observed, rebellion suppressed, and in fine the coine of a young England was like to shoot in Ireland (Stanihurst, 1587: 4).

English civility was safe in its insularity, but once the barriers which guarded land and language were lifted, the dangers of cultural sickness (of which Giraldus had warned in his *History and Topography of Ireland* in 1188) were realized:

when their posteritie became not altogether so warie in keeping, as their ancestors were valiant in conquering, the Irish language was free dennized in the English Pale: this canker tooke such deep root, as the bodie that before was whole and sound, was by little and little festered, and in manner wholly putrified (Stanihurst, 1587: 4).

The infection of the body politic, as in Shakespeare's Denmark, took place through the ear: linguistic intercourse with the uncivilised Irish brought disaster in the form of cultural hybridity. Stanihurst argued that contact engendered jumbled, bastardised forms of culture and language which were neither one thing nor another and cited Wexford as an example. Though Wexford had been a bastion of English cultural purity, Stanihurst noted that through interchange with the Irish the Wexfordians 'have made a mingle mangle or gallimaufrie of both languages, and have in such medleie or checkerwise so crabbedlie jimbled them both together, as commonlie the inhabitants of the meaner sort speak neither good English nor good Irish' (Stanihurst, 1587: 4). Once relations were established the consequences were catastrophic; Stanihurst reported the experience of the politically important planters of Ulster as evidence:

neighborhood bred acquaintance, acquaintance waffed in the Irish toong, the Irish hooked with it attire, attire haled rudenesse, rudenesse ingendered ignorance, ignorance brought contempt of lawes, the contempt of lawes bred rebellion, rebellion raked thereto warres, and so consequentlie the utter decaie and desolation of that worthie country (Stanihurst, 1587: 5).

Language was the key: once contact was made and the Irish tongue was introduced, the slide towards incivility, disregard for law, rebellion and war seemed inevitable.<sup>1</sup>

The most important colonial text which centered upon language was Edmund Spenser's *View of the Present State of Ireland*; composed in 1596 (though not published till 1633) the essay expresses the position of the New English, the more aggressive and ambitious colonists, at a crucial stage of the historical project. Conducted by way of a dialogue between two characters, Eudoxus and Irenius, the text delivers an account of the conquest of Ireland in which mention is made of those who 'remain English' in the colony. In response to the question 'Why? Are not they that were once *English*, *English* still?', Irenius answers 'No, for some of them are degenerate and growne almost mere Irish, yea, and more malitious to the *English* then the *Irish* themselves' (Spenser, 1633: 34). The principal source of such 'degeneration' (a term which enters the English language in the mid to late sixteenth century) was, according to Irenius, easy to trace: 'First, I have to finde fault with the abuse of language, that is, for the speaking of *Irish* among the *English*, which, as it is unnaturall that any people should love anothers language more then their owne, so it is very inconvenient, and the cause of many other evils' (Spenser, 1633: 34). Spenser's attack on the Old English (the ancestors of the original colonists, many of whom had been Gaelicised) is based on the same premise as that which underpinned Stanihurst's

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<sup>1</sup> It is notable that some of the native Irish thought that the English language carried similar dangers for their own culture. State Papers reported that 'for language, they do so despise ours, as they think themselves the worse when they hear it. As did appear by old Con O'Neill, father to the now rebel who upon his deathbed, left his curse to any of his posterity, that would either learn English, sow wheat, or make any building in Ulster, saying that language bred conversation, and consequently their confusion, that wheat gave sustenance with like effect, and in building, they should do but as the crow doth, make her nest to be beaten out by the hawk' (*Cal.S.P.Ire.*, 1598–9: 440).

argument. The responsibility for the decay of Englishness lay primarily with the English themselves for their close relations with the Irish. Spenser identified intermarriage and the care of children as the causes of ‘most dangerous infections’. For this reason, Irenius declares, ‘are these evill customes of fostering and marrying with the *Irish*, most carefully to be restrained; for of them two, the third evill that is custome of language, (which I spake of,) chiefly proceedeth’ (Spenser, 1633: 48). The use of Irish nurses to raise children was particularly dangerous because of their linguistic influence. Children would imitate the language of their nurses and as ‘the words are the image of the minde, so as they proceeding from the minde, the minde must needes be affected with the words. So that the speach being *Irish*, the heart must needes bee *Irish*: for out of the abundance of the heart the tongue speaketh’ (Spenser, 1633: 48). Given the importance of language in the transmission of identity, Eudoxus offers a remedy for this treacherous practice. Citing Roman imperial policy, he asserts the need for linguistic colonialism of the harshest sort: ‘it hath ever beene the use of the Conquerour, to despise the language of the conquered and to force him by all meanes to learne his’ (Spenser, 1633: 47).

### ***Legal Remedies***

How was the contempt of the victors to be expressed and how were the subject people to be forced to use the language of the colonists? Legislation was one way which evidently appealed to the conquerors. The first measure which proscribed Gaelic and prescribed English was the Statute of Kilkenny (1366), which contrasted the situation at the time of the original conquest with cultural developments since:

whereas at the conquest of the land of Ireland, and for a long time after, the English of the said land used the English language, mode of riding and apparel, and were governed and ruled, both they and their subjects called Betaghes, according to the English law ... now many of the said land, forsaking the English language, manners, mode of riding, laws and usages, live and govern themselves according to the manners, fashion, and language of the Irish enemies (Irish Archaeological Society, 1843: 3,5).

The consequence for colonial rule was disastrous: ‘the said land, and the liege people thereof, the English language, the allegiance due our lord the king, and the English laws there, are put in subjection and decayed, and the Irish enemies exalted and raised up, contrary to reason’. Therefore the Statute ‘ordained and established’,

that every Englishman do use the English language, and be named by an English name, leaving off entirely the manner of naming used by the Irish; and that every Englishman use the English custom, fashion, mode of riding and apparel, according to his estate; and if any English, or Irish living amongst the English, use the Irish language amongst themselves, contrary to this ordinance, and thereof be attainted, his lands and tenements, if he have any, shall be seized

into the hands of his immediate lord (Irish Archaeological Society, 1843: 11, 13).

When the Statute was re-confirmed in 1495, the language measures were excluded, which indicates the failure of its essay in cultural regulation; in 1515 a description of the state of Ireland registered that in many parts of the country, except in the cities and walled towns, the English inhabitants were of ‘Iryshe habyt, of Iryshe langage, and of Iryshe condytions’ (S.P.Hen VIII: ii, 6-8).

Legislation had been passed in 1465 in order to ensure that that ‘the Irishmen Dwelling in the Counties of Dublin, Myeth, Vriel, and Kildare, shall Go Apparelled like Englishmen, and Wear their Beards after the English Maner, Swear Allegiance, and take English Surname’. Thus Irish denizens of the Pale were ordered to take ‘an English surname of one town, as Sutton, Chester, Trim, Skryne, Cork, Kinsale: or colour, as white blacke, browne: or arte or science, as smith or carpenter: or office, as cooke, butler’ (Stat. Ire. 1786: 5 E 4. c. 3). But the first serious attempt to prescribe English and proscribe Irish for all the inhabitants of Ireland, came with the centralizing and unifying rule of Henry VIII. Henry’s ‘Act for the English Order, Habit and Language’ (1537) ordered that all of the King’s subjects conform to English manners, dress and language on the ground that linguistic difference created cultural division and prevented political unity:

there is again nothing which doth more contain and keep many of his subjects of this his said land, in a certain savage and wild kind and manner of living, than the diversity that is betwixt them in tongue, language, order and habit, which by the eye deceiveth the multitude, and persuadeth unto them, that they should be as it were of sundry sorts, or rather of sundry countries, where indeed they be wholly together one body, whereof his highness is the only head under God (Stat. Ire. 1786: 28 H 8. c.xv.).

Henry’s proposed interpellation of the Irish as subjects of his kingdom was threatened by the relationship between language and identity, specifically national identity, which the act was designed to counter. Not for the last time in Ireland political and cultural definitions of the nation were opposed and the reaction of the English State was to legislate against cultural difference. Henry re-invoked the Statute of Kilkenny and his act made clear both what was at stake and the dire consequences of disobedience:

his Majesty doth hereby intimate unto all his said subjects of this land, of all degrees, that whosoever shall, for any respect, at any time, decline from the order and purpose of this law, touching the increase of the English tongue, habit, and order, or shall suffer any within his family or rule, to use the Irish habit, or not to use themselves to the English tongue, his Majesty will repute them in his noble heart ... whatsoever they shall at other times pretend in words and countenance, to be persons of another sort and inclination than becometh the true and faithful subjects (Stat. Ire. 1786: 28 H 8. c.xv.)

Cultural Irishness was taken to be the mark of treachery; cultural Englishness was to be the proper test of political and religious loyalty for ‘true and faithful subjects’.

### *The Failings of the Law*

It might appear that legislation against Irish was the keystone of a policy of linguistic colonialism which was developed as part of the panoply of measures designed to subdue Irish resistance to English, later British, rule by destroying the national language. Throughout the period of colonial rule there was indeed a series of legislative steps which directly or indirectly sought to regulate the use of Gaelic. They included those mentioned above and others such as ‘An Act for the Uniformity of Common Prayer and Service in the Church’ (1560), ‘An Act for the Erection of Free Schools (1570), ‘An Act for the Explaining of some Doubts Arising upon an Act Entitled, An Act for the Better Execution of his Majesty’s Gracious Settlements of his Majesty’s Kingdom of Ireland’ (1665) (this law sought to Anglicise the names of ‘towns, land and places’), ‘An Act to Restrain Foreign Education’ (1695), and ‘His Majesty’s Royal Charter for Erecting English Protestant Schools in the Kingdom of Ireland’ (1733). Ranging across the public and the private spheres (place-names, surnames, family, school and the practice of religious faith), colonial legislation was apparently geared towards the imposition of English and the eradication of Irish.

If legislation was at the heart of a colonial policy towards the native language of Ireland, however, then the only conclusion which can be drawn from the historical evidence is that it failed miserably. The very fact that legislation continued to be passed over a period of some four centuries signals that the attempt to destroy Irish in favour of English by means of the law was radically unsuccessful. The Kilkenny Statute’s strictures against Gaelicisation clearly had little impact historically upon a process which continued to worry the colonisers until long afterwards. It is worth noting that four years after his proscription of Irish and prescription of English, Henry the Eighth’s proclamation of his kingship over Ireland in 1541 was made in English to the Irish Lords and Commons. The evident fiasco of the policy later drew a sharp response from Sir Henry Sidney in his ‘Discourse for the Reformation of Ireland’, an answer to Elizabeth’s request in 1583 for his opinion as to how ‘Ireland might with the least charge be reclaimed from barbarism to a godly government’. He recommended that ‘God’s will and word must first be duly planted and idolatry extirped; next law must be established, and licentious customs abrogated’ (*Cal.Carew MSS 1575-88: 367-8*). Among the means to restrict immoral practices he stipulated cultural as well as religious measures: ‘all brehons, carraghés, bards, rhymers, friars, monks, Jesuits, pardoners, nuns, and such like, to be executed by martial law’, and ‘Irish habits for men and women to be abolished, and the English tongue to be extended’ (*Cal.Carew MSS 1575-88: 369*).

More direct testimony of the lack of impact of the law on the use of Gaelic is provided by the pace of the decline of the language. Although colonial policy certainly did attempt to privilege English at the expense of Irish, there were numerous complaints regarding the use of Gaelic even in those areas of Ireland subject to English occupation and rule. For example more than a century after Henry’s

legislation favouring English, Dublin municipal records registered that ‘there is Irish commonly and usually spoken...and by such as live in the country and come into this city on market days, but also by and in several families in this city’. The use of Irish at the heart of the Pale not only by those who entered the city for special purposes but also by some of its denizens was clearly a concern for the authorities; the record notes that the practice was ‘scandalising the inhabitants and magistrates of the city’ (Walsh, 1920: 248). But after the major political defeats suffered by the Gaelic forces during the early and mid seventeenth century, the simple fact that such anxiety existed indicates that the process of stamping out Gaelic and replacing it with English was protracted and slow. This is further borne out by the earliest surveys of the use of the two languages in Ireland which were mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Daniel Dewar’s *Observations on the Character, Customs and Superstitions of the Irish* noted that among the Catholic population ‘there are a million and a half, who understand no tongue but the Irish’ (Dewar, 1812: 95) and ‘about two millions of people in Ireland who are incapable of understanding a continued discourse in English’ (Dewar, 1812: 88). Even the 1851 census, the first to include a question on the use of Irish, which recorded a significant reduction in the number of Irish speakers, registered more than a million and a half users of the language, though even this figure is likely to have been an underestimate.<sup>2</sup>

### *Language and Economics*

These accounts make clear that the decline of Irish was not brought about by the legislation passed by the colonizers; some five hundred years after the first laws were passed there were still significant numbers of native speakers. But the spread of English as a language of everyday life in Ireland is also evident: John Windele’s estimate of the early eighteenth century figures meant that a third of the population were English-speaking (Ó Cuív, 1951: 19), while Stokes’ tally meant that the number had increased to around forty six percent by the beginning of the nineteenth century. One way of understanding why this linguistic change occurred is simply to identify it with naked economic interest: English was the language of commerce and Irish people learned it in order to buy, sell and enter into economic relations. There is good evidence for this point of view. In the seventeenth century the material advantages of English were proclaimed as part of the attempt to consolidate and extend colonial rule: to make Ireland British by making it Anglophone. In his *Discovery of the True Causes Why Ireland was Never Entirely Subdued* (1612), Sir John Davies identified ‘faint prosecution of the war’ and ‘the looseness of civil government’ (Davies, 1890: 218) as reasons for the failure of colonial governance in Ireland. His remedy was war to

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Mac Adam, a contemporary observer, noted that the reported number of Irish speakers ‘by no means indicates with accuracy the entire number of persons who understand it, or who have learnt it in their infancy’ since many ‘returned themselves as ignorant of the Irish language, either from a sort of false shame, or from a secret dread that the government, in making this inquiry (for the first time) had concealed some motive, which could not be for their good’ (Mac Adam 1859: 172). After the trauma of the Famine such reticence is hardly surprising.

conquer the land and break the people and law to keep the King's subjects in proper order. Davies argued that the spread of common law had already had an effect on the Irish, particularly with regard to the crucial question of the education of children: 'because they find a great inconvenience in moving their suits by an interpreter, they do for the most part send their children to schools, especially to learn the English language'. He continued to express the hope that in time this would lead to a change whereby 'the next generation will in tongue and heart and every way else become English' (Davies, 1890: 335–6). Davies's comments were somewhat disingenuous since the administration of the law was notably corrupt but they contain an incidental insight into the relationship between the English and Irish languages at the time. English had started to become not simply the language of economic relations, but also the prestige language of education, law and bureaucracy as colonial rule spread. Thus in the same year as the publication of Davies's meditation on colonial policy, a Jesuit priest living in Dublin protested against 'the greatest injury' inflicted by the colonisers: the 'prohibition of all Catholic schools in our nation'. Protestant educators, he noted, 'have also taken singular care that all children be taught English, and they chastise them if they hear them speak their own native tongue' (McDonald, 1874: 204). One of the effects of this strategy was paradoxically to provoke the emigration of young Irish scholars to Catholic Europe to be educated by the institutions of the Counter-Reformation, but there seems little doubt that some of the native Irish did what Davies said they would: encouraged their children to learn English. Parents were the crucial figures, as registered in complaints against the process. In 1627 the translator of the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* into English criticised those who 'neglect their books and choose rather to put their children to learn Eng[lish] rather than their own native language' (Cunningham, 2000: 129). And in *Cambrensis Eversus* (1662), Gratianus Lucius (John Lynch) commented on the relative economic importance of literacy in the two languages:

I have known many persons who had but a slight acquaintance with Irish books; yet so great was the delight they found in reading them that they would hardly allow them out of their hands, were they not forced by the reproofs of their parents to apply their energy to studies that would be more useful to their material advancement (Cahill, 1939: 129).

Later Sir William Petty, held by Marx to have been the first political economist proper, advised the Irish to 'decline their Language' on two grounds. First, because it fosters antagonism: '[it] continues a sensible distinction, being not now necessary; which makes those who do not understand it, suspect, that what is spoken in it, is to their prejudice'. And second, because it was important for the Irish to be able to engage in economic transactions without misunderstanding: 'it is their Interest to deal with the *English*, for Leases, for Time, and upon clear Conditions, which being performed they are absolute Freemen, rather than to stand always liable to the humour and caprice of their Landlords' (Petty, 1691: 101). Again, though Petty's comments are disingenuous with respect to the relations between tenants and landlords, they do contain a kernel of truth. If tenants could not understand the conditions of their agreement, or if this were possible only through the potentially unreliable medium of



translation, the possibilities for swindling and cheating were even greater than they otherwise might be. The uptake of Petty's point by Irish-speakers is indicated by Nicolson, one of the participants in a sharp debate within Protestant proselytising circles in the early eighteenth century on the benefits of teaching and preaching in Irish or English. His argument against the use of Gaelic was based on the grounds that English was already becoming the necessary medium of business for the younger generation: 'there is hardly a boy of 16 years old in Ireland but can understand and speak English. Their parents encourage them to it for their own trading and dealing with their English landlords' (Nicolson, 1715: 27).

In fact the direct influence of economics on language choice is evinced in a native text which dates from the period which is commonly taken as marking the beginning of the end of the Gaelic order. *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis* (The Parliament of Clan Thomas), the first part of which was composed around 1608–1615, has been read as 'an attack upon the economic and social ambitions of the emergent entrepreneurial class, which had exploited the uncertainty of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries to better its lot' (Caball, 1993: 47). Not the least of the disturbing characteristics of this class was its willingness to use the English language to further its interest, a fact which partly accounts for the severity of the satire. One episode encapsulates the attitude of the bards, the upholders of the traditional Gaelic order, to this new social fact. When Clan Thomas meet with a young English tobacco-seller, Roibín an Tobaca, they want to buy from him but face the difficulty of communicating with the Englishman in his native language. Tomás volunteers to speak to him:

Táinig an t-óglaoch gallda ⁊ beannuigheas go ceannsa agas adubhairt: '*God bless you, Thomas, and all your company*'. Do fhreagair Tomás dó go neamhthuaisceartach agas as eadh adubhairt: '*Pleshy for you, pleshy, goodman Robin*'. 'Dar anmuin mo mháthar', ar Bernard Ó Bruic, 'do dhubhshloigis rogha an Bhéarla'. Do thionóslad cách 'na thimpchioll ag machtnughadh uim Bhéarla Thomáis

(The young Englishmen arrived and greeted them politely and said: '*God bless you, Thomas, and all your company*'. Tomás answered him in no uncivilised fashion and said: '*Pleshy for you, pleshy, goodman Robin*'. 'By my mother's soul', said Bernard Ó Bruic, 'you have swallowed the best of English'. Everybody gathered round him marvelling at Tomás's English) (Williams, 1981: 40, 97).

The bardic laughter is directed against the foolish social upstarts who, having partly abandoned their native culture, and their own place in Gaelic society, are able only to speak a broken version of the language of their colonial masters. But when Tomás asks the price of the tobacco, '*What the bigg greate órdlach for the what so penny for is the la yourselfe for me?*', Roibín's response, '*Two penny an ench*', indicates a significant linguistic, social and economic development. The fact that Tomás and Roibín can communicate demonstrates that some amongst the indigenous population were already used to dealing with the English language, albeit in macaronic form, as part of their participation in the single Irish market which gradually developed in the period and

which, as Canny has noted, had been forged in part precisely by itinerant traders such as Roibín (Canny, 2001: 392). Even at this early point in the process of linguistic change, the basic financial benefits of English for the native Irish were clear.<sup>3</sup>

Colonialism engendered a capitalist social order which favoured a dominant class (Protestant, though the category was delimited in its reference) over the Catholic natives. Thus although *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis* presents a scenario of simple exchange between two apparently equal parties, for most of the Irish participation in the economic order increasingly became possible only on unequal terms. Evidence for the development of this process throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is rendered in a number of Gaelic texts in which the role of the English-speaking worker is revealed. For example in the mid seventeenth century, Pádraigín Haicéad, poet and political priest, recorded a bitter complaint about the decline of patronage for the bardic class in ‘Faisean Chláir Éibhir’ (These fashions on the plain of Éibhear):

Is cor do leag mé cleas an phlás-tsaoilse:  
mogh in gach teach ag fear an smáilBhéarla  
‘s gan scot ag neach le fear den dáimh éigse  
ach ‘hob amach ‘s beir leat do shárGhaelgsa’

(A trick of this false world has laid me low:  
servants in every home with grimy English  
but no regard for one of the poet class  
save ‘Out! And take your precious Gaelic with you!’)  
(Ó Tuama and Kinsella, 1981: 90–1)

Though it is incidental to the poet’s protest, the fact that he mentions Anglophone servants reveals the link between specific forms of employment and the use of English. The connection is made again in the work of perhaps the greatest of the bardic poets, Dáibhí Ó Bruadair. In ‘Nach ait an nós’ (‘How Queer this Mode’) (1643), Ó Bruadair attacked the fashionable tendency for English manners and language after the arrival of the Duke of Ormonde as Lord Lieutenant in November 1643:

Nach ait an nós so ag mórchuid d’fhearaibh Éireann,  
d’at go nó le mórtus maingléiseach,  
giodh tais a dtreoir ar chódaibh gallachléire,  
ní chanaid glór acht gósta garbhBhéarla.

(How queer this mode assumed by many men of Erin,

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<sup>3</sup> The need for language skills for economic exchange worked both ways. Canny’s work on the depositions of Protestants after the 1641 insurrection makes it clear that the demands of everyday life made bilingualism among the colonisers not uncommon (Canny 2001: 452-4). Stanihurst noted the same point in *De Rebus in Hibernia Gestis* at the end of the sixteenth century: the ‘Anglo-Irish’ ‘speak English and Irish because of their daily commerce with their Irish neighbours’ (Stanihurst 1584: 145).

With haughty, upstart ostentation lately swollen,  
 Though codes of foreign clerks they fondly strive to master,  
 They utter nothing but a ghost of strident English)  
 (Ó Bruadair, 1910: 18–19).

The neologisms ‘smáilBhéarla’ (stained English) and ‘garhbhéarla’ (rough or crude English) make clear the poets’ contemptuous regard for the language change, but the fact that they refer to it with such vehemence signals both the novelty of the shift and the cultural significance they attached to it.<sup>4</sup> A century and a half later, the connection between English and employment prospects drew no such comment. In his *Tour in Ireland* (1780), Arthur Young noted neutrally: ‘Lord Shannon’s bounties to labourers amount to 50l a year. He gives it to them by way of encouragement; but only to such as can speak English, and do something more than fill a cart’ (Young, 1780: vol.2, 50).

The role of economic imperatives in the consolidation of English as the language of public life continued in the nineteenth century. One commentator pointed out that whereas Irish was for the native speaker the ‘language of social intercourse’, English ‘is to him the language of barter, or worldly occupations; taken up solely at the market, laid aside when he returns home, a very confined vocabulary’ (Anderson, 1818: 54). Another argued simply that ‘English is the language of his commerce — the Irish the language of his heart’ (Coneys, 1842: 73). Indeed the differentiation in the function of the two languages led to the false but common assertion that English was better suited to grubby materialism while Irish was a poetic and spiritual language (it might be asked precisely what language Irish speakers used when they bartered and bought and sold before the spread of English). Be that as it may, it seems clear that once English was established as the language of economic interest and opportunity, it followed that the Irish learned it in order to serve their interests and to meet their needs, at least in so far as this could be achieved within the limits imposed by the ruling powers. There were two developments in the nineteenth century which gave greater impetus to this process. The first, as Lee has argued, was the nature of the British state in Ireland after the Acts of Union. The expansion of the Anglophone state, often as a response to nationalist demands, made it a source for employment, mobility and favour and thus made it a significant force for Anglicisation (Lee, 1989: 666). The second was the impact of the state’s economic policies on the Irish population. As emigration became a simple fact of life for the Irish after the appalling toll of the Famine, Irish parents demanded that their children be taught and learn English. The refrain was constant: for children to succeed in the countries to which they emigrated they needed English rather than Irish, and thus parents willingly sent their children to the state-funded National Schools which taught the language. The reports of P.J. Keenan, a commissioner of education, made the imperatives clear. His comments on an island school noted that ‘it is natural to inquire how this strong passion for education could have possessed a people who are themselves utterly illiterate... Their passion may be traced to one predominant desire — the desire to speak English’. The

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<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere Ó Bruadair refers to English as ‘béarla breaganta beoiltirim’ (the lip-dry and simpering English tongue) (Ó Bruadair 1917: 88–9); contrast this with the near silence of the bardic class with regard to the English language before the end of the sixteenth century.

motivation was evident: escape from poverty. When strangers visited them, the islanders saw that ‘prosperity has its peculiar tongue as well as its fine coat’; when merchants dealt with them in ‘the yellow gold, they count it out in English’; when they used the law they found that ‘the solemn words of judgment have to come second to them, through the offices of an interpreter’; and of course the schoolmaster and landlord spoke English. Thus for Irish speakers in even the remotest islands,

Whilst they may love the cadences, and mellowness, and homeliness of the language which their fathers gave them, they yet see that obscurity and poverty distinguish their lot from the English-speaking people; and accordingly, no matter what the sacrifice to their feelings, they long for the acquisition of the ‘new tongue’, with all its prizes and social privileges. The keystone of fortune is the power of speaking English, and to possess this power there is a burning longing in their breasts that never varies, never moderates... The knowledge which they thirst for in the school is, therefore, confined to a speaking use of the English Language (Keenan, 1857–8: xx).

This led to the system of punishment reported by Sir William Wilde (Oscar’s father) in 1853. A schoolteacher in Gaelic-speaking Connemara heard an eight-year-old boy speak the language to his sister:

The man called the child to him, said nothing, but drawing forth from its dress a little stick, commonly called a scoreen or tally, which was suspended by a string round the neck, put an additional notch in it with his penknife. Upon our enquiring into the cause of this proceeding, we were told that it was done to prevent the child speaking Irish; for every time he attempted to do so a new nick was put in his tally, and when these amounted to a certain number, summary punishment was inflicted on him by the schoolmaster (Greene, 1972: 10).

The striking thing about this practice was that it was not foisted upon unwilling parents by the state. Irish parents actively co-operated with a policy which they saw as the only means to gain even a limited opportunity for their children:

The master adopts a novel mode of procedure to propagate the ‘new language’. He makes it a cause of punishment to speak Irish in the school, and he has instituted a sort of police among the parents to see that in their intercourse with one another the children speak nothing but English at home. The parents are so eager for the English, they exhibit no reluctance to inform the master of every detected breach of the school law; and, by this coercive process, the poor children in the course of time become pretty fluent in speaking very incorrect English (Keenan, 1857–8: xxi).

Faced with extreme poverty, and with the horrors of the Famine fresh in their minds, it is little surprise that Irish parents went to such lengths to give their children the social capital which English brought with it. As the saying went, they loved their language,

but the loved their children more, and this pressure continued throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. When the Gaeltacht Commission, set up in 1925 to report on the Irish-speaking districts, issued its findings in 1926, it recorded the opinions of significant members of these communities. One teacher noted that parents ‘are opposed to Irish. They see people with English getting all the jobs... It is just a question of bread and butter’ (Walsh, 2002: 60). A priest claimed simply that ‘if you urge Irish speaking the reply is “what good is Irish in America”’ (Walsh, 2002: 102), while a rural schoolmaster commented that:

it would be the veriest mockery to say to those people – “Don’t speak English, or emigrate: speak Irish, stay at home and starve, cry out yearly for doles, and send your children picking winkles instead of being at school, and earn the contemptuous pity of the world’ (Walsh, 2002: 101).

Long experience of economic exigency taught the Irish to engage in what seemed to be the only immediately available way of improving their lot: they wanted English, and they got it.

### *Language and cultural hegemony*

The problem with the account thus far is that although it describes why Irish speakers acquired English, it does not explain why they rejected their own language, very slowly but surely, over a number of centuries. The question remains: why, as well as adding the language of economic opportunity to their linguistic repertoire, did the Irish lose their native Gaelic? The answer lies not simply in the changing functions of the two languages, but in their relative status. English, it will be argued, became not simply the dominant language of economic life, but the culturally hegemonic language; Irish, as a result, became a stigmatised and secondary language.

Though the shift to English is perceptible by the early eighteenth century, it is important to recall that, as the figures cited earlier demonstrated, the vast majority of the Irish population at the time spoke Gaelic. But the social perception of English was already changing. Aodh Buidhe Mac Cruitín (Hugh MacCurtin) noted the progress of English and the means by which it was established:

Féach na flatha ba fairsing in Éirinn uair  
 gur éirigh Galla agus ceannaithe caola an chnuais  
 le tréimhse eatortha ag teagasc a mbéas don tsluagh;  
 do réir mar mheallaid a mbailte dob aolta snuadh  
 tá Béarla i bhfaisean go tairise is Gaeilge fuar.

(Consider the rulers who once were generous in Ireland ... until foreigners and the cunning avaricious merchants came between them, teaching their own customs to the people; according as they seduce our fairest towns English becomes fashionable and Irish decays)

(Ó Cuív, 1986: 397).

Mac Cruitín, a member of the hereditary bardic families and thus trained in Gaelic scholarship, wrote his *Brief Discourse in Vindication of the Antiquity of Ireland* (1717) in English, despite the fact that he described himself as ‘not sufficient to write correctly in the language’ (Mac Cruitín, 1717: ix).<sup>5</sup> His choice derives from his understanding of the shift in the status of the languages, and his desire to address the newly established Protestant Ascendancy and those literate in the language of the colonisers. But what is most striking about Mac Cruitín’s comment on the spread of English is that he identifies not simply the fact that it is the language of economic exchange, but that through the ‘seduction’ of the urban areas it was becoming ‘fashionable’ and Irish was beginning to be lost.

Whereas Mac Cruitín apologises for his lack of skill in the language, John Keogh, a middle class nationalist writing in the mid eighteenth century, attacks foreign commentators for their ‘Ignorance and Stupidity’ with regard to English in Ireland:

The Irish are reflected on by the English, because they have a kind of Tone, or Accent, in their Discourse, (which they are pleased to call a Brogue). I think this ought to be no Disgrace to them, but rather an Honour, because they distinguish themselves by retaining the Tone of their Country Language; which shows, that they have a Knowledge of it (Keogh, 1748: 75).

He turns English criticism against itself by noting that ‘there is hardly a Shire in England, but has a different Tone in pronouncing the English Tongue; so that oftentimes one Shire cannot understand another’ (Keogh, 1748: 75-6). This defence of the Irish use of the English language was pushed to its limit by Maria Edgeworth in the *Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802), in which she asserted that ‘the Irish, in general, speak *better English* than is commonly spoken by the natives of England’ (Edgeworth, 1802: 199). Though she restricted this claim to the ‘lower classes’ in both countries, and particularly in Ireland to the more isolated regions, she declared that ‘amongst those who speak English we find fewer vulgarisms than amongst the same rank of persons in England’. In fact their English was a pure relic from the highpoint of English cultural achievement:

The English which they speak is chiefly such as has been traditional in their families since the time of the early settlers in the island. During the reign of Elizabeth and the reign of Shakespeare, numbers of English migrated to Ireland; and whoever attends to the phraseology of the lower Irish, may, at this day, hear many of the phrases and expressions used by Shakespeare. Their vocabulary has been preserved in its near pristine purity since that time, because they have not had intercourse with those counties in England which

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<sup>5</sup> Mac Cruitín’s claim concerning his about his lack of ability when writing in English is rather belied by the fact that in 1728 he published *The Elements of the Irish Language, Grammatically Explained in English* at Louvain.

have made for themselves a jargon unlike to any language under heaven (Edgeworth, 1802: 199–200).

The evidence suggests that by the end of the eighteenth century there was a confidence about the use of English in Ireland among the middle class, both Protestant and Catholic, which reflected not so much the fashionability of the language, as the fact that they had made it their own. Partly as a result of this class-bound appropriation of English, and also because of the economically distinct roles of the two languages, the Irish language became increasingly associated with rural poverty and distress. A contributor to a debate on the teaching of the native language to priests in a Catholic seminary in France in 1764 argued that ‘it is true that the language of commerce and public business is English, [but] Irish is necessary for the instruction of the poor Irish Catholics’ (Walsh, 1973: 4). By the mid nineteenth century this view had been consolidated, as noted by Thomas Davis, the leader of the Young Ireland movement in the 1840s: ‘the middle classes think it a sign of vulgarity to speak Irish’ (Davis, 1914 105). And by the end of the century this attitude to Irish had spread to native speakers to become one of the main obstacles which language preservationists faced. In ‘Practical hints towards preventing the decay of Irish in Irish-speaking districts’, Flaherty observed that the ‘illiterate Irish-speaking peasant’, regarded by some as the repository of traditional Irishness, actually thought that the Irish language ‘is the synonym of poverty and misery, and that many of the evils from which they suffer are traceable to its continued use; that, if they could dispose with it altogether, they would elevate themselves socially, and be much more respectable members of society’ (Flaherty, 1884: 13–14). It is hardly surprising that the middle class, Catholic and Protestant, turned to English throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries since it served their economic and cultural interests. But the fact that the vast majority of the Irish population went beyond the economic imperative of learning English in order to reject and treat their own language with shame (the most frequent word used by late nineteenth century cultural nationalists to describe the prevailing attitude to Irish) needs explanation.

The answer lies with the two great social forces which affected the lives of most Irish people; these were the political nationalist movement, which embodied their political interests, and the Catholic Church, which looked after their spiritual well-being. Crucially both turned away from the Irish language in favour of English. Nineteenth-century Irish political nationalism, as opposed to Irish cultural nationalism, took its lead from the views of Daniel O’Connell, the movement’s most successful leader and a native Gaelic speaker, on the relative merits of Irish and English:

Someone asked him whether the use of the Irish language was diminishing among our peasantry. ‘Yes,’ he answered, ‘and I am sufficiently utilitarian not to regret its gradual abandonment. A diversity of languages is no benefit; it was first imposed on mankind as a curse, at the building of Babel. It would be of vast advantage to mankind if all the inhabitants spoke the same language’ (Daunt, 1848: 14).

Reflecting on the consequences of this view he continued:

‘Therefore, although the Irish language is connected with many recollections that twine around the hearts of Irishmen, yet the superior utility of the English tongue, as the medium of modern communication, is so great, that I can witness without sigh the gradual disuse of the Irish’ (Daunt, 1848: 14–15).

O’Connell’s practice followed his belief: he addressed the ‘monster meetings’, at which tens of thousands gathered to hear his words, in English, despite the fact that Irish would have been the everyday language of many in the crowd. The effect on the audience must have been marked: the leader of the movement which they supported both politically, physically and economically, spoke to them of their political ideals and right to self-determination in a language which they understood poorly. The linguistic message would have been clear enough.

O’Connell’s attitude was influenced by his utilitarianism, but his opinion was hardly different from that of political nationalists ranging from the revolutionary United Irishmen of 1798 to the late nineteenth century Land Leaguers and the Irish Parliamentary Party. The consensus was that English was the language to do business in – even the political business of gaining independence, of whatever form, for Ireland. The attitude was savagely indicted by a cultural nationalist in the early twentieth century:

It was politics which brought about that change: which enabled the English Government to establish and maintain in Ireland conditions which gave the Irish-speaking Irishman the choice of learning English, and using English, or of being shut out from every public function of life in his own country. There was no Irish leader from 1793, when the peril began, sufficiently clear-headed to see what was happening, and so a refusal to work the machine, the one thing which could have stopped it, was not forthcoming, and Irish gradually faded (Ó hEigceartaigh, 1918: 17).

But if political nationalism was one social force which contributed to the consolidation of English as the culturally hegemonic language and the subsequent demise of Irish, another was the Catholic Church. After 1782, when Catholic colleges became legal, English was used as the language of Irish Catholic higher education; the decision to use English at Maynooth, the principal centre of Catholic education in Ireland which opened in 1795, was particularly significant. A further factor which sealed the church’s attitude was the use of Irish by Protestant proselytisers in the ‘Second Reformation’ during the early to mid nineteenth century. Conor McSweeney noted the consequence of the Church’s stance:

An Irish prayer-book is a thing which the poor Irish peasant has never seen. Not only has he not been taught the language which he speaks, but his clergy have never encouraged, and have sometimes forbidden him to learn it. This objection arose chiefly, I believe, from the impudent intermeddling of Bible Societies with the religion of the people. By their patronage of the Irish language, they had desecrated it in the eyes of the Irish themselves (McSweeney, 1843: vii, 55).



The proscription on Irish did not merely apply to literacy in the language, however, since in a curious parallel to the scene at O'Connell's 'monster meetings', Irish priests, caring for the spiritual fortunes of their flock, also addressed them in a language which many of them did not comprehend:

I have seen an Irish bishop, with mitre on head and crozier in hand, delivering an elaborate English discourse to an Irish congregation, while a priest stood in the pulpit interpreting it sentence by sentence. This prelate was the son of an Irish peasant, born and reared in one of the most Irish districts in Ireland. Many of his audience might have been, and probably were his playmates in childhood and boyhood, and must have heard him speak the language of his father and mother; but he had never learned it, and was now too distinguished a dignitary of the church, to remember anything of the language of the vulgar herd he had left below him (McSweeney, 1843: vii, 55).

Little wonder that a contributor to the cultural nationalist journal *An Claidheamh Soluis* argued later that 'the priests are more to blame for the decay of Irish than any other class of the population... The priests are to blame as a body for their attitudes towards English' (Ruadh, 1899: 454). The fact that the Church supported the Irish language revival in the early twentieth century was small comfort; by that stage the damage had been done.

### ***Conclusion***

It has been argued here that accounts which explain the acquisition of the English language and the loss of the native language by the Irish purely in terms of colonial policy are inadequate. While it is clearly the case that the English colonists attempted to impose their language by a whole series of legislative acts, it is also evident that they failed in their intent. Likewise, while the position of English as the language of economic exchange under colonial rule meant that it became a required and desired medium for the Irish, this was not enough to ensure a national language shift before the nineteenth century. Therefore in order to account for the rapid and massive language change which took place in that period, it is necessary to look to a combination of other factors as an explanation. Paradoxically, it is with the technical ending of Ireland's colonial status and its incorporation within the United Kingdom after the Acts of Union in 1800 that the process of language shift really gathered pace. This was caused by two factors: the first was the extension of the British state apparatus throughout Ireland and the effect of the State's economic policies. But the second factor, often ignored, is the development of the cultural hegemony of English at the expense of Irish. English became the language of prestige as well as the language of the economy. Every time that something was sold in English; or that a political declaration was made in English; or that Mass was said in English; or that a school lesson was taught in English ... the message was reinforced. English was not just the language of economic capital but of social and cultural capital too; not just the

language of getting by, or getting through, it was also the language of getting on. Once it had become established hegemonically, English reduced Irish to the status of the language of the dispossessed, the poor, the shamefully lost.

The particular situation of Ireland in the history of English colonialism and British imperialism means that the lessons which can be taken from this account are not simply transferable to other contexts. Other historical accounts will need to be produced in order to trace the similarities and differences. But it is hoped that this specific example will alert students of those histories to the complex interactions of the legal, economic and cultural factors involved in the process of language change in colonial and post-colonial societies.

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