From manuscripts to street signs via *Séadna*: the Gaelic League and the changing role of literacy in Irish, 1875–1915

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This essay examines the balance between various types of literacy in Irish in the first phase of the revival movement. It addresses questions such as the fostering of basic learner competence, the ambition to create a modern literature and a modern journalism, as well as the public use of written Irish as a cultural symbol. The topic is a broad one and some of these aspects can merely be touched on.

Anticipating its abandonment as a community vernacular, the language had become virtually invisible in written form by 1875, as noted by Philip O’Leary:

Many of the leading writers of the Gaelic Revival never read a book in the Irish language in their formative years. Some had not even imagined that such a thing was possible. Looking back on the language movement and his own involvement in it, one of the most prolific pioneers of modern Gaelic prose, ‘Beirt Fhear’ (Séamus Ó Dubhghaill) recalled: ‘I myself never laid eyes on a book in Irish until I was twenty years old [i.e. 1875].’

O’Leary further observes:

Surveying the linguistic / literary situation of 1882, the year the bilingual journal *Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge / The Gaelic Journal* was founded, Tadhg Ó Donnchadha wrote in 1909: ‘If there were fifty people in all of Ireland at that time who could read and write Irish in the native script I’d say that that would be the total number.’

However, it has to be said that this figure is at variance with other evidence, such as that provided in relation to Munster by John Fleming in an essay submitted to the Royal Irish Academy about 1874:

As to the proportion of the people that read or write Irish, I cannot form an opinion. I know that in several districts in Waterford there are far more

Irish readers now than at any time heretofore, and the sale of Irish books in Cork, Kerry and Clare show that the readers in the counties are many ... these readers are as a rule far below the Irish scholars of forty years ago in their knowledge of the language. Those who can write Irish well or even fairly are very few ...³

A broad brush-stroke approach to literacy in Irish in the year 1875 might be summarized as follows. Writing in Irish had had a remarkably rich manuscript tradition, dating back to the sixth century. This had continued strongly up to the eighteenth century, and persisted, albeit in attenuated form, as long as the language was spoken traditionally. Printing had come late to Irish, delayed by the political and social constraints on the Irish-speaking population. The initial works were religious in content and Protestant in persuasion, the first being issued in Dublin in 1571. Protestant interest publications, including the New and Old Testaments, appeared fitfully between then and 1700. From the early seventeenth century, the Franciscans published Catholic counter-Reformation devotional works on the Continent, most notably in Louvain on. Again, production was low, approximately twelve titles being issued over a period of some fifty years.

We know too that print runs were small, and that copies of the New Testament could still be obtained from source almost thirty years after the initial publication. In the case of the Catholic works, manuscript production was soon reverted to, with printed works being copied out by hand. The only texts which could be said to have enjoyed extended popularity in printed form were Gallagher's *Sermons* (1736 etc.) and Tadhg Gaelach Ó Súilleabháin's *Pious Miscellany* (1802 etc.). Interestingly, the title page and general editorial notes of both of these works were in English, and the font employed was Roman rather the Gaelic script.

The manuscript tradition was strongest in Munster, as evidenced by the work of several generations of the Ó Longáin family of Cork. A second area where the scribal tradition lived on well was Omeath. However, even here the ability to write within the Irish tradition was under threat, as shown by the 1825 Monaghan Jail production of *Mac na Michonhairle* in an orthography derived from English.⁴ This orthographic phenomenon was also quite common in Connaught in the nineteenth century. This English-based phonetic writing shows firstly how wide a gulf had opened up between spoken Irish and the Gaelic written tradition. Secondly, it shows how familiarity with the norms of English was spreading throughout the community; for popular literacy meant literacy in English, sustained by chapbooks and ballad-sheets distributed by itinerant hawkers.

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The Gaelic League and the changing role of literacy in Irish

The Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language (SPIL) was established at the end of 1876 and is regularly held to have heralded the advent of a more vibrant approach to promoting the Irish language than that practised by the antiquarian, backward-looking associations which had preceded it. ‘The object of the Society being the Preservation and Extension of the Irish as a spoken Language’, a number of means was proposed for that end. Among these were: to publish cheap elementary works, from which the Language can be easily learned; to furnish same at reduced prices to Classes and Associations in connection with the Society; and to encourage the production of a Modern Irish Literature – original or translated. 5

One may compare the aims of the Gaelic League, founded at a meeting held in Dublin in July 1893, where the following resolution was passed: ‘That a Society be formed under the name of the Gaelic League for the purpose of keeping the Irish language spoken in Ireland.’ However, the Objects of the new organization were soon identified as being twofold: the preservation of Irish as the national language of Ireland and the extension of its use as a spoken tongue; and the study and publication of existing Gaelic literature and the cultivation of a modern literature in Irish.

It can be seen immediately that the second object was also a binary one, wherein the promotion of a modern literature in Irish was to complement the study and publishing of the inherited tradition. The great store to be set on the printed word, albeit as an auxiliary to the promotion of the spoken language was clear from three of the eleven Means which elaborated on the Objects of the League:

6. The publication and distribution of books and pamphlets in Irish, or relating thereto.

7. The publication of the Gaelic Journal, a magazine devoted exclusively to the objects of the League and issued mainly in the Irish language.

11. The free grant of Irish books to branches of the League that cannot easily obtain them otherwise. 6

When set against the background of the time, the twin objects of restoring the spoken language and creating a new literature in Irish were indeed revolutionary. The retreat of Irish as a vernacular in the second half of the nineteenth century was precipitate. Statistics on its decline were provided by the decennial census returns. Basing his analysis on the 1881 census, Garret FitzGerald has

shown that the Irish-speaking proportion of the cohort of the population born 1861–71 had dropped to 13 per cent while the overall number of monoglots had shrunk from 21 per cent of the Irish-speaking population in 1851 to 6.75 per cent of the Irish-speaking population in 1881.7

While these impersonal figures set out the big picture, they may be complemented by some anecdotal accounts included by Douglas Hyde in the published version of his seminal address, ‘On the necessity for de-anglicizing the Irish nation’, originally delivered in November 1892. These illuminate the practical working out of the language shift from Irish to English which was proceeding at headlong speed in the western half of the country in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In their own way they are more informative than the array of statistics with which one is now familiar. The guilelessness of the second account is truly remarkable, indicative as it is of the vagueness of the individual’s appreciation of the mechanics of the language shift:

I mention the case of a young man I met on the road coming from the fair of Tuam, some ten miles away. I saluted him in Irish, and he answered me in English. ‘Don’t you speak Irish,’ said I. ‘Well, I declare to God, sir,’ he said, ‘my father and mother hasn’t a word of English, but still, I don’t speak Irish.’ This was absolutely true for him. There are thousands upon thousands of houses all over Ireland to-day where the old people invariably use Irish in addressing the children, and the children as invariably answer in English, the children understanding Irish but not speaking it, the parents understanding their children’s English but unable to use it themselves. In a great many cases, I should almost say most, the children are not conscious of the existence of two languages. I remember asking a gossoon a couple of miles west of Ballaghaderreen in the Co. Mayo, some questions in Irish and he answered them in English. At last I said to him, ‘Nach labhrann tú Gaedheilg?’ (i.e., ‘Don’t you speak Irish?’) and his answer was, ‘And isn’t it Irish I’m spaking?’ ‘No a-chuisle,’ said I, ‘it’s not Irish you’re speaking, but English.’ ‘Well then,’ said he, ‘that’s how I spoke it ever’! He was quite unconscious that I was addressing him in one language and he answering in another … This is going on from Malin Head to Galway, and from Galway to Waterford, with the exception possibly of a few spots in Donegal and Kerry, where the people are wiser and more national.8

However, the situation with regard to the written Irish word was just as far-reaching, as is clear from two other accounts of Hyde’s that were included in his

groundbreaking survey and study, *A Literary History of Ireland*, first published in 1899:

A friend of mine travelling in the County Clare sent me three Irish MSS. the other day, which he found the children tearing to pieces on the floor. One of these, about one hundred years old, contained a saga called the ‘Love of Dubhlacha for Mongan’, which M. d’Arbois de Jubainville had searched the libraries of Europe for in vain.9

These things are happening every day. A man living at the very doors of the Chief Commissioner of National Education writes to me thus: ‘I could read many of Irish Fenian tales and poems, that was in my father’s manuscripts, he had a large collection of them. I was often sorry for letting them go to loss, but I could not copy the ½th of them … The writing got defaced, the books got damp and torn while I was away, I burned lots of them twice that I came to this country … I was learning to write the old Irish at that time; I could read a fair share of it and write a little.’10

SPIIL immediately set about providing intermediate school textbooks as well as more basic reading material for learners. By 1880 it had already issued Part I of *Tòrnigheacht Dhíarmuda agus Chhràinne*, with Part II appearing the following year, both based on the 1858 edition of the tale, prepared by Standish Hayes O’Grady for the Ossianic Society. As Ó Murchú has observed, this was actually the first-ever school edition of an Irish-language text, and it has occupied a place on the secondary school syllabus ever since.11 The Society had hoped soon ‘to be in a position to publish a journal partly in the Irish tongue, for the cultivation of the language and literature of Ireland, and containing easy Lessons and Reports of the Transactions of the Society’.12 This aim, however, was actually fulfilled by the establishment of the *Gaelic Journal / Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge* under the auspices of the Gaelic Union, an offshoot of SPIIL, in 1882. There had of course been Irish-language sections, so-called Gaelic departments, in various Irish and Irish-American newspapers from the late 1850s. There had even been a succession of short-lived Irish-language journals, including *Bolg an tSolair*, printed at the Northern Star Office, Belfast, in 1795 and Micheál Ó Lócháin’s *An Goodhal* in Brooklyn, New York, in 1881. However, the *Gaelic Journal* seemed to catch the temper of the times.

If the *Gaelic Journal* made an impact, which was recognized both by contemporaries and in retrospect, it was not until the Gaelic League was making headway that An tAthair Peadar Ua Laoghaire was prompted to embark on *Séadna*. This was immediately hailed as a major creative work. When the first

instalment of Séadna appeared on the pages of The Gaelic Journal in November 1894, it was introduced by the acting editor, Eoin Mac Néill, under the heading ‘Munster Colloquial Irish’: ‘We wish to direct the attention of students to the following specimen of Munster Irish, one of the best examples, if not the very best, of Southern popular Gaelic that has ever been printed.’

Séadna first appeared in book form in 1904. Patrick Pearse welcomed it in an extensive review on the pages of An Claidheamh Soluis, 24 September 1904:

But to receive ‘Séadna,’ whole and complete, into our hands was a new sensation. We read it straight through, commencing it on the top of a city tramcar, continuing it in a train bearing us swiftly westward, and finishing it on the slope of a Connacht mountainside; and when we had read the last line we longed for the presence of our friend of Oireachtas week, for, laying our hand on ‘Séadna,’ we should have said to him in triumph, ‘Here, at last, is literature.’

The appearance of ‘Séadna,’ marks an epoch, for with it Ireland has once again become creative ... We have here, indeed, the everyday speech and beliefs of the folk, and yet we have something entirely different from the folk-tale. The folk-tale is an evolution; ‘Séadna,’ like all works of art, is a creation.

... Before ‘Séadna,’ was written men thought that the way to produce Irish prose was to slavishly follow Keating; the lesson ‘Séadna,’ taught was that, in writing, your prime care must be, not to imitate this or that dead or living writer, but first and foremost to utter yourself ..."}

An tAthaír Peadar explained in his autobiography Mo Sgéal Féin that he had noted the lack of any work in book form which could be put into the hands of young learners of Irish to teach them Irish. He had therefore determined to rectify this by writing Séadna. He then proceeds to note with evident satisfaction: ‘Everyone, young and old, liked the book. It was read to the old folk and they liked it. They heard their own speech coming out of a book to them, something they had never heard before. The young people liked it because the Irish of that book was very like the English they themselves spoke.’

While there was an almost inevitable reaction later against Séadna, a text which dominated the Irish language classroom for some two generations after its first appearance, it has to be acknowledged that the creative possibilities of a human striking a bargain with the devil continues to engage readers in many languages today. In fact, An tAthaír Peadar’s original work has a layered com-

plexity which was lost from view for many years, because the structured framework in which it was set (the telling of the story by a baby-sitting young teenage girl and the children’s fireside discussion of the story as it unfolds) was edited out of the school version, Scéal Shéadna. Ironically, this had the effect of reducing the tale to a more straightforward narrative, indeed going a long way towards restoring it to its folklore origins.

Although it still defies easy classification, Séadna was welcomed as a folk-novel. Writers in Irish also eagerly cultivated other modern literary genres. The short story in particular proved especially congenial, both Pádraic Ó Conaire and Patrick Pearse himself making lasting contributions. Ó Conaire’s novel Deoraidheacht, urban and avant-garde, was the very antithesis of Pearse’s and Ua Laoghaire’s timeless rural settings. An tAthair Peadar’s Mo Sgéal Féin (1915) is a memoir of the public man. The Gaeltacht autobiography genre, which was to overshadow almost all other creative endeavours, was still some time in the future, Tomás Ó Criomhthain’s An tOileánach, not appearing until 1929.

The Gaelic Journal functioned as the premier forum for Irish-language writing until it was superseded by the newspapers Fáinne an Lae and An Claidheamh Soluis almost twenty years later. Bernard Doyle set himself clear – and ambitious – aims for Fáinne an Lae, which he started to publish in 1898: ‘The new journal will be a bona fide newspaper intended to supply in Irish a summary of news, and miscellaneous interesting matter as weekly reading for the ordinary household. In fulfilling this purpose it will attain the great end of creating an Irish-reading public.’ However, the journal was not a commercial success and within three years had been amalgamated with a new Gaelic League newspaper, An Claidheamh Soluis. Functional written Irish was to experience a slow growth. Indeed, as Nic Pháidín observes, no Irish-language newspaper has yet succeeded in creating as big a market as Doyle had hoped for in 1898. But the very fact that Irish was being written, could be written, was vested with symbolic significance, and soon became a powerful weapon in the language movement’s crusade to gaelicize the administrative environment of urban areas.

Early in its existence the Gaelic League launched a popular initiative to raise public awareness about Irish-language place-names, while simultaneously harnessing this awareness into pressure on the postal and local authorities to facilitate their active use.

Candidates were lobbied in advance of the 1900 election to Dublin Corporation, and a majority of those subsequently elected had agreed to the inclusion of Irish on street nameplates. The Paving Committee initially drew attention to the great cost which would be involved by ‘erecting bi-lingual street-name-plates at 8/- each – the ascertained price – in the different streets of the city, including those within the added area, will amount to a sum of £3,400, for

15 Nic Pháidín, Fáinne an Lae, p. 52. 16 Ibid., pp 83–4.
which of course, there is no provision in our finances’. The minutes of a subsequent Municipal Council meeting record that their report was adopted by way of amendment: ‘That the report be adopted, and that in cases where street plates are renewed or new ones put up they shall be lettered bi-lingually.’

And so, Dublin Corporation came to adopt a policy of bilingual street nameplates early in 1901. However, the implementation of this new policy cannot have been particularly swift, for we find Alderman Cole serving notice of the following motion in 1904:

That this Council, desiring to meet the widely-expressed wishes of so many thousands of the citizens to have the streets of the entire city named in the Irish as well as in the English Language, direct that estimates be advertised for showing at what cost, and in what Irish material the names of the streets throughout the city could be affixed to the Electric Lamp Poles, and that a Special Sub-Committee of this Council be appointed to draw up a list of names in Irish to be so placed – the present names of the streets in English to remain as they are.

This motion was ruled out of order, because the Council had already considered this matter and decided that when any new nameplates were being affixed they should be bilingual. We may note again how the process of bilingualization was couched in Cole’s motion in such a way as not to challenge the existing names, the vast majority of which were of English-language origin.

By 1903, written Irish and the question of its status was increasingly finding its way into the public domain. There was continuous feuding between the League and the Post Office and railway companies over delays in the delivery of parcels and letters addressed in Irish. It was reported that a letter sent from Dublin to Béal Átha an Ghaorthaidh spent eight days touring Co. Cork before it was delivered. Matters came to a head in 1904:

In the Post Office two postmen were employed in Dublin to translate into English the names and places on the 4,000 Irish-addressed letters which they handled each week.

In January, 1904, the Post Office printed a new rule: ‘The address of a parcel must be clearly written in English characters in ordinary use in the United Kingdom. A parcel bearing an address otherwise written will not be accepted unless a translation of the address can be made.’ The rule was not put into operation until An

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Conradh sent several hundred parcels of Seachtain na Gaeilge literature to the G.P.O. to be posted. The parcels were refused. Three days later the parcels were brought back – by 150 members of Conradh na Gaeilge. Business in the parcel office was brought to a standstill, as officials argued with the members. Eventually all the parcels were posted in the letter box.\textsuperscript{20}

An essential facilitating element in the gaelicizing of postal addresses was the publication of the two-volume bilingual gazetteer of Seosamh Laoide or J.H. Lloyd, the first volume of which (English–Irish) appeared in 1905: Post-Sheanchas i n-a bhfuil Cúigí, Dúithchí, Conntaethe, Baile Puist na hÉireann. Cuid I. Sasbhéarla-Gaedhilg, the second volume (Irish–English), Cuid II. Gaedhilg-Sasbhéarla, followed in 1911.\textsuperscript{21}

An Claidheamh Soluis had been publishing the Irish forms of anglicized surnames since 1900, while summonses by the Royal Irish Constabulary of people for having ‘illegible’ names on their carts were becoming more frequent. Ruth Dudley Edwards sets the scene for Pearse’s one and only court case, effectively contrasting the diplomatic bent of Hyde with the younger man’s desire for action: ‘It was legally necessary for a cart-owner to put his name on his cart, and with the spread of the League’s ideas on the use of Irish forms where possible, individual cart-owners began painting their Irish names in Irish characters. There were one or two prosecutions on this account, with small fines resulting.’\textsuperscript{22} Hyde had ‘wanted the placing of the Irish forms on carts to become so common that it could not be interfered with, and the government was not interfering’. However, Pearse appealed to the higher courts in the case brought against Niall Mac Giolla Brighde (Neil McBride) in 1905, and lost: ‘Thus it was made illegal not only to have the name in Irish letters but to have it in any form except the correct English form.’\textsuperscript{23} Pearse’s own account of what transpired has quite a heroic ring to it:

On Tuesday last the language movement marched boldly into the King’s Bench Division of the High Court of Justice in Ireland, and for five hours counsel discussed with the Lord Chief Justice, Mr Justice Andrews, and Mr Justice Gibson, various questions ranging from the origin of the Irish alphabet to the position of the Pan-Celts with regard to the Irish language.

We are only carrying out the spirit of the resolution of the Ard-Fheis when we advise all Gaels to simply ignore the British Law that makes it penal for them to use their own language to the exclusion of English. If they are summoned and fined, let them refuse to pay; if they are sent to prison, let them go to prison. The question can be brought to a head no other way.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 26. \textsuperscript{21} Both volumes were published by Conradh na Gaedhilge, Baile Átha Cliath. \textsuperscript{22} Ruth Dudley Edwards, \textit{Patrick Pearse: the triumph of failure} (London: Victor Gollancz, 1977), p. 79. \textsuperscript{23} Ibid., pp 79–80. \textsuperscript{24} Ibid., pp 80, 81.
Mac Giolla Brighde lived in an Irish-speaking area and had been fined for having the Irish form of his name on his cart, the judge deciding that the Irish language had no standing in law. The Coiste Gnótha said that the court had, in effect, called Irish a foreign language. In another case, in an English-speaking district, Tomás Mac Seoin, was sentenced to a week's hard labour when he refused to pay a fine of one shilling on being summoned for having his name in Irish on his cart.25

A macaronic ballad-style song was composed celebrating one such encounter between a representative of the state, a policeman by the name of Thingyme, and the humble owner of an ass and cart. It tells how Mícheál an gabha, was accosted as he made his way across a bridge in Muileann na hAbhann:

Ba ghairid go bhfaca mé asal a's trucaill bheag,
Chugainn ar a shodar faoi Mhícheál an gabha
Siúd leis an Bobby 'This cart has no signature
Only a lingo I cannot make out.'

'Your name my good man, and answer[ed] right quickly now.'
'Amharc ar an trucaill an bhfuileann tú dall?
Tá m'ainmse breacaithe i dteanga a thuigimse,
Agus fógraím thusa go hIlfreann lom.'

'Ten shillings with costs or a fortnight's imprisonment.
Next on the list. Take this reprobate down.'
'Cuirtear faoi ghlasa mé feasta a ghlagaire,
Píngin de m'sheilbh ní féidhfidh síbh ann.'

[It wasn't long till I saw a donkey and a little cart,
Coming towards us at a trot with Mícheál the smith
Out steps the Bobby: 'This cart has no signature
Only a lingo I cannot make out.'

'Your name my good man, and answer[ed] right quickly now.'
'Look at the cart, are you blind,
My name is written out in a language I understand,
And I damn you to the barreness of Hell.'

'Ten shillings with costs or a fortnight's imprisonment.
Next on the list. Take this reprobate down.'
'Let me be locked up now you prattler,
Not a penny of my money will you see there.']26

The language movement was therefore engaged in a broad campaign, not only to reverse the shift in vernacular from Irish to English, but to confront the legal and administrative underpinning that had set the scene for that language change. Central to the project was the change from an invisible, private, apologetic role for Irish to a highly visible, public manifestation of a cultural revival, proclaimed from the sides of carts, from the names of train stations, from street name plates and from the addresses on letters and packages. This was undoubtably an ideological stance, reacting against the reverses of several centuries.

The issuing of Séadna in book form came at a time when publishing by the Gaelic League in and about Irish was reaching new heights, under the general editorship of Seosamh Laoide. Hyde states that ‘the work of producing publications was proceeding at such a rate that we had to put a particular editor in charge of them, who would read them and correct the text. We chose Laoide (J.H. Lloyd) for that. He had been editor of the Gaelic Journal until then.’

Seosamh Laoide took up his new appointment on 1 January 1903. Throughout his time as the League’s Publications Editor he seems to have been indefatigable. For instance, the year 1903 saw 37 volumes published, 31 followed in 1904 and 35 in 1905.

Irish may have had textbooks, produced under the auspices of SPIL and the Gaelic League, it may have had an embryonic modern literature, but it did not have a numerous, literate, book-reading public. Most of the learners inevitably would never progress beyond the less demanding works. More insidiously, the lack of a reading tradition in the Gaeltacht stunted the growth of a literature in Irish, which needed informed readers as well as competent writers.

The 1915 Ard-Fheis of the Gaelic League, held in Dundalk, is well-known for the clash about the constitutional change committing the organization to the ideal of ‘a free Irish nation’, led to Hyde’s resignation from the presidency, but there were other tensions too. Due to lack of funds, the publishing enterprise had to be brought to a halt, effectively rendering Seosamh Laoide redundant. He was then fifty years of age. A bitter correspondence between Laoide and the Coiste Gnótha or Executive Committee ensued, when steps were taken to wind up the publishing activities and dispense with Laoide, because of the lack of sales. A trenchant letter which he sent, contained the following enumeration of the work he had accomplished:

- Books written by myself from beginning to end: 31
- Books for which I provided vocabularies and references: 36
- Books which I read and edited: 73
- Original scripts of my own: 68
- Scripts to further learning: 120

27 Dubhghlas de híde, Mise agus an Conradh (Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig Dhíolta Foillseacháin Rialtais, 1937), p. 102.
This gave a grand total of 328 publications, a very considerable achievement for the 13-year period 1903–15.\textsuperscript{28}

Endorsing Durkacz’s view that ‘the alienation of language from literacy’ was a critical factor in the decline of Irish, Gaelic and Welsh, Mary Daly sees this as part of a pervasive process, extending over several centuries:

From the sixteenth century the Irish language was progressively excluded from the worlds of commerce, politics, official religion, the professions and printed word as a result of complex socio-economic and political circumstances, and although Gaelic literature survived in oral and manuscript form, the overwhelming majority of Gaelic speakers remained illiterate.\textsuperscript{29}

Cullen grapples with the same problem for the period 1700–1850:

The answers to the question as to why a living language with such an immense written culture ... did not spawn printing lie along two lines. First, printing could only have succeeded in an urban context. However the towns represented the most anglicised aspect of Ireland ... Secondly, printing ... would have had to be sponsored actively in the seventeenth century, when modern means of communication and the penetration of law and legal forms to the masses were still in their early stages. Once these citadels were captured by a language, given the persuasive advantages not only of the written but of the printed word, the cause was lost.\textsuperscript{30}

Peirse and others wished to proclaim Irish on the side of carts, as part of a grander design. Hyde initially wished to make the Irish present a rational continuation of its past; soon he and others were striving to make the present and the future a continuation of a cultural past which should have been.

They marshalled a mass movement, lobbied the local authorities. They ensured that the reading and writing of Irish was central to its position in the schools, and a prerequisite for entry to the new National University and to a range of local authority employments. They created a literary milieu in which the language flourished. With regard to creative literature, Máirtín Ó Cadhain was of the view that writing in Irish was the clearest result of the work of the

Gaelic League on behalf of Irish. The printing presses that had been denied the language were now employed with zeal, making up for lost time and the neglect of centuries.  

Irish had achieved a symbolic public presence as well on Dublin street-name plates. However in 1915, the challenges remained daunting, especially that of making written Irish a meaningful, everyday language in the adult world of administration and commerce. To encourage the Irish-language communities to become active literates in their native language was still difficult, as witnessed by the on-off engagement with Irish as a creative medium even a generation later of one such as Liam O’Flaherty.

By 1915, the Gaelic League alone had issued some 300 books and publications in and about Irish. The works in Irish available to the public covered the full spectrum of modern literate life – primers, textbooks, dictionaries, poetry, novels, short stories, plays, journals, polemic. The constraints now were not those of official hostility, but rather the indifference of the market place. The invisibility of Irish had been replaced by a very public presence on letters, on parcels, on carts, on street nameplates. Indeed, the written medium largely was the message.

This essay has been concerned with investigating the balance aimed at and achieved between various types of literacy in Irish – the fostering of learner competence, the ambition to create a modern literature, to create a modern journalism, the use of written Irish as symbol. There are of course other areas of interest. There is, for instance, the question of the relationship with English, a relationship that encompassed code-mixing and macaronic composition, topics, which I have been examining elsewhere, as well as the issue of the impact of English orthography on the native tradition. But more fundamentally, there are some underlying assumptions, which would merit discussion and challenge. For example, was the attempt to ape the development of literacy and literature in the major Western European languages the only path available to Irish? The whole oral-written dynamic in Irish should be opened up again to debate. There can be no gainsaying the vibrancy of the oral tradition in Irish in the nineteenth and preceding centuries. This contrasted with the neighbouring societies that had experienced the cultural upheaval, brought about by industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A quotation from Canon Ulick Burke in his Academy essay of 1874 will show the complexity of the strands being woven together:

[The] tales and traditions which are recited at the fireside by the peasants in the country villages are of two classes – Namely those which have

been published by the Gaelic Society and by the Ossianic Society;—and secondly those not yet published:—Of this latter class—there are two sorts—those which have a literary status in Manuscript; and those which are still floating on the winds of mere oral tradition, and which yet have not been as far as the writer is aware committed to writing.\textsuperscript{33}

Here, we have evidence for a three-fold interaction between print, manuscript, and oral transmission of texts. It was the interplay of these three strands that had set traditional Irish culture apart from the experience of the mainstream Western European languages. The period from 1875 to 1915 had seen writing in Irish thrust headlong into the modern world.