

# **Ireland As We Would Surely Have Her**

*Nationalism, Civil War, and the*

*Failure of Language Revival in the Irish Free State*

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**Introduction:**

On November 25th, 1892, Douglas Hyde, the future president of the Republic of Ireland, addressed the Irish National Literary Society in Dublin, giving one of the most important speeches in modern Irish history. “In anglicizing ourselves wholesale,” he declared, “We have thrown away with a light heart the best claim which we have upon the world’s recognition of us as a separate nationality.”<sup>1</sup> The sentiment expressed in Dr. Hyde’s address was not unfamiliar to colonized Ireland. Across the island, the fear of declinist politics was beginning to grip the nationalist consciousness. For almost a century, the language had been in a state of decline, and by the time of Hyde’s speech, much of the native-speaking populace had been confined to small pockets of land largely in the West of the island, known as the Gaeltacht. Organizations such as the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, Society for the Propagation of the Irish Language, and in 1893, Douglas Hyde’s very own Gaelic League began to crop up, becoming hubs of organization and discourse for language and cultural enthusiasts. Often, although more covertly, the organizations of the Gaelic Revival became centers of Republican activity.<sup>2</sup>

For many of the members of the Gaelic League and its associated organizations, the revival of the Irish language was more than an academic pursuit, but a crucial form of resistance against colonial oppression. There was a great overlap between the membership of the League and the IRA which would win Irish independence. Similarly, the Gaelic League would be well represented in the Irish Civil War, with prominent language revivalists taking up arms against each other over the issue of Northern partition. After the guns fell silent and the smoke cleared, the duty of restoring the Irish language to cultural hegemony was inherited by the government of

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Hyde, “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland,” In *The Politics of Language in Ireland: 1366-1922: A Sourcebook* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2000), 182.

<sup>2</sup> Richard English. *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland*. 2nd ed. London, United Kingdom: Pan Books, 2008, 227.

the Irish Free State. But despite the project of de-Anglicising Ireland having the complete backing of successive Irish government administrations, a state-run program for the education of the Irish language, and a strategy to preserve the communities where it was still spoken, the revival of the Irish language largely failed to reverse the tide of linguistic anglicization and create the society envisioned by the Gaelic League and the Irish government.<sup>3</sup>

Although the factors for the failure are extremely multifaceted and are still debated today, many of the obstacles the Irish administrations of the twentieth century faced surrounding Irish language revival have their roots in the earliest days of the nation. The fratricide of the Irish Civil War led to a disillusionment of the Gaelic Revivalist movement and economically stunted the nation in its infancy. The culmination of these two factors directly led to the divestment of governmental endowments for public language revival efforts and to the continued erosion of the Irish-speaking communities through economically driven emigration and assimilation into English-speaking regions. At the dawn of self-governance, when linguistic revitalization was most culturally feasible and the fervor for Gaelicisation was most palpable, the movement's momentum and enthusiasm were halted and dissipated, and the revolutionary dream of an Irish-speaking nation lost priority to the burgeoning material needs of the newly born state.

### **Britain, Famine, and the Decline of the Irish Language:**

While the causes of the decline of the Irish language are as multitudinous as the reasons for its failure of revival, the common denominator among the stimuli that caused the linguistic replacement is the historical British domination of the island. As Ireland fell increasingly into dependency on the growing colonial Britain's economic system and its imposed government, the adoption of English brought real-world advantages in the realms of business and state.<sup>4</sup> A clear

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<sup>3</sup> Reg Hindley, *The Death of the Irish Language: A Qualified Obituary* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 1990), 30.

<sup>4</sup> Richard English. *Irish Freedom*, 227.

connection began to be drawn between cultural anglicization and economic prosperity. This reality was brutally demonstrated by the Great Irish Potato Famine, which decimated the Irish population. Within a decade, mass starvation and emigration dropped the population from about 8.5 million in 1845 to just over 6 million in 1852. The famine especially ravaged the island's South and West, where the density of subsistence farmers was highest.<sup>5</sup> Before the famine, these areas had some of the largest population densities of monolingual Irish speakers on the island, largely due to their geographical distance from Britain, and high population of potato-reliant subsistence farmers who were mostly uninvolved in the British economy.<sup>6</sup> While Irish had been in decline before the famine, largely because of the advantages of English and the refusal of the church and state to preach, educate, and govern in Irish, the effects of the potato blight cannot be understated.<sup>7</sup> In 1800 Irish was still monolingually spoken by about half the population, compared to merely five percent that survived and remained after the Great Hunger.<sup>8</sup>

Both before and after the famine, within the Anglo-centric British Empire, the Irish language increasingly came to be associated with negative stereotypes. Irish was often seen as uncivilized, lower class, and uneducated within the British zeitgeist. This typecasting would come to be perpetuated by the poverty that was often experienced within the Irish-speaking communities. James Joyce, in his short story *The Dead*, depicts the dissemination of these stereotypes into Irish culture itself, and the cultural divides anglicization had created within society. Upon being pejoratively named a West Briton for learning European languages and

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<sup>5</sup> A. Stewart Fotheringham, et al. "The Demographic Impacts of the Irish Famine: Towards a Greater Geographical Understanding." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38, no. 2 (2013): 221–37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24582470>.

<sup>6</sup> Richard B. Walsh. "The Death of the Irish Language." In *Milestones in Irish History*. (Blackrock: Mercier Press, 1986), 93.

<sup>7</sup> Walsh, "The Death of the Irish Language," 89-90.

<sup>8</sup> Richard English. *Irish Freedom*, 227.

reading English books, Joyce's protagonist Gabriel Conroy remarks "Irish is not my language."<sup>9</sup> In *Dubliners*, the compilation within which *The Dead* was published, Joyce critiques many of the structures and attitudes of Irish society that he perceived around him, including the internalized cultural shame regarding the Irish language and Gaelic culture. Between demographic decline brought about by the Irish Famine and the British economic and cultural domination of Irish society which created stigma against speakers of the language, the Irish language and Gaelic cultural tradition in general fell from prominence, giving rise to dominance of British culture and the English language. The Irish language loomed on the precipice of extinction, and as many contemporary scholars believed, the Gaelic identity was to follow suit.

### **Revival, Republicanism, and Dreams of a Gaelic Ireland:**

The politics of decline brings with it a powerful pathos. In the case of Ireland, the sharp diminution of the Irish language and Gaelic culture's relevance inspired an almost knee-jerk reactionary response towards public interest in Irish and Gaelic identity. Within this post-famine 'Gaelic Revivalist' movement, the restoration of the Irish language was seen as "an essential bulwark" against the process of replacement at the hands of British culture.<sup>10</sup> The loss of language along with the loss of traditions and customs, posed a widely perceived threat to the Irish identity. A wide array of cultural organizations sprung up across Ireland, claiming members from a large cross-section of society. The movement encapsulated both the academically inclined linguist societies such as the aforementioned Gaelic League, and muscularly focussed organizations such as the Gaelic Athletic Association, which provided a network for competition

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<sup>9</sup> Joyce, James. "The Dead." In *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories*, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 239.

<sup>10</sup> Richard English. *Irish Freedom*, 227.

in traditional Irish games.<sup>11</sup> The appeal of the movement to both academics and laypersons and to both young and old brought the movement into the cultural spotlight.

At first, the Gaelic Revival was not inherently separatist or republican in its goals. Certainly, the movement was politically conscious and had political agendas, such as The Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, a predecessor to the Gaelic League, which in 1878 successfully campaigned to have Irish taught in the national schools.<sup>12</sup> This was a major victory for the language revivalists, paving the way for future nationally funded Irish education. However, while the organizations may have had political goals, many leaders within the organizations, including Douglas Hyde of the Gaelic League, attempted to keep their organizations non-partisan regarding Republicanism and the Fenians. Hyde feared a politicization would divide the movement between Catholics and Protestants, sending the organization into insignificance.<sup>13</sup> While influenced by Republicans, Hyde himself was Protestant, which distanced him from the likewise Gaelic-enthused but generally Catholic nationalists.<sup>14</sup> At the beginning of the movement, Gaelic Revivalism did not necessarily equate to Catholic religiosity or Republican separatism.

The goal of neutrality was made difficult by the Gaelic Revival's context within a culturally and politically oppressed society. Irish nationalism and the drive for independence had a lot going for it. The history of its people, its distinct geographical separation, and its majority religion being different from that of its English overlords contributed greatly to the creation of an imagined community. Language, however, was perhaps one of the greatest factors in a non-English identity. The presence of a distinct language creates a distinguishable “other,” and

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<sup>11</sup> English, 229.

<sup>12</sup> Séamas Ó Buachalla, “Educational Policy and the Role of the Irish Language from 1831 to 1981,” JSTOR, 1984, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1503260.pdf>, 70-71.

<sup>13</sup> Seán Ó Lúing. “Douglas Hyde and the Gaelic League.” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 62, no. 246 (1973): 136. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30088031>.

<sup>14</sup> Ó Lúing, 134; English. *Irish Freedom*, 123.

for minority and oppressed identities, resists the status quo of assimilation and acceptance.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, the belief that language and literature impart upon its speaker and reader a degree of cultural values was powerful for the Irish nationalist cause. As Thomas Davis, a Young Irelander put it:

“The language, which grows up with a people, is [...] descriptive of their climate, constitution, and manners mingled separately with their history and their soil, [...] To impose another language on such a people is to send their history adrift among the accidents of translation, [...] and abridge their power of expression.”<sup>16</sup>

The necessity of the language for the nationalists was not only a visible divide between the Irish and English but also the idea that through the literature and customs of the English language, its speakers would gradually adopt the habits and values of the culture that developed it, becoming English. Around the turn of the 19th century, anglicization and the willing use of the English language were increasingly viewed as a colonization of the mind, an extension of the colonization of the physical world, and an internalized shame of one's culture and heritage.<sup>17</sup>

Due to both the natural relationship between language and nationalism and by gradual infiltration of the organizations by Republicans, the Gaelic League and the Gaelic Revival were generally becoming more or less synonymous with Republican separatism. The politicization of the Gaelic Revival is demonstrated by the Gaelic League's official publications and advertisements.

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<sup>15</sup> Eric Hobsawm, “Nationalism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *The Nationalism Reader*, 2nd ed. (Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 2006), 364.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Mays, *Nation States: The Cultures of Irish Nationalism* (Plymouth, United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2007), 44. Quoting Thomas Davis in C.P. Meehan, *Literary and Historical Essays*, (Dublin: James Duffy and Son, 1846), 173-174.

<sup>17</sup> Joyce. “*The Dead*,” 239. Miss Ivors, a feminist and nationalist activist, insults Gabriel as a “West Briton” for favoring English and continental languages over Irish, implying his internalized shame towards the culture of his heritage.



Figure 1. Chenevix Trench, Frances Georgiana. *Seachtmáin Na Gaedhilge: Language Collection Now on: On Which Side Are You?* Gaeilge League, 1913.

In Figure 1, a Gaelic League poster on the right depicts a downtrodden Irish woman, draped in the British flag for warmth. Her hand is extended eastward for help, with the control of the island's trade being held by England. This West Briton beggar is juxtaposed with the image of a proud Irish woman on the left, standing tall and armed, holding the leashes of control over the Irish trade. Figure 1 encapsulates the growing Republican ideology of the League, with support for Irish economic, military, and cultural independence. Much to Hyde's dismay, the politics of the organization's Republican members became enshrined into the League's mission, with a popular resolution being passed by the group's leadership committing the league to "making



Ireland ‘free from foreign domination.’”<sup>18</sup> The Irish language came to be seen by nationalists as the key to preserving a unique and authentic Irish identity that would never be satisfied with anything less than self-determination. In 1915 Patrick Pearse, perhaps the most prolific and vehement advocate of this belief, orated at the funeral of O'Donovan Rossa, a prominent leader of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, declaring “the clear true eyes of this man [...] envisioned Ireland as we of today would surely have her: not free merely, but Gaelic as well; not Gaelic merely, but free as well.”<sup>19</sup> Whereas the Gaelic Revival began its days largely as an academic and cultural phenomenon, the Gaelic movement and the Republican camp became inextricably intertwined in their aspirations, membership, and organizations.

### **Language, Revolt, and Revolution:**

Ironically, while the decline of Irish was perceived to be one of, if not the most dangerous threat to Irish culture and an independent identity, the fear of cultural displacement was instrumental in the creation of the nationalist fervor and community organization that would culminate into the 1916 Easter Uprising and the Irish War of Independence. Groups like the Gaelic League became breeding grounds for revolutionary thought and organization, turning existential fears into nationalist politics. The majority of leading figures in the revolutionary period and the Free State claimed membership from the League.<sup>20</sup> Pearse, an early Gaelic League member and proclaimer of the Irish Republic during the Easter Rising, is perhaps the epitome of the fusion of the Irish language revivalist and the militant freedom fighter.<sup>21</sup> Where he stated

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<sup>18</sup> Seán Ó Lúing. “Douglas Hyde and the Gaelic League.” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 62, no. 246 (1973): 135. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30088031>. Quoting a 1915 Gaelic League resolution.

<sup>19</sup> Padraig Pearse, “While Ireland Holds These Graves,” Oration, In *Great Irish Speeches of the Twentieth Century* (Dublin, Ireland: Poolbeg, 1996), 40.

<sup>20</sup> Tom Garvin, *Nationalist Revolutionaries in Ireland 1858-1928*, (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press, 1987), 78.

<sup>21</sup> English, *Irish Freedom*, 269.

earlier in his funeral oration the importance of a united Ireland both Gaelic and free, he concludes his speech with the famous and prophetic declaration:

They think that they have pacified Ireland. They think that they have purchased half of us and intimidated the other half. They think that they have foreseen everything, think that they have provided against everything; but the fools, the fools, the fools! – they have left us our Fenian dead, and while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be at peace.<sup>22</sup>

For many republicans, like Pearse, Gaelicization was freedom. Without a complete de-anglicization as proposed by Hyde, and a strong Gaelic national identity, the struggle for domination would never end, whether in direct political control or indirect economic and cultural subservience. Pearse's prediction proved to be true, and within a decade of his oration, after an uprising and a war, the Irish Republicans gained independence from the direct control of Great Britain.<sup>23</sup> The new nation now had the momentous task of forming a democratic government and providing for the well-being and economic prosperity of its people.

For the victorious revolutionaries, however, the fight for a free Ireland was not finished. Michael Collins, a leader of the Irish Republican Army, and the Minister of Finances for the new government, upon independence, stated “The biggest task will be the restoration of the language [...] We are now free in name. The extent to which we become free in fact and secure our freedom will be the extent to which we become Gaels again.”<sup>24</sup> Whereas before the War of Independence, the Irish language had been a nationalist rallying cry, during the uncertain peace it became the new test of the nation's identity, to prove whether the free Irish could ever be culturally Gaelic in the face of the global cultural hegemony of English. Furthermore, at least in Collins's mind, the permanent strengthening of the Irish identity through a distinct language

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<sup>22</sup> Pearse. “*While Ireland Holds These Graves*,” 40.

<sup>23</sup> English, *Irish Freedom*, 307.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Collins. “Distinctive Civilization. Ancient Irish Culture: Glories of the Past,” In *The Path to Freedom: Articles and Speeches*. (Cork, Ireland: Mercier Press, 2018), 105.

would forever instill within the Irish people an independent fighting spirit that could “keep out the enemy [of England], and all other [future] enemies.”<sup>25</sup> The war against Britain had ended and the war against English had begun. Bullets were to be replaced with words, and soldiers were to be replaced by teachers. The new battlefield for Ireland's cultural independence was in the minds of its people.

### **Brother Against Brother, The Irish Civil War:**

The dream for a united and free Ireland was left philosophically unfinished by the need for language revival, and materially unrealized by the terms on which the state came into being. The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, which brokered the tentative peace between the Irish provisional government and the British Empire was extremely controversial. While the nationalists had envisioned an Irish Republic, the terms of peace gave them a free state still within the realm of the British Empire. Loyalty oaths to the British crown were to be taken by the Oireachtas, Ireland's bicameral parliament. Additionally, Ireland would be required to pay a portion of Britain's public debt and war pensions from the Great War and the War for Irish Independence.<sup>26</sup> Most controversially, the treaty divided the Protestant Ulster from the Irish Free State, leaving nearly a fourth of the island under British dominion. By many within the nationalist movement, the compromise was seen as a sellout of the Republican ideal, leaving Ireland both politically and economically beholden to the United Kingdom, and riven by the concession of their northern territory. This view was echoed both by high-ranking politicians and military men. Minister of Agriculture, Art O'Connor, at the Dáil Eireann debate on the Treaty prior to its signing, declared “I will vote against this Treaty because the acceptance of it would mean the death knell of this

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<sup>25</sup> Collins. *Distinctive Civilization. Ancient Irish Culture*, 102.

<sup>26</sup> “The Anglo-Irish Treaty, December 1921,” CAIN, accessed March 17, 2024, <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/ait1921.htm>. Articles 1-16.

Dáil and Republic.”<sup>27</sup> The treaty divided the highest levels of government, with Sinn Fein leader Eamon de Valera abhorring the notion of a territorial division, and War of Independence hero Michael Collins believing the treaty to be a stepping stone towards an eventual republic and united Ireland.<sup>28</sup>

The resolution of negotiations under the less-than-satisfactory compromise infuriated many IRA hardliners, creating a split within the nationalist movement. In the minds of many militant nationalists, the independent republic they fought for was betrayed by the movement's political leaders, who in exchange for peace installed what was perceived to be a puppet state.<sup>29</sup> In these tense early days of the Free State, much of the focus of the government was diverted away from building an economic strategy and education plan to preserve the Irish-speaking regions and spread the language, and was instead distracted and made ineffective by the growing intensity of the us-versus-them politics caused by the Treaty.<sup>30</sup> Many within the army's ranks, having been hardened by war, imprisonment, and reprisals, wished to continue military operations against the British forces, to accept nothing less than a united Irish Republic. These men, known as the Anti-Treaty IRA, challenged the Free State Government by occupying significant government buildings, including the Four Courts in Dublin, which contained the highest levels of Ireland's court system.<sup>31</sup> A tense, month-long standoff ensued, with neither side wanting to act against their former comrades.

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<sup>27</sup> “Dáil Éireann Debate - Tuesday, 3 Jan 1922,” House of the Oireachtas, January 3, 1922, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1922-01-03/2>. Quoting Art O’Connor, Minister of Agriculture for the first and second Dáils. Subject of debate was the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921.

<sup>28</sup> Calton Younger, *Ireland's Civil War*, (London, United Kingdom: Fontana Press, 1990), 198-199.

<sup>29</sup> Tom Garvin, *Nationalist Revolutionaries in Ireland 1858-1928* (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press, 1987), 141.

<sup>30</sup> Garvin, *Nationalist Revolutionaries in Ireland 1858-1928*, 143. Quoting Mark Sturgis, a senior Anglo-Irish civil servant who observed the political split among the Republicans. He remarked that Sinn Fein's enemy primary issue was not its distrust of the old British enemy, but instead was its distrust growing between its pro and anti treaty members.

<sup>31</sup> Younger, *Ireland's Civil War*, 259.

The political situation proved to be untenable. Under the threat of British military intervention and needing to rise to the existential threat the challenge of its authority posed, the Free State Provisional Government was forced to respond aggressively.<sup>32</sup>



Figure 2. Daily Mail. *Blazing Four Courts, Dublin*. Photograph. Dublin, July 4, 1922. Dublin. The National Army under the command of Michael Collins bombarded the occupied government buildings, engulfing the surrounding area in flames.

Reluctantly, Michael Collins, under orders from the Provisional Government, directed the National Army to bombard and storm the occupied Four Courts.<sup>33</sup> In the wake of the assault,

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<sup>32</sup> Younger, 284-285.

<sup>33</sup> Younger, 306-307.

Liam Lynch, leader of the Anti-Treaty forces, called upon all citizens to support the resistance against the “recreant Irishmen” who had forsaken their “allegiance to the republic.”<sup>34</sup> One by one, unit leaders of the IRA across Ireland had to choose the side on which their loyalties lay. In deliberating the question, one brigade commander asked himself and his men, “Is this a surrender of the Republic, a compromise we cannot agree with?”<sup>35</sup> IRA men across the country were asking themselves similar questions, and the varied answers often saw entire brigades and divisions breaking into two, ultimately leading to the creation of two opposing armies.<sup>36</sup> The ensuing civil war would see the triumph of the Free State over the guerrilla Anti-Treaty IRA, and although relatively short, and low in casualties, would forever change the society and politics of independent Ireland, and greatly contribute to the failure of its efforts to revive the Irish language.

### **Disillusionment, Debt, and Language Policy in the Free State:**

The tragedy of the Irish Civil War and its impact on the nature of Irish politics and society cannot be overstated. In its earliest days of its independence, the Irish Free State was brutally divided by the treaty and the war. This divide within the populace and the experience of the war proved to be the death of the idealistic energy of revolution and much of the excitement and momentum for the creation of the new state and the revival of Irish was stopped in its tracks.<sup>37</sup> To those closely associated with the language project, the disillusionment, although unquantifiable, was apparent almost immediately after the war ended. In 1923, poet and senator William Butler Yeats motioning in the senate to create a government plan for the preservation and publication of Irish manuscripts, spoke of this disillusionment saying “We will have to build

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<sup>34</sup> Younger, 327.

<sup>35</sup> Younger, 334. Quoting Brigade Adjunct Frank Carty.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Tom Garvin, “The Aftermath of the Irish Civil War,” essay, in *De Valera’s Irelands* (Douglas Village, Ireland: Mercier Press, 2003), 81.

up again the idealism of Ireland [...] like a spendthrift coming into possession of his inheritance, it has wasted that idealism in a year of civil war.”<sup>38</sup> Yeats' sense of the public pulse was accurate. A general apathy toward the language set in, and with Gaelic League branches shutting down, going from 819 chapters in 1922 to only 139 in 1924, the attitude had a direct effect on the language project.<sup>39</sup>

Part of the decline in the Gaelic League's popularity was due to the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Members “expected to have a republic” and that national honor demanded an independent language, but as the nation was a partitioned free state, for some it was “not worth the effort of learning a language.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, much of the tangible cultural impetus for learning the language disappeared upon the certainty of independence. While before the revolution, Irish was a nationalist rallying point, after victory was won its usefulness as a national distinction had served its purpose and was no longer needed.<sup>41</sup> While the majority of people very likely agreed when Collins declared “Until we have [Irish] again on our tongues and in our minds we are not free”, without the immediate need of the colonized to resist the status quo of the oppressor, the task of reviving the language was simply not as pressing.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the disillusionment of the project, the government publicly remained committed to its mission to revive the language. Upon independence, the Provisional Government made Irish a compulsory subject in national schools, and all teachers were mandated to know Irish by

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<sup>38</sup> “Seanad Éireann Debate - Thursday, 19 Apr 1923,” House of the Oireachtas, April 19, 1923, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1923-04-19/11>. Quoting Senator William Butler Yeats. Subject of debate was a motion to appoint a government committee to devise a plan to edit, index, and publish Irish manuscripts through the universities.

<sup>39</sup> English, *Irish Freedom*, 321.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Mays, *Nation States: The Cultures of Irish Nationalism* (Plymouth, United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2007), 101. Referencing Siobhan Lankford, a north cork activist, who himself quoted a student of his Mallow Gaelic League.

<sup>41</sup> Mays, *Nation States*, 102.

<sup>42</sup> Collins. *Distinctive Civilization. Ancient Irish Culture*, 105.

graduation from teacher training college.<sup>43</sup> While much of the pre-Civil War zealotry had dissipated, the goal remained a major national goal, and people agreed with the premise, although perhaps not enough to go out and learn it themselves, as represented by the downsizing of Gaelic League membership. Instead, the task would be left largely in the hands of the nation's children and teachers. They were not without support, however, receiving a fair amount of focus and reform in the early days of the Free State before the Civil War. Scholarships were set up for students to attend Irish-speaking schools, and a National Library was established to aid those studying Irish in higher education.<sup>44</sup> To encourage the language's use outside of primary school and higher education, a national broadcasting program was instituted for traditional Irish language music.<sup>45</sup>

Although early headway was made in transforming an Anglo-Irish society into a Gaelic one, and many government institutions were set up to aid the process, the political turmoil of the early state created major roadblocks for the venture. Most importantly, the civil war was an immense expense for the new government. According to British Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin:

The new Government had to maintain an army of 50,000 men, costing in 1923 £10,000,000, in 1924 £7,000,000, and that in a country whose revenue amounted to £26,000,000. The damage done cost them £10,000,000 in compensation alone, apart from damage done to public property and the inevitable losses to trade and commerce.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> English, *Irish Freedom*, 321.

<sup>44</sup> "Dáil Éireann Debate - Wednesday, 17 Aug 1921," House of the Oireachtas, August 17, 1921, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1921-08-17/14/>.

<sup>45</sup> "Seanad Éireann Debate - Thursday, 20 Jul 1933," House of the Oireachtas, July 20, 1933, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1933-07-20/2>. This 1933 debate concerns the appropriation of funds for the referenced National Broadcast program.

<sup>46</sup> "Ireland (Confirmation of Agreement) Bill.," *Historic Hansard*, 1925, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1925/dec/08/ireland-confirmation-of-agreement-bill>. Quoting British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin within a debate on the amendment of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in response to the Border Commission of 1925.



The Free State had to raise and train the military and account for the damages that naturally occurred when fighting the rebels in densely populated urban areas.<sup>47</sup> With the maintenance of the army and the cost of the damage almost equaling the national revenue, the Free State's economic situation was far from sustainable. The situation was made even worse by the death of the nation's Minister of Finance, Michael Collins, who died fighting the Anti-Treaty IRA.<sup>48</sup> Due to the financial turmoil, the programs set up for the expansion of Irish were given less focus and largely defunded during the war period.<sup>49</sup> At the time there was simply a greater need for guns and ammunition than for school books and radio programs. As British newspaper *Time* succinctly put it in 1923, "\$50,000,000 was appropriated to defray the cost of the Free State Army [...] only \$20,000,000, is appropriated on account of education."<sup>50</sup>

Not only did the Civil War redirect funds from social programs and education during its duration and the days of uncertain relative peace, but the fratricide created long-lasting economic problems for the new state that would continue the damage to the Irish language program. In order to fund the war the Provisional Government was spending wildly on defense, and within the first two years of the nation's existence, it had acquired a spending deficit of over £13,000,000.<sup>51</sup> This financial shortfall was even further compounded by the Free State's obligation to pay annuities for its share of the British Empire's public debt. In accordance with the Anglo-Irish Treaty, the greatest contributing factor to the start of the conflict, the independent

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<sup>47</sup> See Figure 1.

<sup>48</sup> Younger, *Ireland's Civil War*, 433; see also, "Dáil Éireann Debate - Monday, 25 Jun 1923," House of the Oireachtas, June 25, 1923, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1923-06-25/5>. Minister for Home Affairs, Kevin O'Higgins has to make finance motions in the absence of Minister for Finance, Michael Collins. Collins was unable to take his seat in the Dáil, being away waging war against the Anti-Treaty IRA.

<sup>49</sup> Reg Hindley, *The Death of the Irish Language*, 28-29.

<sup>50</sup> "Foreign News: Irish Pot Pourri," *Time*, April 7, 1923, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,715202,00.html>. Note the change in currency from pounds used in previous citations to dollars used in this figure.

<sup>51</sup> G. A. Duncan, "The Irish Free State Budget." *The Economic Journal* 38, no. 150 (1928): 267-75. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2223866>.

Irish state was required to pay to Britain an annual £6,250,000 for sixty years.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, another 5,000,000 pounds was to be paid annually for the repayment of loans given under the Land Acts of 1891-1909.<sup>53</sup> The Land Acts, a method of the British government to enable Ireland's farmers to purchase the land on which they worked, were intended to allow for greater economic freedom within Ireland. Now, without the support of the British Empire, the weight of the annuities on the independent Irish economy was crippling. From its first years, the Free State government was saddled with an immense amount of debt. Although much of what was owed to Britain was forgiven in 1925, in exchange for the Irish government's formal confirmation of the partitioned border, the effects of debt and financial deficit caused by the Civil War were profound within the psychology of many of those in government.<sup>54</sup> A culture of parsimony set in within 1920s Ireland, much to do with the costs of the Civil War upon the new nation and its inability to pay its debts. This fiscal conservatism can be seen in the early government endowments of resources to programs for the arts and humanities. In a 1923 debate on the salaries and funding of the National Library, Parliamentary representative Darrell Figgis summarizes this attitude of austerity:

It is the desire of this nation to economise to the utmost; the necessities for economy have been pressed upon us, and each Deputy is fully alive to the necessities for economy; but there is economy and economy, and to economise on salaries given to persons in the National Library [...] is not wise.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> "Ireland (Confirmation of Agreement) Bill.," *Historic Hansard*, 1925, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1925/dec/08/ireland-confirmation-of-agreement-bill>. Quoting British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin.

<sup>53</sup> "Seanad Éireann Debate - Thursday, 20 Jul 1933," *House of the Oireachtas*, July 20, 1933, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1933-07-20/2>. The issue of the Economic War being waged over the payment of land annuities is correlated by a member of parliament with the inability to fund a national broadcast program.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> "Dáil Éireann Debate - Monday, 25 Jun 1923," *House of the Oireachtas*, June 25, 1923, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1923-06-25/5>.

Minister of Agriculture Patrick Hogan subverts Figgis's plea for funding, instead advocating for government efficiency and parsimony:

You will not get Irish properly taught, and you will get a large sum of money wasted unless there is co-ordination. I have no doubt that we could give the same service with better teaching if the systems were co-ordinated.<sup>56</sup>

The debate concluded with the postponement of a budget increase till a time when the budget estimates were more forgiving.<sup>57</sup> The discussion of government efficiency represents the powerful attitude within the early government for fat trimming and parsimony.

The death of idealism and belief in the Gaelic Revival was also experienced within the realm of economics. According to Garret FitzGerald, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs and son of Desmond FitzGerald, a Prominent Irish Revolutionary, and Cumann na nGaedheal politician, "The civil war demoralized the people of the state" and "the feeling that the state started with an appalling failure made it difficult to tackle some of [...] the economic problems [the nation] had to tackle."<sup>58</sup> Many prominent thinkers and politicians, including Michael Collins, perished fighting one another in the conflict. The nationalists, those who most believed in the philosophical need for the rejuvenation of the Irish language, were brutally divided. The ill-will of the Civil War, which would later represent itself in the major political parties of 1920s and 30s Ireland, would degrade the effectiveness of the state in producing a stable economic strategy, and therefore the state's ability to revive the Irish language. This disunity would further expose the government's weakness in sailing through the economic typhoon that was to be the 1930s.

### **The Great Depression, The Economic War, and The Gaeltacht:**

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Seán O'Mórdha. "Depression and the Rise of Fianna Fáil to Power." Episode. *Seven Ages* no. 2. RTÉ, 2000. Quoting former Minister of Foreign Affairs Garret FitzGerald.

Central to the government's plan to revive Irish was the preservation of the Gaeltacht regions in the west of Ireland that still used Irish as their community language. For centuries these regions, generally poorer than the rest of the nation, were slowly eroded by economically incentivized emigration.<sup>59</sup> These Irish-speaking economic refugees would resettle in English-speaking areas in search of opportunities not afforded to these historically underprivileged and underdeveloped areas, eventually losing their native Irish through generational assimilation. A major front in the government's war to revive Irish, the belief was these areas could become regions of preservation, a veritable fortress of Irishness. To accomplish this goal, in 1925 the Free State commissioned a report on the economic situation of the Gaeltacht, in the hope of uncovering the root causes of the unique economic strife experienced within these communities and offering prescriptions to promote the Irish language.<sup>60</sup> Some of the recommendations given by the report included mandating fluency of primary school teachers, giving salary bonuses to Irish language-only schools, selling low-cost Irish language books, and requiring Irish as the language of governmental administration.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, a large number of recommendations aimed at preserving the economic status of these regions, such as protectionist and modernizing policies for the area's primary industries and the resettlement of Irish families into the western counties.<sup>62</sup> One can only hypothesize how effective in preserving the population of the region or spreading the language the recommendations of the 1926 Gaeltacht would have been. From a certain view, the lack of modernization that was being targeted by the recommendations safeguarded against the prevention of homogenization with the rest of the nation, and modernization of the region's industries would encourage outside immigration of

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<sup>59</sup> Richard B. Walsh. *"The Death of the Irish Language,"* 93.

<sup>60</sup> Coimisiún Na Gaeltachta Report (Dublin, Ireland: Stationery Office, 1926).

<sup>61</sup> Coimisiún Na Gaeltachta Report, 59-61.

<sup>62</sup> Coimisiún Na Gaeltachta Report, 63-64.

English speakers into the Gaeltacht.<sup>63</sup> However, one can conclude with a degree of certainty that any execution of a plan to protect the economic future of the Irish-speaking communities and teach the language would contribute to the overall cause of preventing mass emigration from the Irish-speaking regions.

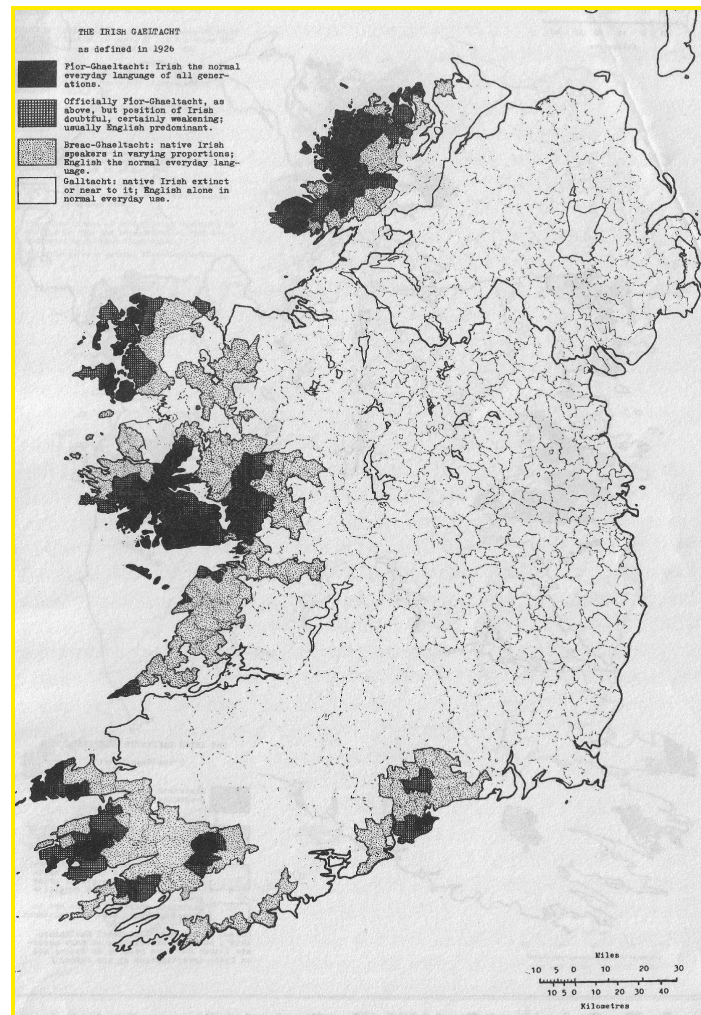


Figure 3. Reg Hindley, “The Gaeltacht 1926,” In *The Death of the Irish language: A Qualified Obituary*, London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 1990, 31. A map of the Gaeltacht regions denoting areas fully Irish-speaking, areas that were partially Irish-speaking, and regions where the language was waning.

The commission was an important step in the preservation of Irish-speaking regions. As demonstrated in Figure 3, action desperately needed to be taken. However, little was accomplished in implementing the prescriptions of the report, primarily due to the economic

<sup>63</sup> Reg Hindley, *The Death of the Irish Language*, 29.

disarray of the government.<sup>64</sup> Contrary to the commission's recommendations, access to reading materials was persistently difficult and expensive to acquire, with “more than 75 percent of [...] children and their parents [in 1934][finding] it a very difficult matter to [buy Irish language] books.”<sup>65</sup> The cost of education remained a large economic barrier to an already impoverished community. Perhaps even more importantly, the emigration of young working men from the Gaeltacht persisted, leading Senator Patrick Hogan to describe the Gaeltacht Department as a fifteen-year failure, with any government only able to espouse “sentimental slop.”<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, according to Hogan, the half measures the government had utilized to encourage population retention were accomplishing little than putting the Gaeltacht into a state of perpetual dependency:

If the Gaeltacht is going to be preserved, it must be preserved by giving a livelihood to the manhood of the Gaeltacht... [another senator] talked about giving this £2 grant in the Gaeltacht [to families with an Irish-speaking child]. I am going to be straight and blunt. Is this House going to turn this entire area, that is to preserve the Gaelic race, into a huge workhouse where there will be no self-help and no self-reliance?<sup>67</sup>

While Hogan's rebuke of a grant to Irish-speaking families is yet another example of the state's parsimony concerning the Gaeltacht, it also reveals the government's failure to attack the root causes of poverty and emigration within the region. Without measures to protect and create stable employment in the Irish-speaking communities, supplemental measures would do little to stop the bleeding in these areas.

A direct cause of the Irish state's inability to follow the plan laid out by the Gaeltacht Commission was the nation's continued financial destitution and the political divide within the

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<sup>64</sup> Reg Hindley, *The Death of the Irish Language*, 28-29.

<sup>65</sup> “Dáil Éireann Debate - Wednesday, 11 Apr 1934,” House of the Oireachtas, April 11, 1934, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1934-04-11/22>. Quoting Patrick McGovern in debate on a 1934 education finance bill.

<sup>66</sup> “Dáil Éireann Debate - Wednesday, 11 May 1938,” House of the Oireachtas, May 11, 1938, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1938-05-11/19>. Quoting Patrick Hogan in the committee of finance on Gaeltacht services.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

government. 1929 marked the start of the Great Depression and the renewal of Ireland's battle with its economy. Although initially, Ireland was relatively unaffected by the American stock market collapse, elected in 1932 under a platform of "reconstituting the economy as a more self-sufficient entity," Eamon de Valera and the Finna Fáil party capitalized on the global economic turbulence.<sup>68</sup> De Valera, in line with his history as a supporter of the Anti-Treaty IRA, took a hard line on Britain. Most notably, he promptly refused to continue the payment of land annuities owed to Britain under the 1891-1909 Land Acts.<sup>69</sup> In response, Britain launched a tariff on Irish agricultural exports determined to be paid the amount due. This blow-for-blow maneuver culminated in what became known as the Economic War, with Ireland and Britain placing tariffs on the other greatest exports, cattle and coal respectively.<sup>70</sup> The resulting damage of the sudden economic estrangement was devastating to Irish industry. Losing an estimated £30,000,000, the Irish economy was plunged from the financial crisis of the Civil War to another within the span of ten years.<sup>71</sup> The effects of this blow to the Irish economy are directly seen in the government's estimated expenditures for government programs: in 1931-32, the estimate for Gaeltacht services and programs was £141,000 while being only £91,000 in 1938-39.<sup>72</sup> The Economic War, lasting over half a decade, ushered in a new level of de Valerian austerity, where economic independence was favored over economic prosperity and social programs.

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<sup>68</sup> Mary E. Daly, "The Irish Free State and the Great Depression of the 1930s: The Interaction of the Global and the Local." *Irish Economic and Social History* 38 (2011): 19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24338903>.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Kevin O'Rourke, "Burn Everything British but Their Coal: The Anglo-Irish Economic War of the 1930s." *The Journal of Economic History* 51, no. 2 (1991): 358. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2122580>.

<sup>71</sup> "Seanad Éireann Debate - Thursday, 20 Jul 1933," House of the Oireachtas, July 20, 1933, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1933-07-20/2>.

<sup>72</sup> "Dáil Éireann Debate - Wednesday, 11 May 1938," House of the Oireachtas, May 11, 1938, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1938-05-11/19>.

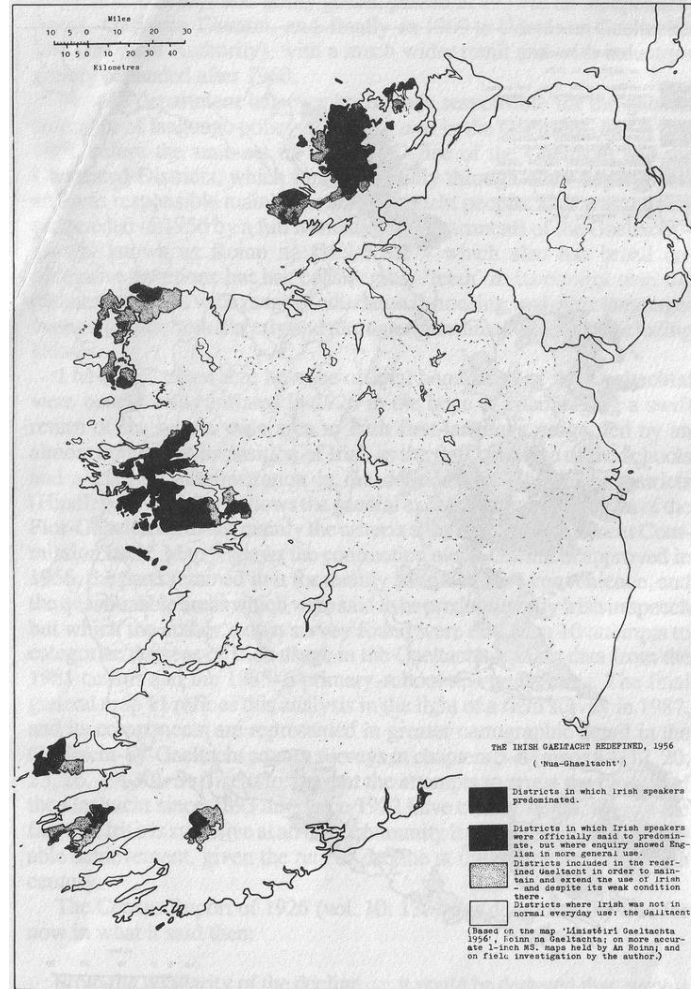


Figure 4. Reg Hindley, “The Gaeltacht redefined 1956: ‘Nua-Ghaeltacht’”, In *The Death of the Irish language: A Qualified Obituary*, London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 1990, 32. The map depicts the further erosion of the Gaeltacht, with regions partially and fully speaking Irish denoted.

Although Eamon de Valera was at least publicly, a strong proponent for the revival of the Irish language, stating that without it Ireland “could never aspire again to being more than half a nation,” the social and economic programs tasked with teaching the language and protecting the people that spoke it greatly suffered in the 1930’s under his administration. As evidenced by Figure 4, the Gaeltacht would suffer greatly in turn, further eroding twenty years after the 1926 Gaeltacht Commission.

### **Conclusion and the Stagnation of Linguistic Revival:**



In James Plunkett's short story, "Weep for Our Pride", a young boy named Peter is corporally punished by his school teachers for not having memorized a line of Irish poetry. Upon the beating, his teacher declares "If I can't preach respect for the patriot dead into you, then honest to my stockings I'll beat respect into you."<sup>73</sup> The revival of the Irish language cannot effectively be forced into existence. Something as innate and natural as language requires very careful planning, resources, circumstances, and above a powerful cultural impetus. During the time of British colonization, perhaps such a nationalistic drive existed. However, in light of the political divides and economic problems created by the fratricidal Irish Civil War, much of a sense of purpose towards the revival of Irish was wasted. The language project and the Gaeltacht would repeatedly take the second stage in light of the need for economic frugality posed by the Civil War and the Economic War. While the Gaelic Revivalists always knew there was a ticking clock on the Irish project, much of the fervor and excitement for revival dissipated at the creation of the Irish Free State and the start of the Irish Civil War. Without the desire, the material needs of the economically endangered state took precedence until the opportune moment for the revival of the Irish language, the years just after independence, was long gone. While to state that an event will never happen would be to diminish the roles of human agency, will, and determination in history, it is likely that the "Ireland as we of today would surely have Her" that Padraig Pearse dreamed of at the graveside of O'Donnovan Rossa, will remain a dream, at least for the near future.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> James Plunkett, "Weep for Our Pride," In *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 429.

<sup>74</sup> Padraig Pearse, "While Ireland Holds These Graves," Oration, in *Great Irish Speeches of the Twentieth Century* (Dublin, Ireland: Poolbeg, 1996), 40.

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## Epilogue

### Irish of Today and the Tomorrow:

It was said in 1958 by Senator Ó Donnabháin that “the Irish language was the great casualty of the civil war...from that time there were years of strife, a struggle for national independence, which directed our activities into other fields.”<sup>75</sup> While it is true that in the 1920s and 30s, Ireland directed its focus to more pressing existential threats, I am hesitant to declare the fate of the Irish Language in the future. The Irish language and its revival efforts have often been compared to that of the Hebrew language in Israel, which to its credit was widely successful compared to the failure of the Irish.<sup>76</sup> The Hebrew language was considered dead as a community language for nearly 2,000 years, and yet given the right focus and cultural imperative it was resurrected. More often than not history will make fools out of those who attempt to predict her. Further, the term “dead language”, often paints an inaccurate image of a complete extinction. Although the Gaeltacht has diminished greatly, as shown in Figure 4, there is a certain degree of historical precedent of new Gaeltachts being designated, and of urban pockets of the language being birthed.<sup>77</sup> Even if the Irish language is not revived to its pre-famine state, there will still always be those who study it, listen to its music, read its poetry, and connect with its history.

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<sup>75</sup> “Seanad Éireann Debate - Thursday, 30 Jan 1958,” House of the Oireachtas, January 30, 1958, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1958-01-30/6/>. Quoting Senator Ó Donnabháin.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ryan Price, “Two New Gaeltacht Regions Announced in Ireland,” *The Irish Post*, February 23, 2018, <https://www.irishpost.com/news/two-new-gaeltacht-regions-announced-ireland-150324>; see also Figure 4 on the next page, in which a pocket of the Irish language appears in Meath, where as it previously did not exist on maps made from the 1926 Gaeltacht Commission or the 1956 census.

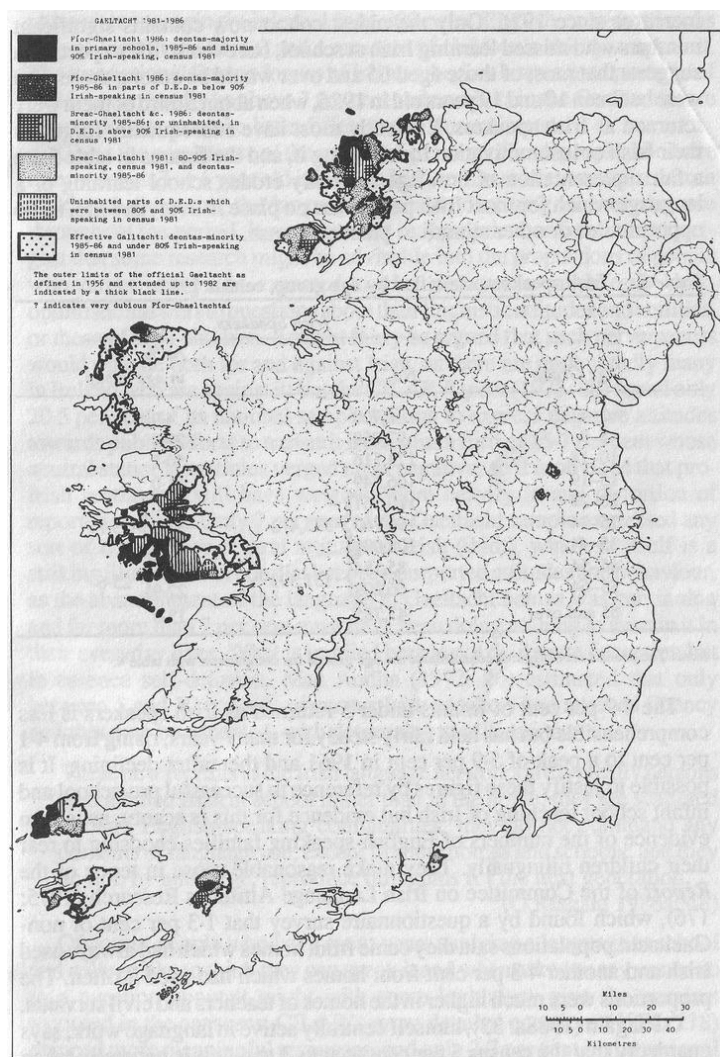


Figure 4. Reg Hindley, “The Gaeltacht redefined 1981–6: a tentative categorization of the real state of the language,”

In *The Death of the Irish language: A Qualified Obituary*, London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 1990, 32.

The map depicts the state of the Gaeltacht in the mid 1980’s. Note that while in the West the language continues to erode, in the East small diasporic pockets have emerged.

As the world moves to an increasingly globalized culture, it has been theorized that the largest languages, such as Indian, Chinese, and English may dominate the internet, trade, and culture to such an extent that they drown out most other languages.<sup>78</sup> However, at least in some ways, this theory has proved inaccurate. Irish remains a ceremonial language of the state, many

<sup>78</sup> Babbel.com, “Will the World Ever Be Monolingual?,” Language for Life - Babbel.com, accessed March 21, 2024, <https://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/future-of-language>.

people have Irish names and come from places with Irish denominations. Additionally, Irish became an official language of the European Union in 2022, despite Ireland's move towards a more centralized Europe by joining such an organization.<sup>79</sup>

A major reason for the adoption of the Gaelic Revival movement by the Irish Republicans was because of languages' association with nationalism and national identity. In the years of British colonization, and to a lesser extent today, much of the Irish national identity simply surrounded being not British. The British were protestant, and Protestantism's importation into Ireland was the doing of the British, so the Irish must remain Catholic. The British spoke English, and so the Irish must speak Irish. However, the experience of the Irish language in the second half of the twentieth century has demonstrated that there is much more to the Irish identity than merely being Catholic or even speaking Irish as opposed to English. In some ways, the revival of the Irish language, if it were to occur at the present moment, may even be counter-productive to the creation of a united Ireland. Should the language rebirth occur in the Republic of Ireland, but not in the North, the cultural and linguistic differences will likely be so strong as to stifle the possibility of a reunified Irish island.

In his book *Voices Silenced: Has Irish a Future?* UCSC professor James McCloskey analyzes much of the state of the Irish language and its possible hopeful future. Interestingly, McCloskey posits that it is difficult to call a language 'dead' that has a relatively high number of speakers when compared with many of the indigenous languages of California. Additionally, Irish has been so widely documented through the medium of audio recording and writing, that the syntax, inflection, and sound of the language will forever be preserved.<sup>80</sup> This is a

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<sup>79</sup> "Translation Centre for the Bodies of the EU," Irish gains full status as an official language of the EU | Translation Centre For the Bodies of the EU, 2022, <https://cdt.europa.eu/en/news/irish-gains-full-status-official-language-eu#:~:text=Irish%20has%20been%20a%20Treaty,working%20language%20of%20the%20EU>.

<sup>80</sup> James McCloskey, *Voices Silenced: Has Irish a Future?* Cois Life Teoranta, 2001.

particularly interesting idea, as it suggests that as long as there is a will for someone to learn the language, they have the resources to do so to at least some amount of proficiency. Seeing as Irish is still a compulsory language in schools within the Republic of Ireland, likely there is still such a degree of national will or importance placed upon the language. It is uncertain to me whether a system of bilingualism is out of the realm of possibility, as long as the education of the language remains in school. Similarly, it is uncertain if the trends within the Gaeltacht will continue. The only statement I can definitively make about Irish is that the language will continue to be studied, appreciated, and celebrated by not only the Irish people but the entire world.