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The Irish Language and Nationalism in the 20th Century

Under centuries of British colonial rule, mass emigration, and discriminatory laws, the Irish language took a secondary position to English. As Irish nationalist ideology gained momentum in the early 20th century, Irish became useful and popular as a powerful symbol of resilience and a discrete national identity. However, Irish's significance to nationalism had a mixed impact on its perception across the island due to the violence and sectarianism that accompanied the struggle for independence. This paper explores the influence that this divisive history had and continues to exert on the perception of and legislation supporting the Irish language, as well as the integral role of the Irish nationalist and independence movements on its revival and survival.

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THE IRISH LANGUAGE AND NATIONALISM IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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PSU Challenge History of Modern Europe

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The now-famous phrase “*Tír gan teanga, tír gan anam*”—a country without a language is a country without a soul—was written by early-20th-century Irish revolutionary and author Pádraig Pearse, executed in 1916 for his role in the Easter Rising. Despite its age, the sentiment reflects present-day concerns as the Republic of Ireland struggles to normalize its native language despite its near-century of freedom from British colonial rule, and Irish speakers in Northern Ireland fight against the politicization and violent connotations of the Irish language.¹ In the 18th and 19th centuries, Irish dropped sharply in use from the everyday vernacular to the tongue of only the poor, uneducated, or rebellious. In addition, the devastating Great Famine, beginning in 1845, saw many Irish people, particularly those from the poorest areas of the west where Irish was commonly spoken, leave the island in search of security elsewhere.² As the cause for independence from Britain gained traction, however, the language would resurge. Revolutionary nationalists seized onto Irish as an emblem of resilience and self-determination, while the political party Sinn Féin built a platform out of Irish language rights and sovereignty. The Irish language was also central to nationalists as a method of drawing a racial and cultural boundary between British and Irish ethnicities, resulting in a push for a new body of Irish literature free from imperialist and pro-British themes. These politically charged motivators ensured Irish survived, gave it deep symbolic importance, and encouraged its use in government and literature. Nationalist support for Irish would also lead to controversy over its modern-day political significance as possibly and inherently anti-British. Despite these concerns, with

¹ Féidhlim Mac Róibín, “Irish Is a Living Language That Safeguards Ireland's Soul,” *The Irish Times* (The Irish Times, July 6, 2016),

<https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/irish-is-a-living-language-that-safeguards-ireland-s-soul-1.2711485>.

² “The Irish Language--a Linguistic Crisis?,” Oireachtas Library & Research Service (House of the Oireachtas, September 2016),

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/libraryResearch/2016/2016-11-07_1-rs-note-the-irish-language-a-linguistic-crisis_en.pdf.

numbers growing to almost two million speakers in the Republic of Ireland, Irish nationalism was integral to the language's revival and popularization in the 20th century.³

Across the island of Ireland,⁴ British lawmakers treated anglicization as a necessary step towards the civilization and upward mobility of “wild” Irish. As British rule progressed, the unequal treatment of Irish people was largely blamed on their inability or unwillingness to assimilate, rather than imperial doctrine. In 1366, the Statutes of Kilkenny banned Irish speaking among English colonists and their Irish neighbors.⁵ More indirect methods allowed British lawmakers to curtail its use throughout this colonial period: other medieval laws required Irish people to adopt English surnames, and in the 1830s, England introduced a school system entirely in English, forcing Irish children to use the language.⁶ When the Great Famine swept across the island in 1845, it spurred mass emigration from the *Gaeltacht*, the Irish-speaking parts of Ireland, resulting in a loss not only of fluent speakers but also of the culture endemic to *Gaeltacht* areas. Other additional factors, such as the preference for bilingual workers, general emigration, and internalized prejudice, also drove the island-wide shift to English.⁷ 1916 was a pivotal year for the language, as the Easter Rising, where pro-independence rebels took over part of Dublin from April 24 to April 30, would incite violence and political dialogue. In 1919, members of the Sinn Féin political party, which would play a strong role in Irish linguistic nationalism, declared Ireland an independent state, initiating a war for independence.⁸ In 1920, these conflicts

³ Merike Darmody and Tania Daly, “Attitudes towards the Irish Language on the Island of Ireland.” Dublin: Economic & Social Research Institute, August 2015.

⁴ In this paper, “Ireland” refers to the whole island, not any specific country. Northern Ireland (UK) and the Republic of Ireland will be referred to by name.

⁵ “The Statutes of Kilkenny,” The Statutes of Kilkenny (1367) (Maricopa Community Colleges), accessed November 22, 2020, <http://www.mc.maricopa.edu/~thoqh49081/celtic/KilkennyStatutes.html>.

⁶ Séan Ó Cathail, “The Politics of the Irish Language Under the English and British Governments.” New York City: NYU Arts & Science, 2007,

https://as.nyu.edu/content/dam/nyu-as/irelandHouse/documents/0111-0126_PoliticsOfTheIrishLanguage.pdf.

⁷ Mary Cogan Bromage, “Linguistic Nationalism in Eire,” *The Review of Politics* 3, no. 2 (April 1941): 228, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s003467050000111x>.

⁸ “Independent Ireland to 1959.” Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Accessed December 17, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ireland/Independent-Ireland-to-1959>.

culminated with the Anglo-Irish Treaty, recognizing the creation of an Irish Free State in the south of the island while the United Kingdom retained its six northernmost counties.⁹ Conflicts, known euphemistically as “The Troubles,” continued throughout the 20th century, and Irish is still regarded with suspicion, particularly in the North, as a potential signifier of extremism.¹⁰

The UK’s restrictive measures and abuses were met with resistance throughout Irish history. Irish nationalism was born out of the lasting frustration of Irish people at their forced assimilation and oppression. Irish nationalism is unique among similar ideologies because both right and left-wing branches exist, with disagreements arising over the existence of a separate “Gaelic” race and plurality in Ireland, religion and its role in government, and economic policy.¹¹ Generally, however, this platform advocated for a distinctive Irish identity and nation, free from British influence of any sort. From the beginning of the 20th century to its end, political, cultural, and paramilitary groups alike would adopt Irish nationalism, or at least some of its values, as a method of supporting Irish language revival. Likewise, some, such as Sinn Féin, would use Irish itself to buttress their nationalist platforms and as a method of signaling patriotism and dedication to their causes.

Nationalists valued Irish as it differentiated Irish and English culture, neatly sorting Ireland’s residents into the “native” Irish and either the English, or people who enabled them. Irish was also seen as essential to legitimizing Ireland’s claim to nationhood, so nationalists seized onto it. At the turn of the 20th century, bubbling popular support for independence called for a focus on what nationhood actually required. Irish soon became a focal point in these debates. As Douglas Hyde, president of the advocacy organization Conradh na Gaeilge (the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Olaf Zenker, “‘Our Own Native Language’: Local Representations and Practices of the Irish Language.” In *Irish/Ness Is All Around Us: Language Revivalism and the Culture of Ethnic Identity in Northern Ireland*, 122. Berghahn Books, 2013. Accessed December 9, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qckff.11>.

¹¹ Paul A. Townend, “Ireland,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World*, ed. Peter N. Stearns (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008).

Gaelic League) said in 1894, Irish was “the best claim we have upon the world’s recognition of us as a separate nationality.”¹² Having been colonized for nearly four hundred years at the time of Hyde’s remarks, many Irish people had become so accustomed to English culture that native language was one of the only outwardly apparent qualities capable of distinguishing between the two nationalities.¹³ It followed that in order to mark oneself as an autonomous and decolonized citizen, speaking Irish was essential. According to Mary Cogan Bromage, writing in 1941, “only those who have their Irish are now recognized as full-fledged patriots in Eire.”¹⁴ By the turn of the 20th century, English had long been a necessity for business, education, and societal advancement, but a focus on the Irish language placed importance on historically disdained groups and traditions: poor and rural Irish speakers were suddenly the face of an important political movement, while before they had been disenfranchised in the face of British rule. Such a power shift elevated Irish from vernacular to a political symbol that highlighted the differences between Irish and English people. The *fáinne* ring-shaped badges Irish speakers wore to broadcast their fluency signaled not only proficiency but a care for native culture that had been repressed for so long.¹⁵ As Bromage observed: “If the Gaelic tongue had been allowed to go its own way, it would hardly have become the badge of Irish nationhood it is today.”¹⁶ Speaking English was an admission of defeat and willingness to compromise that, as tensions heightened into the 1920s, was increasingly at odds with Irish nationalist purpose. If one was to support independence in Ireland, they would have to live their values by supporting the language as well.

¹² Ó Cathail, “The Politics of the Irish Language.”

¹³ Nicholas P Canny, “The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (1973): 575. Accessed December 17, 2020. doi:10.2307/1918596.

¹⁴ Bromage, “Linguistic Nationalism in Eire,” 226.

¹⁵ “An Fáinne,” Conradh na Gaeilge (Conradh na Gaeilge), accessed December 9, 2020, <https://cnag.ie/ga/scoileanna/acmhainn%C3%AD-scoile/fainne.html>.

¹⁶ Bromage, “Linguistic Nationalism in Eire,” 226.

After all, without Irish, as Hyde reasoned, Ireland would not be distinct enough from England to justify independent nationhood.

Irish also gave religious and racial distinctions legitimacy and promoted the moral superiority of a hypothetical Irish Catholic government over the British Protestants who ruled Ireland until 1929. The concept of a separate “Gaelic race,” once used by British colonists as a method of differentiating between civilized English and the Irish underclass, became essential to early-20th century nationalism. The militant Irish Republican Army (IRA), for example, sought to overturn the “minority rule” of a Protestant class—members of Irish and Anglo-Scottish Parliament, viceroys, and the monarchy—making policy decisions for an Irish Catholic cohort making up around 80% of the island’s population.¹⁷ Ireland, nationalists argued, must be governed by native Irish, and preferably those who can represent all aspects of the island’s culture accurately, including its language but extending to religion as well.¹⁸ The Reverend Patrick S. Dinneen, speaking in front of Conradh na Gaeilge in 1902, accused the English language of “planting the seeds of social disorder and moral degeneracy amongst even our still-untainted population.”¹⁹ Rev. Dinneen was referencing divorce, permitted in the Church of England but not under Catholicism, and espousing the view that the only way Ireland could retain its majority-Catholic values would be through mainstreaming the use of Irish, a sure way to filter English influence out of government and legal affairs. By using Irish as a pathway to criticize British religious values, Catholic nationalists in particular were further encouraged to

¹⁷ Townend, “Ireland.”

¹⁸ In the modern day most of these ancestrally English and Irish people would be considered white with little racial distinction being drawn between the two groups. Both the Republic of Ireland and the UK have racially diverse populations and neither Irish nor English are spoken exclusively by ethnically Irish or English people. The terms “Irish” and “English” in this paper refer to people of Irish or English ancestry and citizenship unless referred to more specifically otherwise (i.e. Irish speakers, Irish citizens).

¹⁹ Patrick S. Dinneen, “Introductory.,” in *Lectures on the Irish Language Movement Delivered under the Auspices of Various Branches of the Gaelic League, with an Introductory Chapter* (Dublin: Pub. for the Keating Branch of the Gaelic League by M.H. Gill, 1904), 10.

reject assimilation and distance themselves from the Church of England by reclaiming their native language.

The creation of a separate Irish nation, headed by former rebel leaders and nationalists, led to prioritizing the reestablishment of Irish as a living language and the introduction of pro-Irish policies, encouraging fluency all the more. Irish language rights were made a concern from the start when the Irish Free State was established in 1922. The Provisional Government of 1922, which ruled what would in 1937 become the Republic of Ireland, decreed Irish should be taught in all schools with an able teacher, and Irish became compulsory in 1929 under William T. Cosgrave as President of the Executive Council.²⁰ Michael Collins, a former revolutionary turned politician, was the first Chairman of the Provisional Government, and he worked alongside other former activists and servicemen who found government positions, such as Éamon de Valera as the President of Dáil Éireann.²¹ De Valera authored the Republic of Ireland's 1937 *Bunreacht na hÉireann* (Constitution of Ireland) in Irish, declaring it the nation's first official language.²² Besides introducing legislative measures to support the spread of the Irish, Republic of Ireland government terminology borrowed from pre-colonial power structures: rather than a prime minister, for example, the state was headed by a Taoiseach—literally meaning “chief”—and members of the House of the Oireachtas, its legislative branch, were called Teachtaí Dála.²³ These titles signaled a rejection of the UK model of government and returning power to its rightful, Irish hands.²⁴ As a result of these measures, Irish vocabulary was normalized within the

²⁰ Bromage, “Linguistic Nationalism in Eire,” 232.

²¹ “Dáil Éireann Debate - Friday, 26 Aug 1921,” House of the Oireachtas (Houses of the Oireachtas, August 26, 1921), <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1921-08-26/3/>.

²² Bromage, “Linguistic Nationalism in Eire,” 232.

²³ Houses of the Oireachtas, “Glossary of Parliamentary Terms,” House of the Oireachtas (Houses of the Oireachtas, March 18, 2021), <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/visit-and-learn/glossary/>.

²⁴ “Taoiseach,” New Oxford American Dictionary (Oxford University Press), accessed December 17, 2020, https://www-oxfordreference-com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195392883.001.0001/m_en_us1297051?rskey=PPcli0.

government, and anyone wanting to talk about politics would need some familiarity with the language regardless of their personal views towards it. These initiatives were also driven by the connections between Irish and nationalism, since many rebels had spotlighted language rights and, once partition had been accomplished, were obligated to make good on their promises. As a result of partition and the Free State's government, Irish, once sidelined in favor of English, became a real possibility for Irish citizens to learn thanks to this early governmental legislation.

Another significant contributor to the rebirth of Irish culture and language was the Irish Literary Revival. While not overtly nationalist, from the 1880s to the 1920s, a surge of Irish authors recognized the need for an Irish-centric body of literature to combat British dominance of the field, stop the spread of imperial doctrine, and establish a separate movement that relied on distinctly Irish folkloric and linguistic influences.²⁵ Authors such as William Butler Yeats and Lady Gregory used oral tradition and folklore as inspiration for their poetry and stories.²⁶ James Joyce, citing an aversion to the "acquired speech" of English, incorporated Irish speech patterns and expressions into his work, despite not supporting the nationalist movement itself.²⁷ Conradh na Gaeilge itself was born out of this literary interest and has continued to advocate for the Irish language and its speakers since its 1893 founding.²⁸ One reason for this widespread fascination with Irish themes was a renewed academic interest in a previously unexplored body of pre-colonial art including the Ulster Cycle epic of 100 BCE²⁹ and the 9th-century Book of

²⁵ Patrick S. Dinneen, "The Irish Language the National Language of Ireland," in *Lectures on the Irish Language Movement Delivered under the Auspices of Various Branches of the Gaelic League, with an Introductory Chapter* (Dublin: Pub. for the Keating Branch of the Gaelic League by M.H. Gill, 1904), 25.

²⁶ Bromage, "Linguistic Nationalism in Eire," 229.

²⁷ Bromage, "Linguistic Nationalism in Eire," 229.

²⁸ "Cad é Conradh Na Gaeilge?," Conradh na Gaeilge (Conradh na Gaeilge), accessed December 17, 2020, <https://cnag.ie/ga/eolas/conradh-na-gaeilge/cade-conradh-na-gaeilge.html>.

²⁹ "Ulster Cycle," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Ulster-cycle>.

Kells.³⁰ Rev. Dinneen argued Irish was well-suited to literature because of its “purity”—a lack of technical jargon and confusingly precise grammar, both results of its colonial-era dormancy.³¹ Dinneen’s call to action for apathetic listeners recalled a romantic reason to speak Irish, appealing to a noble shared heritage born from folkloric tales: “Woe to that Irishman who is not proud of his ancestors, of their history, of their vigorous spirit, of the glorious heritage of heroism and faith that is enshrined in their language.”³² This sentiment had resonance: Pádraig Pearse, the author and revolutionary who edited the Conradh na Gaeilge newspaper *An Claidheamh Soluis* (*The Sword of Light*), was inspired by ancient Irish heroes such as Cú Chulainn to take up the cause of Irish independence and put revolutionary themes into print in both English and Irish.³³ The result of non-nationalists and nationalists alike seizing onto the movement was a renewed appreciation for the literary value of Irish and Irish culture. While not all Irish authors used the language explicitly, out of the revival came a romanticized version of the Irish language, born out of distinctively Irish themes and heroes, that drove popular interest in distinctly Irish language and culture.

While Irish found supporters among nationalists, in the later 20th century it was also popular to a slightly different alignment: republicanism. While republicanism is usually centered around a desire for freedom from arbitrary power or political influence, in Ireland it has become associated more specifically with calling for a united Ireland, free of British rule and influence, and reached by any means necessary.³⁴ Irish became a central concern of republican paramilitary

³⁰ “The Book of Kells,” The Library of Trinity College Dublin (Trinity College Dublin), accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www.tcd.ie/library/manuscripts/book-of-kells.php>.

³¹ Dinneen, *Lectures on the Irish Language*, 27.

³² Dinneen, *Lectures on the Irish Language*, 29.

³³ Frank M Flanagan, “Patrick H. Pearse,” *Minerva - An Online Open Access Journal of Philosophy* (Mary Immaculate College, 1997), <http://www.minerva.mic.ul.ie//vol1/pearse.html>.

³⁴ Joe Humphreys, “Ireland Has a Strange Relationship with the Word 'Republican',” *The Irish Times* (The Irish Times, March 5, 2020), <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/ireland-has-a-strange-relationship-with-the-word-republican-1.4186888>.

groups such as the IRA and fluent speakers within its ranks did their utmost to spread knowledge of the language. Irish was useful not only as a signifier of anti-British dissent, but also more practically as a method of secret communication.³⁵ The term “Jailtacht,” while not coined until the 1980s, is even used to refer generally to the system of Irish learning and speaking among political prisoners, a play on *Gaeltacht*. One prisoner observed “generations of imprisoned republicans held one thing in common—an interest in learning the Irish language.”³⁶ Beginning in 1972, the Long Kesh prison camp outside Belfast became a hotspot of learning, since prisoners were initially allowed to freely move about and associate with one another. When British officials cracked down on Irish speaking in prisons, the prisoners went on widely publicized hunger strikes to protest, turning the language into a symbol of defiance by broadcasting their determination to defend it.³⁷ While such education efforts were limited in their scope, expanding Irish knowledge only to political prisoners, the symbolic importance of Irish to republicanism incentivized supporters to learn it, and thus Irish grew in republicanism-aligned speakers throughout the 1970s and 1980s. As the focus of several protests, republican prisoners also heightened Irish’s profile throughout this time and increased awareness of its suppression even outside of their own circles.

The left-wing party Sinn Féin,³⁸ established in 1905, is notorious for its ties to the IRA and sectarian violence, and holds a contested role in the history of Irish language advocacy.³⁹ Sinn Féin has achieved mainstream recognition and acceptance across the island of Ireland

³⁵ Jennifer O’Leary, “Why Is Irish Language Divisive Issue in Northern Ireland?,” BBC News (BBC, December 17, 2014), <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-30517834>.

³⁶ Diarmait Mac Giolla Chríost, “Ideology,” in *Jailtacht: the Irish Language, Symbolic Power and Political Violence in Northern Ireland, 1972-2008* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), 153.

³⁷ Chríost, *Jailtacht*, 35.

³⁸ Irish for “we ourselves,” indicative of the party’s emphasis on self-determination and desire for independence from British culture.

³⁹ Mícheál MacDonncha, “Founding of Sinn Féin 1905,” Sinn Féin (Sinn Féin, November 28, 2005), <https://www.sinnfein.ie/contents/5591>.

despite this history, but its platform is still a polarizing subject of debate. Sinn Féin, like other republican and nationalist groups, advocates for language rights and equal status across Ireland on the grounds that Irish is a symbol of independence and nationhood.⁴⁰ In particular, Northern Ireland has received attention from the party as needing more advocacy for language use and education. As Sinn Féin works towards its ultimate goal of a united, culturally distinct Irish island, their mission has been complicated by waves of sectarian bloodshed. After the 1960s, religious and ethnically motivated violence reemerged in Ireland, leading to rioting, bombing, mass murder, and over 3,500 deaths as of 2001.⁴¹ Sinn Féin, historically welcoming to extremists such as IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands and built on republicanism, was associated more with committing this violence than stopping it.⁴² Sinn Féin strengthened the connection between the Irish language and nationalist purposes by focusing on grassroots-level Irish advocacy in addition to suggesting and supporting legislation. In his 2013 book *Irish/Ness is All Around Us*, ethnologist Olaf Zenker recalled the story of a Sinn Féin councillor who, when elected to the leadership of a cross-community organization, was “made chairman and subsequently changed the whole orientation of the project” to improve Sinn Féin’s reputation for Irish-language advocacy, rather than support unifying initiatives.⁴³ Other speakers in Zenker’s account directly accused Sinn Féin of manufacturing a link between Irish and republicanism, citing these alleged takeovers as attempts to control all aspects of Northern Irish culture.⁴⁴ The connection between Sinn Féin and Irish is fraught with hatred, but their continued support for Irish language initiatives may have had benefits as well. Carál Ní Chuilín, a former provisional IRA member,

⁴⁰ “Plécháipéis Ghaeilge Shinn Féin.” Dublin: Sinn Féin, n.d.

⁴¹ Daniel C. Williamson, “Troubles, The,,” Oxford Reference (Oxford University Press), accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www-oxfordreference-com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195176322.001.0001/acref-9780195176322-e-1615?rskey=udIoTg>.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Zenker, “Irish/Ness Is All Around Us,” 129.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

founding the Líofoa campaign as a Sinn Féin minister, drawing over 10,000 people to commit to learning Irish; increased funding to Irish-language schools;⁴⁵ and Sinn Féin’s advocacy for legislation keeps the language in international consciousness.⁴⁶ Both the motivation and effects of Sinn Féin’s Irish language platform remain contested, and while some want nothing to do with such a violent history, other Sinn Féin supporters are encouraged by the party’s commitment to language rights.

More general connections to nationalist and republican causes make some speakers wary of using Irish, and some non-speakers unwilling to learn, especially in Northern Ireland.⁴⁷ Even de Valera admitted a limit to the amount of violence and sectarianism the Irish people were willing to excuse for the sake of their language, saying that “popular feeling was strongly in favor of the language up until 1919. Then the physical fighting took away the energies of a large section.”⁴⁸ In Northern Ireland, without the need to claim distinct nationhood, and with more pressure to assimilate into British culture, policymakers made efforts to distance their government from Irish. A 1949 law made Irish-language street signs illegal, and was only repealed in the 1990s. More recently in 2002, controversy arose after the UK refused to broadcast TG4, a southern, Irish-language network, on Northern Irish televisions. One unionist—a person supporting British presence in Northern Ireland—commented, “How did you all cope before Sinn Fein/IRA started to bring the Irish Language into all arguments? I am sure you found your way around our hospitals,” referring to the equally controversial use of bilingual signage, which many unionists viewed as a waste of money.⁴⁹ Furthermore, unionists argued that

⁴⁵ Siobhan Fenton, “How the Irish Language Became a Pawn in a Culture War,” *The New Statesman* (The New Statesman, July 5, 2019), <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/northern-ireland/2019/07/how-irish-language-became-pawn-culture-war>.

⁴⁶ “Equal Rights For Irish Speakers,” Sinn Féin (Sinn Féin), accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www.sinnfein.ie/equal-rights-for-irish-speakers>.

⁴⁷ Fenton, “How the Irish Language.”

⁴⁸ Bromage, “Linguistic Nationalism in Eire,” 237.

⁴⁹ Ó Cathail, “The Politics of the Irish Language.”

Irish was about as useful as learning any other foreign language at school, and that more attention should be paid to more widespread tongues such as French or Spanish.⁵⁰ This hostility can be traced to even the governmental level: a proposed Irish Language Act, which would give the language protected status, has been blocked in the Northern Irish legislative assembly since the early 2000s by unionist politicians. Supporters argue that the act would help to preserve and depoliticize Irish, but many politicians, citizens, and lobbyists are concerned the Act would reduce Northern Ireland's status within the UK, making it more "Irish" and less "British."⁵¹ Yet despite these complaints and setbacks, Irish has experienced a recent surge in popularity in the North, with around one in three citizens speaking it on some level.⁵² While anti-Irish advocates claim the language has too many extremist connotations, supporters of language rights in Northern Ireland reply that the politicization of Irish would not have been possible without its suppression over centuries of British colonialism.⁵³ However, the order of events does not necessarily quiet the minds of those concerned about endorsing violence, and the history of nationalism and Irish inhibits legislation that would benefit the language even in the present.

Despite these lingering challenges, Irish is beginning to differentiate itself from the terms of its revival. Non-partisan initiatives have seen success: the popularization of Irish-language schools has improved fluency among young people,⁵⁴ and the western Gaeltacht, once considered the poorest area of the country, is now a popular spot for tourism, including specially planned trips dedicated to learning and using Irish.⁵⁵ At the end of the 19th century, only 13% of Ireland

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Éanna Ó Caollaí, "Explainer: Breaking the Deadlock over an Irish Language Act," *The Irish Times* (The Irish Times, January 9, 2020), <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/explainer-breaking-the-deadlock-over-an-irish-language-act-1.4135275>.

⁵² Ó Cathail, "The Politics of the Irish Language."

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Fenton, "How the Irish Language."

⁵⁵ "About the Gaeltacht," *About the Gaeltacht (Líofa)*, accessed December 17, 2020, <https://www.liofa.eu/gaeltacht/about-gaeltacht>.

spoke Irish.⁵⁶ As of 2016, 39.8% of the Republic of Ireland did.⁵⁷ A report by Foras na Gaeilge, the pan-Ireland organization responsible for promoting the language,⁵⁸ and the Economic & Social Research Institute recommends that in order to increase the number of Irish speakers across the island, more efforts be made to use the language outside of school, promote Irish-language clubs and activities, provide grants, and support cross-border programs.⁵⁹ These measures emphasize social connection and enjoyment over meaningful but divisive political motivators and signify that the Irish language community may no longer need nationalism to survive, but is embracing Ireland's multiculturalism to encourage residents of all backgrounds to learn.

In the early 20th century, Irish transformed from a beaten-down vernacular to a nationalist tool. Useful in distinguishing between Irish and British, legitimizing claims to nationhood, and reclaiming their distinct identity from British dominion, Irish became a necessary attribute for anyone seeking to assert their patriotism in early-20th century Ireland. Irish was regarded as both linguistically and ideologically pure, inspiring influential authors to utilize Irish patterns or language while shunning the English literary tradition. Additionally, by enacting education legislation and terminology, early governments of what would become the Republic of Ireland helped to normalize the language in daily life. These measures were incentivized by the background many politicians had as pro-Irish and nationalist activists. Republicans, taking a more extreme position against British involvement in Ireland, contributed

⁵⁶ Jeanne Buckley, "Not Gaelic, But Free. Not Free, But Gaelic: The Role of the Irish Language in Cultural and Political Nationalism in Ireland" . Library Faculty Scholarship. Paper 1. (2013)

https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/librarian_articles/1

⁵⁷ "Census of Population 2016 – Profile 10 Education, Skills and the Irish Language - CSO - Central Statistics Office," CSO (Central Statistics Office, November 24, 2017),

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp10esil/p10esil/>.

⁵⁸ "About Foras Na Gaeilge," www.forasnagaeilge.ie, accessed April 10, 2021,

<https://www.forasnagaeilge.ie/about/about-foras-na-gaeilge/?lang=en>.

⁵⁹ Darmody and Daly, "Attitudes Towards the Irish Language."

to both the revival of Irish, by emphasizing its importance to sovereignty, and its politicization, which had damaging effects on Northern Irish policy. All these measures were controversial when introduced, and evoked criticism from people, Irish or not, who felt that the language they hoped to speak freely had instead become more polarizing and taboo. Despite opposition and the progress left to be made, however, Irish has prevailed over centuries of suppression. Nationalism catalyzed this revival and ensured the Irish language's success over a violent, tumultuous period in its history.

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