

“SOME KIND OF GIBBERISH”: IRISH-SPEAKING CHILDREN
IN THE NATIONAL SCHOOLS, 1850-1922.

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“I didn’t take long to cast my eyes all round the house”, wrote Tomás O’Crohan (1951: 15, 47) of his first day at National School on the Blasket Islands off southwestern Ireland around 1866. He noticed books and heaps of papers and a blackboard covered with strange marks:

I was beside myself with wonder what they meant until I saw a teacher calling up the oldest girls and point out the marks to them with the stick in her hand, and I heard her talking some kind of gibberish to them. ... I asked [my friend] in a whisper what was the rigmarole the teacher was talking to the girls around the board.

Thus the monoglot Irish-speaker confronted a school system that for most of the nineteenth century taught through English alone, even in Irish-speaking areas of the country. The teacher knew no Irish, and only slowly would children like O’Crohan adjust. Although he actually liked school, he believed that, even after six years as a pupil, he had not mastered the language of instruction.

Responding to reports from several commissions, the British Parliament in 1831 funded an Irish elementary school system – an experiment characteristic of the early age of mass schooling, but decades ahead of such an approach for England itself. The duly-appointed Commissioners of National Education in Ireland (CNEI, also called “the Board”) were mostly Irishmen, but saw their task as anglicization. Their major goal was to transform Irish boys and girls of all religious denominations into well-behaved subjects, tolerant of each other’s beliefs, and loyal to the 1801 Union between Britain and Ireland. Not only would all instruction be through English; until late in the century the Board provided a curriculum that almost ignored the Irish child’s own culture and

environment (CNEI *Report* 1834-1920; Farren 1994; Coolahan 1981: 3-38; Akenson 1970).

Despite competition from schools of the Irish Christian Brothers, the Church of Ireland's Church Education Society, and others, the National School system grew impressively. By 1835 perhaps 145,521 pupils attended its 1,106 schools (CNEI *Report* 1835, in CNEI 1851: 1, 15). In 1900, even after the Great Famine (1845-48) had reduced the population from over eight million to less than five, these figures had grown to about 770,000 pupils at 8,684 schools (CNEI *Report* 1900: 13). By the early twentieth century the system had become, in John Coolahan's words (1980: 8), "a landmark institution in the life of the Irish countryside" – with an urban presence too.

Such a major educational establishment has received sustained attention from historians, but the responses of those at the receiving end have attracted little attention. For this essay I will draw upon half a dozen published and unpublished autobiographical accounts which, however fragmentary, allow us glimpse the diverse responses and coping strategies of their narrators *as children* to the language policy of the CNEI. My time frame stretches from around 1850, when Fr. Peter O'Leary, author of *My Story* (1970), began his schooling, to 1922, when the new governments of the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland absorbed the system.

Scholars (e.g., Goodwin 1993: 11-12; Spindel 1996) are justifiably critical of long-term memory, however, and many see autobiographers as *constructing* a story that expresses the present psychological state of the narrators rather than accurately *reconstructing* an earlier life. I have argued (Coleman 1993, 1994b) that we can corroborate narrator recall through comparison with other autobiographical accounts and with documents contemporaneous to the events recalled. This "triangulation" can never prove the *objective truth* of an account, but can establish an acceptable degree of historical credibility or plausibility. As I show here and elsewhere (Coleman, in preparation), Irish autobiographical accounts of schooling are mutually corroborative and highly consistent with both CNEI documents and with later historians' treatments of the period.

As late as 1850 perhaps 1,500,000 Irish people were to some degree bilingual, and about 300,000 still spoke only the old Celtic language in its various forms (O'Donoghue 1988: 209). The Great Famine especially devastated the more remote, Irish-speaking areas in the northwest, west and southwest. This, along with decades of educational and other forms of anglicization severely reduced the numbers of monoglot or bilingual Irish speakers, but as late as 1900 perhaps 75,000 children still spoke the vernacular at home (Ó hAodha 1982: 80, 99; Fitzgerald 1990: 59-72).

National School pupils brought up in predominantly or totally English-speaking areas faced many problems as they entered a school system that taught

little about their own culture or history. But they escaped the kind of entry shock experienced by pupils such as the young O'Crohan. The master at the National School attended by Peig Sayers (1974: 21) in Kerry, southwestern Ireland, seems to have spoken Irish, but the "schoolmissus" spoke English and only when another girl promised to translate for her did Peig feel easy. She recalled (1974: 28-29) her later shock at the arrival of a new teacher who "hadn't one tittle of Irish in his beak". Lending credibility to the account is her memory of "the first time that Irish came into the school" – as she attended in the 1870s she probably refers to the Board decision of 1879 (CNEI *Report* 1879, Appendix I: 151-152) to accept Irish as an extra subject for higher classes to be taught *outside* school hours. Though a native speaker, Sayers (1974: 28-29, 68-69) thrilled to "learning Irish" – becoming literate in the language, studying it systematically, and comparing English and Irish vocabulary. The new schoolbook had Irish vocabulary on one side of the page, and the English translation on the other: *bó bhán*, 'a white cow', and so on. Fortunately, one of her teachers could also speak Irish, and her literate knowledge of her own language "was all the while increasing". Her knowledge of English, however, progressed slowly. Indeed she claimed that even after leaving school "I knew no English except and odd word here and there and that made no sense."

Similarly, Michael MacGowan (1962: 11-12) from Donegal in the northwest, "hadn't a single word of English no more than anyone else in my family and I couldn't answer the master when he asked me what was my name". He and his friends "might just as well have been ... minding sheep" for all they learned. The teacher spent long periods teaching Latin to English-speakers, and apparently ignored the others. "[W]hatever learning I got on my tongue - and I tell you that wasn't much - I'd say that it was in spite of him and in spite of myself I learned it." A local old man taught MacGowan the alphabet by depicting the letters as everyday items: "A, the joining (of the roof beam); B, spectacles and so on." Before long he had it by heart, "and that's something we wouldn't have been able to do with the master himself teaching us for a year".

Some teachers – Irish men and women themselves, convinced of the utility of English and anxious to please their Board superiors – employed various punishments to compel the abandonment of the old language. Maurice O'Sullivan (1983: 207-208) of the Blasket Islands remembered an older man who told him how the teacher pinned a board to his back with the words "If you speak a word of Irish you will be beaten on the back and flank." And Patrick Shea (1981: 1) told how at his father's school in Kerry, "the use of the Irish language was a punishable offence". As a result the older man, though bilingual, had never learned to read or write in Irish. Shea and his siblings grew up without the language. An informant of the Irish Folklore Commission (Irish

Folklore Collection, vol. 657, p. 119. Hereafter IFC 657: 119. In Irish) told how, at his school in the nineteenth century, pupils who entered without English had to stand silently in one place all day and listen to the class conversation. Another informant (IFC 657: 104. In Irish) remembered pupils having to wear a dunce's cap for speaking Irish. Some teachers resorted to the "tally stick", infamous in Irish folk memory. In 1855, according to Séamas Ó'Casaidé (IFC 495: 219. In Irish), his teacher placed a cord around the necks of pupils, and marked the cord each time the child spoke Irish: "and he would get a slap in the evening for each mark on the cord". The Irish Folklore Commission has gathered over seventy accounts (IFC vols. 495, 657) of the tally stick in various parts of Ireland during the nineteenth century, but only a few are first-person accounts such as Ó'Casaidé's. None of the published autobiographies which I examined mentions the tally stick, however, and Victor Durkacz (1983: 223-224) discounts the whole folk tradition. However, it is likely that, along with initial incomprehension, some Irish-speaking children faced such continuing humiliation until they acquired English.

Due to the efforts of his English- and Irish-speaking mother, Peter O'Leary was bilingual by the time he began school at the age of thirteen around 1852. Although a great lover of the Irish language, he was no opponent of English, strongly believing in the advantages of bilingualism. He mentions neither tally stick nor the punishments for speaking Irish, but has left a memorable account (1970: 53-57) of other difficulties. The teacher drafted him into translating for monoglot boys, and decades later he remained acutely aware of their predicament. "They were never given the opportunity that had been given to me to get the knowledge of those English words", he wrote. "They would never hear a word at home but Gaelic or broken English. The English which they had to learn was the same to them as Greek." That even bigger boys accepted the help of a beginner suggests the depth of the problem. They gathered around, "so that they'd have me smothered, and I answered their questions, telling them the meanings of the words in the lesson." There were four National Schools in an area where O'Leary later served as Parish Priest (1970: 97-98), and not one of the teachers spoke Irish – yet they had to teach the whole CNEI curriculum to Irish-speaking children:

That was a terrible injustice to teachers and young folk alike. The teachers were killing themselves trying to teach through a language that was not understood, and the minds of those who were learning were being tormented, blinded and sent astray from trying to take in knowledge through the unknown tongue.

The result was often a "horrible English", neither accurate nor natural-sounding.

Even more unjust, in O'Leary's view (1970: 97-98), was the attitude sometimes taken by CNEI inspectors, who regularly visited schools to examine pupils

and ascertain the competence of teachers. O'Leary recalled the gross insensitivity of one, who mocked both pupils and teachers for the inaccurate English – ignoring the pedagogical difficulties faced in Irish-speaking areas. This inspector asked a child why he had missed school the day before:

"I does be thinning turnops [*sic*], sir," the child said.

"And what does your brother be doing?" the inspector asked.

"He do be minding the cow, sir? [*sic*]" said the child.

"I does be, 'he do be.' That is nice teaching!" he said to the teacher.

"Well, Mr 'Do be,' he said to the child, 'how are you today, Mr 'Do be'? And how is old Mr 'Do be'? And how is Mrs 'Do be'? And how are all the other little 'Do be's' and 'Does be's'?"

A public insult to teacher, child, and family, fumed O'Leary, and "before the whole school".

Not all CNEI inspectors were so insensitive. Indeed, the oft-quoted words of Patrick J. Keenan, then Head Inspector and later Resident Commissioner of the CNEI, corroborate such memories of childhood suffering. For much of the nineteenth century the annual *Report* of the Board studiously ignored the Irish language and associated cultural and pedagogical problems. After 1879 inspectors began to report on examinations in Irish as an "extra" subject, and the language policy of the Board became a subject of more open discussion. As early as 1855, however, Keenan (*CNEI Report* 1855, Appendix G: 74-75) powerfully and perceptively questioned the approach of his employers. He noted that almost one quarter of the population still spoke Irish, although the National School system was "every year diminishing this number". With an appreciation of bilingualism perhaps rare in his day, Keenan claimed that "The shrewdest people in the world are those who are bilingual; borderers have always been remarkable in this respect." And then he attacked the whole CNEI pedagogy:

It is hard to conceive any more difficult school exercise than to begin our *first* alphabet, and *first* syllabication, and *first* attempt at reading, in a language of which we know nothing, and all this without means of reference to, or comparison with, a word of our mother tongue.

Yet this, noted Keenan, was "the ordeal Irish speaking children have to pass through". Primarily interested in the efficient learning of the new language, Keenan corroborated O'Leary by noting how "the natural result is that the English that they learn is very imperfect". The correct policy, Keenan insisted, was "to teach Irish grammatically and soundly to the Irish people, and then teach them English through the medium of their native language."

A powerful passage in the annual report two years later (*CNEI Report* 1857, Appendix A, II: 135) again conveyed Keenan's sensitivity to the difficulties described above by autobiographers. He lamented how even teachers who spoke

Irish fluently resisted or feared to use it in the classroom. "I was frequently engaged in the examination of classes of children who exhibited neither intelligence nor smartness", he continued, "nor even ordinary animation whilst being questioned in English." When Keenan or the teacher resorted to Irish, however, and allowed the children answer in their own language, the transformation was dramatic:

at once their eyes flashed with energy, their voices became loud and musical, and their intellectual faculties appeared to ripen up and to delight in being exercised. I never experienced a contrast more marked than the appearance of a class of Irish-speaking children, who were examined first in English and then in Irish, or who were required to repeat a lesson – even the simple multiplication table – first in one language and then in the other.

Decades later in 1883 the Rev. William Egan, a parish priest and school manager, echoed Keenan's frustration. To children of his parish English was still "in truth a *modern* or *foreign* language", of which they heard not a word at home. It was like introducing an entirely English curriculum into the heart of France, "without any *graduated instruction*". We do not teach Greek and all other subjects only through Greek, he noted. "How absurd too to place the same programme before Irish-speaking children of the bogs, mountains & wilds of West Kerry as is required of the children of Belfast, Dublin, or Cork whose homes and whose surroundings are a constant school" (National Archives of Ireland, Ed. 2, file 1934). And in 1918 Dr. W. J. M. Starkie (in Ó hAodha 1982: 110-111), like Keenan a Resident Commissioner of the CNEI itself, critically pondered the work of his organization during the previous century:

I fancy few educationalists will deny that the National Board were guilty of a disastrous blunder in thrusting upon a Gaelic-speaking race a system of education produced after a foreign model, and utterly alien to their sympathies and antecedents.

Those who suffered such an absurdity give us only glimpses of how they survived it. Strange though it may sound to contemporary educationalists who reject rote memorization of texts – as did the Board itself a century ago – pupils could enjoy this method of learning. Peig Sayers, product of an oral culture, certainly did. After the school day she took out the book containing verses in English and began to work on "There came to the beach a poor exile of Erin." (Sayers 1974: 39). Being "very interested in the poem" it was not long until she had it off by heart. Such memorization hardly improved her understanding of or active ability in English – as we have seen, she had difficulties with the language after leaving school. Yet such initiative did familiarize her with the language, and her pleasure at memorizing and reciting English verse most likely motivated her to continued improvement.

A folklore informant (IFC 657: 120-121. In Irish) told how the teacher refused to speak a word of Irish in the classroom, increasing the learning problems of the Irish-speakers. They attempted to pick up their English from the textbooks. And, like Sayers, this resourceful pupil worked independently on the problem. He brought English schoolbooks home and studied the meanings of the words through English (possibly with parental help). Almost eighty years later he still remembered:

Frost: frozen water.

Catapult: a forked stick with elastic made to fire stones.

Some children benefitted from the help of more fortunate schoolmates. Individuals who mediate between cultures are known to ethnohistorians as "cultural brokers", and I have shown elsewhere the crucial role of children in cross-cultural educational situations (Coleman 1993: 127-145, 1994a). Even where teachers and pupils speak the same language, more experienced children may be the difference between adjustment and alienation for those entering the strange world of the school. When the very language of instruction is new to the child, such cultural brokering assumes an even more decisive importance.

We have already seen how O'Leary's teacher immediately assigned him to translate for the Irish-speaking pupils – a form of exploitation not particularly resented by the younger boy, indeed it appears to have boosted his ego. Sayers (1974: 21) recalled such mediation from the recipient's point of view, and conveyed also the cyclical nature of the brokering. Pupils appeared to begin school at all times of the year, so marginally older children would help a younger one, who in turn might be called on to perform the same role, often before too long. Sayer's little helper was only three weeks her senior and had been "terrified out of [her] wits" on first encountering the school. By the time Sayers arrived equally bemused the slightly older girl claimed – perhaps over-confidently – that "it doesn't bother me at all." She immediately agreed to mediate for Sayers: "I'll be your friend," she said. "I have English and I'll tell you what the schoolmissus is saying."

Sometimes the brokering went the other way. Brought up speaking English, Maurice O'Sullivan (1983: 1-3, 18-28, 33) later moved to the Blasket Islands. Instruction was easier for him, perhaps, but survival among his Irish-speaking schoolmates was difficult until he began to learn that language from them. "Tomás and I were together very day now," he wrote, "going to and coming from school. I was picking up Irish rapidly, getting to know the boys and girls and becoming a fine talker dependent on no one but as good as another at the language." While employed as a young domestic, Sayers (1974: 72) helped the children of the house with their Irish while they helped her improve in English. Children could even help a teacher. The new master sometimes sidled up and

stood behind Sayers (1974: 29-30) and her friends, to improve his knowledge of Irish from listening to their chatter. Similarly, children were a vital brokering link between school and home. A folklore informant (IFC 52: 141. In Irish) told how Irish-speaking parents would listen carefully to the children, trying to pick up words of English from them.

Indeed, the attitude of parents towards the new language was also a major motivational factor for children. Autobiographical narrators corroborate the contemporaneous claims of the CNEI and those of later scholars (e.g., Coolahan 1980: 21) who insist that Irish people themselves were often willing accomplices in the decline of the old language. They realized that in the modern Ireland, or, even more so, if children emigrated to Britain or the United States, English would be the key to economic and social success. In 1855, for example, Inspector Keenan (CNEI *Report* 1855: 145) reported how the teacher in a western area not only punished those who spoke Irish. He also "instituted a sort of police among the parents, to see that in their intercourse with one another, the children speak nothing but English at home. The parents are so eager for the English, they exhibit no reluctance to inform the master of every detected breach of the school law." (Also, e.g., CNEI *Report* 1906-1907, Appendix, section I: 49-50). A folklore informant (IFC 657: 109) recalled how *his parents* placed tally sticks around the necks of their five children. And McGowan (1962: 10) sadly remembered the adult pragmatism: "Older people had been going to and from Scotland for years," he wrote, "and they were always complaining that they were looked down on because they had neither education nor English. So I was sent to school." A number of narrators (e.g., IFC 1194: 295) noted how parents spoke Irish to each other, but English to the children. Another informant (IFC 495: 153) claimed that in his district "the parents at home fifty years ago discouraged the speaking of Irish" For "they reckoned it was just *a slave's gibberish*, and a useless load" (emphasis added). In his youth this man was often "bitterly blamed" for daring to speak the vernacular at home. Teachers and National School managers almost looked on their speaking Irish as "down-right bad manners and quite vulgar". With such adult resolve often ranged against them, children had little alternative but to adapt to the new.

From these sources it is difficult to glean more about pupil coping strategies in an immersion situation of great insensitivity. Like others thrown into similar predicaments – such as American Indian children at United States Government and Christian missionary schools (Coleman 1993: 105-108) – Irish children struggled towards competence in the dominant language. They gradually picked up English – if sometimes "horrible English" – often through the help of friends, the demands of parents, and through their own doggedness and initiative. And, it seems likely, through the efforts of generations of harried, sometimes sensitive, sometimes brutal teachers.

My own experience is perhaps instructive here. I too grew into a two-language school situation in the Republic of Ireland during the 1950s and 1960s. The government still sought to reverse the trends of the previous century and revive the Irish language (then spoken by less than 5% of the population). A native speaker of English, I began to learn Irish at school from the age of five. The teachers just threw *an teanga* (the language) at us – prayers, expressions, texts. I recall little instruction in grammar, for example, in the early years. Gradually, without realizing it, I picked up more and more Irish until, by the age of 16, I was almost bilingual. I studied most of my subjects through Irish to the end of junior high school – including history, geography, arithmetic, algebra, geometry and physics. Of course the home language – English – was also used in the classroom, so I was not as disadvantaged as Peig Sayers and her peers. I suspect that they too picked up English in a similar fashion; at this point I have no way of knowing how well. From their few accounts, however, I have tried to suggest some of the difficulties facing those at the receiving end of a determined policy of cultural and linguistic assimilation.

As the decades passed this determination eroded. The Board reluctantly conceded ground to those inspectors, teachers, and school managers sympathetic to the increased use of Irish in the National Schools – and to the gathering forces of the Irish national revival, especially the organized activities of the Gaelic League (O'Donoghue 1988: 211-214). After allowing Irish as an extra subject in 1879, the Board in 1884 (CNEI *Report* 1885, Appendix A: 78) accepted the obvious: that teachers should be able to utilize the vernacular in the teaching of English. Finally, in 1904 the Board (CNEI *Report* 1904, Appendix, section II, K: 213-218) inaugurated a full "Bilingual Programme for National Schools", which would apply "to Irish-speaking districts, and to districts where Irish and English are both commonly spoken". These grudging concessions were "too little too late" to restore Irish as the language of the majority – this was never the intention anyway. The reforms meant that later generations of children from the *Gaeltacht* (Irish-speaking areas) would be spared the miseries inflicted on Ó'Crohan, Sayers, MacGowan and thousands of similar children.

Guadalupe Valdéz (1997: 418) accepts that "language must be seen as an important tool that can be used by both the powerful and the powerless in their struggle to gain or maintain power." The CNEI definitely used English as a tool in the struggle to anglicize Ireland, just as nationalists used Irish as a counter-tool. By the end of the period under review the balance of power had shifted somewhat, to the benefit of monoglot Irish children.

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