The Irish Language in County Clare in the 19th Century

Caoimhín Ó Danachair

The ordinary language of County Clare in the late 16th and early 17th century was Irish. It was then the everyday speech of both gentle and simple, of officials like Nicholas Cahane, sovereign of Carrigaholt, and Boetius Clancy, Queen Elizabeth’s Sheriff of Clare, as well as of noblemen like Lord Thomond. Irish gentlemen of this station would speak English with more or less fluency as a second language, but Irish was their everyday speech.

In the course of the 17th century, however, the pattern changed. The aftermath of the Cromwellian and Williamite wars had brought into the area an increasing number of officials and landowners who were ignorant of the Irish language and unsympathetic to the culture which that language expressed. At the same time, numbers of the “old gentry” had been dispossessed, or had gone into exile. In the wars of the 16th century the gentry of Clare had in the main supported the winning side in the wars between Elizabeth and the succession of Irish lords who had challenged her rule, but in the next century they had backed the losers, particularly in the war between Scottish James and Dutch William. The disabilities against Catholics had forced those who remained either to conform to the ruling pattern or to lose property, power and prestige. Thus, in the early 18th century a new social pattern became firmly established in County Clare in which English became the language of ‘polite society’ and Irish that of the ‘lower orders’.

Nonetheless Irish maintained its vigour. This is shown, for instance, by the number of poets who flourished in County Clare during the 18th century, and by the quality of their poetry. True, the poets had lost their erstwhile patronage of the gentry. We find Aindrias Mac Cuirtín still dedicating poems to members of the old families, Ó Lochlainnns and others, and regretting the fact that appreciation of the old literary and aristocratic forms of the Bardic metres was dying out, so that he now had to turn to the more popular song metres—‘aiste thuata’, uncouth rustic form, as he calls it.


The lives of these poets reflects the changing status of their medium. Aindrias Mac Cuirtín, who died in 1738, to the end regarded himself as a professional poet; his cousin Aodh Buí mac Cuirtín also regarded himself as a gentleman. As a young man the latter served in the Jacobite army in Ireland and in Clare’s Regiment in Flanders; later he was a schoolmaster in France and in Ireland, dying in his native Kilmacrely.

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1 This paper was read to a public session of the Merriman Summer School, held at Killaloe, County Clare, September 1970.
County Clare, in 1755. He published *A Brief Discourse in Vindication of the Antiquity of Ireland* in Dublin in 1717 and an *Irish Grammar* in Louvain in 1728.

Michéil Coimín's people became Protestant under the pressure of the time so that he lived in comparative affluence as a substantial farmer. Several others, like Donnchadh Ruaidh mac Con Mara, Tomás Ó Miacháin, Séamus Lloyd and Merriman himself taught school for a living. Séamus Mac Coimisiúin made his livelihood as a *fear leighis*, a country herb-doctor, and Seán Ó hOirde was a blacksmith in Dún Atha near Kilkee. Thus, as time went on, the status of the poet grew less.

Probably the first reference in English to the state of Irish in County Clare is in an English poem by Tomas Ó Miacháin, published as an introduction to the *Short Tour or Impartial Account of County Clare* which was published by his friend Seán Lloyd in Ennis in 1779, in which he says:

"Pure Wit and Parts eclips’d and disrespected,  
Our native Tongue most shamefully rejected;  
A Tongue primitive, florid and sublime  
of nervous force in either Prose or Rhime."

"Our native Tongue, most shamefully rejected" well describes the state of the Irish language in County Clare at the beginning of the 19th century. Now, in the eyes of those in power and position, of wealth and social eminence, it had become a mere dialect of the 'lower orders' who knew no better, and its only champions country rhymesters and rakish school-masters, and this state of affairs is reflected in the published accounts of the time.

In the *Statistical Survey of County Clare* written for the Royal Dublin Society in 1808 by Hely Dutton we read (p. 302-304):

"Sect. 22. Use of the English language; whether general, or how far increasing.

"There are very few, except in remote situations, that do not at least understand a little English, but from an apprehension of not speaking correctly they frequently pretend not to understand it: I have often heard them declare in good English, that they could not speak a word of it; almost all the better kind of people speak Irish to the country people, but scarcely one of their sons is able to hold a conversation in this language; of course in the next generation it may be expected, that almost every person in the county will use the English tongue, which would certainly be a desirable object, as the sooner we assimilate with the English in every respect, the more likely we are to forget ancient prejudices, and to adopt their improvements in agriculture, manufactures, and every useful science. That the English language is encreasing, it may be necessary to observe, that the children of almost all those, who can speak scarcely any thing but Irish, are proud of being spoken to in English, and answering in the same, even though you may question them in Irish.

"No Irish is spoken in any of the schools, and the peasantry are anxious to send their children to them for the purpose of learning English. I am informed very little pure Irish is spoken in this county, the present language being a jargon of Irish and English; therefore the sooner it is forgotten, the better. The encouragement of schools by the distribution of good books, at a low price, (not gratis) with ink and paper, would in a few years do wonders, in making the English language become general. I do not recollect to have seen any of the useful little tracts, printed by the Society for promoting the comforts of the poor, in this county; the clergy should attend to this, if not too troublesome."

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This shows clearly the declining status of Irish. The older generation of the “better kind of people” still know it, but their children do not. The “lower orders” have become ashamed of it and try to get their children to speak English, even bad and broken English in preference to Irish. His remark on the quality of County Clare Irish, that it had become a jargon, is peculiar, for we know from much more recent records, for instance from Fr. Clune’s Caint an Chilláir, that this was quite untrue. Nevertheless other writers copied Hely Dutton’s statement. For instance, Lewis’s Topographical Dictionary, 1837, (vol. I, p. 335) states: that “The Irish yet spoken in the remote parts of the County is chiefly a jargon of Irish with English intermixed.”

Probably Dutton knew no Irish and got his information second-hand from an unsympathetic source, while Lewis’s informant has copied his opinion from Dutton.

However, to return to some of the earlier accounts, Mason, in his unfinished Parochial Survey of Ireland, (1814-1818) says of the parish of Noughaval and Carrune (vol. III, p. 283) “The inhabitants in general appear to be industrious and well disposed. The language used by the people in general is the Irish.” Of the parish of Kilmanaheen the same writer says (Vol. I, p. 493):

“The language used by the people in general is the Irish language but the English language has of late years made, and is making a considerable progress among them; very few are to be met that cannot use some kind of English in conversation: of the few exceptions was a man that worked in the Archdeacon’s garden for 25 years, and is now dead. He never could extract one word of English from him, though he understood the language so well, that both had frequent conversations, he in Irish and the Archdeacon in English. He never hurried himself, but he was uniformly at work whether the gardener was with him or not: he was a philosopher in his own way, and frequently made very shrewd observations: he often told the hour of the day by looking at the sun, and also the approaching change of the weather, with an exactness that was astonishing.”

Of the vicinity of Kilrush town; then an important small seaport and naval station, he says: (Vol. II, p. 456):

“The language generally spoken here, except in the remote parts of the union, is English. Many persons however are still utterly ignorant of the English language; and a great proportion of the inhabitants speak Irish in preference. In the years 1799 and 1802, twenty-four copies of the gospel of St. Luke, and the Acts of the Apostles, were sent by Doctor Stokes, of Trinity College, to the curate of this parish and union, to be distributed here. One consequence of this was, that the parish priest of Moyarta endeavoured to collect these books, for the purpose, it was generally understood, of burning them on the high road, as false translations: in this, however, he met with more resistance than he expected; for many refused to give up the Irish gospel, and the books reminded in the hands of the people.”

And of the union of Kilrush, that is to say, the parishes of Kilrush, Killard, Kilfieragh, Moyerta and Kilballyhone in general (Vol. II, 462):

“The Irish language is in general use here, but the English is rapidly gaining ground: most of the rising generation understand it: a sworn interpreter is however still used at the assizes of Ennis and the different quarter sessions, and a country gentleman, ignorant of the Irish language, would be much at a loss how to transact his business at the fairs or markets. Owing to the great intercourse with English and Scottish navy officers and traders; the dialect of English spoken at Kilrush is much less provincial
than in the more inland parts of the south of Ireland. It however differs widely from that of the inhabitants of the northern counties; not only in the mode of pronunciation, but in the tone and inflection of the voice."

Here we see clearly the influence of the busy little harbour on the language of the locality.

Another influence which worked against Irish was the coming of large numbers of Summer visitors to Lahinch, Miltown Malbay, and, especially to Kilkee. This is not a recent development; it has long been established and it increased in volume all through the nineteenth century. The summer visitors regarded themselves as being of the "better class;" townspeople from Ennis and Limerick, and professional people and prosperous farmers from parts of County Clare, County Limerick and even farther away. Most of these knew little or no Irish, and many of those who did pretended that they did not. Thus the holiday resorts, too, became centres of the spread of English.

Some of these summer visitors have left us impressions of their experiences; and, possibly because they had no axes to grind, a more sympathetic note creeps into their accounts.

A lady visitor, Mary John Knott wrote in 1836 a little book called "Two Months at Kilkee," in which she makes some references to Irish in the locality: p. 42: "All kinds of provisions are brought in neat baskets to the houses, and we found an advantage in having a native servant; as few of the people can speak English, the bargains consequently must be made in the Irish language." p. 109: "The Irish language has from time to time been taught in another school, as the master informed us, to sixty or seventy boys." She visited the other school: p. 110: "In this school the Irish language was taught, and we heard it read by a little boy of eleven years old, with a fluency which surprised us." p. 129: "On stopping to enquire the shortest path to the 'Bridges,' the good countenanced natives flocked around us, but as they could not speak English, we were at a loss for direction until a little lad, who understood our language, came up and offered to act as guide." p. 133: (same place, in a fisherman's house) "She [the fisherman's wife] being the only one present who could speak English, and acted as my interpreter."

Another lady who wrote a series called "Letters from the Coast of Clare" published in the Dublin University Magazine in 1841 describes an excursion from Kilkee to Dunliddy Castle. Near the castle they had to leave their side-cars and search for someone to guide them: (Dublin University Magazine, April 1841, p. 517):

"At last we descried a group of children driving some cows down a rocky winding path into the valley. We darted away after them to obtain the necessary information; but no sooner did the little urchins perceive our intentions than they took fright at the strangers and scampered off as fast as their bare legs could carry them. They were soon at the bottom of the valley, leaving us to retrace our steps and to console ourselves—fox-and-grape fashion—with the idea that even if we had overtaken them, it would have availed us nothing, as the probability was that they neither spoke nor understood a word of English."

However, they met a local man who volunteered to show them the sights. The author tries to reproduce this man's broken English: (id, p. 517)

"We were soon relieved from our dilemma by P——, who made his appearance on the brow of the hill with a guide. Where he had found him I know not; but there he was, a tall, well-built man, without shoes or—yes he had stockings reaching to the ankles which, covering his legs, left the feet in the enjoyment of their pristine
liberty. His intelligent face was innocent of a razor, so that a set of large white teeth looked whiter still, contrasted with a sable fringe, which as far as a lady might venture a calculation on so abstruse a point, might have been of three or four days growth. Mister James Purtill, for so was he hight, having announced that he 'had none of de English,' proceeded to deeds in default of words, and strode stoutly on, we following.

Our lady author was terrified to see a boy fishing from the cliff in what she considered was a most perilous position; she goes on (p. 518):

'Farther on, a large party of men were similarly employed, though in a safer situation; and we sat ourselves down on a ledge of rocks to watch the fishing operations. Our guide took his position behind us, to act, in case of need, as interpreter. His stock of English seemed to have marvelously increased since our first meeting, and during the walk he had managed to give us a sketch of his worldly affairs, and to inform us that his personal property consisted of a cabin in the village of Moveen, a wife, a cow, seven children, nine sheep, and geese innumerable.

'Why you are a rich man!' we exclaimed, as the catalogue proceeded—'nine sheep, geese—'

''Yes, indeed,' he interrupted ironically, 'much dat! maybe one dog come, and put sheep or goose into de hole;—maybe goose go of herself into hole—and den rich! much dat!'''

She attempted conversation with one of the group of fisherfolk (p. 519):

'A pretty girl, sister to one of the men, was busy opening the muscles with a small knife, and taking out the fish in readiness for baiting the hooks. Her dark mantle was draped gracefully over her head, and her rosy face and laughing blue eyes peeped out of the folds. She did not understand a word of English.'

And so it appears that up to the time of the famine, Irish was still the spoken language of many parts of County Clare. The Census of 1841 does not give figures for Irish speakers, but an estimate of about 210,000 speakers of Irish out of a total population of 286,000 appears to be fairly accurate; that is to say that before the famine at least three quarters of the population of Clare knew Irish. The Famine of the late 1840s, as we know, bore most heavily on the poorest section of the population; the labourers and others who had neither land nor trade. This is shown in County Clare by, for instance, the types of houses in which people lived. The Census officials were instructed to enumerate the class of house in four categories, which may be described as 1. Gentlemen's residences 2. Large farmhouses 3. Small Farmhouses and similar dwellings 4. One-roomed cabins of the poor.

During the famine decade 1841-1851 the better types, 1, 2 and 3, all increased slightly in number in the county but the one-roomed cabins fell from nearly 23,000 in 1841 to 5,169 in 1851, that is to say that 3 out of every four of the dwellings of the poorest people disappeared. This is, of course, a fact that, in the circumstances of the time, the poorest people were the Irish speakers. Thus, in County Clare, as in many other parts of Ireland the Famine bore more heavily upon the Irish speaking part of the population than upon the English speakers. This, too, is true of the post-Famine

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2 This type of soleless stocking (loíphli, maidhli, troighli, etc.) has been fully described in A. T. Lucas, CLAF, 13 (1953-54), 309 ff.
3 For a description of this type of house and discussion of the reasons for its decline, see C. O Danachair, 'The Bothán Scóir', North Munster Studies (edit. E. Rynne), Limerick 1967, pp. 489-498.
period—emigration was highest amongst the poorest, amongst those most likely to be Irish speakers.

The following are some figures from the Census Returns:

In 1851 there still were 126,996 Irish speakers in County Clare—more than half the whole population. Of these over 25,000 knew only Irish.

Twenty years later, in 1871 there were 58,000 Irish speakers, roughly two-fifths of the population, these included 4,400 monoglots. By 1891 the number of Irish speakers had fallen to 46,000, but this was still over one-quarter of the total population. But the general spread of English is shown by the figure of monoglots; only 900 now knew no English, that is to say, considerably less than one per cent of the population. In 1911 the figure given for Irish speakers is 36,704 and for monoglots 161, but from now onwards, because of the fact that it was becoming fashionable and patriotic to claim a knowledge of Irish, the figures are no longer reliable as a guide to the number of genuine native speakers.

During the 18th century the attention of the learned world began to turn to the remains of antiquity, among which the scholarly antiquarians now began to number the Irish language. Here we find a transition period, where survivors of the old tradition of poet-scribe-schoolmaster joined the ranks of the new group of scientific scholars. Peter O'Connell was perhaps the first of these; a country schoolmaster whose life-work was the compilation of his Irish-English dictionary. Another was Eugene O'Curry, who, as we know, was, as a young man, a schoolmaster at Kilfeeragh, near Kilkee and was something of a minor Irish poet.

Through the eyes of the antiquarian scholars we get glimpses of the survival of fragments of Irish learning and culture in 19th century County Clare.

John O'Donovan, for instance, writing for the Ordnance Survey from north County Clare in 1839 tells us of a certain Mr. Peter Comyn, of whom he says “Captain Tyrell of Kinvara has a curious MS. found after Peter, which gives one a curious idea of his industry in collecting local legends and of his sagacity, talent and candour in describing the habits, morals and superstitions of the primitive and sequestered people among whom he lived. He was of a very respected family, and a native genius.”

It appears that this Peter Comyn is to be regarded as the first folklore collector who worked in County Clare and his curious manuscript, if it still exists, would be worth examining. John O'Donovan further states—“His prodigality and dissolute habits brought him at length to the gallows”—it appears from this letter that Peter Comyn was hanged about 1828, for burning down his own house.

Dr. George Petrie, in his _Ancient Music of Ireland_, (published 1855) includes a number of songs, the words and music of which he got from a Clare countryman, Tadhg MacMahon who was introduced to him by Eugene O'Curry. It appears that Tadhg MacMahon went to Dublin to have an operation for the cataract which in the end left him completely blind, and that O'Curry by chance heard him speaking Irish to a companion. O'Curry recognised the accent of south west Clare, spoke to him and found that he was a neighbour of his own and a former friend of Peter O'Connell, also a friend of O'Curry and of his family. MacMahon with O'Curry's help gave Petrie such songs as “Cuirfhninn-se chuid an Searbhdh Seóil,” “The Ploughman’s Whistle,” “Ag an mBóithirín But,” and these, together with “A Bhuachail an Cháil Dualaigh,” “Ní d'fhéadfadh mór ar na Bóithre seo Sligigh,” “An Bhuachail Caol Dubh” and “Péarla

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4 MSS, O.S. Letters for County Clare, pp. 34-35.
*An Bhrollaigh Bháin*" given to Petrie by O'Curry himself shows us the quality of the popular Irish songs of County Clare in the early 19th Century.

Mrs. Morgan John O'Connell visited Tadhg Mac Mahon in the Workhouse in Kildysart in 1886 and has left us a vivid description of him.5

Mrs. O'Connell writes:

"Though born near Kildysart, Teague hails from further west in Clare—from Kilmurry MacMahon, where his people were followers of the extinct family of Mac Mahons of Cloneeena. When Teague grew up, he took service with one Connell, who, besides his farming, worked a quarry near Money Point, not very far from Kilrush. This Connell was brother to Peter Connell, a famous old hedge-schoolmaster, and a very shanachie of shanachies, at whose feet the sturdy hewer of flagstones sat. Peter was an old man then, Teague a very young one; so the gleaner of old traditions flourished in the last half of the last century.

"Teague only knows a limited amount of English. He speaks like a foreigner, with difficulty and deliberation, using the most dignified idioms and with a tantalizing slowness but with a wonderful good accent. He evidently picked it up late in life from educated people. As his vocabulary is limited, he needs an interpreter.

Once he turned to him (the interpreter) in the middle of a broken sentence of his halting but picturesque English, to exclaim in Irish: "Why cannot Morgan John's wife speak Irish?" but this was said more in sorrow than as a reproach for my degeneracy. In his young days country ladies had to know enough of Irish to manage the large number of servants then kept when the killing and curing of meat, the opening and carding of flax and wool, and the making of bread and cider, had all to be carried on at home. Except silk, broadcloth, saddlery, and wine, almost everything was produced in the house-hold."

She tells of Tadhg's pride in his memory of how he was welcomed by the learned world in Dublin, where O'Curry had introduced him to the savants of the Royal Irish Academy. She continues:

"He is fully convinced that but for his blindness they would have made him porter in the Royal Irish Academy. He knew Dr. Todd, and Dr. Lyons and "Dr. Stokes and his son the Councillor" and the late Mr. Pigott, and Mr. O'Mahony who keeps him in newspapers and tobacco, and Mr. Joyce; but his man is 'The Doctor,' not the great lexicographer but gentle, kindly Dr. Petrie. Many a tumbler of punch has Teague partaken of in a corner of his dining-room while 'singing songs, and the doctor playing them on the fiddle,' and some other tricean (? 'taking them down.' Great was his pleasure when I told him I had been playing over some of them the other day, and he says Mr. Joyce has 'translated them finely.'

"Teague looks on the Royal Irish Academy as a sacred shrine, and it is his great boast that his was the only single knock that was ever answered at that learned door. Once a policeman ordered him off the steps as having no business there. The indignant shanachie responded: 'It is I that have business there with the gentlemen, and not the likes of you that would be let inside.' Teague's emphatic rap was repeated and he was let in, in the very teeth of the guardian of law and order.

"Long after his various patrons had got all the songs and stories and old pedigrees they wanted, they continued their benefactions, and Teague says he never wanted for

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5 *The Irish Monthly*, 14 (1886), 27 ff.; see also T. Wall, "Teige MacMahon and Peter O'Connell", *Béaltaidse*, 30 (1962), 89-104.
anything in all the years he gave in Dublin.” But when he got very old he felt smothering in the city, and a longing came on him to go back to the breezy west country.”

The country people in many parts of County Clare still had a love of the old literary tradition. In a manuscript in the Royal Irish Academy* are contained a number of essays on the state of the Irish Language in various parts of Ireland. One contributor, Proinsias Ó Cathain, writes, with reference to County Clare:

“The manner in which the foregoing Irish Manuscripts are kept alive and preserved among the people is remarkable, it is this: One individual borrows from his neighbour his Irish Manuscript, and makes a copy of it; or, if unable to write himself, procures one who can do so for him. Thus they keep up, among themselves, several copies of those Irish Manuscripts, upon which they bestow great time and labour in transcribing. They find great pleasure and amusement in reading those manuscripts, especially on Winter nights, on which occasion the neighbours of the surrounding districts flock together for the purpose of hearing them read, the reader being often obliged to perform his task with no other light than that of what people commonly call a sgoilpóg of Bogdeal, or the light of a bogbrush dipped in oil extracted from fish livers.”

As regards the manuscripts, he tells us:

“I have at present in my possession an Irish Manuscript of 300 pages containing a great number of Irish songs and poems, composed by different Authors, transcribed by a Blacksmith named Martin Griffin, late of Killrush, in the County of Clare”; and he goes on to list the 188 poems which are included in it.

He also tells us of “an Irish manuscript, also in my possession, transcribed by a man named Michael Mangan, of Carrigaholt, in the County of Clare. Among our recent Irish Poets I may mention this remarkable man. Besides being an Irish Poet he was a wheelwright, a School-master, and a dancing Master. Had the Irish language existed as the spoken and cultivated language of this country and not been confined merely to the poor and the uneducated, the name of this poor man might have ranked high amongst those of poets and Authors, instead of remaining sunk in obscurity, forgotten and unknown.”

This MS, of some 800 pages, contained such works as:

“Eachtra Thoirdeithilb mhic Stairmn mac dearbhráthair Righ Lochlainn, The Adventures of Toirdhealbh the son of Stairn nephew of the King of Lochlinn.
Eachtra Chloinne Thoirdeithilb, The adventures of the Children of Toirdhealbh
Oídeadh Chloinne Theirrín, The death of the Children of Terrin.
Oídeadh Chloinne Lir, The Death of the Children of Lir.
Oídeadh Chloinne Uisg, The death of the Children of Uisneach.
Eachtra an Mhadra Mhaoil, The adventures of the bald dog.
Eachtra Tllain an Airn Dhearg mac Rígh Gréig, The Adventures of Iollan of the red armour son of the King of Greece.
Bás an athar Nioclás mhic Sígha, The death of Father Nicholas McSheehy.
Aodh Buidhe mac Cuirtín air Éire, Yellow Hugh McCurtin on Éire.
Tuasagadhail an Chatha Gabhra, An account of the Battle of Gabhra.
Luadh na con Duiibhs, Lay of the black Hound.
Luadh an doirn, Lay of Dorn (a fist).
Luadh Archoin, Lay of Archoin.”

* R.I.A. MS 12Q13, for permission to quote from which the writer wishes to thank that body.
He tells us, too, of a letter which he had recently received from a young man in Kilkee, written in Irish; it reads:

"Cill-chaoidh, Márta 17th 1868.

"A Chara fonmhuin,
Is mian leam sgríobh chúghad, mar shúil as go ndéanfá nídh bheag dom, agus beagn mé, d’a bhithin, fé oibhlegaid agud choidhche. Do bhí mé a chaimit le máthair do chéile, beagn laethi óshoin, agus dúbhhairt sí leam go raibh morán leabhar Gaedhailge agad do sgríobh leat féin. Má tá Cuirt a mheadhain oidiache agad eadartha, do bheinn ro bhuidseach diot d’a gcuirtha chugham é áir fheidh amaill. Geallaim duit ná bainfhiú do bháisil do chuirr do lóir go maith.

Do charaid ionmhuin
Tomas Ó Loingse.""

Proinsias Ó Catháin
Baile Átha Cliath.

As regards schools and the teaching of Irish he says:
"There is not a town in the province of Munster that had not its teacher of Irish over 20 years ago, but such is not the case now. Those teachers, who were then chiefly elderly men, have all passed away, and the practice of teaching Irish in the present day has nearly fallen into disuse. There are, therefore, no schools at present established in Munster for the purpose of teaching the Irish language to the peasantry."

In this way, the number of people who had some little store of Irish learning diminished almost to nothing in County Clare towards the end of the nineteenth century.

The death of the literary tradition was accompanied by a decline in the oral tradition of the storyteller and the seanachai, all of which brought about an impoverishment of the language, the purity, vitality and versatility of which was due in the main to its cultivation in both the written and the oral tradition.

Another cause of impoverishment was the disappearance of the craftsmen. As we know, the development of a language depends upon the complexity of the society which uses it; the speech of a community which includes learned, professional, merchant and craftsmen groups will be more developed and facile than that which is confined to a band of herdsmen or fishermen. The loss of the craftsmen meant the loss of their idiom and vocabulary, which in turn was a loss, a serious loss to the language as a whole.

In 1851 there were, according to the census, in County Clare:
- 71 millers, 158 bakers and pastrycooks, 7,121 spinners, 221 linen weavers, 140 wool weavers, 10 dyers, 863 boot and brogue makers, 619 tailors, 114 embroiderers and lace makers, 851 dressmakers and milliners, 432 masons, stonecutters and quarrymen, 62 slaters, 62 sawyers, 585 carpenters, 25 millwrights, 43 cartwrights and coach builders, 46 shipwrights, 18 basketmakers, 22 brush or broom makers, 146 coopers, 577 blacksmiths, 106 nailers, 15 whitesmiths, 35 tinplate workers, 43 saddlers, 16 candle and soap makers, 50 painters and glaziers, 27 thatchers, 6 wood turners and
1,517 knitters, that is to say nearly 14,000 craft workers, at least half of whom were Irish speakers, on the county average of 59.8% Irish speaking. By the end of the century many of these trades had disappeared, others were much reduced in numbers, and Irish had become a language only of small farmers and fishermen, both very worthy occupations, but not enough to maintain a language in its full strength and complexity.

We must realise that the decline of Irish, in County Clare as elsewhere, was brought about, not by direct legislation or compulsion from those in authority but by the social and economic circumstances of the time, which made English seem progressive and desirable, and Irish, by contrast, old-fashioned, backward and generally useless.

It was the people themselves, in their desire for a better life who laid aside Irish and took to English. It was the parents who made their children speak English instead of Irish. Sir William Wilde tells the following, although from Co. Galway, not from Clare:

"While supper was preparing, and the potatoes laughing and steaming in the skieh the children gathered round to have a look at the stranger, and one of them, a little boy about eight years of age, addressed a short sentence in Irish to his sister, but meeting the father's eye, he immediately lowered back, having, to all appearance, committed some heinous fault. The man called the child to him, said nothing, but drawing forth from his dress a little stick, commonly called a scoreen or tally, which was suspended by a string round the neck, put an additional notch in it with his penknife. Upon our inquiring into the cause of this proceeding, we were told that it was done to prevent the child speaking Irish; for every time he attempted to do so a new mark was put in his tally, and, when these amounted to a certain number, summary punishment was inflicted upon him by the schoolmaster. Every child in the village was similarly circumstanced, and whoever heard one of them speak a word of Irish was authorized to insert the fatal nick. We asked the father if he did not love the Irish language—indeed, the man scarcely spoke any other; 'I do,' said he, his eye kindling with enthusiasm; 'sure it is the talk of the old country, and the old times, the language of my father and all that's gone before me—the speech of these mountains, and lakes, and these glens, where I was bred and born; but you know,' he continued, 'the children must have larning, and, as they tache no Irish in the National School, we must have recourse to this to instigate them to talk English.'"

Sir William goes on:

"We have known a young man, who had assumed a very fine English accent, twitted with the circumstance of his having once carried the 'score,' by being told; 'Arrah, leave off your English; 'tisn't so long since the beam was round your neck.'"

That this practice was also known in Co. Clare is shown by Seán Ó Suilleabháin in his essay "Batal Scór".

"Dualt Micheál Ó Tighearnaigh, Luach, liom go bhfuca sé an bata scór (scórmaine a thugann Tighearnaigh ins an scoil fánach (nú scoil bothán) mar do chomhnaighheadh máistir a dtugail Liddy (Lidín) air. Do chuireadh an máistir an scór-mhaidhe seo ar mhuinteál an scóil aghus dá rangúighdhe go labhairteadh sé aon fhocal amháin Gaedhilge san mbaile, gheobhaidh 'athair sgní, agus chuireadh sé ang nú gearra san

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7 Irish Popular Superstitions, Dublin 1853, pp. 26-27.
8 Féil-Scribhinn Éadan Mhic Néill, (ed. J. Ryan), Dublin 1940, pp. 551-566; this account, from Seán Mac Mathghamhna, Luach, Dubhlinn, Co. an Chláir, is on p. 560.
maide, agus dá ndeineadh sé an choir cheudhna scór uaireanta bhí an t-ang san maide gach uair aca. Agus annsin nuair a théighheadh an sgoilire as comhair an mháistir bhí a chomhharthá le na chos go raibh sé cionnacht agus bhí iarraidh do'n tслаit nǔ do'n chàna le faghail ag an sgoilire ar son gach ang san maide. Duairt Micheál liom nuair a dhein sé cascaíní ar an máistir gur ghearr 'athair ang andaoinhin mar scóir 'na choime. Bhí pianóis dúbailte le faghail aige nuair a d'fhéicheadh an máistir ang do'n sórt seo ar an scór-mhaide. Ach bhí Tighearna suas leis mar fuair sé an lá sin maide ná raibh scór ar bith ann. Ins an mbaile seo thos a dtugtar Baile Chuitín air do bhí Liddy a' múnadh i mbothán nuair a bhí Micheál Ó Tighearnaigh a' d'ul ag iarraidh air, agus dear sé liom gurb é seo an saighdiu scór-mhaide do bhíodh fé na mhunéad agus e 'dul ar an scoil sin.'

In some schools the tally was used within the school only. One child only wore it at the time, and he had to spy on the others and report anyone who spoke Irish. This was recorded at New Quay, near Ballyvaughan:9

"The following I have recorded from Mr. James Moylan (90), Boland's Lane, Gort, Co. Galway, who remembers the batal seoir being used near New Quay:

"I have not seen the stick myself, and can give no description, but it must have been of hazel-wood, the commonest near New Quay. One stick only was used and kept in the National School, and was worn by the 'guilty one' during school hours. The children 'spied' on each other. The 'guilty one' was called up, the batal seoir hung around his neck, a notch cut on it by the teacher, and a sound 'horse-whipping' given. In the morning the 'horse-whipping' and spying took place. To my knowledge the parents knew nothing about it.

"The batal seoir ceased to be used in 1866. The first National Teacher appointed in New Quay was a one Mr. Connolly. He used the batal seoir and he was the only one I knew of that used it. He was not acting under orders of the Board, and did it in order to make a name for himself. Mr. Connolly died in 1869. He had retired a few years before that (about 1866) and that finished the batal seoir to my knowledge."

Towards the end of the century the speaking of Irish had died out in nearly all of East and Mid Clare but was still vigorous in the north and here in the south west.

In the middle 1880s, Irish was still the common speech of most of the country people of this area. The father of the present writer, as a small boy, went on holiday to Kilkee on a number of occasions in the 1880s with his grandmother, a farmer's wife from County Limerick. She spoke Irish and made a point of attending Kilkee market to converse with the people there, among whom she had many acquaintances. My father said, too, that in the boarding house where they stayed, he often heard the old people talking of poets and poetry, in which, he confessed, he took little interest at the time, but that he often heard there old stories in Irish of giants, fairies and heroes, to which he gave eager ear.

And the present writer, as a small boy more than forty years ago, remembers going with his father to the market square in Kilkee, and hearing him conversing in Irish with some old people there;—this would be about 1926.

In 1946 Professor Nils Holmer, who was engaged in a dialect survey found that, as regards County Clare:

"In very few houses was Irish spoken by all the members of the household—one of them, for instance, was that of one Mr. McInerney at Kilbaha (Kb 10) and another, that of five brothers Dillon at Ballycottageen (parish of Kilmacrehy; Lu 7-ro). In most

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9 Ibid., pp. 560-1.
of the households, Irish was spoken either by the man or the wife or by both (in a few cases the man and the wife spoke different subdialects), whereas the children generally had little knowledge of the language beyond what they got at school. The school Irish, however, often differed considerably from the language of the parents and was referred to by old speakers as the 'New Irish.' Practically everybody was bilingual; in many parts where Irish was spoken English was nevertheless the current language.10

Recent work on the Irish of County Clare, insofar as it concerned living speech, consisted solely of rescue work, that is to say, the recording of the last speakers so that something of the language might survive after they were gone.

In the introduction to his Caint an Chlár (Dublin 1940) Fr. Clune wrote:

"Tá Gaedhilge an Chlár, chomh fada is gur teanga labhartha í, ag faghlúth bháis go tugtha. An Geata Bán, An Scairbh, Cill Molua, Cathair Luinnigh, Ínis, Baile an Ruadháin agus an Geata Bán arís, deimeann sí an linn go bhfuil an Ghaedhilge geall agus le bheith marbh laistigh dí. Ú charan am chéad nó idir fhoclóir agus abairtí beo fós i bhfhor mhór an cheanntair sin, agus teabhrann siad ce n-iseas Ghaedhilge a labhairt an ann.

"Tá bhfhor mhór an chuid eile den chomhdaí maireann an Ghaedhilge fós, sé sin lir dí dá bhual na seana-cainteóirí go léir marbh ann. Ach lámnigh de Ghaelainn Eochaidh (gaird do Bhaile Úi Bheachadáin), nil flor-Ghaedhealacht ar bith sa Chlár; agus dá bhruigh sin bhon na caintéirí scartha amach ó n-a cheile."

In 1951-52, Professor Heinrich Wagner, similarly engaged, reported:

"In County Clare, Irish has almost disappeared. In Kilbaha—Loop Head area Irish is on the verge of dying, although most of the older generation can speak it. Our subjects [i.e. his informants] were equally fluent in both languages. ——In Doolin and Fisherstreet Irish is on the verge of dying, although most of the older generation can speak it.—Only a few speakers are left in the area west of Ballyvaughan."

He sums up:

"English has become the vernacular of the younger generation everywhere. In most districts the population is very thin as a result of emigration which has been going on in all Irish speaking areas for a long time. There is no economic life of any description in any area. The best informants were found in remotest localities, along the seashore, in mountain areas or on islands.

"As a matter of fact there are very few places where both Irish and English are equally used. Once English has become fashionable in a place, Irish is considered old fashioned and inferior. This trend is strongly connected with the social structure of Ireland. As it is not spoken in large centres of population, or by persons above a certain social standing, Irish is regarded by rural dwellers as belonging to a primitive, poverty stricken way of life."

I do not know how many genuine native speakers of Irish survive now in County Clare. The last twenty years have taken their inevitable toll of the "older generation" who provided the material for Fr. Clune, and Drs. Holner and Wagner, as well as of

those whose tales and traditions are preserved in the archive of the Folklore Commission. The survivors must now be pitifully few. If, by some miracle, Irish should become again the vernacular language of County Clare, it certainly will not be the native Irish of County Clare, because too many links in the chain are broken, and we should remember that our own century must bear much of the blame for this loss, because in 1900 there were as many native speakers of Irish in County Clare as there now are in the whole of Ireland.