

AN EXTRAORDINARY PIONEER OF THE IRISH LANGUAGE MOVEMENT

BROTHER JEROME FITZPATRICK 1878 - 1910

BY BARRY COLDREY

In 1910, an unusually gifted young Christian Brother died in Dublin of tuberculosis. In the previous thirteen years he had produced no fewer than eleven textbooks, on his own initiative or in collaboration with others, the first of them when he was nineteen years of age. Yet he was not proclaimed within the order for his achievements, and even the Gaelic League accorded him but a slight remembrance.⁽¹⁾

There were reasons why Br. Jerome Fitzpatrick was largely ignored within the Congregation at his death in 1910. In the preliminaries for the general chapter of that same year he was considered among the radicals of the order – both in his politics and towards contemporary questions of religious life. He was not elected to the chapter. In the event, that general chapter was deeply divided on some issues and Brother Jerome was associated with the minority group. In a post-chapter atmosphere of divisiveness and bitterness a number of Brothers left the order – and Brother Jerome died. His necrology “Life” was written by a member of the general council. It was short and bland, a mere four pages, quite inadequate to do justice to its subject. When the necrology was printed, in a number of communities, Br. Jerome’s “Life” was torn from the book by his friends; better he remain little known than that he be dammed with faint praise. Unaware of these proceedings, but aware of his son’s commitment, Brother Jerome’s father had remarked: “My son was a great fighter for lost causes”.⁽²⁾

Man in religious life remains a political animal and the brokenness of the human condition permeates the cloister on occasions. However, enough of long-forgotten unpleasantness. It is time to pay tribute to a great pioneer of the Language Movement, whose work in collaboration with leading members of the Gaelic League did more than anything else to cement the image of the Christian Brothers as the driving educational force within the movement to revive the Irish language.

Jerome Fitzpatrick was born in Cork and educated at the North Monastery



Br. Jerome Fitzpatrick.

where he scored impressive results in the Intermediate Examinations between 1892 and 1894.⁽³⁾ In the latter year, he joined the Christian Brothers and by the following year, when he was 19 years old he was receiving advice and assistance from Eoin McNeill on his *First Irish Grammar*, as he wrote: "Thank you for your kindness in correcting the Irish exercises ... I am continuing the Second Book"⁽⁴⁾

By 1898, Fitzpatrick was teaching the Middle Grade Intermediate class at CBS Synge Street, Dublin, and was achieving exceptional results with his students. There was a dearth of resource material for teachers and students of Irish: few grammar books, dictionaries, essay books and short stories were available. In his spare time Fitzpatrick began work on an *Irish Grammar* which was to establish his reputation in Irish-Ireland circles.

In December, 1900, Fitzpatrick wrote to McNeill "once again" for assistance with his new book "in aid of a noble cause". He had rewritten the first draft, paying attention to all McNeill's suggestions, and now requested an endorsement of his work to assist in having it published. It is also plain that McNeill was in the process of writing or revising the chapter on the irregular verbs for the proposed textbook.⁽⁵⁾ It is not possible to specify exactly to what extent Eoin McNeill was involved in the preparation of the text but collaboration appears to have been close, rather than casual. Br. Jerome had also sought and received help from Mr. W. Shortall, a lay teacher at CBS Synge Street. Shortall did proof-reading and gave secretarial assistance to him when he was away from Dublin on summer holidays in the Dingle peninsula. Shortall also wrote the chapter on "Irish Phonetics" for the text.⁽⁶⁾

A month after his previous letter, Fitzpatrick thanked McNeill for "your beautiful notes on the Irish verb" and added:

I am delighted with your arrangement of the tenses and voices. I can assure you that I have used your manuscript very freely. I sometimes say to myself that by the time the book is published I shall have very little claim to it, as my contribution will form a very small fraction indeed. Notwithstanding all you have already done for me, I am going to intrude on your generosity again. There are a few minor points.⁽⁷⁾

In May, 1901, McNeill was invited to correct the proof-sheets of the text as they came from the printer "seeing that up to the present I have made so many slips in the grammar".⁽⁸⁾ Apparently there were no further problems with the work



The title page of "Irish Grammar", 1901.

and it was soon released. Immediately there was an encouraging response from reviewers. One noted that the Christian Brothers had been "very emphatic" in thanking Mr. John McNeill for his invaluable and generous assistance with the preparation of the book. The reviewer noted that since McNeill had worked on the book its excellence was guaranteed, and because it emanated from the Christian Brothers it was assured wide and immediate acceptance.⁽⁹⁾

McNeill himself, was one of the reviewers and his comments in the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* were less fulsome and more technical. More enthusiastic than most was the anonymous reviewer in the *Irish People* who outlined at length the previous services of the Christian Brothers to the people of Ireland: they had fought the Satanic denationalizing tendencies of the Commissioners of National Education for generations; their textbooks for decades had taught Irish children the history and geography of their own country; and they had pioneered the revival of the native language by introducing the study of Irish into many of their schools. After all this achievement for the nation, their new *Irish Grammar* would be welcomed joyfully by every teacher and student of the language. The book was described as "splendidly cloth-bound, comprehensive, with an artistically designed cover and issued at a moderate price".⁽¹⁰⁾ It marked

an epoch in the history of the Irish revival.

In May, 1902, Fitzpatrick sent a copy of his new book to Douglas Hyde with the following dedication: "As a small token of gratitude for your assistance to me on several occasions".⁽¹¹⁾ Meanwhile, Brother Jerome had begun work on his *Annotated Irish Texts* before the final release of the *Irish Grammar*. This new work necessitated some negotiation with Douglas Hyde in May, 1902, when Fitzpatrick wrote Hyde a long and emotional letter, obviously the work of a man under some strain. They had met at a function at the Rotunda some time before, when Fitzpatrick had been unaware that Hyde himself had prepared an edition of the same short stories. Understandably, Hyde did not want another similar book placed on the market.

Fitzpatrick told Hyde that he had prepared a complete vocabulary for students using the *Annotated Irish Texts* and now he offered this vocabulary in return for Hyde's permission to publish an expurgated edition of the proposed book. As he said: "There are several schools which will not take up Irish as long as our prescribed authors contain anything which is objectionable". Since there is a good deal of

robust sexuality in the stories of the Tain, an expurgated edition was necessary for teachers dealing with young and innocent children.

Fitzpatrick concluded his appeal by recounting his extraordinary efforts on behalf of the language revival: sleepless nights, sacrificed vacations and holidays "through a purely disinterested zeal for the re-establishment of our dear old tongue".⁽¹²⁾ He concluded by stressing that a bowdlerized version of Hyde's work would permit more schools to take up the study of the language.

Hyde gave the required permission, and in his letter of acknowledgement Fitzpatrick mentioned that since the first edition of the *Irish Grammar* was almost sold out, he was revising the material.

He invited Hyde's suggestions.⁽¹³⁾ In view of this success with Brother Jerome's work, the Publications Committee of the Gaelic League turned down suggestions that any other grammar book be prepared, since: "The Committee are of the opinion that the *Simple Lessons* and the Christian Brothers' *Grammar* meet our present requirements".⁽¹⁴⁾

Almost immediately afterwards, Fitzpatrick began work on a book which would be a suitable guide for composition practice, that is to say, compositions translated from Irish to English and from English to Irish. None was available in the Irish language. After

many enquiries, he obtained a French composition text (i.e. one intended for French students learning English) from Pdraig Pearse and was able to use this as a model for his own work. In this proposed *Aids to Irish Composition* Fitzpatrick collaborated with Brother V. Casey, who was teaching in Mount Sion, Waterford, and again sought assistance from Eoin McNeill. In a letter of December, 1905, to McNeill he outlined the position:

In conjunction with one of our Brothers at present in Waterford, I have written a book for use in our schools, according to the principles of the "Direct Method" or rather should I say, the Brother in Waterford has written the book and I have done merely the drudgery portion in preparing it for the printer, making out the vocabularies, etc.⁽¹⁵⁾

Fitzpatrick's main request was that McNeill look over the manuscript and give a written opinion whether the material was worth publishing. The *Aids to Irish Composition* was released and so it is reasonable to presume that McNeill's opinion was affirmative. A letter of September, 1907, has Fitzpatrick apologising to McNeill for his neglect to send McNeill a copy. In fact, the production had taken longer than the texts done previously because the co-authors were living widely apart, and in addition because Brother Fitzpatrick was posted to CBS Sexton Street, Limerick, for the years 1904-6 and heavily involved in teaching senior secondary classes.

By 1907, Fitzpatrick had been re-assigned to CBS Synge Street, Dublin, and commenced work on Irish-language resource material for primary school pupils. He developed a series of charts with illustrations of everyday objects and situations. The Irish text was attached. The use of charts was not a new idea in itself in language teaching, but was a novelty for instruction in Irish at primary level. A manual was provided with the charts to assist teachers who had been trained in more conventional methods.⁽¹⁶⁾ The charts were tested at the primary school at CBS Synge Street before being made more generally available.

Soon after the *Aids to Irish Composition* was finalised and published, Fitzpatrick moved on to writing a small inexpensive grammar for beginners. Understandably, the 351-page *Irish Grammar* which had been available after 1901 was worth buying only for students in secondary classes. The aim was now to produce a much shorter and considerably cheaper book for primary classes. This was published in 1908 and sold extremely well. In these last three years of his life, Brother Jerome, in collaboration with his confrere in Waterford, prepared a booklet of eighty-nine pages: *Aids to the Pronunciation of Irish*, and also a 246-page *Sequel to Aids in Irish Composition*.

All this work was not well known to the Irish public, even that section of the

Irish people associated with the language movement. Fitzpatrick's name was not on any of his works. This was the Christian Brothers custom at the time. The publishing programme in Irish language resource material appeared under the generic title: "The Christian Brothers" and this highlighted the work of the Institute as a whole for the language revival to a very wide audience, though it minimised Brother Fitzpatrick's role – and also that of Brother Casey in Waterford and Mr. Shortall in Synge Street, CBS.

Brother Fitzpatrick was a reserved, intense personality and reputed a revolutionary by other teachers at the schools in which he taught.⁽¹⁷⁾ One is reminded of the almost inevitably close relationship between language revival and advanced nationalism. As the *Ulster Echo* expressed it: "Scratch a Gaelic Leaguer and you will find a Fenian no matter what he may call himself".⁽¹⁸⁾ He did his best to encourage the Brothers to teach Irish, supported the GAA, the Irish industrial movement and instructed past students in Irish history in adult education classes. A past pupil commented after his death:

Often as I listened to him on such occasions I felt my heart beat faster and the blood course more quickly in my veins as I heard him tell so graphically, yet so simply, of Sarsfield's ride or Emmet's death.⁽¹⁹⁾

However, all this work, the requirements of religious life, the pressure of senior examination classes, the production of eleven books in thirteen years with pre-computer age technology – all took their toll. Brother Jerome succumbed to T.B. in his thirty-third year.

Immediately there were generous tributes accorded him in the Irish-Ireland press. One journal referred to the death of a "young soldier of Erin"; another proclaimed him "a martyr" to Irish-Ireland causes; and a third referred to him in glowing terms as "an extremist". *An Claidheamh Soluis*, as a tribute to Fitzpatrick's work, sponsored a fund, the "Brother Fitzpatrick Memorial Scholarship Fund", to enable some young men, students of the Christian Brothers' Dublin schools, to attend free-of-charge summer schools in Gaelic-speaking areas of the country. However, the fund was not well-subscribed and it was six years before it was finalised in a modified form. In 1916, monies were made available to permit two students of the CBS to attend summer schools in Gaeltacht areas.

Thus Brother Fitzpatrick's name faded from memory, though his books under the Congregation's badge remained in common use until the 1960s. It is reasonable that his sustained endeavour be remembered eighty-two years after his death.

FOOTNOTES & REFERENCES

1. This is the personal opinion of this

foreigner who was working on his dissertation "The Contribution of the Christian Brothers to the Development of Irish Nationalism, 1802 - 1921" (Melbourne University, 1985) in Ireland during the 1980s.

2. Folklore memories from a number of unrelated sources and gleaned during research for my dissertation.
3. O'Buachalla, S. *The Letters of P.H. Pearse*. (Gerrards Cross, 1990) p. 446; Hennessy, P.J. "Life of Brother Jerome Fitzpatrick", *CBER (Necrology)* (Dublin, 1911); p. 226; Caomhanach, A.P. "The Extraordinary Br. Jerome Fitzpatrick", *An Reiltin*, Vol. 9, No. 2. February, 1955, p. 1. This journal, *The Little Star*, was an Irish cultural magazine produced by the Christian Brothers between 1946 and 1965 to foster Irish-Ireland causes within the Brothers' schools. It was written entirely in Irish and I have always been indebted to Brother A.P. Caomhanach for making available to me the only full set of *An Reiltin* which appears to exist. Translations from the Irish language are by Rory Leahy, Esq. Beechpark, Lucan, Co. Dublin.
4. Fitzpatrick to McNeill, 24 November, 1895. McNeill Papers Ms. 10905 Box 23. "Christian Brothers Grammar File". National Library of Ireland.
5. Caomhanach, A.P. *op. cit.*, p.2.
6. Fitzpatrick to Shortall, 17 April, 1901. S/Section 4/4 O'Connell School Library, North Richmond Street, Dublin.
7. Fitzpatrick to McNeill, 28 January, 1901. McNeill Papers. *op. cit.*
8. Fitzpatrick to McNeill, 8 May, 1901. McNeill Papers. *op. cit.*
9. Anon. "Christian Brothers' Irish Grammar – a Review", *Irish Monthly*, Vol. XXII. No. 12. December, 1901.
10. J.M. "Review *Irish Grammar* by the Christian Brothers", *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, Vol. XI, Fourth Series, January to June, 1902. (Dublin, 1902), p. 381. *Irish People*, 23 November, 1901. p.5.
11. This copy of the *Irish Grammar* is in the Library of the O'Connell Schools.
12. Fitzpatrick to Hyde, 3 May, 1902. S/Section 4/4 O'Connell School Library.
13. Fitzpatrick to Hyde, 12 June, 1902.
14. Minutes of the Publications Committee, Gaelic League, 9 April, 1903. Ms. 9806. National Library of Ireland.
15. Fitzpatrick to McNeill, 10 December, 1905. McNeill Papers. Ms. 10905. Box 23, Christian Brothers Irish Grammar. National Library of Ireland.
16. Caomhanach, A.P. *op. cit.* p.3.
17. *The Irish Nation and Peasant*, 15 October, 1910, p.1. In this obituary Fitzpatrick is called "an extremist". The term was intended as a high compliment.
18. *Eire-Ireland*, 21 November, 1914, p.2.