

## **A Very Brief History of Irish here**

It is recognised that in an increasingly diverse society, immersion education, as practised in Irish language schools here, gives children a broader cultural experience and by doing so promotes understanding and acceptance of different cultures, religions and traditions. The language these children pre-dates Christianity and therefore the Reformation.

Unknown to most, many of the Protestant settlers from Scotland spoke Gaelic, especially Argyll Gaelic which was also identical to the Irish spoken in the north-west of Ireland. Scottish Gaelic speakers settled in many areas of the North. A souvenir booklet (1954) of Loughgall Presbyterian Church in Armagh notes the Scottish origin of the congregation, and continues:

” We glean that the Scotch settlers here still used the Gaelic of their native Scotland, a language spoken also by the Irish in the district. The Rev. Archibald MacClane, who hailed from Argyle, and was a fluent speaker in the native tongue, preached in Loughgall meeting house in Gaelic in 1717. “

## **A TOLERANT AND OPEN SOCIETY**

Irish language schools are playing an important role in promoting a tolerant and open society proud of its native traditions and open to those of others.

Protestants often assume their ancestors came to Ireland as speakers of English from Scotland or England. However, there is evidence that many Protestants were Irish-speaking natives who converted. In the present congregation of Saintfield First Presbyterian Church there are families bearing the old Irish surnames of their district: Hanvey (Ó hAinbheith), Connolly (Ó Conghaile), Hayes (Ó hAodha) Peak (Mac Péice), McVeigh (Mac an Bheatha) etc. It is likely that members of this Presbyterian congregation spoke both Irish and English up to the late 17th or early 18th century. It has been noted that the old Session book of Templepatrick Presbyterian Church, covering the years 1646 to 1744, contains many who bore purely Irish names such as Meive O Conalie, Shan O Hagain, Oyen McGouckin, Rory O Crilie and Patrick O Mory.

## **THE MARKETPLACE IN LISBURN**

Eileen Donnelly, a native of County Derry and a convert to Methodism, used to preach in Irish in the latter half of the eighteenth century in the marketplace in Lisburn. It is likely she was preaching to people who spoke Irish in the rural districts near the town.

Irish survived into the 19th century in a long strip of territory on the north side of the Mourne, from Ballynahinch to Newry. In the 1800s Protestants in Newry talked Irish to the incoming country folk on market days. In the early 1900s the author Seán Mac Maoláin recalled meeting a Protestant baker from Newry who recalled learning Irish from country people when he was young, including the toast ‘Slanty go seel agad agus ban er du veen ugat’. (Sláinte go saol agat agus bean ar do mhian agat / ‘Health and long life and the woman of your choice.’)

A market held in Lisburn two weeks before Christmas, known as the ‘margy more’ was called so after the Irish margadh mór ‘great market’.

## **MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING**

With context of the conflict within Ireland came a greater knowledge of a joint Gaelic heritage, which has been largely ignored by historians, but is opening new doors to mutual understanding and respect between the Protestant and Catholic traditions.

Irish was used as a motto by the Protestant business classes on their buildings as an indigenous alternative to Latin. Some old branches of the Ulster Bank carry the motto *Lamh Dhearg Eireann* (Red Hand of Ireland), including a branch in Bangor and what is now the Merchant Hotel in Belfast. The motto also appears above Saint George's Market and on the lintel of the Ulster Hall. An Irish and Latin motto was inscribed on the foundation stone of the Royal Victoria Hospital (1815).

### **VISITING ENGLISH MONARCH**

It appears that the greeting *Céad Míle Fáilte* ('A hundred thousand welcomes') was popular among Protestants in the 19th century. Queen Victoria noted that crowds shouted the phrase when they greeted her in Belfast in 1849.

A banned Orange Procession on 12 July 1867 travelled from Bangor to Newtownards, according to the Belfast News Letter, 'without interruption save the *céad míle fáiltes* of hosts of sympathisers'.

### **ULSTER UNIONIST CONVENTION OF 1892**

At the Ulster Unionist Convention of 1892 in Botanic Gardens 20,000 delegates were greeted by the banner 'ERIN-GO-BRAGH' (Ireland for Ever) which appeared on the pavilion, surmounted by a harp and shamrocks. This would have been of little surprise, since those attending would have considered themselves to be the 'Queen's Irishmen' .

### **HENRY COOKE / 'THE BLACK MAN'**

Henry Cooke, the stalwart of orthodox Presbyterianism who was born in Grillagh, outside Maghera in South Derry, was not averse to using Irish himself. During an address to the Assembly of the Church of Scotland, he said this:

And trust you may be spared to see the day, when on visiting the Synod of Ulster, you may adopt the tongue of your native hills in addressing us, and not be necessitated to enquire of any of us, 'An labhrann tú Gaeilge?'... and the '*céad míle fáilte romhat*' with which Ireland will meet you, will flow as warm from her heart as from the spirits of your Highland clansmen.

Understanding of our Gaelic heritage may bring us to a place where people from the two main traditions within Irish society can explore and celebrate a shared heritage that threatens no one's beliefs, religious or political views.