Gaeilge - the language and the state

The Celtic peoples of Europe are presently represented by the population of six separate nations. These are Alba (Scotland), Breizh (Brittany), Cymru (Wales), Eire (Ireland), Kernow (Cornwall) and Mannin (Isle of Man). These six have a total combined population of about 17 million. Of these, a little over 2.5 million can speak a Celtic language, with approximately another 1.25 million speakers living outside the home nations.
Each of the nations has its own separate language, all of which are currently living languages in the sense that there is in each case a group who can speak it fluently. Of these the least known and used is Cornish (c.200 fluent speakers). I have listed each nation and its respective language below:

Nation	**Language**
Alba	Gaedhlig (Scots)
Breizh	Breizoneg (Breton)
Cymru	Cymraeg (Welsh)
Eire	Gaeilge (Irish)
Kernow	Kernewek (Cornish)
Mannin	Ghaelg (Manx)

In addition, there are the two existing Celtic Colonies in Nova Scotia, Canada (Scots) and Y Wladfa, Patagonia, Argentina (Welsh). The Nations themselves are divided into two groups of three, according to the type of Celtic tongue used - Gaelic and Britonnic. These are described below.

Gaelic

Relating to Eire, Alba, Mannin & Nova Scotia, their people and (Celtic) languages. Often referred to as Q-Celtic, in contrast to the P-Celtic Britonnic nations. This refers to the shift from Celtic Q to P found in Gaulish (now dead), Welsh, Cornish and Breton, which did not occur in the Gaelic languages:

Q-Celtic (Gaeilge): Ceann Ceathair
P-Celtic (Cymraeg): Pen Pedwar
Germanic (English): Head Four

Eire/ Ireland

The whole island of Ireland - all 32 counties. The 26 county state is officially known as the Republic of Ireland, otherwise as the Irish Republic, the other six counties officially

as Northern Ireland, or the Six Counties. Northern Ireland is not synonymous with Ulster, of which province it makes up six of the nine counties.

Population

Irish Republic - 3,540,643.
Northern Ireland - 1,502,385.
Total - 5,043,028.

No. claiming ability in Irish -

Irish Republic - 1,042,701 (29.45% of population).
Northern Ireland -142,003 (9.5% of population).
Total - 1,184,704 (23.5% of population).

Political -

The Republic of Ireland is the only wholly politically independent Celtic state. Northern Ireland is a part of the UK state, and currently has no self-government.

Language -

In the Irish Republic, Gaeilge is the joint official language of the state with English, and constitutionally the first language of the state. Obligatory in schools at primary and secondary level. Required for entry to the National University of Ireland and all state posts. The number of Irish-language schools is increasing in the Republic. No official status for Irish in Northern Ireland, but there are a few Irish-medium schools.

Alba/ Scotland

Scotland, as defined within the current UK state, including the Northern and Western Isles.

Population - 5,136,500
No. claiming ability in Scots - 65,978 (1.4% of population).

Political -

A constituent nation of the United Kingdom state since the Act of Union 1707. It has no self-government, but has retained its own legal and educational systems.

Language -

No official status. The little TV and radio broadcasting tends to be off peak, though opinion polls support its inclusion throughout the schedules.

Mannin/ Isle of Man

The self-governing Crown Dependency of the Isle of Man. Not a part of the UK state, nor of the EC. The nation, Mannin should not be confused with the island itself, Ellan Vannin when using the Manx names, though the English names - Man and Isle of Man are used as synonyms regularly.

Population - 65,000.
No. claiming ability in Manx - 643 (1% of population) full skill, 497 read only, 343 read & write only.
Total - 1,483 (2.3% of population).

Figures are out date and are probably now at least double these figures.

Political -

Confirmed as a Crown Dependency with full fiscal autonomy in 1959, separate from the UK, though subject to its authority in the areas of foreign affairs and defense. The national parliament - Tynwald - originally formed in the early 10th century AD and reconstituted at the recognition of home rule by Westminster in 1866.

Language -

Officially supported by parliament in theory at least, no language legislation passed until 1992 when the post of Manx Language Officer created to introduce Manx as an optional school subject. The Broadcasting Bill 1993 contained a clause to ensure the use of Manx on Manx Radio, the national radio station.

Nova Scotia

The province of Canada called Nova Scotia, formerly an separate colony within the English Empire.

Population - ??? offers ???
No. claiming ability in Scots - c.1400 (1984).

Political -

Province of the Canadian state since 1867, when it joined the Canadian Federation.

Language -

In 1921 the Nova Scotia Department of Education allowed Gaedhlig to be taught in school as an optional subject. No legal status now, and not available as a school subject.

Britonnic

Relating to Cymru, Breizh & Kernow, their people and languages. These P-Celtic languages are distinguished from the Gaelic Q-Celtic (See Gaelic above).

Cymru/ Wales

The principality of Wales as currently defined within the UK state.

> **Population - 2,807,200.**
> **No. claiming ability in Welsh - 508,100 (18.7% of population).**

Political -

Technically still annexed to England, the nation has no separate identity, except through the Welsh Office. No self-government or separate legal system, though some legislation is passed for Wales only.

Language -

Joint official language with English, though not fully equal in status. Welsh language schooling available from preschool to primary degree level. Road signs all in Welsh and English, and all official documents and notices bilingual.

Breizh/ Brittany

The four departements which currently make up the French region of Bretagne, plus the `stolen' departement of Loire Atlantique, removed from Breizh by the French state authorities for "administrative reasons". These five made up the old independent state of Breizh.

> **Population - 2,796,000 (excluding Loire Atlantique). Total c. 3,500,000.**
> **No. claiming ability in Breton - c. 700,000 - 800,000 (c. 20% of population) The region of Bretagne was estimated at 689,000 skilled, 268,000 as first language, 1992 .**

Political -

Four fifths constitute the region of the French state called Bretagne. No self-government, no status for the five departements as a whole.

Language -

None. Minimal state support for the teaching of the language at school level. Local councils able to install bilingual road signs, French only on motorways.

Kernow/Cornwall

The Duchy of Cornwall, currently named the county or shire of Cornwall within the UK state, and officially treated as a part of England.

> **Population - c. 439,000.**
> **No. claiming ability in Cornish - c. 500 fluent users (0.1% of population). Several thousand with some knowledge.**

Political -

Technically separate from England as the Duchy of Cornwall, was first called a shire of England in 1888, though this has been shown to be unconstitutional. Has its own parliament - the Stannaries - confirmed through royal charters and given the right to veto over legislation relating to Cornwall in 1508. This was reaffirmed in 1753, the last date it sat until 1974.

Language -

None. Funding received from the Cornwall County Council Education Department and the European Commission for Lesser Spoken Languages only. Not available for study within the state schooling system.

Y Wladfa

A Welsh colony in Patagonia, settled in 1865, and annexed to Argentina in 1869. Currently has a Welsh-descended population of 80,000.

> **Population - c80,000 of Welsh descent.**
> **No. claiming ability in Welsh - c.8,500 with some ability, all bilingual with Spanish.**

Political -

No more than a part of the Argentinean state, it has no official status within the Argentinean state, nor any degree of self-rule.

Language -

No official status. No known funding, bilingual schooling exists in conjunction with Spanish. No official state acknowledgement.

Celtic Diaspora / Celtic Exiles

Any nationals of the Six Nations, or their descendants living outside The Six Nations. This includes Nova Scotia and Y Wladfa. There is also a small Breton language pocket on the island of Laval near Montreal, 35,000+ Welsh speakers and 30,000+ Irish speakers in London, 6,000 Scots speakers in Ontario, another 3,000 in each of Alberta and British Columbia, 2,500 each in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Manitoba also has 90,000 Irish speakers.
It also includes all you mailers in California, Washington etc, and me, my wife and two children stuck in the heart of London.

Roman, Norse & Norman Influences

Aside from ogam and other memorial stones, Irish as a written language, that is in the form of texts, first appears under the hands of Christian monks. Despite this religious basis for literacy, Irish is now considered to have the most extensive early western European vernacular literature, on a parallel with the earlier Roman and Greek. No invasion of Ireland by Roman armies ever occurred, though, and the language was hardly affected. Latin - mainly in the form of religious and related terms which were added to the vocabulary only to meet the needs of Christianity.
Viking settlements in Ireland from 825ce had a more marked effect, not just because of words added to the language, but because they formed non-Irish speaking communities in what is now north County Dublin (recently re-named Co. Fingall, the old name of the area - Fionn Gall = Fair Foreigner, or Norseman) and in the south east corner of County Wexford. These areas of linguistic weakness in the Irish speaking community that were to have an impact after the `Gallghaoidhil' (Irish-Norse) were assimilated into the native community as they never seem to have fully reverted to monoglot Irish speaking regions.
Norman settlers, themselves originally Norse settlers in western France, first entered Ireland at the invitation of Diarmaid Mac Murchadha, lord of Ui/ Chennselaigh in Leinster, who wanted their support in his dispute with the High King. These were soon followed by King Henry II who quickly got the willing submission of many Irish lords. The resulting expansion of towns, and creation of new ones, with burghers, retainers and religious orders from England arriving and expanded trade compounded the linguistic diversity of the towns of the east coast, initially with Norman French, though this was quickly replaced by English. From this point onwards English held its position as the language of court, law and social advancement in the English ruled areas of the country. Those who settled in the rural areas lost their English more rapidly and were largely assimilated into the native way of life by the time of the Tudors.
Those living in the towns suffered death and economic decline during the 14th and 15th centuries as a result of the Black death epidemics, and Irish began even there to become the language of everyday life. English still held first place as the language of law and administration, however.
Attempts to stem the regrowth of Irish in the English `Pale' were several, the main being the Statutes of Kilkenny in 1366 "many English of the said land, forsaking the English language, fashion, mode of riding, laws and usages, live and govern themselves according to the manners, fashion and language of the Irish enemies". That this and other laws prohibiting the use of Irish in courts and corporate boroughs existed at all shows up the main weakness of these communities - a lack of numbers which made intermarrying with the native Irish inevitable.
Ulster showed the least English influence due to links between the Gaelic speakers of Ulster and Scotland who cooperated against English attempted incursions in both lands. This applied even after the lowlands of Scotland became heavily anglicised,

support coming instead from the Western Isles, which were nearest to the Irish coast.

Tudor, Stuart, Cromwellian and Williamite influences & Penal Laws

De-Gaelicisation was from the start a part of the process designed by the Tudors to create a centralised state. Henry VIII was particularly keen on this aspect of assimilation into the English world and it remained a part of state policy for several hundreds of years. This was emphasised less by his successors, though - Elizabeth I even had a primer made so she could get a grasp on the language of her Irish subjects. The principles of the reformation, too, advocated the use of the vernacular for religious teaching, and ministers found themselves dealing with the contradiction of trying to pass on the word of God through Irish while not actually promoting it right through to the 18th century. James I was not so keen on the use of Irish as Elizabeth and, though permitting it for religious purposes, insisted on English for the law and administration.
The reformation gave us the first printed Irish texts, starting in 1571 with a Protestant catechism. Printing increased through the 17th century, the language slowly becoming a symbol of resistance to the pressures of the new ascendancy for the old Gaelic and Old English nobles. The patrons of this work soon lost their power to support Irish works as the military, legal and economic measures taken during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries led to widespread land confiscation's and the imposition of primarily English speaking settlers across Leinster and Ulster particularly.
These events - the Tudor and Stuart supressions and settlements of 1534-1610, the Cromwellian settlement of 1654 and the Williamite campaigns of 1689-91, topped by the Penal Laws first introduced in the 1690s had the cumulative effect of removing the Irish speaking aristocracy, learned classes and institutions.
The Ulster plantation of 1609 came on top of this. With the union of crowns of England and Scotland there was now little or no Scottish support for this area of Gaelic strength. The settlers were mainly from southern Scotland, the most heavily anglicised parts, who - much more than their English counterparts (who came from warmer and dryer lands) - saw Ulster as a place worth settling in. This settlement was concentrated on the best lands, especially those near fortified towns and ports, and most especially those areas with easy access to the east coast and trade with England and Scotland. In this we have both the source of the downfall of Irish as the common language in Ulster (Donegal and Derry to the west being the obvious exceptions) and the establishment of a Scottish, anglicised, loyal, Presbyterian population concentrated on the eastern half of the province.
Large scale movements of the Gaelic population unsettled all aspects of the culture including the language. English was needed to retain or regain lost or threatened ancestral lands. English was becoming the unquestioned language of wealth and power, but the `old tongue' still was seen as a representation of the glory of the old order in Ireland. The first half of the 18th century saw the last main bastions of Catholic landownership destroyed systematically through Protestant government and legislation. The general population, too, felt the effects of the Penal Laws, losing their political and social rights and status, their religion outlawed, their right to property ownership denied, their clergy hounded from the island.
The main interest of the new Protestant ascendancy was the consolidation of their position of power, not the conversion of the masses - their religion was one of the prime elements in defining their position as an elite, a situation built into the Penal

Laws. There was no real advantage to be gained from the conversion of the common masses, and much status to be lost.
The beginning of the 18th century saw only 14% of the land in Catholic hands. This fell to just 5% by the end of the century. The only way around this for Catholics was either to adopt Protestantism or resort to the towns in an attempt to `make it good' as a part of the commercial middle classes. Adoption of Protestantism included acceptance into the Protestant world, and this meant adopting more English manners, attitudes, and of course the language of social advancement - English. Equally, urban middle class Catholics found that good English was an essential for success in trade and encouraged their children to speak the language, increasingly speaking no other language at home in an attempt to improve these language skills.
The strength if Irish outside the towns was such that the descendants of the Cromwellian settlements were commonly monoglot Irish in 1700. The spread of English from the towns was slow up to this point but growing. It is unlikely that there was any significant move to English in native homes before 1750. By 1800, though, the gentry countrywide were fully anglicised in their first language preferences.
Schooling in Ireland at the time was done mainly through English, the `hedge schools' being the exceptions. The language taught was heavily accented - the famous Irish `brogue', heavily influenced by Irish grammar and idiom. Many who could afford it sent their children to school in England to bypass this problem and the stigma attached to it. Even the hedge schools gave rudimentary English language lessons to the poor. Success had not just a language, but an accent.
The long peace of the Georgian era, a solid and secure Protestant rule, and calls from Catholics for relaxations of the Penal system (so they would be free to express their loyalty as equals to their Established Church and Dissenter brethren) led to the gradual dismantlement of much of the anti-Catholic legislation from 1782 onwards. The English language was by then firmly secured as the language of law, commerce, `society' and politics, even anti-English politics. One of the old `standards' of the history of the Irish language was that O'Connell and the Catholic Church killed the language, their efforts given a boost by the Great Hunger.
This simplistic finger-pointing was misdirected. O'Connell and other major protest figures in Ireland at the end of the 1700s and early 1800s were responding to a general acceptance of English, not creating it. Their messages were addressed to those they opposed as much as to those they defended, and given through the language they themselves used. They dealt with the law and politics, of which the language was English, and addressed people who were either primarily English speaking or saw (as most now did) English as the `right' language for this sort of thing. The result was to exacerbate the problem already begun during the preceding decades.

The Nineteenth Century

By the end of the eighteenth century almost all rural property in Ireland was in the hands of a minority - the Protestant landed gentry, or Ascendancy. These were in the main the descendants of the planters of the previous century, with some descendants of Old Irish (Gaelic) and Old English (Norman) families who had converted to Protestantism in order to retain their properties in response to Cromwellian-era confiscations and the Penal Law system. Their world was almost wholly Anglo-centric and monoglot English speaking, their position of dominance seemingly set in stone. By contrast, the relatively huge Catholic rural population was predominantly landless, but

still largely Gaelic in culture and language.
In terms of the fate of Irish there are a number of points to note about this period - the use of English as the language of politics among the United Irishmen and notable national figures such as the Liberator, Daniel O'Connell; the publishing of `Reliques of Irish Poetry' by Charlotte Brookes in 1789; the start of a strong rise in the population of Ireland; the formation of the United Irishmen, an armed republican nationalist organisation; agitation for agrarian reform; and the gradual restoration of rights to the Catholic majority. These became the basis of almost all events of significance during the nineteenth century.

The Irish Antiquarians

During the 1780s and 1790s some of the educated middle classes in the towns and gentry in the countryside, influenced by the Romantic movement and antiquarianism began to take an interest in the Irish language. This interest centred on old manuscripts - the written poetry, prose and history of Ireland's past, and the antiquities of the Irish countryside. This was very definitely not a movement for language revival - the spoken language was seen mainly as a source of oral material and as a reference for translators. The transcribing and translation of Ireland's most ancient heritage began in the north east, as did the collection of songs and other elements of the oral tradition. The interest spread along the northern half of the east coast, from Belfast, through Dundalk to Dublin. Belfast was the centre of the movement, it was here that `Bolg an tSolair', the first periodical written in Irish, was published from 1795, Belfast Academy started providing classes in Irish at this time, and it was here that Charlotte Brooke's `Reliques of Irish Poetry' was published. This significant work was the first Irish language secular literary anthology published.
A number of organisations with antiquarian and literary interests appear during the following half century - The Gaelic Society in 1807, The Iberno-Celtic Society in 1818, The Irish Archaeological & Celtic Society in 1840 and, in 1853 probably the most famous of these, The Ossianic Society.
These organisations and the interest in things Gaelic among the gentry and urban middle classes they provided for demonstrates a real interest developing in Irish culture and language which started to give Irish Studies, and the language and culture themselves, the beginnings of respectability again. Unfortunately, this interest and opinion of the language did not easily filter down to the mass of the population who were at this time losing the language at a frightening rate.
The reasons for this wholesale abandonment of Irish are several and complex, and the scarcity of reliable studies and census data during this period make analysis even more difficult. I will therefore explore the possibilities later, once a fuller picture of nineteenth century Ireland has been drawn.

The language revival movement 1830 - 1893

Though the United Irishmen during the late 1700s were strongly nationalistic few saw the Irish language as an important part of their Irishness. Their propaganda was written in English, their meetings held in English. In parallel to this, and throughout his career, Daniel O'Connell, the great Liberator of the Catholic people of Ireland, made (so far as

I can determine) exclusive use of English in his writings, his political and legal work and even his speeches at the mass meetings of the Repeal Movement.
These two examples demonstrate how strong the public perception of English as the language of the law, of politics, of achievement now was among the great mass of the population. This sense of greater utility both for the purposes of communication and, more importantly in the eyes of those looking to the comfortable middle classes of the cities, for success played a large part in tipping the balance of languages in Ireland.
Many reasons have been put forward for the sudden drop in Irish language use during the nineteenth century; what matters for now is that the drop occurred. That there were people in the Celtic societies who were paying attention to the language was a blessing, even if their interest was the literature of Ireland rather than the preservation of her language, because this new popularity laid the basis for the beginnings of the Irish language revival movement. In 1828 Robert McAdam began a series of public efforts to promote the revival of the language. This led, in 1830 to the founding of Cuideachd Ghaedhilge Uladh (the Ulster Gaelic Society) the aim of which was to attempt to reverse the decline in Irish usage in daily life. This gigantic task was made more difficult with the introduction of the national schools system the following year which provided compulsory primary education. This may not seem to be a problem initially, but one of the main principles of the system was that the Irish language be banned totally within schools, and its use be punished.
On top of this, a dispute which had been brewing for some years became a major controversy in the 1840s. It centred on the teaching of the Bible in Irish in Meath and across the north east of Ireland. The problem was that the organisation operating the scheme was Protestant, but the people actually delivering the lessons were predominantly Catholic as there were not enough Protestants fluent in Irish available for the work. Equally, the Catholics needed the work. The ensuing controversy, followed in detail in the newspapers, resulted in the fragmentation of the revivalists in the north east and the near death of the Irish language movements in the area. By 1849 Belfast Academy had ceased to provide Irish language classes. The Irish speakers of eastern Ulster, an important area of Irish usage outside the Atlantic counties, were again unprotected. Across the country other groups were forming throughout the middle years of the century. In the south east Philip Barron set up a college teaching all subjects through Irish in 1835. Unfortunately this adventurous move came to an end within just six months. Others were more successful, however. In Tipperary, for example, Richard D'Altan founded `An Fi/or E/ireannach' (The True Irishman) in 1862. This Irish language periodical greatly aided in spreading the language revival movement countrywide. More significantly in some ways Archbishop MacHale of Tuam, Co. Galway began publishing popular works in Irish in an area which still held a significant Irish speaking population at the northern edge of the Galway Gaeltacht (Irish speaking area). He was also vocal in discouraging the use of schools for the anglicisation of the Irish speaking children of the area.
Archbishop MacHale was also a patron of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, which was founded in 1876. This important countrywide group sought to tackle the problems of language revival head on. Their first meeting laid out a series of issues seen as key to successfully reversing the rapid decrease in Irish usage in everyday life. They are interesting not just for their ambitiousness, but for the relevance many of them have to the language issue today:
- Defining the best method for removing the difficulties of studying Irish in schools and universities
- How best to use the available facilities to promote the teaching of Irish in schools and universities

- Establishing the best means for maximising the study of Irish in Irish speaking areas, and countrywide
- Defining the most effective method of teaching Irish to bilingual students
- Establishing the best means to aid teachers in obtaining proper qualifications to teach Irish
- Establishing a methodology whereby a more uniform orthography could be created
With the exception of the last two, all these are questions asked even today.

Language loss in the later Nineteenth Century

As the century passed through its third quarter the degree to which Irish was being abandoned by the general populace became more and more apparent, particularly with census figures from 1851 onwards showing a rapid fall in those claiming an ability in the language. The age distribution of users made these figures even more frightening - only a small percentage of children were returned as speakers of Irish and the highest percentages of users in the older age groups. This indicated that the older generations, at least since the start of the century, had been passing the language onto their children less and less.
Though at the end of the 1700s it is estimated that between one half and three quarters of the population used Irish, extrapolation of census figures show that less than half of the children at the time were being taught Irish by their parents. By 1851, the first year in which a question on Irish language use was included in the census, less than 13% of children under ten years of age were speaking Irish.Though the 1881 figures demonstrate that this was an underestimation, even extrapolation from these inaccurate figures does not match the rapidity of language loss during the latter part of the century. By 1891 only 30,785 of those under ten were Irish speakers, less than 3.5% of this age group. This was, at least, a fourteen fold drop in Irish language usage in just 100 years.

The Gaelic Union and The Gaelic League

The accelerating decline in usage led many with previously academic interests in Irish to merge with the reformers, and an increasing number to form more radical revivalist positions. In 1878 the Gaelic Union was formed, taking an aggressive approach to protecting the language. They promoted the use of Irish in everyday life and offered classes in the language. Their journal, `Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge', providing both a means for the redevelopment of Irish as an acceptable medium for literary works and a forum for the promotion of language revival philosophies, became a major influence for a whole generation of revivalists and learners alike.
It was not, however, the Gaelic Union, but the Gaelic League which is credited with saving the language from almost certain extinction during the early decades of the twentieth century. Founded in 1893 by, among others, Douglas Hyde, Eoin MacNeill and Eugene O Growney the League took up the objectives of the Gaelic Union and pursued them with great vigour. By establishing a nationwide network of language classes, publishing several publications and hounding the National Education Board incessantly they were able to turn around the common perception of Irish as a language with no future and no utility. Most particularly, they encouraged ordinary

people to take up the study of the language their parents had kept from them and, riding on the widespread disaffection for political nationalism following from the splits and disagreements among constitutional nationalists at Westminster, created an image of the language as a symbol of national identity.
I will not explore the implications of this approach here as they are relevant more to the first three decades of this century - the formation of Sinn Fe/in, the 1916 Rising, the War of Independence, creation of the Irish Free State and the Civil War. Instead, I will turn to the National School System and its effect on the national language.

Irish language study within the state educational system 1831 - 1900

In 1831 the National School System was established, providing free primary education to Irish children. As at this time the common view was that, in terms of utility, English was far superior to Irish, a not unreasonable assumption on the part of the authorities in Dublin Castle within a nation where all significant commerce, all legal and political matters and certainly the lives of the more affluent people were carried on exclusively through the English language. In addition, the generally poor grasp of English among the population was perceived to be a result of the `excessive' use of Irish. By extension, Irish was see as a hindrance to integration into the predominantly English speaking United Kingdom and to personal advancement.
English was imposed on the new school system and through it on the children of Ireland, many of whom were more used to Irish, and a significant minority of whom were monoglot Irish speakers. Irish was banned in school, and its use punished with beatings and humiliation. There can be no doubt that this approach, however one may place it in the hierarchy of causes for language decline, was a significant force in promoting that decline even in strongly Irish speaking areas.
The Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language was first in campaigning for the inclusion of Irish as a subject in the school curriculum. Backed by many prominent people they succeeded, to an extent. Irish was allowed as a primary school language subject from 1879 on a par with Latin and Greek, both, significantly, dead languages, offered as an optional subject to be taught only outside normal school hours and for an extra fee. In addition, and importantly, study would not count towards any qualifications. They also succeeded in the previous year in having it included in the secondary school system.
Most families who still spoke Irish at home were located in areas where the extra money to pay for the classes was hard - more often impossible - to come by. The classes, and similar ones introduced into the (exclusively fee-paying) secondary schools the following year made little impact on the existing Irish speaking population, though they did offer the opportunity to learn the language to those, mainly in the eastern half of the island, who came into contact with the language but rarely if at all. In addition the official presentation of Irish as a subject for study added to its slowly re-emerging respectability.
It is worth bearing in mind, though, that this achievement was the result of the work of primarily middle class enthusiasts who saw the language as a symbol of national ethnicity and ran contrary to the still prevailing view among the majority of Irish parents of Irish as an embarrassment and a hindrance to their children's progress.
It was not until 1900 that Irish was allowed as a subject for study within normal school hours, and another four years before the language had gained sufficient support and respect to be allowed as the medium for teaching anywhere in the country. As this falls

outside the scope of this present post, I will therefore now leave off here and examine instead some other relevant events of this period.

The following is a brief summary of some information I hold on the current position of minority languages. I hope that it will stir in you some sense of the urgency that surrounds the fate of the Irish, and all Celtic languages.

In Europe at present there are some 50 million speakers of minority languages. These people speak at least one of Europe's 50 minority languages, including Irish, Welsh, Cornish, Basque, Sorb, Frisian, Manx, Piedmontese. These have been, since 1983, the concern of the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages (EBLUL).

The Bureau, with funding from the EC, hopes to be able to protect these languages, though in the long term growth, not preservation, is the ideal.

Are attitudes to minority languages changing in Europe? Well, yes. Official support for the EBLUL has been slow in coming in some cases (France and the UK particularly), but the Bureau's work, along with a raised sense of the value of language in defining a people's uniqueness within an ever more uniform Europe, has had its effects already. Cornish language support comes almost purely from the Bureau. In Wales, always a stronghold (relatively) of Celtic language, "People begin to think that the use of Welsh helps their career prospects," [Dafydd Morgan Lewis, administrator, Welsh Language Society]. Almost a third of young people in Wales now speak Welsh.

Spain is a classic example of how minority languages can live alongside the official state tongue. Languages such as Basque and Catalan, once banned and persecuted under Francisco Franco, are widely used in public administration, schools and the media. The Barcelona Olympics (in the Catalan capital) in 1992 had Catalan as one of its official languages.

The above reports all sound promising, but the real question is whether they are actually enough to prevent some, or many, of Europe's lesser-used languages from ossifying, or dying out totally during the next century. The following words paint a bleaker picture, worldwide, and Europe's languages are not immune.

It is estimated that, of the 6,000 languages currently in use worldwide, one half - three thousand languages - will be dead within the next 100 years. Our children will live to see this happen. Of the remaining 3,000 a further two thousand will be threatened during the century after that.

So, what is causing all this damage? Money and power. Sounds a bit cliched, but it is true. Economic and political pressures have been and will continue to shape the way minority language users view the UTILITY of their native tongues. It is sad that the least attractive feature of language - communication - and not poetry, stories, cultural symbols etc etc are the driving forces behind the changing shape of the world's linguistic base.

In many ways, the attraction of a better standard of life (measured, remember, in western terms) in exchange for learning to trade in Spanish or English, to deal with officials through Hindi or Russian seems like a fair trade at the time. The Irish experience tells a different tale. A population that saw the use of English, and the adoption of foreign social manners as the only way to better their position encouraged their children to learn and speak English. The authorities played their part too. the result was a population increasingly dependent on English for everyday matters, and the Irish language seen more and more as the tool only of those who were still 'stuck in the gutter'. We know the result today of this approach. Hundreds of languages are now facing the same dilemma - and with far smaller numbers of speakers to fall back on.

To finish, I would like to draw attention to the primary means both of killing and rejuvenating the world's lesser spoken languages: TV, or more generally, the media.

The fine and upstanding media mogul, Mr. Rupert Murdoch, giving the 11th annual John Boynthon lecture in Melbourne two years ago this Sunday had this to say on the power of mass media to shape the fate of imperiled languages across the world: "Indian leaders have long been desperately worried about disunity in their vast, teeming, multilingual country. There has been an effort ever since independence to promote Hindi as the lingua franca, what in India is called the "link language". But the effort has failed for a number of reasons.

Until now. With the coming of the electronic mass media, Hindi is finally spreading because everyone wants to watch the best television programming. And I suspect we will see this story repeated throughout the developing world.

And he thought this was really a great idea...until there are only 10,000 Gujerati speakers, under 100,000 speaking Punjabi...and then what?

Have a think over this weekend about this. And, with Samhain approaching and its sanitised version telling us about the souls of the dead walking the earth for a night, ask yourself if we really want to take the chance that Irish, or Breton or Manx could be dead souls for your grandchildren to read about in books, and no more.

Stiofan MacAmhalghaidh

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