

NO POOR MOUTHING HERE: TEACHING AND LEARNING IRISH BY MEANS OF A NOVEL

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Teaching and learning a less-commonly taught language can be fraught with problems of finding a venue, gathering enough interested people, and surmounting obstacles posed by various levels of interest or ability. A method that has been tried by one group is to read a novel written in the Irish language, taking a close look at items such as grammar or usage only when necessary to decipher the author's meaning, but mostly just trying to have a good time while studying the language. In this article, three members of this group, two of whom have also taught the language in formal classes, discuss the sessions as well as the strategy behind them.

Brendan M. Kane

This is a brief report on Irish language instruction currently available in Princeton, N.J. Classes for beginners and intermediate students have been provided through the Princeton Adult School (PAS)—a community-based adult education program not affiliated with the university. More advanced students can take part in an Irish reading group that meets weekly at Princeton University. Although the group meets in facilities provided by the university, there is no formal affiliation between the two, and participation in the meetings is open to the wider community. We meet once a week for two hours during the academic year. Currently the group is reading Myles na gCopaleen's (Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien) *An Béal Bocht*, which we hope to finish by the end of the fall semester, 2001. Although there is no college- or university-based instruction in Irish in the Princeton area, it is hoped that through this combination of community resources and informal organization the means exist to provide for all levels of instruction in the language. Perhaps this example may be of some interest to

those involved in the teaching of Irish but who live in areas not served by a third-level institution.

Since we are rather fortunate in Princeton to have the PAS classes, I will instead focus here on the reading group as an example of how, in an area where limited formal means of training are available, one can offer Irish-language instruction to students whose levels of knowledge run from intermediate to near-literacy. The group came together through the work of Paul Muldoon, poet and Princeton professor and myself. I came to Princeton—where I am currently a Ph.D. candidate in the history department—fresh off completing an M.Phil. in Irish Studies at NUI Galway. I was eager both to teach Irish and, more selfishly, to become involved with other Gaeilgeoirí in an effort to stave off any deterioration of my new-found competency in the language. While the university offers little in the way of courses or activities relating to Irish studies or culture—thus rendering it difficult to gauge the level of interest/competency in Irish within the university community—Mr. Muldoon and I were convinced that between town and gown we would find sufficient interest to justify organizing such a project. A few fliers here, an advertisement there, and the odd radio plug generated a surprisingly large initial meeting, about a dozen people.

The levels went from complete beginner to near-native fluency. This was purely an organizational meeting and the immediate concern was how to cater to the varying levels of proficiency. After some ill-starred attempts to work collectively on songs and poems, it was decided that a group such as this would benefit most by working for some time on one text—a novel. This decision arose for a number of reasons. First and foremost was the continuity provided from week to week. During the first meetings of this group one of us would arrange to provide copies of poems or songs for translation. Given that few people lived in the immediate vicinity of the university, it proved difficult to pre-distribute texts. Thus people would come to the meeting and face the unpleasant task of sight-translating what were at times rather daunting texts. Consequently we determined that the best approach was to take the surprise out of our weekly sessions and work on one long text that was readily available for purchase. Moreover

working on a novel somewhat solved the question of how to accommodate different levels of proficiency: those with relative fluency could try their hands at translating on the fly, while less advanced students could spend as much time as they wished preparing between sessions. Finishing a novel also provides a sense of accomplishment and psychological boost not attainable through reading poetry, or even short stories, and thus offered a good organizing goal to the group. Along similar lines, we believed that reading an important and well-known piece of twentieth-century literature would also appeal to those who may have heard much about Myles, perhaps had even read him in translation, and yet had never had the confidence to tackle his work in the original.

This method has worked relatively well. During our sessions we simply take turns reading aloud and translating. I have been particularly pleased at the way in which the structure has accommodated members with varying levels of knowledge. As hoped, those for whom the text is rather difficult have used the time between sessions to have a go at the text themselves, dictionaries and grammars at the ready. Come meeting time, they are able to try out their translations, ask questions about grammar, etc. And for those who can read fairly proficiently, by not studying the material prior to the meeting they have the opportunity to test their reading comprehension of unseen texts. Moreover, the novel has provided exactly the sort of continuity for which I had hoped. I am well aware that this is only a pastime for most and that on account of work schedules, family demands and so on people are not always able to make the weekly meetings. Therefore, I send out a general e-mail detailing where we stopped and any questions/puzzlers discussed. That way those who may have been absent can still keep current with whatever progress has been made and jump right back into the mix come the next week.

September 2001 will mark the second year of the Princeton Irish reading group. We are confident that the model is in place through which an interested learner could advance from no knowledge whatsoever to reading literacy in a town that offers no formal third-level instruction in Irish. And while I hope to see just that sort of progression in the future, I will be satisfied in the

meantime if our experiences may be of some value to others facing the difficult task of trying to turn initial interest in Irish into long-term study and enjoyment.

Donald McNamara

The choice of *An Béal Bocht* was a felicitous one for me, because I was concluding my Ph.D. dissertation, which included a study of that book as a part of O'Nolan's oeuvre. I confined my dissertation to the English-language version of the book, *The Poor Mouth*, not only because language was not the primary focus of my research but also because the Irish-language version is quite difficult for those who are not fluent Irish speakers.

The knowledge that I acquired during my research has enriched my own interpretation of *An Béal Bocht*, and I hope I have been able to enhance the reading for the others by sharing that information. For certain passages that were difficult to understand (some of which even gave Brendan a great deal of trouble), knowing O'Nolan's purpose seemed helpful in making sense of the text. For example, O'Nolan intended *An Béal Bocht* as a blistering satire, not of native Irish speakers but of those language and culture enthusiasts who valorized poverty as an ideal state and who used Irish during weekend trips to the Gaeltacht but not during their day-to-day business. O'Nolan was angered because, while such enthusiasts expressed the most profound admiration for the Irish language, they had only a rudimentary knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar and, much worse, had no *feeling* for the language. They saw Irish as a means of holding on to times past; O'Nolan envisioned Irish as part of an exciting future. In all of his writing, he makes free use of jokes, puns, and allusions to virtually any topic, ancient or modern. Because of his desire to confine his readership to a select audience, O'Nolan refused either to write an English-language version of *An Béal Bocht* or to authorize anyone else to do so (*The Poor Mouth* was written only after his death in 1966). He purposely tried to keep the book inaccessible to any but the most proficient speakers, and, speaking for myself, I can say he succeeded quite well. I have outlined my struggles as Irish-language teacher and learner in the "Teaching Forum" of the 2000 issue of the *Journal of Celtic*

Language Learning, and I can only hope that, now that my doctoral quest has concluded, I can devote more time to learning the language. In this, then, I am optimistic that gaining a better grasp of the language will help me deal more effectively with *An Béal Bocht*, the study of which will in turn improve my proficiency in *an Ghaeilge*. All of this is aimed at enhancing my Irish-language ability both for my own edification and to make me a better teacher. That is the plan, anyway.

Ken McIndoe

I was certainly quite nervous about joining the Irish reading group at Princeton. My knowledge of the language was a shaky acquaintance with about seven chapters of *Teach Yourself Irish* and Part I of *Buntús Cainte* from attending classes at the Princeton Adult School. I did have a keen interest in learning more, fueled by several visits to Ireland, where I had heard this mysterious language spoken in Connemara. So with some exterior bravado I joined the group. Thank goodness for the English-language version of the chosen book to help me through the hard parts, as well as for the kindly assistance from the other members in the group. Each week's preparation took several hours but after a while it became somewhat easier—though I cannot say as much for my reading ability, which needs more practice.

The experience of learning in this manner has been wonderful, the pressure was not as great as I feared, and the story line kept my interest. I am looking forward to the group continuing to get together.

Book Review

Gruffudd, Heini. 2000. *Cymraeg Da: A Welsh Grammar for Learners*. Talybont: Y Lolfa. 312 pp. ISBN 0-86243-503-X.

Gruffudd, Heini. 2000. *Ymarferion Cymraeg Da*. Talybont: Y Lolfa. ISBN 0-86243-533-1. (Companion booklet).

"Mae'r Gymraeg bellach yn dibynnu ar y rhai sy'n ei dysgu yn ail iaith yn ein hysgolion. Bydded i'r fyddin honno amihau a chryfhau." ("Welsh depends now on those who are learning it as a second language in our schools. May that army increase and strengthen.") With these words (Foreword, page 5), Heini Gruffudd dedicates his new grammar and exercise manual for the Welsh learner and reaffirms his unflagging zeal for the language. Gruffudd has been an ardent promoter of the Welsh language and Welsh social causes, and he has authored a number of successful books including *Welsh is Fun*, *Welcome to Welsh*, and *Welsh Learner's Dictionary*.

While most of his previous books have targeted beginners, *Cymraeg Da* aims at learners of intermediate or even advanced proficiency. Gruffudd indicates in his foreword that the units can be covered sequentially, by the intermediate student for whom much of the material may be new, or thematically, by the advanced student who wishes to review a particular topic. The very detailed table of contents will prove essential in locating the various places in the book where a given topic is treated. *Cymraeg Da* would undoubtedly work well in an intermediate classroom setting, and a number of oral exercises are designed for small-group or pair work on topics such as pollution or drugs. On the other hand, the intermediate student working without a teacher might find the book somewhat difficult to use, in part because all grammatical explanations are in Welsh; the use of English is limited to translating idioms and glossing example sentences.