

American influence on the Gaelic League: inspiration or control?

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American support for Irish causes was common in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Leading Irish figures including Parnell, Davitt, W.B. Yeats, Pearse and de Valera, made the voyage across the Atlantic to convince the American Irish of the worthiness of their respective causes. The Gaelic League was no exception. It too pursued American support for its ideals and campaigns at home. When Douglas Hyde, the founder of the Gaelic League, visited the New York Gaelic societies in Manhattan, Long Island and the Bowery on his way home from a year's teaching in Canada in 1891, he acknowledged the example and the inspiration that the Irish Americans were giving to those at home.¹ And when finally the Gaelic League was founded in 1893 in Dublin, eyes turned very quickly towards America – Tír na nDólar – for financial support. Indeed, the money collected in America was essentially the lifeblood of the League in the early years of the twentieth century. As the paymasters of the movement it is pertinent therefore to ask if the Americans in fact exerted any control over the home organization.

Although one would imagine that the logical place for the beginning of a Gaelic revival was in Ireland itself; the Irish in America actually had a head start on the movement at home. Scholarly interest in the Irish language and literature in Ireland in the 1870s manifested itself through societies, such as the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language (1876), The Gaelic Union (1879) and in the publication of the *Gaelic Journal* (1882); however, it was not until the foundation of the Gaelic League in 1893 that a practical program of de-anglicization was put into effect. Yet, long before the foundation of the Gaelic League in Ireland, Gaelic societies had appeared in the United States. As early as 1872–3 letters began to appear in the *Irish World* professing love for the 'fast dying language of our sires ... the only landmark left to distinguish our race from our cruel calumniators and oppressors'.² The first Irish class was founded by Michael J. Logan in Brooklyn in 1872, and the first society in the United States, the Philo Celtic Society of Boston, was founded in April 1873, 'to give free instruction in the Irish language to such of the children of the Clan-na-Gael as desire to take advantage of and be benefited by the opportunity.'³ Many newspapers, includ-

¹ Janet Egleston Dunleavy and Gareth W. Dunleavy, *Douglas Hyde – a maker of modern Ireland* (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991), pp 166–7. ² Letter from 'Leix', *Irish World*, 26 Oct. 1872. ³ *Ibid.*, 15 Nov. 1873.

ing the *Irish World*, the *Irish American*, the *Boston Pilot* and the *Boston Globe*, devoted space to reading material in Irish in their papers. The first edition of *An Gaodhial*, a monthly, bilingual journal was published by Logan in October 1881 as he argued that 'the preservation and cultivation of the Irish language was indispensable to the social status of the Irish people and their descendants and therefore of vital importance to Americans of Irish descent'.⁴ By 1884, it was claimed in the *Irish World* that there were over fifty 'Irish' schools devoted to the study of the Irish tongue in the United States.⁵

In some ways this inclination towards the preservation of language in America is not surprising. Although one of the primary reasons for language shift in Ireland from Irish to English was emigration, there was a substantial body of Irish speakers in America.⁶ Vaughan and Fitzpatrick estimate that 27.1 per cent of total Irish emigrants in the period 1851–5 and 24.4 per cent of total Irish emigrants in the period 1891–1900 were Irish speaking. Between 1856 and 1910, 49.3 per cent of all Irish emigrants to the United States came from those counties where the speaking of the Irish language was strongest.⁷ And these Irish speakers in America tended to be concentrated in urban areas. Stiofán Ó hAnnracháin estimates that there were 40,000 in Philadelphia, 30,000 in Chicago and 20,000 in Yonkers at the close of the nineteenth century. David Doyle looks at New York and Boston where there were 70,000 and 30,000 Irish speakers respectively. Kenneth Nilsen and Seán de Fréine have documented the extensive use of Irish in Portland, Maine, at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁸ But although these may have been Irish speakers they were also well versed in English. By 1910, 95 per cent of Irish immigrants claimed literacy in the English language.⁹ If, therefore, the numbers show that there was little reason to support a language which had no place in the new world, the urge to preserve Irish in the English speaking United States must have been motivated by other considerations.

In the post-civil war United States, the Irish were still on a tentative footing as Catholic immigrants in a Protestant land. While Irish nationalism appeared to unite the Irish as a group, political nationalism was not its only manifestation. Irish music, history and language were held up as proof that the Irish were entitled to respect and status. Journalists reminded immigrants of the 'greatness' of

4 *An Gaodhial*, Dec. 1881. 5 *Irish World*, 12 Apr. 1884; 17 May 1884. 6 The 1851 census recorded one and a half million native Irish speakers; the 1891 census 700,000. Noel Mc Gonagle, 'Writing in Gaelic since 1800' in Thomas Bartlett et al. (eds), *Irish studies: a general introduction* (Gill and Macmillan: Dublin 1988), p. 108. 7 Counties which had at least 10 per cent Irish speaking population in 1891. W.E. Vaughan and A.J. Fitzpatrick, (eds), *Irish historical statistics: population, 1821–1971* (Royal Irish Academy: Dublin 1978), pp 261–353. 8 *Irish World*, 4 Mar. 1899, 29 Oct. 1898, 13 May 1899, quoted in Stiofán Ó hAnnracháin (ed.), *Go Meirceá Siar: Na Gaeil agus Meirceá: cnuasach Aistí* (Dublin, 1979), p. 10; Seán De Fréine, *The great silence* (Mercier Press: Dublin, 1965), pp 126–7; K.E. Nilsen, 'Thinking of Monday: The Irish speakers of Portland, Maine' *Éire-Ireland* 25:1, (1991), pp 6–19. 9 Chris Curtin, Riana O'Dwyer and Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, 'Emigration and exile', in Thomas Bartlett et al., *Irish studies*, p. 68.

the old country and reiterated the idea that 'the Irish constituted a distinct and superior race complete with admirable traits and worthy characteristics'.¹⁰ In 1884, the *Irish World* in an article about a musical performed in New York, *An Bard agus an Fód*, linked language and music with the self-respect of the Irish and their rights to nationhood: 'The more our language and music are understood the more claim can we lay on the educated mind to advance every struggle made for Ireland.'¹¹ Michael J. Logan reiterated this again and again in the pages of *An Gaodhal*. He urged his readers to support the Irish language so that they could be proud of their heritage and their race. This pride, he believed would contribute to an increase in their status and prestige as society recognized the Irish people in the United States as belonging to a nation with an ancient and glorious culture of its own. And while J.A. Fishman suggests that language was more likely to be a source of embarrassment and an obstacle to becoming true Americans, he does stress that language loyalty and language maintenance became aspects of consciousness for many immigrants as they became aware of their 'groupness'.¹² Therefore, in the Irish quest for assimilation to the host country a badge of ethnicity that indicated an ancient and glorious past rather than a demeaned and debased one could prove invaluable.

The American Irish in the years before the foundation of the Gaelic League were regarded as an inspiration to the Irish. They showed how societies could be founded for the revival of the language. They attended lectures on the revival and sent the proceeds to the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language in Dublin. They bought the books. They offered prizes to Irish children for proficiency in the language. But there were no real links between them and 'home'. It was not until the foundation of the Gaelic League in 1893 that more formal links began to be established between the two movements.

And from the beginning the essence of this more formal link was money. What the Gaelic League in Ireland primarily wanted from the American societies was not inspiration but support in the form of financial assistance. With the foundation of the Gaelic League in Ireland the Gaelic societies in the United States became, in Irish eyes, useful tools for the promotion of the message of language revival in Ireland and a means of collecting money for that same revival. When the Gaelic League of America was founded in 1898 with headquarters at Madison Avenue in New York, it appeared that both Gaelic movements were as one in their ideals and objectives.¹³

And yet the Gaelic societies were slow to give money to the home organization. This was partly because their own numbers were small and they were not

¹⁰ J.P. Rodechko, *Patrick Ford and his search for America: a case study of Irish-American journalism, 1870-1913* (Arno Press: New York 1976). ¹¹ *Irish World*, 29 Nov. 1884. ¹² J.A. Fishman, *Language loyalty in the United States* (Arno Press: The Hague, 1966), p. 171. ¹³ Michael Funchion (ed.), *Irish American voluntary organizations* (Greenwood: Westport, Conn.), p. 132; *An Gaodhal*, Nov. 1898.

patronized by the wealthy. Their energies were focused on attending to their own members with picnics and balls and classes. A fund was set up by the *Irish World* in 1899 and by the Gaelic League of the state of New York in 1903 through the columns of the *Gaelic American* but by 1904, only \$1,000 had been subscribed.¹⁴ The Ancient Order of Hibernians had voted \$2,000 to the Gaelic League in July 1902 'to be expended in Irish speaking districts' but the money was slow in arriving.¹⁵ And Americans appeared confused as to what the Gaelic League was really about. Fr Peter Yorke, an Irish priest and nationalist in San Francisco, stressed the need for information on the aims and objectives of the League:

The Gaelic League is not a mere literary movement, to be conducted in a lady-like manner by the speaking of pieces and the consumption of ice cream. It is not a mere language movement for the edification of scholars and the delectation of cranks. The Gaelic League is the national movement ... the Irish at home and abroad must know what they are aiming at and must see clear.¹⁶

It was in this context that the Gaelic League in Ireland decided to send three missions to the United States in 1906, 1910 and 1915. The first of these missions is probably the best known because Douglas Hyde was the main protagonist. Not only was he feted and well received in the States but he also collected \$50,000 (£10,000) with the help of John Quinn, an Irish American lawyer and patron of the arts who lived in New York. It is on this mission that we see some effort of the Americans at control. Hyde made an agreement with the American collection committee that no more than £2,000 of this money would be spent by the Gaelic League in any one year. This meant essentially that although the amount of money collected was significant and badly needed that it was not going to be the saviour of the language movement at home and that more funds would soon be needed. Indeed as early as 1907, Hyde was again issuing appeals for money to the United States referring to the expenses of the League as being close on £700 a month. This money was being spent on organizers and traveling teachers, twelve paid officers, maintaining its premises, publishing a weekly and monthly newspaper as well as books and pamphlets.¹⁷ The Butte, Montana branch of the Gaelic League was even clearer about the way it wanted the money that it contributed spent: it promised to send as much money to Ireland each year as would keep one organizer in the field – an annual sum of £120.¹⁸ However, while the spending of the money was circumscribed to some extent, most Leaguers felt that the cushion of the American money was enough to give

¹⁴ *Gaelic American*, 30 Apr. 1904. ¹⁵ *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 16 Aug. 1902. ¹⁶ *Chicago American*, 1 Sept. 1901, quoted in *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 28 Sept. 1901. ¹⁷ *Gaelic American*, 2 Mar. 1907. ¹⁸ *Gaelic American*, 16 Apr. 1907, 6 Sept. 1908, *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 15 June 1907, Sept. 1908, 2 Oct. 1909.

it the freedom to begin a campaign in 1908 to make Irish an essential subject for matriculation in the National University of Ireland and this campaign was successful when the university senate voted in favour in June 1910.¹⁹ In this way it could be argued that the control of the American movement over the Irish Gaelic League was negligible but that the financial contributions allowed the League in Ireland to make significant advancements. And this sense of support was felt in America also. Under a front-page headline 'Splendid Victory for Essential Irish' in June 1910, the *Gaelic American* appealed for more funds to aid the Gaelic League to prevent Ireland becoming an English province.²⁰

In the two later tours which were not as financially successful for the envoys as Hyde's tour – the 1910–12 mission netted \$15,000 (£3,000) in eighteen months – that element of control was more evident. Fionán Mac Coluim was promised '\$25,000 a year to be devoted to the payment of teachers and organizers in the old country' and conditions were specifically laid down by Judge Cohalan and Judge Keogh who were the treasurers of the finance committee: 'The condition must be rigidly adhered to viz. that the proceeds of American delegations shall be devoted to the upkeep of a system of traveling teachers of Irish.'²¹ Having said that, the control disappeared somewhere over the Atlantic and Mac Coluim himself in his report to the executive committee in Dublin in 1914 not only castigated the committee for not acknowledging contributions but also stated that:

Over \$10,000 has been received from America since the bargain was made. On the basis agreed upon we should be able to point to at least 100 men in the field. In 1907 there were 125, in 1908, 140, in 1910 150. This year according to figures I have received there were only 76 or about one half of the number in 1910. This is unsatisfactory.²²

And the solution was simple:

There are thousands of too busy or too lazy well to do, fairly patriotic Irishmen, 'good fellows' who would never study Irish or attend meetings or do any organizing work but who would subscribe if approached provided they feel we can give them some distinction and adequate recognition of their subscriptions, supply them with periodical reports as to what we do with their money and give them some quid pro quo in the line of journals and literature as free gifts.²³

¹⁹ Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh, *Douglas Hyde – An Craoibhlín Aoibhinn* (Maunsel: Dublin, 1917), p. 92. ²⁰ *Gaelic American*, 14 May 1910, 18 June 1910, 30 July 1910. ²¹ Fionán Mac Coluim to the Executive Committee of the Gaelic League, 11 February 1914 in Minute Book of the Executive Committee 1912–1917. Ms. 9,770, National Library of Ireland (NLI). ²² *Ibid.* ²³ *Ibid.*

But this was not done and MacColuim who was on the ground in the United States could see the effect this was having on contributions to the Gaelic League as only \$1,703 was collected in 1914. The Americans were exerting control in the most obvious way open to them – through closing their pocketbooks.

The people who were contributing to the Gaelic League were part of the problem. Those who were regularly giving money to the language movement were ordinary workers who were contributing small amounts of cash. Of the \$826.50 collected in 1914 in New York, \$600 was collected in the form of \$5–\$25 contributions primarily through a card system inaugurated by Diarmuid Lynch.²⁴ Collection cards were issued to Irish American societies to be distributed among their members and a person who collected or contributed a minimum of \$5 would receive a Gaelic Alliance membership card issued in Dublin and signed by the president of the Gaelic League. While big names like Bourke Cockran and Daniel Cohalan may have fronted the fundraising, these ordinary American Irish did not carry much clout with their small denominations. Even during Hyde's successful mission friction was evident between those who were members of Gaelic societies whom John Quinn scornfully dismissed: 'I mistrust enthusiasm very much on general principles. Most enthusiasts want to belong to "committees" and go to "banquets".'²⁵ While the Gaelic societies regarded the visit of Hyde as recognition of their efforts over the previous thirty years, Quinn and Hyde focused on courting the wealthy as the money needed to be collected and this caused friction between the societies and the mission. Hyde remarked:

But the more I see and hear the more convinced I am that it is not through public speeches, no matter how good they may be, or applauding meetings, no matter how loud the applause, that the money will come in; but through personal appeals to men who are well disposed and at the same time, wealthy.²⁶

It could therefore be said that the American Irish had no control over the Irish language movement. And yet, the moral support and imprimatur of the American Irish was of great significance for the Gaelic League. When the *Playboy* controversy erupted in America in 1911, many supporters of the League including John Devoy condemned the Gaelic League for appearing to endorse the production because of its links with Lady Gregory and Yeats. The *Gaelic American* carried lengthy protests from various Gaelic societies condemning the play and recorded resignations from the Gaelic society in Washington when Lady Gregory was invited to address the members.²⁷ Devoy complained about Hyde's inaction on the *Playboy* to Daniel Cohalan:

²⁴ Subscriptions to Gaelic League Fund (United States) 1911; 1912; 1913; 1914, Ms.9,770, NLI. ²⁵ John Quinn to Douglas Hyde, 27 Oct. 1905, Ms.17,299, NLI. ²⁶ Douglas Hyde to 'A Chara' (a Gaelic Leaguer in Ireland), 29 Nov. 1905, Ms.18,253, NLI. ²⁷ *Gaelic American*,

Many things have chilled my enthusiasm for the Gaelic league. The worst is that Yeats has managed to fill every American editor with the ideas that his theatre company is a product of the Gaelic League, had Hyde's endorsement and, by inference, that he approves the *Playboy*. It is repeated almost every day ... and we are being lectured as being 'out of touch' with Ireland by people who never knew Ireland. Until he comes out with a denial I will personally do no more for the Gaelic League.²⁸

Straightaway, Hyde sent a cable to the United States dissociating the Gaelic League from the Abbey production and Fr Ó Flannagáin, one of the League's envoys, issued his own statement:

Neither Lady Gregory nor W.B. Yeats were [sic] ever elected to the governing body of the League. Neither of them has ever been present at a National Convention of the League. Not one of the authors whose plays are being staged in New York is recognized in Ireland as a prominent Gaelic Leaguer.²⁹

The panic that ensued among the Leaguers at home and abroad when it appeared that support, both financial and moral, would be withdrawn from the Gaelic League is telling. They needed the wider context of the Americans to prove to the world that they were not mad and that emigrants, who had no practical, linguistic need of the Irish language, were supportive of the movement. Thus, both Lady Gregory and Yeats, two of the most steadfast friends of the League at home, were rejected in the United States to appease the Americans. This indeed was control but imposed more by the Irish than by the Americans.

The American Gaelic societies were parts of a larger process by which assimilation into American society also involved the embrace of a distinctive ethnic identity, though they rarely acknowledged that this was the case. As societies they were neither organized nor powerful enough to exert control over the home movement. Indeed, in spite of resolutions supporting the aims of the Gaelic League in Ireland their focus was firmly on the United States and on their need for asserting a distinctive and cultured identity there. Equally, the Gaelic League in Ireland formed part of a bigger nationalistic picture, which would become more evident at the 1915 Ard Fheis. The movements meant and constituted different things in both countries.

A great deal of the Gaelic League's energies was focused on the United States at the turn of the century. While the Irish were painfully conscious of the poten-

14 Oct. 1911, 25 Oct. 1911, 25 Nov. 1911. 28 John Devoy to Daniel F. Cohalan, 29 Nov. 1911, quoted in Charles Callan Tansill, *America and the fight for Irish freedom, 1866-1922* (Devin-Adair: New York, 1957). 29 *Gaelic American*, 9 Dec. 1911.

tial that was America whether in the form of cash or moral support, the Gaelic League more often ignored than met the needs of its most consistent supporters there for some form of recognition. This blithe dismissal of the ordinary contributors in the United States lead to receding returns at a time when other, more immediate, political issues diverted attention from the language question. In the few years when substantial contributions flowed to the Gaelic League from the American missions American money provided a shield and a buffer for the League campaigns. Yet, American influence on the direction and objectives of the Gaelic League in Ireland was minimal.