

## Gaelic biography: an Irish experience

### Caint a thug Diarmuid Breathnach in Ollscoil Ghlaschú

Our work in Radio Telefís Éireann's Sound Archives more than 40 years ago made Máire Ní Mhurchú and me more aware of the general shortage of Irish biographical information and especially with regard to the previous 40 years. There have been advances since: Oxford companions to Irish history and literature ... and so on. But there are still no good biographical dictionaries of movements in Ireland's recent history: revolutionary movements, politics; labour; theatre.... No matter how excellent the Royal Irish Academy's *Dictionary of Irish Biography* will be – it's due in November - it will not fill gaps which only dedicated dictionaries can. Bernard Canning's *Irish-born secular priests in Scotland 1829-1979* is one such dictionary. They were sent to Scotland mostly because of a surfeit of clergy in Ireland but also to enable Gáidhlic-speaking priests in the lowlands to move to Gáidhlic-speaking parishes. We would see the true national dictionary as biography by county, professions, politics, minorities, sport and so on.... all shelved cheek by jowl with the Academy's volumes. In the so-called national dictionary, with its conventional principles, many fascinating people will be omitted. A dictionary of national biography deals with the famous, the infamous and the remembered. Dedicated dictionaries focus on people in various fields of endeavour, many, if not most of them, unknown nationally.

In 1979 we became aware of the Academy's plan for an national biography. The founding in 1882 of the *Gaelic Journal* is often seen as the beginning of the Irish language revival. Its centenary looming, we conceived the idea of presenting the Academy with an agenda - a dictionary of Irish language writers, revivalists, scholars, folklorists, singers, publishers... It's style, we hoped, would engage the interest of readers. We could be self-indulgent, something the Academy should not be.

It took six years to bring out that first slender volume, *Beathaisnéis a hAon*. But during that time, in order to form some notion of who had accomplished important work for Irish, we read through files of all language and nationalist periodicals from 1882 on. Much later we read all interviews with writers and language activists in *The Irish Press* and in weekly *Inniu* between 1954 and 1973 (about 450 of these articles are listed in *1982-2002 Beathaisnéis*, 2003, pp.271-76). These chores helped us garner information on many forgotten revivalists. The name Pádraig Ó Brolcháin, for example, meant nothing to knowledgeable friends. And yet here was the civil servant who in 1922 oversaw the planning of teaching Irish in national schools for an hour a day.

Progress was so slow we'd surely fail to influence the Academy's dictionary. Never did we imagine it would take them another 30 years. So, in 1986 I opted for SELORP - Special Extended Leave on Reduced Pay! Two years later Máire took early retirement. A second volume came in 1990; a third in 1992 and so on until, with a fifth in 1997, we had completed coverage of 1882-1982. Two considerations persuaded us to continue. We had veered to the notion of a seamless flow in the language's fortunes. John O'Daly died in 1878, and John McHale in 1881. They would be listed among any twenty prominent Irish language figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Would not their omission - just because of a few years - be perverse? A more

pressing reason for continuing was that many personalities of the language movement and of scholarship since 1940 were still alive. To quote Myles na Gopaleen: ‘They studied far higher / Than ould Kuno Meyer / And fanned up the glimmer / Bequeathed by Zimmer / Binchy and Bergin and Best’. We had all he named – Zimmer, Standish O’Grady, Marstrander, Bergin, Best and indeed Myles himself - who, by the way, spent an early part of childhood in Glasgow. Yes, all except the great Dan Binchy who lived until 1989.

An even more pressing argument was that, not dealing with post-1982 deaths, meant neglecting language developments after 1940: standardisation, spelling, print, journalism, lexicography, scholarship, publishing, Gaeltacht economy... We would have to wait twenty years ghoulishly for more than 200 to die! We filled time by going back to 1782-1881 and then kicking further back to 1560. Why 1560? Manus O’Donnell died three years later and it’s conjectured that he envisaged his life of Colm Cille as a printed book. In addition, at that point in Tudor and Reformation times, language had become more of an issue. The first printed book in Gáidhlic, Seon Carsuel’s *Foirm na nUrnuidheadh* in roman print, published in 1567, was easy reading for Gaelic Ireland’s learned class. This worried England’s state church. The first printed book in Irish in Ireland, O’Kearney’s Protestant catechism, in an odd kind of so-called gaelic print, followed four years later. In covering 1560 to say 1850 we could depend in the main on scholarly articles.

By 2001 we were ready to face 1983-2002 and our eighth volume consisted of 294 lives. Was this the end? No, alas! To give the volumes some kind of unity indexes were necessary. This gradual publication of *Beathaisnéis* enjoyed one advantage: the publishing corrections and additional information. A names index would draw attention to these. The only listing of books in Irish, *Clár Litridheacht na Nua-Ghaedhilge*, covered only 1850 to 1937. At the time even a limited one covering 1567 to 2006 would be useful. We followed with indexes of published and unpublished plays, pseudonyms, placenames, schools and universities, Gaelic League branches, translated authors.... In a national biography a thematic index would be unwieldy, so countless and disparate would topics be. But for *Beathaisnéis*, an index of topics relevant to language revival and development might be helpful. That movement concerned itself with issues that affected the not only the language but also the perceived nature, character and problems of Irish people: emigration, tuberculosis; employment; exclusion of women; publishing; enlivening village life; drama; moderating our drinking; a higher regard for Irish products; the need to teach Irish history .... Yes! The language movement had set out to reform our character - an impossible task! Connections with movements for independence needed notice. And there were problems arising from centuries of linguistic neglect: spelling, print, standardization, publishing, theatre, the war of the dialects, a modern literature, terminology.... and so on.

A small part of the final volume is the categorising of lives: singers; song collectors; folklorists; storytellers and seanchaithe; Christian Brothers; 1916 participants; MPs; national teachers who taught Irish before 1922; volunteers during 1913-22; customs and excise officers; clergy; Celtic and folklore scholars; civil servants in the language movement before 1922; members of the Dáil .... Some historians give importance to the make-up of national movements in terms of class, education, religious persuasion, county of origin and, in the case of language, learner or native speaker.... Inevitably a

‘dedicated’ dictionary may also be a survey of a kind. In this ninth volume we have also lives of some who died between August 2002 and January 2007 and persons of the earlier periods whom we had overlooked.

In each life story we endeavoured to have parents’ names and occupations, schools attended, whether there was an Irish monoglot in the household . . . . In the 1901 census Irish monoglots were common in Irish-speaking areas, but they were also elsewhere. The Lawlesses, a farming family near Swords in Dublin, prominent in the language movement, in 1901 census had in their home a labourer with no English, aged 82, from Leitrim. Can we attribute that family’s interest in Irish to his presence?

As you know, all Irish census returns before 1901 were destroyed in 1922. A 1901 problem for researchers is that even a native speaker might not wish to claim having Irish. This was more probable in the then large breac-Ghaeltacht areas. By 1911 attitudes had changed. Learners with only the ‘cúpla focal’ might now appear as genuine Irish speakers. The League’s propaganda was bearing fruit. But, in a census, aspiration can take from fact. Up to recently when searching without an address for a city dweller census returns were of little use. On-line, that difficulty is overcome.

We have dates of death for more than 1,700 between 1860 and 2006. With these we could find obits. And, as late as the 1940’s, Irish papers listed relatives and friends at funerals, something useful for contacting informants. Catherine Smith of Glendalough is our only failure to find the date of death. Her books and contributions to the language revival merited election as Gaelic League vice-president. At the time of her leaving the scene the League’s journal implied that she entered an order of nuns in Meath. All an elderly nephew could tell us in 1993 was that she had not attended any family funerals in the thirties. Enquiries to convents in Meath, Louth and Dublin, and appeals in the national press, yielded nothing. Our experience of some orders of nuns, and of the Irish Christian Brothers, is that long ago they regarded a life as beginning only on joining their orders. Brother Joseph Jerome Fitzpatrick wrote a famous Irish grammar, used in secondary schools from 1905 to 1940. And yet up to the 1960’s all accounts by the Brothers themselves of his origins are inaccurate. Luckily for us, Fitzpatrick’s brother was a Franciscan and that order had all particulars.

As I have said, a national biography is not expected to include the so-called ordinary person, be he country poet, labourer, village schoolmaster, a man whose career was unexceptional but who accomplished one thing of importance. For example: after almost a century’s failure to discover the time and place of Philip Barron’s death, one Pádraig Ó Cléirigh did so in 1997. 1860 in Paris was commonly accepted but Ó Cléirigh proved it was 1844 in London. Barron, often called the ‘first Gaelic Leaguer’, had, as early as 1835, founded in Waterford, a college to teach Irish and had, among other things, founded *Ancient Ireland*, a journal to draw attention to Irish language and history. And so Pádraig Ó Cléirigh was admitted to our pantheon. And think of David O’Callaghan, the Aran schoolmaster. His pupil Liam O’Flaherty based the novel *Skerret* on him. This would be O’Callaghan’s only claim to national fame. But he was indeed an important figure in those Irish-speaking islands and as such should be honoured by us. Another example is James Cogan. This youth of 18 seconded Eoin Mac Néill’s motion to establish the Gaelic League. At 23, a customs and excise man in Oldham, Greater Manchester, he married his landlady of 51. Within a year he died of TB in Australia. He gave the impression he was from Kerry. None

guessed he was a mere Kildare man! As ‘Duine gan ainm’ for two years he wrote an Irish column in a nationalist paper. He is one of many examples we have of how in his day mere youths were active, even prominent, in national movements

Early on we chanced on people anxious and able to assist us. A Mayo telephonist became so interested he would regularly phone to know what could he do next. We would mention a name and village and back he would come in ten minutes with information from a postmistress. It reminded us of Ó Cadhain’s *Cré na Cille* where the village post mistress is the Legion of Mary’s information officer! In Australia a young Irish scholar, Gréagóir Ó Broin, gave us much assistance about five born or resident there. And without assistance from an Australian parish priest, we couldn’t have written about Richard O’Daly, the Australian polyglot who introduced phonetics to the Gaelic League’s colleges. Over 27 years about 800 people helped us, the majority of them now dead.

Travel was essential. We searched many graveyards. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Annie O’Reilly of Macroom was a pioneer in the collecting of Irish songs. So common is the name that it was difficult to find the date of death. For a week I searched all graveyards around Macroom and sought out people who remembered her. Finally a friend found her grave in one of Cork city’s cemeteries. Máire also frequently visited graveyards. She was once locked in as night was falling and had to exit over a high wall!

Without knowing the many English forms of many surnames, finding birth certs can be difficult. Professor Tomás Ó Máille of National University of Ireland, Galway, was born in Staffordshire. His father, a builder’s labourer, was Melia, a version of O’Malley. And his mother’s name? It was Maley, a Co. Down version. Again, we had difficulty in finding the surname of novelist Dónall MacAmhlaigh’s widow and indeed the date and place of Dónall’s birth. The widow wouldn’t reply to letters. Máire was searching a 1958 newspaper for someone else entirely when by chance her eye lit on notice of Dónall’s marriage to one Máire Noonan. Dónall was given here as McCawley, whereas McAuley was the form we had taken for granted. We could now trace his birth in Galway. Yes, sheer luck is helpful!

Is even autobiography to be trusted? Tarlach Ó hUí, wellknown writer and journalist, in his autobiography said his father was an Ulster Unionist. *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* took him at his word. But the parents were not Irish of any hue! Tarlach’s adopted daughter put us in touch with his niece, the family historian. There was no question, she said, of the Hoods being Irish. The young Tarlach joined the IRA and spent 1939 to 1945 in Belfast and Derry jails. Not unlike Seán Mac Stiofáin, head of the Provisional IRA 30 years ago and also a prominent Gaelic Leaguer. He was John Edward Drayton Stephenson, and had little or no connection with Ireland. Perhaps a model for both was yet another entrant, Micheál Mac Liammóir, Ireland’s great 20<sup>th</sup> century actor. A Gaelic author, he claimed, as you know, to be a Cork man. It was only after his death was he revealed as the English Alfred Lee Wilmore. Not until eighteen did he set foot in Ireland. We are indeed grateful that he came. Writer Seán Ó Ciosáin among other things wrote admired translations of *Wuthering Heights* and *The Vicar of Wakefield*. But nowhere in two autobiographies does he give his father’s personal name and surname. Ó Ciosáin is more usually Kissane. But no, he

was Cashman. He even gives his mother the wrong maiden surname. Autobiography is not always reliable.

Another pitfall is where two or more share names and surnames. There are 79 instances in *Beathaisnéis*. In three we erred. We mixed up Mary O'Reilly, bookseller, with Margaret O'Reilly, publisher. In Ruth Dudley Edwards' *Patrick Pearse* Margaret in error had become Mary. This led us astray. Both women's lives are interesting and we had to re-write accounts of both in a later volume. Another error was conflating two Seán O'Hogans, one from West Clare, the other from East Clare. We mistakenly attributed to the west man participation in a 1947 campaign to have Clare Co. Council permit a monument to poet Merriman. A radio colleague, Seán Mac Réamoinn, had met the grand-daughter of one and he assumed her grandfather was his 1947 fellow crusader. This O'Hogan wrote a history of Clare in Irish and was a prominent early Gaelic Leaguer. We added that he participated in that Merriman campaign. Years later I had a call from a cross Mullingar woman. 'You have nothing about my uncle Seán O'Hogan of Feakle!' This east Clare O'Hogan, a customs and excise man, was indeed the Merriman crusader and had published two plays in Irish. Both O'Hogans deserved entries. Not even one of 2,000 users of *Beathaisnéis* had leaped to point out our error! The third case was the two Pádraig Mac Seáins, cousins in Donegal. Each had translated a historical novel and we attributed both translations to the one Pádraig. We weren't the first to wrong the second Pádraig, a modest man who had never bothered to direct attention to this earlier mistaken identity. We added an apologetic entry in the next volume

I made mention of customs and excise. Many in that job contributed to the Irish revival in Ireland, England, and Scotland. Other references to Scotland would be about Irish scholars here – and Scottish scholars in Ireland, Scottish authors in English translated to Irish, Irish language activists born in Scotland, Irish missionary priests in Scotland. Many notable Donegal authors, such as Niall Ó Dónaill and Séamus Ó Grianna, did seasonal labour here as well as nearly all famous Donegal storytellers.

A dedicated dictionary is free to include non-nationals. We have accounts of over 50 European and American scholars who placed Irish under great obligation during 1785-2006. A Scottish dictionary might include many of these. Scots we included, and a few simply Scottish-born, are: Seon Carsuel, Reuben John Bryce, John Abercromby, John Strachan, Kenneth Jackson, Alan Bruford, Gordon Mac Gill-Fhinnein, James Carmichael Watson, James MacPherson, Alasdair Mac Colla Chiotaigh Mac Domhnaill, barber Seán Mac Diarmada (1890-1956), Christopher Anderson, Patrick McFadden (whose parents were from Donegal), Winifred Wulff, Calum Mac Gilleathan.... Of some small interest, perhaps, is Conn Ó Mongáin, a Redemptorist priest on the Scottish mission who left a diary of his experiences on the islands, translated into Gáidhlic by Agnes Stewart.

Any venture of this kind needs a boss. Diarmuid assumed that role since he was Máire's boss in RTÉ. Both of us took part in writing, researching and travelling ... but it would be fair to describe Máire as chief researcher and Diarmuid as chief editor. A 30 years writing partnership is rare indeed.

If we knew at the start what we now know, what would we have done differently? The probability is that we'd simply have taken fright and attempted nothing at all!

Innocence or ignorance is surely not an indecent element in many ventures! If asked what did we bring to this work, our answer would be that we were of an age to have known an older rural Ireland – make what you like of that! We have no idea what publication cost. Works in Irish are subsidised by the state. As for ourselves, I'd guess that over 27 years we received enough to cover costs of computers, travel, phone, books, learned journals and so on.... We enjoy reasonable pensions, and the pleasures of learning, of adventure, discovery, and the appreciation of users...ba leor iad sin mar chúiteamh. Finally, *Beathaisnéis* online may happen. It would mean a good deal of rewriting. Think of incorporating all corrections, additions, new information. And indeed online would mean perhaps adding eight new lives a year.

**Diarmuid Breathnach**