

## Exploring hidden history through the Irish language

Aindrias Ó Cathasaigh

*[This article is taken from a workshop given on 19 Feabhra 2016, in Lehman College, as part of the symposium "Irish Language Literature and the History of Ireland" organized by the Irish Language Program of the Department of Languages and Literatures. The speaker is an historian who has written two books and two television series regarding the Easter Rising: 1916 Seachtar na Cásca (2010) and 1916 Seachtar Dearmadta (2013).]*

The Easter rising whose centenary we are commemorating is sometimes called a poets' rebellion, and not unfairly. Quite a number of its leaders had turned their hands to poetry, with varying degrees of success. I'm not a poet, I'm a historian: in fact, I think my great contribution to poetry is the fact that I haven't written any. But ten years ago, I did translate a selection of poems by Bertolt Brecht. One of them opens like this:

Cé a thóg Téibeas na seacht ngeata?  
Sna leabhair tá ainmneacha ríthe.  
An iad na ríthe a tharraing na clocha leo?

Translated into English rather than Irish, that would be something like:

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?  
In the books are found the names of kings.  
Did the kings drag the rocks along?

This is one of the things that has driven me as a historian, the fact that history records the kings and presidents and leaders, the great men (occasionally women) — while the people who actually drag the rocks along, who do the work, get forgotten. There's always a job to be done to unearth the story of these people, how they lived, what they thought, their efforts to change that destiny instead of just accepting it.

This requires a willingness and an ability to look beyond the usual places. The official records of parliaments and congresses, the reports of respectable newspapers, often have little to tell us of these stories. To discover the history of the poor, the workers, women, oppressed nationalities and ethnic groups, those subjected to injustice on any number of grounds, we need to be prepared to go off the beaten track. The traces they leave tend to be less well preserved, less accessible, less noticed — which is all the more reason for historians to go out of their way to find them.

A part of this, and a part my work has focused on to a large extent, is exploring historical sources in Irish. From the seventeenth century onwards at least, Irish appears as the language of history's losing side: excluded from the corridors of power, but clinging on in the minds and mouths of the downtrodden. If you want to understand their position and their attitudes, they were expressed in Irish for the most part, and you have to look at what survives of those expressions. This would not be a very controversial point to make among Irish historians.

It becomes controversial, however, when you come to a more modern period, which happens to be the period I generally work in, the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By this point the English language is clearly dominant in Irish society. Ireland's big narratives of politics, religion, even culture, are largely conducted through the English language. The idea

emerges that a knowledge of English is sufficient to take part in this discourse, and a knowledge of Irish redundant. Historians of the period have often followed the same line.

Three months ago a symposium was organized in Trinity College Dublin by Conradh na Gaeilge as part of their 1916 centenary program. One of the speakers was Eunan O’Halpin, a professor at Trinity and a distinguished historian. He admitted that his Irish was poor, but said that this hadn’t affected him as a historian or his research into the records because “in practice they’re all written in English”. To be fair to him, he wasn’t aggressively boasting about this, just stating it as a plain fact.

But it isn’t plain fact — or at least, in so far as it has a factual basis, it’s anything but plain. Eunan O’Halpin’s work deals with politicians and officials, the history of political administration in Ireland, and he is very capable at relating the activities of governments and government departments. The language of government in Ireland has traditionally been English, both under British rule and since an independent state was established in the south. Having said that, you do sometimes come across official files and correspondence in Irish.

But this is a very limited view of Irish history, one which is trapped in the bubble of the administration, the actions of politicians and bureaucrats. What about everyone else outside of that bubble? In fact, can you fully understand what’s going on inside that bubble unless you also examine the ways people outside react to it, and interact with it? The history of Ireland’s economic policy, for instance, shouldn’t just be concerned with internal discussions in the Department of Finance, but with the real impact they had in Cork and Cavan and Carlow — and also in Conamara and Croithlí and Corca Dhuibhne. To do that properly, you need to look at what was being said and written in Irish.

Ireland’s sociolinguistic history for the past century and a quarter, or thereabouts, is not merely a tale of the more widespread use of English. It’s also a tale of resistance to that, of attempts to fight back against the marginalization of Irish and to secure for it a lasting place in Irish life. Those attempts demand the attention of historians in their own right. But also, those attempts have brought about situations where historical movements and activities have taken place in Irish as well as in English. Historians ignore that at their own peril. Dismissing sources you can’t understand is bad historical practice, and leads to an incomplete, or even lopsided, picture. The tragedy is compounded by the unfortunate tendency on the part of some Irish-language scholars themselves to follow this established pattern rather than question it.

To be honest, there are few if any areas of Irish history which don’t require an examination of sources in Irish to do them full justice. Again and again, even when dealing with issues and movements with no apparent connection to Irish, I’ve come across sources in Irish which yield wider insights. But I’ll just give a few examples which specifically concern Pádraic Pearse, obviously one of the central figures of the Easter rising. There is a copious literature on Pearse in English, including full-length biographies, written by people unwilling and unable to take account of what Pearse wrote and did in Irish — and I think this goes some way to explain why he remains a largely misunderstood figure.

For a long and very significant time, Pearse was one of the leaders of the Irish language movement and, as editor of its newspaper, probably its most prominent spokesperson. It was through the language movement that he came to be involved in public life in the first place, and much of what he said and wrote in this capacity was in Irish. For a period in 1912 when he was turning more clearly towards political activity, he expressed his thoughts entirely in Irish in a weekly newspaper he established, *An Barr Bua*. At the same time he established an organization which aimed to work through Irish for Irish independence, *Cumann na Saoirse*, which was short-lived but brought together some of those who would play leading roles in 1916.

To ignore all of this activity through Irish — and more could be added to it — is to ignore a huge part of Pearse’s work. And yet, this is precisely what has been done. Generations of biographers and historians just haven’t bothered to draw upon it, and as a result have missed important elements of Pearse’s development as a political figure and as a person.

The truth is that Pearse was never more self-revelatory than when he wrote in Irish. “Is dóigh liom go bhfuil dhá Phiarsach ann”, he wrote: I think there are two Pearses, one of them gloomy and one of them light-hearted. “Agus is í an chuid is greannmhaire den scéal nach eol dom cé acu an fear dorcha nó an fear geal an Piarsach ceart”: and the funniest part of it is that I don’t know whether the gloomy one or the light-hearted one is the real Pearse. This was Pearse writing in his own paper, expressing his own views on his own behalf.

Another thing that emerges from Pearse in Irish is his sense of humour. We tend to imagine him as this austere figure going around with his head full of dreams of freedom and bloodshed and so on: a very intense man who you wouldn’t like to be stuck in an elevator with. In reality, he could be very witty and funny, even at his own expense. This is particularly true of *An Barr Bua*, which is full of private jokes, nods and winks, references which readers at the time would have picked up on. I’m especially aware of it because I edited the newspaper for publication as a book a few years back, and one of the things I had to do was explain his jokes in my footnotes.

So there’s a satire on the coiste gnótha of the Gaelic League which mentions the Belfast members who argue over how correct Ulster Irish is, the member who wore kilts as a matter of principle, and the member who fell asleep during long meetings — but claimed he was always awake for the important parts. Pearse also has a reference in his paper to a court case going on in London where two spiritualists, a Mr and Mrs Izard, were accused of embezzling money from a solicitor to give to the spirits of the dead: as well as being bankrupt with convictions for embezzlement himself, the solicitor was the father of Mrs Izard’s child. Now Pearse only mentions this in passing, but it proves that he didn’t spend all his time with his head in the clouds envisaging the Ireland of his dreams: he was not above spending a little time having a laugh at petty newspaper scandals. In other words, if he was around these days, I think he would watch the *Jerry Springer Show* from time to time.

What emerges from all this is a far more human Pearse, not the saint on a pedestal that is often presented to us, but a person with quirks and foibles, serious and joking in turn, sometimes both at once — pretty much like the rest of us, in fact. And there is always a problem to overcome when you look at history, because you’re dealing with people who are separated from ourselves by a gulf of decades or centuries. They were of course shaped by the times they lived in, which are different times to our own, but in some respects similar. We should try to see them, not as saints or sinners, but as men and women not a million miles removed from ourselves, confronting obstacles which have something in common with those that we also come up against. That opens up the prospect of understanding their situations and their responses, creatively reimagining them, even wondering what we might have done in those circumstances. In the case of Pearse, that door can’t really be unlocked without the key of the Irish language.

There are numerous other aspects of 1916 and the period where historical sources in Irish shed valuable light, and help to answer important questions. But in our own day, Irish is being used to bring a more fruitful approach to bear on our history. There is a small but quite vibrant group of historians working in Irish at the moment, and a small wave of publications around 1916 in particular.

A major factor in the growth of history in Irish is TG4, the Irish-language television channel which will celebrate its twentieth anniversary this year. TG4 has many faults, but one of its lasting merits has been a continuing openness to historical documentaries as a central part of its output. They generally reach a decent standard as well as respectable viewing figures.

The fact that TG4 broadcasts in Irish brings certain advantages to its historical programs. It isn’t possible to categorize Irish speakers as a whole along specific political lines: you will find many shades of opinion amongst us. But I think it’s fair to say that Irish speakers are less prone to the notion that the history of Irish resistance to British rule is something to be wary or ashamed of, or even apologized for — a notion which does still persist to some extent. Secondly,

for a historian willing to explore sources in Irish as I've advocated, a documentary made in Irish provides an ideal platform.

I'm very aware that I've only touched on a lot of the points, and there are other points which could be brought up as well, but the main one I hope to make is that for people willing to explore history through the Irish language, there are some very fertile fields of enquiry to be dug up.

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