The DEATH of the IRISH LANGUAGE



Reg Hindley

ROUTLEDGE

The death of the Irish language

Using a blend of statistical analysis with field surveys among native Irish speakers, Reg Hindley explores the reasons for the decline of the Irish language and investigates the relationships between geographical environment and language retention. He puts Irish into a broader European context as a European minority language, and assesses its present position and prospects.

Reg Hindley, who has been researching into minority languages for many years, is Senior Lecturer in Geography in the Departments of European Studies and Environmental Science at the University of Bradford.

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The death of the Irish language

A qualified obituary

Reg Hindley



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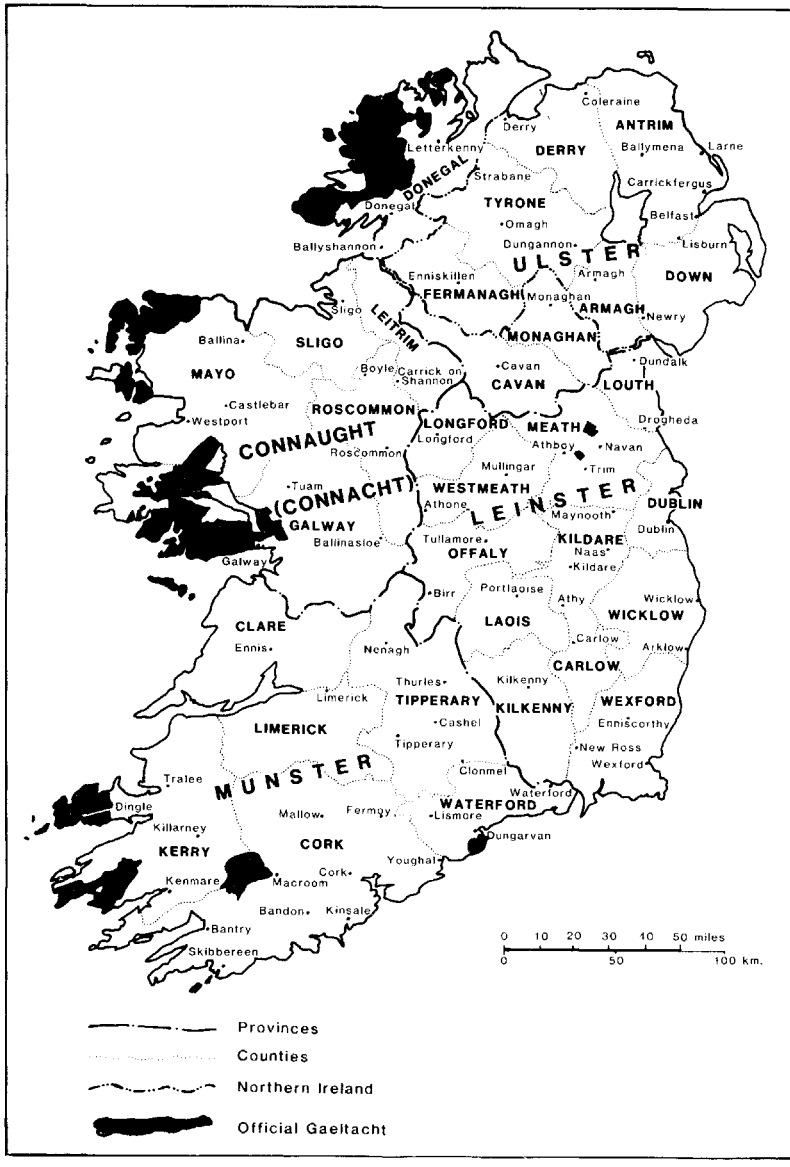
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To those who work to keep Irish a living language

'Oh the shame of Irish dying in a free Ireland . . .'
(unattributed)



Map 1 Ireland: provinces, counties, principal towns. The Gaeltacht as 1987

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A note on place-names

The following guidelines have been applied to the presentation of place-names in the text:

The names of Irish-speaking Gaeltacht places are on first use given in Irish with an anglicized equivalent, but thereafter only in Irish unless far removed in the text. This also applies to Gaeltacht places with moderate Irish-speaking minorities. The use of the Irish forms is felt appropriate because (1) they alone represent the correct form (and often meaning) in the language to which the name belongs; (2) any further reading or research will demand acquaintance with the Irish forms, if any venture is made into Irish-language sources; (3) the language is dying and the correct forms of Gaeltacht names are often elusive, even to Irish speakers. They should therefore be recorded and used while they are still current. The anglicized equivalents of most names provide a rough but serviceable guide to the popular native Irish pronunciation. Where the anglicized equivalent is itself unpronounceable except to the initiated – e.g. Iveragh, which is pronounced *eev-raa* – I have attempted a passable approximation of my own, to assist the reader.

The names of nominally Gaeltacht places where little Irish is in everyday use are given in English, except in contexts where the Irish version is appropriate, as when using material from Irish-language sources.

County names are usually given in their English forms because they are internationally familiar and no county is mainly or substantially Irish-speaking; but in the regional survey and the tables they are given bilingually because the emphasis there is on Irish language survival in each county and it is therefore appropriate to indicate the Irish forms, which of course are the originals from which the English names derive.

Gaeltacht district names such as Corca Dhuibhne (Corkaguiny) and Dúiche Sheoigheach (Joyce's Country), Gaoth Dobhair (Gweedore), and Iorras (Erris) are used in their Irish forms, with the English equivalent provided on first use.

Directional indicators such as north or west are in English only, except where it is intended to indicate the full Irish-language name for a district.

In such cases the English version will also normally be given to maintain clarity of meaning.

Appendices three and four provide bilingual indices of the Irish and English names of current Gaeltacht national schools and district electoral divisions, arranged in county and Gaeltacht order more or less from north to south. These will usually be the forms employed in the text but in cases of conflict appendix three has precedence for greater accuracy in Irish orthography.

Appendix two provides a fuller outline of problems encountered in the rendering and identification of Gaeltacht place-names.

Preface

This book is written by a geographer with a central interest in language and the manifold factors which combine to determine and influence language distributions. He began work on the border-lands of the Welsh language in 1949 and extended this to Irish and Scottish Gaelic in 1956 when he conducted his first field survey in north-west Scotland. An exploratory field investigation of most of the surviving areas of native Irish speech followed in 1957, at much the same time that the official boundaries of the Gaeltacht (the legally defined Irish-speaking districts) were being redrawn. It was already clear that the new boundaries were generous in including within them many areas in which Irish was very little used, and the difficulties of boundary definition in conditions of language change and political sensitivity feature prominently in the work which follows.

Supervision of undergraduate field courses in later years involved detailed studies in north-west Donegal and in the Meath Gaeltacht colonies, and in 1987 the generous grant of study leave by the University of Bradford made possible a repetition and elaboration of the comprehensive survey undertaken thirty years earlier, before all the changes brought about in the wake of the advent in the Gaeltacht of universal secondary education, television, the near-universal private motor car, electricity in every home, piped water, and a revolutionary degree of access to employment in modern light industries. Given this list, a perceptible weakening of the Irish language over the intervening years is only to be expected and some surprise may be permitted that it still survives at all in normal everyday use.

Some Irish writers, including Desmond Fennell (1970, 1981), have already declared the native language moribund in the districts they know, and the author returned to the west in 1987 half expecting to report an obituary notice similar to his account of the final demise of Manx (1984). Fortunately this proved highly premature, but it was evident that close knowledge of the true extent of the survival of Irish in everyday use in the only places where it is or recently was a community language in natural

use from the cradle and 'on the hearth' was uncommon. Hence this book, which sets out to show where Irish is still a normal means of daily intercourse in families and between groups of people who acquired it traditionally from their parents instead of learning it from school and college. This is not to disparage the second-language learner, who obviously has a much more difficult task in mastering Irish than the native speaker and merits credit for the fluency acquired. Support from second-language learners is important in encouraging the native speaking community to maintain its own 'natural' use of Irish, but it is very much this author's view that Irish as a *living* language will have expired once there are no longer mothers who speak it to their newborn infants, because it comes unconsciously and naturally to their lips, without measured thought of choice or national sentiment. Once that point has passed, reasons for learning Irish will remain, but only at an esoteric level and for select interest groups.

It has not yet come to this, but the threat is clear. Under ten thousand native Irish speakers are now living in communities with a sufficiently high level of attachment to the language to make probable its transmission to a substantial majority of their children as *a* language of the home (see below, p 251). They live in three separate territorial blocs, backing on to the sea and otherwise surrounded and separated by English speakers. They also speak distinctive Irish dialects and seem reluctant to listen to radio programmes in any but their own dialect. There are another seven or eight pockets of lesser, insecure survival where children can still speak Irish with native or near-native fluency at school-majority level, but these are so small and so shaky as to attract interest only for their marginality – at least to a geolinguist. The fact remains that the surviving pockets of Irish language survival include much of the most scenically spectacular and beautiful scenery in these islands, challenging the thinking visitor to ascertain the causal relationship between physical environment and language retention which this work, among other things, attempts.

One has inevitably mixed feelings in advising the reader to hasten to visit these last outposts of a dying language while they are still there and while there are plenty of old people still able to talk about the Irish-speaking life which is now being lost. It is sad, but talking to them in English will emphasize the inadequacy of their Irish and talking to them even in fluent 'school-Irish' (the synthesized standard language which is nowhere native) will do much the same, despite the best of intentions. Irish thrived on relative remoteness and lack of visitors, and it is symptomatic that one can now tour all the Gaeltacht districts in comfort by car in about a fortnight, omitting only a few of the offshore islands where ferries would add to the time. This could not be done thirty years ago, when cars were few in the west and roads much worse, and a hundred years ago such a tour would have occupied two months or more on foot or by

wagonette. Travelling time has contracted immensely in a few short generations and most Gaeltachtaí (plural; see glossary, appendix 1) do now cater for visitors – another revolution since 1956 and, as usual, both excellent for the people and questionable for Irish survival. On reflection, the best advice must be to hasten. . . .

The thirty maps are designed to show the distributions of the Irish language as accurately as possible over the period since 1800, with emphasis (map 8 onwards) on the Gaeltachtaí in independent Ireland and still more on the present position, explored in maps 10–30. The last nineteen maps are devoted to the present official Gaeltacht, county by county. Six of these present the author's considered categorization of the different district subdivisions according to their real Irish strength or weakness. It is hoped that this precision will help to counter the prevailing tendency towards broad generalization about 'the state of the Gaeltacht' and avoidance of all local detail which might hurt people's feelings. Such imprecision leaves Gaeltacht studies all too often in a vague and foggy state. The language is dying at specific places among specific communities which the official Gaeltacht boundaries hardly help to pinpoint and which are hidden in the generalized and averaged data produced for the official Gaeltacht. There will no doubt be local disagreement as to the justice of my categorizations. Suffice it to say that my sources were sound, sometimes in disagreement, and that the judgements are my own, taken in the light of my own experience. They may be awry on nuances, i.e. on the margins of grades, for in the present state of the Irish language so much is transitional. Changes are most likely to be for the worse, as this is the historic trend.

The book is divided into three main sections. The first outlines the background to the development of the 'language problem' in Ireland. The second is the core of the book and shows what survives of Irish as a native language, indicating precise localities and stressing the tiny scale of the communities involved. It also examines critically the extent to which real gains have been made by revival efforts since 1893 and 1922, and devotes considerable attention to the value and severe limitations of the statistical data, which confuse anyone new to Irish language studies.

The third and final section abstracts the causative factors which have a bearing on Irish language survival, and goes on to place Irish in the context of the many other European minority languages as a preliminary to a final assessment of its present position and prospects. The title of the book anticipates its guarded conclusions.

Acknowledgements and sources

This is not meant to be a book-bound work, for the main source is the author's questions to and answers from people living and working in the various Gaeltachtaí or otherwise concerned with their administration from more distant places such as Dublin. The bibliography provides the literary underlay. Teachers, school inspectors, parish priests and curates, and officials of various ministries, semi-state bodies and local government authorities have all been extremely helpful over the years, their frankness to me usually helped by assurances of confidentiality which I assume are valid until death, unless bilaterally rescinded. The subject is sensitive in nationalistic terms and extremely complex psychologically, in that probably most Irish speakers and most advocates of language 'revival' are constantly torn between what they would wish the future of the language to be and what on the other hand they feel obliged to speak themselves in the normal course of everyday exigencies, even if they are fluently bilingual (see pp. 177–8). People therefore often feel deeply ashamed of their considered views of language prospects, sensing them to be disloyal or defeatist, even when they are thoroughly objective in terms of everyday realities; and if they do not feel disloyal, etc., they know this is what their political or social enemies will say if such views are openly broadcast.

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A book which has germinated over thirty years or more owes many debts, far too many for full acknowledgement. The first inspiration came from Welsh scholars, including most notably Professors G. R. J. Jones, Emrys Bowen, and Estyn Evans, and the detailed practicalities were spelled out with his usual precision by (later) Professor T. W. Freeman. In Ireland itself early direction and impetus were supplied by Professor B. Ó Cuív and S. Ó Súilleabháin of the Irish Folklore Commission, whose local 'folklore collectors', usually retired schoolteachers, proved a mine of information.

Donncha Ó Laoire, secretary of Comdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge,

pointed me towards the real as against the spurious Gaeltachtaí, the distinction being more obscure in 1955 than it may appear now, and Muiris Ó Cinnsealaigh, Deputy Chief Inspector of National Schools, shared a lifetime's wisdom and experience with me, as well as opening numerous doors to my searching enquiries. He introduced me to the three regional Gaeltacht inspectors of national schools who were the main data providers for the 1956 redefinition of the Gaeltacht borders, and to whom I remain deeply indebted for their realistic and sympathetic explanations of the problems of the language in both school and community. Officials of the Gaeltacht Department were then more Dublin-based and had no responsibility for *deontas* awards, but did give valued assistance on the generalities of language policy. Officers of the Land Commission introduced me to the Gaeltacht colonies in Co. Meath and the general field of Gaeltacht 'decongestion' policies.

R. de Valéra, Donn Sigerson Piatt, and Heinrich Wagner also gave advice and guidance.

My work in the Gaeltachtaí has relied heavily on local teachers, priests, folklore collectors, and a miscellany of officials concerned with language work. Assurances of confidentiality for their frank expression of opinions and assessment of local conditions and problems deter me from naming my most recent local informants, lest my own expressed conclusions be attributed to them. This would be doubly unjust, as I have often had to discount a particular view when it was countered by other evidence, and the conclusions here are always my own. However, the quality of my local helpers may be judged by the following list of notable contributors to my groundwork in 1955–7:

Pádraig Breathnach NT, Caisleach, Kerry; John Casey NT, Kilmakerin, Kerry; Annraoi Ó Corrduibh (Henry Corduff) NT, Rosdoagh, Mayo; Seán Costigan NT, Rathcarn, Meath; Tomás mac Cúileannain (Hollywood), Blackrock, Dundalk; Patrick Joyce NT, Derreens, Achill, Mayo; Pádraig Mac Conmidhe, secretary of Comhaltas Uladh; Micheál Mac Enrí (Henry), retired NT and folklore collector (gave evidence to Gaeltacht Commission 1925–6), Bangor Erris, Mayo; Michael J. Murphy, folklore collector and writer (sometimes as M. Ó Murchadha), Warrenpoint, Down; Mairead Nic Dhonnchadha, Tourmakeady, Mayo; Caomhín Ó Cinnéide NT, Baile na nGall, Kerry; Joseph O'Driscoll NT, Clear Island, Cork; Peadar Ó Dubhda, Dundalk; Séumas Ó hEocha (James Hough: 'An Fear Mór': on the Gaeltacht Commission 1925–6) Ring, Waterford; Sean Ó Heochaidh, folklore collector, etc., Gortahork, Donegal; Rev. J. O'Reilly PP, Clonbur, Galway; Mrs Sheridan, Doolough, Mayo; 'An Suibhneach Meann', Coolea, Cork. Spelling and accentuation are as in their correspondence or as otherwise communicated.

There was little need for expert assistance in locating and studying the Conamara and north-west Donegal Gaeltachtaí in the 1950s, for their

presence and authenticity were indisputable except on the outer margins.

Many librarians contributed greatly to the basic research which underlies the historical sections of the book. Most notable were staff of the (then) British Museum, the Manchester Central Reference Library, the National Library of Ireland, and the Royal Irish Academy. Assistance from the librarians of the University of Bradford has been sustained and unstinting over many years.

More recent and/or long-term help which must be acknowledged has come from Pádraig Ó Durcáin and Séumas Ó Raghallaigh of the Gaeltacht Department, and the regional officers at Letterkenny (now Gweedore), Furbogh, and Tralee. Valuable updating was provided by Professor Máirtín Ó Murchú and Nollaig Ó Gadhra, and in their special fields Art Ó Maolfábhail and Nollaig Ó Muraíle of the Place-names Branch of the Ordnance Survey have saved me from countless errors. Pádraig Ó Riagáin was of direct personal assistance at An Foras Forbartha in 1969 –70 and his prolific publications on language matters have continued to guide if not to direct me.

Invaluable assistance was given by officers of the Departments of Education in Dublin and at Bangor, Co. Down, and Údarás na Gaeltachta, Gael-Linn, Raidió na Gaeltachta, and Comhaltas Uladh put me deeply in their debt.

The innumerable Gaeltacht residents who over thirty and more years have welcomed me to their homes, even when I arrived as an unannounced stranger and simply knocked on their doors soliciting guidance, deserve my special thanks. Whatever their views of my conclusions I hope that they will find ample and fair echoes of their own and, if I have sometimes mentioned the unmentionable, will accept that my paramount aim has been to clarify the cloudy issues and to be frank wherever lack of frankness has befogged them.

I must thank Stewart Davidson, cartographer of Bradford University, for his work on the maps. European Studies departmental secretaries under Mrs Jean Davison have struggled nobly with the manuscript and especially with the unfamiliar Irish names and terms.

To my wife I am indebted for her careful and constructive criticism of the draft, the invaluable sorting out of wood from trees, and the provision of much-needed impetus when the depth of material seemed overwhelming. Completion of the book is due mainly to her.

I am indebted to the following for their permission to quote extensively from their own publications and works:

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Colin H. Williams, Department of Geography and Recreation Studies, Staffordshire Polytechnic, for permission to reproduce maps 8, 9, and 10 from my chapter in his edited volume *Linguistic Minorities, Society and Territory* (forthcoming, 1989).

Printed sources

Background reading has constantly intruded to pose its own questions and challenges, and while the bibliography which concludes the book attempts full coverage of the relevant works which have influenced the findings it is appropriate to mention here the more useful and stimulating printed sources.

When the author began work on Irish in the 1950s there was only one current publication which purported to describe the location of the Irish-speaking districts and to discuss their problems. This was a twenty-three page pamphlet entitled *A Board for the Gaeltacht* (1953), prepared as a memorandum for the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) by the state-sponsored language body Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge (see appendix 1, glossary), with five useful maps. These showed the contraction of the various Gaeltachtaí since 1925, but only partially, as they still exaggerated their real extent in a few key areas. The map of the Gaeltacht borders (*Límistéirí Gaeltachta 1956*) published to help define the responsibilities of the newly created Roinn na Gaeltachta (Gaeltacht Ministry/Department) improved on them somewhat, but bibliographic searching failed to find anything useful in print by way of commentary on the language and its problems apart from a splendid but misleadingly titled little work, *Irish Dialects and Irish-speaking Districts* (1951), by Brian Ó Cuív, over half of which consists of a history of the vicissitudes of the language and a very detailed appendix abstracting many of the major sources on the distribution of Irish in (especially) the early nineteenth century. This is still a useful *aide-mémoire* .

Official statistics on language distributions were available in the *Report of the Census of Population of 1946*, unpublished until 1953, but that contained a discouraging introductory warning against placing any reliance upon the figures (p. viii). For any comprehensive account of the Gaeltachtaí and their problems it was necessary to go back to the 1926 *Report of the Gaeltacht Commission* , its excellent maps, and its elusive *Minutes of Evidence* , which were published on a daily basis as evidence was gathered between April and October 1925. The statistics were again unreliable but the work as a whole forms the essential basis of any

thorough study of the fate of the living language in the twentieth century. Almost all the ideas currently being debated on language policy were already aired in it, including the need for and dangers of industrial development in the impoverished heartlands of Irish residual survival.

The detailed local evidence on the basis of which the official Gaeltacht boundaries were drastically contracted in 1956 –7 was never published, but the author's own surveys of that period were greatly assisted by the Gaeltacht inspectors of schools, whose findings and experience were paramount in the redefinition. Many of the local folklore collectors of the Irish Folklore Commission were equally helpful, and as old Gaeltacht residents, commonly retired teachers, they were very well placed as guides.

The nearest thing to a fully objective survey of language survival was published in 1958 as an incidental and subsidiary part of the introductory volume of H. Wagner's *Linguistic Atlas and Survey of Irish Dialects*. The purpose of the survey was to describe the characteristics of the surviving Irish dialects, and these were ascertained by interviewing elderly (average age 70) people at eighty-seven localities between 1949 and 1956. The summary description of these localities, many of which were outside what could still be regarded as Irish-speaking districts, included a pithy assessment of the current state of the language there (vol. I: ix –xvii, including map), and the map classified the survey areas into six categories of Irish usage, three of which rated English the true vernacular. These latter grades were shown to embrace all south-west Donegal and all the present official Gaeltachtaí of Munster except western Corca Dhuibhne/ Corkaguiny: a point which should be noted by all who think decline there is recent. The survey was not meant to be comprehensive in terms of area coverage and did not seek to establish the language boundary, but the use of specifically Irish linguistic criteria to ascertain the extent to which people were truly at ease in the language was unprecedented and, so far as is known, has not been repeated. Adverse comment at the time held Wagner over-meticulous in finding evidence of English dominance in the many anglicisms which characterized the spoken Irish of many districts which it was insisted were otherwise sound in their habitual use of Irish, but my own independent enquiries in 1957 in all cases confirmed Wagner's prognosis.

The bibliography at the end of this book lists all the main sources which have provided background material for it, but the following may be picked out for their special value.

De Fréine's *The Great Silence* (1965) is an idiosyncratic work which nevertheless explores in some depth the causes and consequences of language change in Ireland. It is in marked contrast to the Final Report of the Commission on the Restoration of the Irish Language (An *Coimisiún um Athbheochan na Gaeilge*), published in a 143 page English summary

in 1963 and in full (486 pages) in Irish early in 1964. Both are valuable on the history of efforts at revival but the Irish version is essential for anyone able to make a reasonable attempt at reading it. It is symptomatic of the cost problems of publication in Irish and of the perceived lack of interest that no full translation was ever thought necessary.

The Commission report was quickly followed by a government White Paper, *Restoration of the Irish language* (1965), which in turn engendered brief progress reports in 1966 and 1968. Far more impressive from the point of view of detailed practical proposals to maintain the Irish-speaking population in their home areas were the *Gaeltacht Planning Reports* published by An Foras Forbartha (for the state) in 1971 and the rival Galway Gaeltacht Survey, which though originally intended to be an integral part of the series was published independently by its director, B. S. Mac Aodha, in 1969 (Hanly, 1971; Ó Riagáin, 1971; Mac Aodha, 1969). Despite brief caveats, none of these studies dealt frankly and fully with the basic fact that much of the area they were concerned to develop and maintain had ceased to speak Irish for normal everyday purposes some time earlier. This weakness has been a major stimulus to the present author's work, for it has long seemed obvious to him that an attempt to extend effective state aid to 'the Gaeltacht' must be directed precisely and with careful discrimination to just those places where Irish is either in full daily use *or* understood at levels of traditional fluency sufficiently high to make its restoration to daily use a realistic and practicable proposition for the immediate future. This point was made in the Gaeltarra/SFADCO report *Gníomh don Ghaeltacht: Action Programme for the Gaeltacht* (1971), but again the sensitivity of the issue prevented any pinpointing of areas in question. These reports, taken together, do nevertheless form a firm bedrock for objective study of the Gaeltacht areas and their problems.

The state's creation in 1969 of a council, Comhairle na Gaeilge, to advise on Irish-language matters generally, resulted rapidly in the publication of five substantial papers on language policy and Gaeltacht local government. No. 1, *Language and Community* (1970), by Máirtín Ó Murchú, made a notable start, followed up by practical proposals. The most authoritative work on national language policy to be produced in the 1970s was the 1975 *Report* of the Committee on Irish Language Attitudes Research (CILAR), the result of a thorough sample survey conducted throughout the Republic but with detailed attention to twenty-three district electoral divisions within the official Gaeltacht. This forms essential reading, but involves the terrible frustration for a geographer or anyone else with a sense of place that its valuable data were published for DEDs which were coded by number so as to retain their anonymity (p. 231). Hence although 'some kind of bias in the Donegal 11 report' is indeed suspected (p. 253) it is not possible to make the normal local assessments and adjustments which knowledge of any particular Gaeltacht

setting makes possible when attempting to understand apparently anomalous linguistic evidence from a specified place. Anonymity for individual informants should be distinguished from anonymity for areas and districts, though it must be admitted that attitude surveys on a district basis may be expected to be distorted by considerations of the possible loss of language-related grants which might be expected to follow from publication (as distinct from confidential communication) of objective local linguistic attitudes and performance.

Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin (1984) repeated much of the CILAR survey a decade later, with several refinements, and largely confirmed its findings in their *Preliminary Report* – which has remained their final one so far (1989). Ó Riagáin (1988b) has yet more recently exposed some dangers of more narrowly drawn Irish language attitude surveys, especially in relation to compulsory Irish in the schools.

The flow of substantial official and semi-official reports and papers temporarily dried up in the mid-1970s, when real progress was being made in Gaeltacht secondary education and economic development and the new (1975) Bord na Gaeilge, founded by the state to oversee the general promotion of Irish, was pondering how to undertake its task. It eventually produced its *Action Plan for Irish 1983–86* and three annual progress reports thereafter. They are all realistically depressing and overly bureaucratic in their approach and record, attempting to push language maintenance and revival out of the narrow bounds of token respect and symbolic usage. Public bodies were required to report annually on progress with Irish in their own offices and work, and their reports were summarized in Irish or in English, presumably as submitted. The nadir of these is probably the fourth item of 'implementation' reported by the Geological Survey Office in 1986: 'A table was set aside in the tea room each Wednesday for those who wish to speak Irish' (Bord na Gaeilge 1986: 72).

Much more has been achieved by Údarás na Gaeltachta, the elective Gaeltacht Authority set up in 1979 as a successor to the Gaeltacht Industries Board, Gaeltarra Éireann, but with wider powers and responsibilities in the fields of education and cultural activities. Weighty and broad-ranging publication on language matters has not yet featured in its strictly practical programme. Its annual reports are businesslike in every sense and signify little unless one knows a mass of essential background, a reasonable amount of which is given in *Rural Development in the West of Ireland* , ed. P. Breathnach (Maynooth 1983), and more thinly in *Change and Development in Rural Ireland*, ed. P. Breathnach and M. E. Cawley (Maynooth 1986).

Polemical comment on the school-based attempt to revive Irish as the first language of Ireland has been plentiful for many years and is neatly summarized in J. R. Edwards's *Language, Society and Identity* (Oxford

1985: 56–62). The Irish National Teachers' Organization 1941 *Report . . . on the Use of Irish as a Teaching Medium to Children whose Home Language is English* is a classic critique, ignored by the state until well after J. Macnamara had published his analytically critical *Bilingualism and Primary Education* in 1966, in Edinburgh. The abandonment of fixed dogmas has led to much more objective consideration of schools' policies, represented by E. A. Hilliard's *Changes in the Usage of Irish among Gaeltacht Children at School Entry 1970–1980* (ITÉ 1981) and Bord na Gaeilge's own Advisory Planning Committee report *Irish and the Education System* (1986), neither of which allows revivalist sentiments to cloud its judgement.

The same cannot be said of Bord na Gaeilge's most recent (1988) Advisory Committee report on *The Irish Language in a Changing Society*, which denounces current state policies as tending towards 'benign assimilation ' and 'anglicization by stealth'. It recognizes the innumerable obstacles posed to successful language policies by prevailing socio-economic trends and ambivalent public opinion, but demands that 'the state' assert firm leadership to restore supportive motivations and incentives by a return to the public-sector compulsion which was discredited by the 1960s and recommends as essential its extension into the private sector as well. This reads very much as a counsel of despair, a 'coded' way of saying that the prospect is hopeless without extreme measures which the report's own evidence demonstrates are unlikely to be attempted, let alone successfully implemented. Responsibility for this is placed on the people and the state, with appropriate socio-economic excuses for both; but the overt recommendations are unrealistically utopian at this terminal stage in Irish decline and would need enforcement by an elite class of Platonist 'guardians' which it is difficult to envisage finding acceptance in modern Ireland.

ITÉ, i.e. Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann (Linguistics Institute of Ireland), has been publishing on language matters, initially under the aegis of the Department of Education, since about 1976, and the twenty-five issues of its journal *Teangeolas* (up to early 1989) contain much essential material – occasionally in Irish only and frequently about languages other than Irish. The title means *Linguistics*.

General works on the language which may be commended are now quite numerous but some established classics still deserve mention, starting with Douglas Hyde's *Literary History of Ireland from Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London 1899) and T. F. O'Rahilly's *Irish Dialects Past and Present* (Dublin 1932). D. Corkery's *The Fortunes of the Irish Language* (Dublin 1954) was too tendentious for comfort and the best early history of the language is in numerous references to it in the works of E. Curtis, especially his *History of Medieval Ireland from 1086 to 1513* (London 1938 edn) – this is now slowly being replaced by the

multi-volume *New History of Ireland* (T.W. Moody *et al.*, 1976 ff.). On the modern revival of Irish and its struggle for survival S. Ó Tuama's *The Gaelic League Idea* (Cork 1972) is a small but sound symposium volume, and the same applies to the same publisher's *The English Language in Ireland*, edited by D. Ó Muirithe (1977) and presenting some of the other side of the Irish language's historical problems.

A View of the Irish Language, ed. B. Ó Cuív (Dublin 1969) is a well balanced symposium by eleven leading authors, originally prepared for a lecture series on Radio Éireann and covering most aspects of the language's history and literature. T. P. Coogan's *Ireland since the Rising* (London 1966) has hardly dated and provides a cogent account of the history of the state, distilling that of the Gaelic movement into a useful twenty-two pages (183–205), roughly four of which are about the Gaeltacht. Quite different in character but very well illustrated, readable, and entirely reliable is Máirtín Ó Murchú's seventy-seven page booklet *The Irish Language*, published by the Department of Foreign Affairs (and in this case Bord na Gaeilge) in its 'Aspects of Ireland ' series. Final reference must be made to volume 70 of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 1988, edited by Pádraig Ó Riagáin and entirely devoted to language planning in Ireland. Ó Riagáin's name is a recommendation in itself – he was a leading figure in the Gaeltacht Development Studies of 1971 – and he has here contrived to bring together almost all the leading Irish authorities on the language in education and socio-economic life except Ó Murchú himself.

I am sorry to have relegated to the bibliography many other helpful sources and all non-Irish writers except Edwards, who has so greatly broadened my horizons at the psychological end of sociolinguistics and to whom I feel indebted for introducing me to G. F. Streib's *exposé* (1974) of the concept and practice of 'patterned evasion', i.e. the regularized evasion or violation of utopian or 'heroic' standards or norms otherwise notionally expected to control actual behaviour. This provides the key to understanding why it is so normal for large majorities of Irish people both to favour the revival of the language and to be prepared to do nothing inconvenient towards that end.

Part 1

Background

Chapter one

Irish before 1800

The Irish language is one of the Celtic sub-group of the Indo-european language family and is closely related to Scottish Gaelic, which only slowly broke away from it in the thousand years after *Irish* Gaelic speakers had set out to colonize south-west Scotland from around the fifth century A.D. Before that Gaelic seems to have been confined to Ireland, save for a few colonies in western mainland Britain, which was otherwise dominated by people speaking Brittonic languages from which modern Welsh and continental Breton are descended. In northern Britain the enigmatic Picts appear to have included Celts with Brittonic linguistic affinities and an older, more northerly group of different but pre-Indo-european speech, about which little is known and a great deal speculated.

Irish was thus a militantly expanding language until around A.D. 1000 and did succeed in displacing its Brittonic rivals (including Strathclyde or Cumbrian Welsh) and Pictish in Scotland, even subduing Northumbrian English in the Lothians, though impermanently. The first recorded external attacks on its supremacy in Ireland were those of the Norsemen from the early ninth century onwards. The Norsemen or Vikings are usually credited with the introduction of urbanism to Ireland, and especially the foundation of the historic port-cities, including Dublin, Cork, Galway, Waterford, Wexford, and Limerick, the last three of which still bear Norse-derived names. The areal extent of their displacement of the Irish language was none the less extremely limited and within two centuries they were almost entirely assimilated, very much as happened in Normandy, Rus (Russia), and the English Danelaw. Lack of numbers and lack of women settlers must have played a part here. The only significant areas in which the Norse language may have been established sufficiently well to lay the groundwork of future anglicization after the Anglo-Norman conquest which began in 1170 were Fingall in the north of present Co. Dublin and the so-called 'English baronies' of Forth and Bargy in the extreme south-east of Co. Wexford. There are obvious parallels here with the Norse settlements in Gower and the peninsula of southern Pembrokeshire in Wales, and with north-east Caithness in Scotland, all

of which afforded later footholds for English in otherwise Celtic hinterlands. Fingall and south-east Wexford seem never completely to have reverted to Irish speech again.

The Anglo-Norman conquest rapidly enveloped the whole island and established the juridical supremacy of Norman French, relatively soon displaced by English for all but narrowly legal purposes. Yet in most parts of Ireland the conquest proved a veneer and the new landowners intermarried with native families, becoming themselves Irish speakers and indistinguishable from the native Irish to English officials and visitors. Laws enjoining the use of English and prohibiting the use of Irish in the courts and the corporate boroughs recur throughout medieval Irish history, the most comprehensive embodied in the Statutes of Kilkenny of 1366. The salient point is that they were felt necessary – again and again – because they were ineffective and Irish was always insidiously asserting itself despite its lack of legal status. The term 'Old English' had to be invented to distinguish great families which were conscious of their historic rights and status as conquerors for the Crown but who otherwise spoke and behaved like Irishmen and were just as inclined to revolt against royal authority.

Lack of numbers was again crucial. The Anglo-Normans were an elite group with relatively few plebeian settlers, almost everywhere enormously outnumbered by the native Irish, with whom intermarriage was inevitably attractive after initial antipathies. Inadequate medieval transport links could not maintain close relations with the home country, except again in a handful of coastal ports, and the only indigenous linguistic allies were the Norsemen of the tiny territorial pockets already referred to. Fingall with adjacent Dublin formed the core of the 'English Pale', a constricted area covering no more than Co. Dublin with parts of Meath, Louth, Kildare, and Wicklow. Even here the evidence points more closely to subjection to English law than to any consistent or exclusive use of the English language by the people at large. It must always be remembered that in pre-modern times government impinged little on everyday life, so unless there were other pressing reasons to learn English, e.g. for trade, there would be no cause to do so; nor would the government itself be concerned with the language of ordinary people.

It is remarkable that throughout medieval Irish history the province exhibiting least English influence was Ulster, from which Scottish missionaries and conquerors had earlier transferred their Gaelic language and their very name to Scotland. The latter had been known under various names, including Caledonia, Pictavia/Pictland, and Albania/Albany, but these applied only to the parts north of the Forth–Clyde isthmus and it was the Scots from Ireland who united as their kingdom the territories now known as Scotland. Linkages across the North Channel of course worked both ways and were even reinforced by the seafaring Norsemen. This

meant that whenever the Anglo-Normans attempted to conquer or settle Ulster the northern Irish could always seek help or refuge in and from Scotland, and Scotland in turn valued Irish friends who could divert the attentions of the English when, as under Edward I, they threatened the survival of the Scottish state. The Donegal name Gallagher (in Irish *Ó Gallchobhair*) means 'foreign help' and is an ethnic marker similar to Walsh (Irish *Breathnach*), which is widespread in the South, signifies Welsh origin, and is often spelled and/or pronounced *Welsh* in Munster and Connacht. (See Mac Lysaght 1973.) The Welsh, however, came only as auxiliaries of the Anglo-Normans, whereas the Scots represented a balancing political and cultural force which despite the progressive linguistic anglicization of the medieval Scottish monarchy and the Lowlands continued to share the Gaelic heritage in the islands and peninsulas closest to Ireland.

The Tudors under Henry VIII and his successors undertook to pacify their turbulent Irish subjects by enforcing English law and imposing the English language. The Reformation is commonly credited with consolidating the attachment of the semi-hibernicized Old English to Irish customs and usages but it should also be remembered that the first modern-style attempt at English colonization outside the diminutive Pale was the carving out of King's and Queen's Counties (Offaly and Leix) from Irish lands under the Counter-Reformation Mary I and her consort Philip II of Spain in 1556. This met with violent resistance and experienced the usual shortage of ordinary English settlers much below gentleman-adventurer level. Ireland had never attracted the English peasant class, for it combined a hostile population with a cooler and damper climate for agriculture. France had always been far more attractive to the English gentry too and it is scarcely coincidental that the effective end of English aspirations there with the loss of Calais (1558) was followed by their transfer to North America – not swiftly but after less than a century of struggles which confirmed that Ireland was no safe or profitable field for colonization.

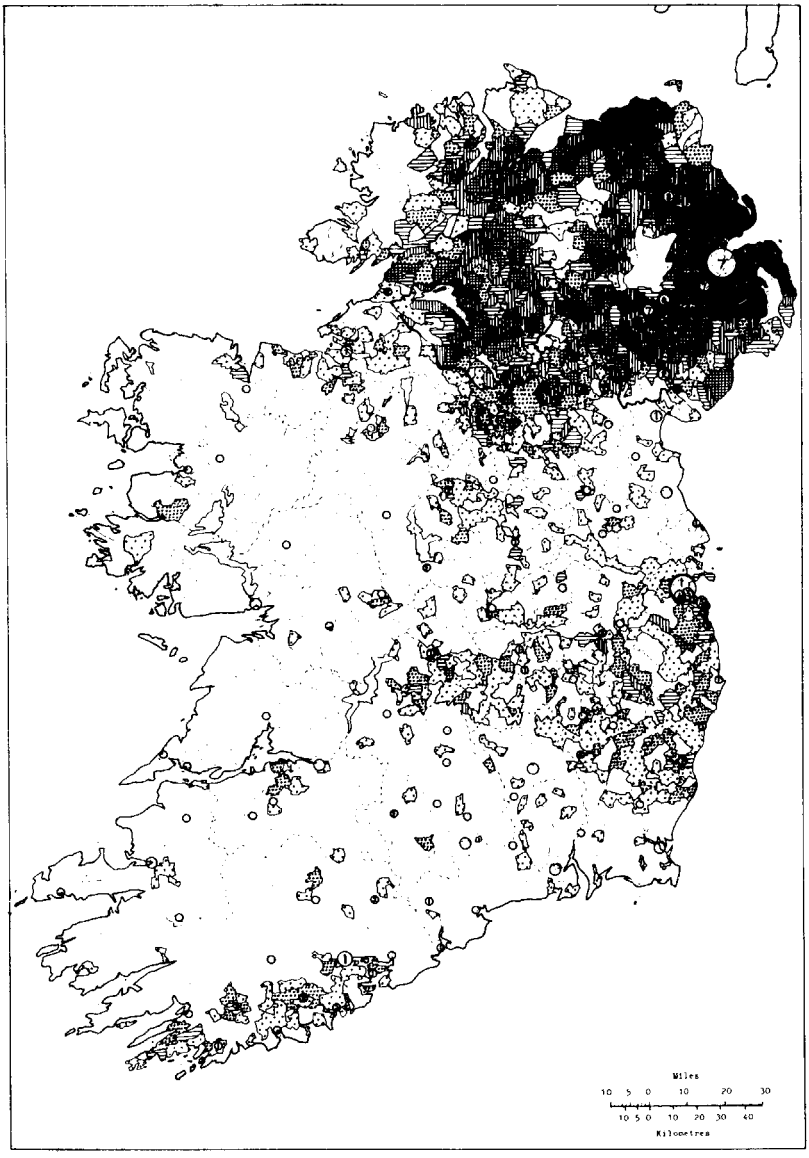
The Marian plantation was a failure that disrupted traditional Irish proprietorship but left a solidly Irish under-tenantry, as no one else wanted their place and new landlords had no use for land without tenants to work it. Much the same applied to Elizabeth's plantation of Munster in 1586 but the Ulster plantation of 1609 onwards was a different matter, for the Union of the Crowns of England and Scotland under James VI and I for the first time united British interests in the joint exploitation of Irish resources.

The agricultural potential of Ireland may have been uninviting to most English country men but was an attractive prospect viewed southerly from much of Scotland. Hence the prominent part played by Scots in providing the basic numbers on which the partial success of the 'Great Plantation'

was founded. The plantation excluded three of the nine Ulster counties, and it is remarkable in terms of subsequent linguistic history that both Antrim and Down were excluded whereas Donegal was not. Again the geography of soils and accessibility by sea provide a readier explanation of the regionally varied progress of colonization than mere changes in land ownership, for new grantees found it very difficult to secure British tenants for poorer land or for land far removed from one of the new defended towns. Private initiative was also used by settlers keen to secure tenancies in the eastern coastal counties. In general the better land fell to immigrant Protestant settlers, and the hills and lowland bogs (as around Lough Neagh) were left to the native Irish Catholic tenantry. The latter can also be shown to have fared better in areas granted to the (Anglican) Church of Ireland, and some interesting anomalies in later denominational distributions relate to this. See for example the land ownership map of the Londonderry plantation in Moody (1939) and the religious map of Ireland for 1911, here map 2. The lowland 'Catholic triangle' marked on the latter at the mouth of Lough Foyle became Church land from 1609. The linguistic result of this was for about two centuries a quiltwork pattern of English- and Irish-speaking districts.

This pattern was not established at one blow, for colonization was severely disrupted by native revolts and concomitant wars which were at their most bloody in the Cromwellian and early Williamite periods. The net result was the almost total exclusion of Catholic landowners from Ulster but a major survival of native people in all but a few small and rich lowland areas. Map 2, compiled from the census reports of 1911, gives a good indication of the extent to which the English-speaking incomers were able to impress themselves on the province. The Protestant element represents the incomers, the Catholic group the native Irish, and although modifications of the pattern have undoubtedly occurred since the last wave of colonization which accompanied the Williamite settlement they consisted principally of the migration of native Irish people into the towns. The religious pattern and with it the pattern of British and Irish settlement was effectively fossilized in the early years of the eighteenth century, and it is most significant that almost everywhere where Catholics formed more than about 30–40 per cent of the population in 1911 there is evidence that Irish was still spoken by all or most of the indigenous inhabitants around 1800.

The Cromwellian settlement scheme of 1653 was grandiosely conceived to clear Leinster and Munster of Irish gentry and landowners and to plant all the corporate towns with 'new English'. It did little to shake the hold of the Irish language among ordinary working people anywhere in the country but did greatly advance that alienation of the gentry from the people which was finally consummated at the end of the century. Without doubt many native Irish landowners changed their religion to save their



1. Rural

Percentage of the population

0 – 10	10 – 20	20 – 30	30 – 40	40 – 50	50 – 60	60 – 70	70 – 80	80 – 90	90 – 100
(no fig.)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Representative figures (used with town circles)

2.Urban

Towns are indicated by circles graded according to population.

Population		Population
150,000 – 250,000	250,000 – 350,000	
50,000 – 100,000	100,000 – 150,000	
Towns Under 10,000	10,000 – 50,000	

Percentages in urban pqpulations are indicated by a figure placed inside the circle.

Map 2 Protestants by towns and district electoral divisions. Census 1911

estates but at the same time they usually accepted the advantages offered by cultivation of the English language in the pursuit of a peaceful civilized life which became a real possibility after the Boyne (1690) and final military pacification.

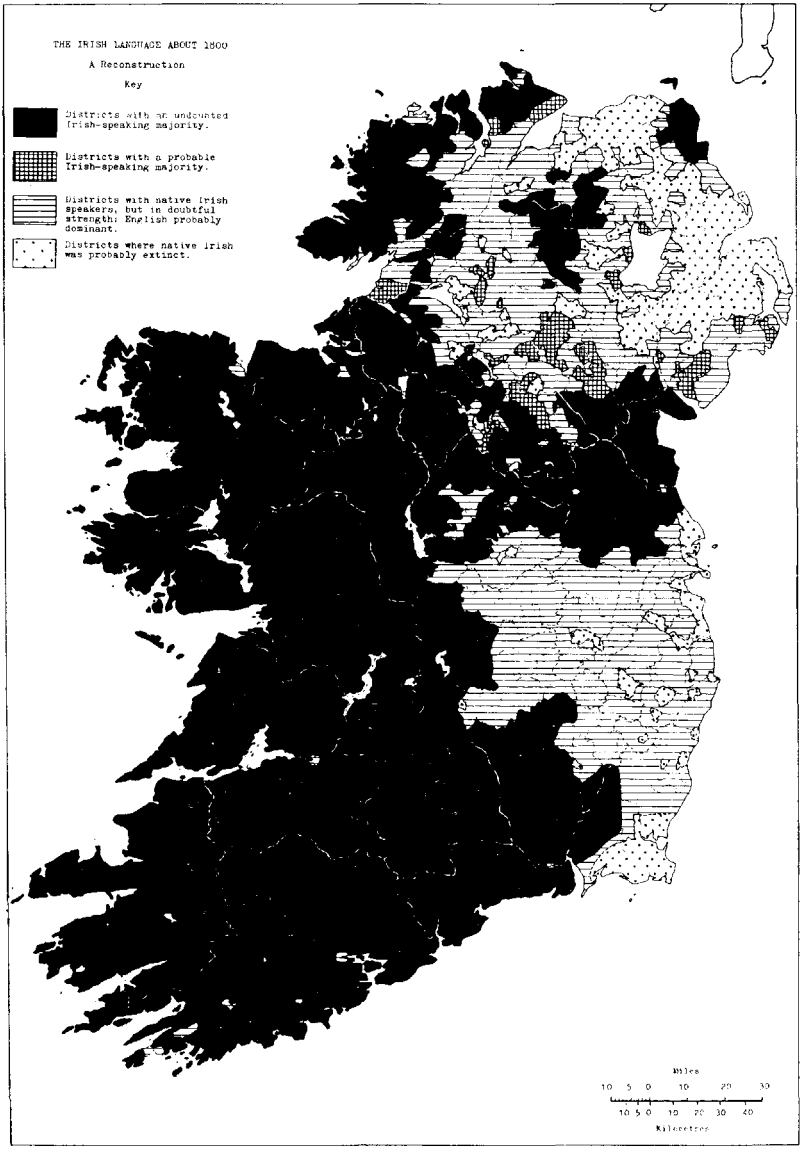
The political instability and recurrent civil disorder of the seventeenth century made sheer survival the main concern of most Irish people and Ó Cuív's review of contemporary sources shows that Irish remained current (if not dominant) in Dublin itself throughout the period (1951: 18). In many country districts outside the planted North its position was still so secure that descendants of Cromwellian settlers were commonly monoglot Irish by 1700. Thereafter it is fairly clear that the spread of the knowledge of English which radiated from the main cities and towns made such assimilation infrequent, but it is unlikely that Irish began to fall into disuse in native homes before about 1750, except in a handful of towns.

The onset and extent of the spread of English and abandonment of Irish among ordinary folk in eastern Ireland received scant attention from eighteenth-century writers, a few of whom remarked on language use at individual places; but there was no comprehensive survey and all that can be said with certainty is that by 1800 the gentry throughout the country were entirely anglicized in their first-language preferences and in most eastern and central Ireland spoke no Irish at all. Yet in very few districts was the language entirely extinct among the native population. Garrett FitzGerald (1984) has shown how the age-grouped Irish-language census returns of 1881 can be used to establish minimum levels of Irish speaking by baronies extending back to before 1800, thus developing earlier work by G. B. Adams (1964–79), who made use of the census returns from 1851 onwards and noted their limitations.

Map 3 here attempts to synthesize their conclusions and to merge them with inferences from the sources abstracted by Ó Cuív and evidence from the O'Donovan and O'Curry Ordnance Survey papers (*c.* 1834–40) in the Royal Irish Academy. Detail has been added in the Ulster counties on the following assumptions:

1. That in 1800 the great majority of Catholics in the North spoke Irish as their native language.
2. That the detailed pattern of religious distributions in 1911 (when details were first published) gave a reliable indication of the patterns in 1800).

In the first case, local ministers who commented on language usage at that time considered it remarkable if Catholics did not speak Irish, and in the second all reliable observers note the relative stability of religious strengths during the nineteenth century, except in the towns, where industrial growth brought a marked Catholic influx. In the country districts higher Catholic birth rates were countered by job discrimination plus higher



Map 3 The Irish language about 1800. A reconstruction based on literary sources and censuses 1851, 1881, 1911

mortality and emigration.

From these two basic assumptions and a study of the contemporary evidence available it appeared to follow that in Ulster:

1. Where over 70 per cent of the population in 1911 were still Catholic a clear majority of the people would have been Irish speakers in 1800.
2. Where there were over 30 per cent of Catholics in 1911 but less than 70 per cent, an Irish-speaking population would have been present in 1800, but of strength unknown, failing other evidence.
3. Where under 30 per cent were Catholics in 1911 there would be no Irish-speaking community at the earlier date.

Only in one case, the parish of Ardstraw, south of Strabane, was reason found to assume the death of Irish in a district with over 30 per cent of Catholics (Mason 1814–19: I, 123), and one must allow the possibility that the reporting minister was not fully acquainted with the intimate lives and language of his Catholic parishioners, who would undoubtedly have been fluent in English but not necessarily to the total exclusion of Irish. That said, the map is merely an assessment of broad probabilities and cannot claim to be more.

The assumptions made for Ulster cannot be applied in the rest of the country, where in general the presence of much lower numbers and proportions of Protestants posed much less of a barrier to the economic and social advancement of Catholics and therefore did much less than in Ulster to remove the main reason they could have for the cultivation of English. In short, Ulster Protestantism imposed a sort of *apartheid* on the native Irish Catholics and by confining them to the lowest social strata and excluding them from all but menial employment gave them no incentive to learn English. The anti-Catholic 'Penal Laws' imposed after 1695 had limited effect on the ordinary agricultural and commercial opportunities available to Catholics in Leinster, which, with its rich farming lands and the capital city of Dublin, steadily developed through the Georgian period and had insufficient Protestants to monopolize any but the highest positions. The influence of Protestantism seems therefore to have been linguistically negative in Ulster, confining Catholics to the native Irish 'ghetto' because of a denial of opportunity, but positive in Leinster, where the Protestants set a lead in which they needed the services of Catholics, who were only too pleased to profit by providing them and to adopt English the better to advance themselves.

The 1911 religious statistics are least satisfactory as a guide to the language map of 1800 in what Freeman (1950) termed the Drumlin-Drift Belt of East Central Ireland, the lake-studded undulating claylands which, marginal to Ulster and Leinster, were heavily influenced by plantation to the north and were prevented by their physical geography from fully sharing the economic advance of Leinster. The area undoubtedly stayed