
McMahon’s *Grand Opportunity* is a nuanced historical account of a key social institution in Ireland at the turn of the nineteenth century—the Gaelic League. As a book, it has few shortcomings, and these may be disposed of summarily: McMahon’s treatment really needed to extend the date he set himself (see above) to the one he identifies as critical, 1915, when the movement was commandeered by what he quaintly refers to as those with ‘advanced nationalist politics’ (p. 212), that is, the IRB. This was the point at which those who had tried to keep the League non-political (like Hyde) gave up and resigned from it. This is not to say that the League did not have a strongly political nationalist complexion, and what McMahon does well is to demonstrate how strenuously contested this was in the heyday of the organisation. As it is, I wonder what happened in the period 1910 until 1915 and another (shorter?) volume seems inevitable.
My second, and admittedly minor criticism, is that although literary revivalism and Yeats’ and Lady Gregory’s work do get a guernsey, albeit briefly, McMahon does not find space for Flann O’Brien’s trenchant satire of League activists at work in *The Poor Mouth*, or Joyce’s in ‘The Mother’ in *Dubliners*. McMahon is a purist who does not depart from his dates, though the Dublin *feis* Joyce imaginatively revisited was set very much in his era and Flann’s critique is timeless even if he had the academicians of later decades in his sights. This failure to address the efflorescence of cognate literary activity in the period, however, has been well canvassed elsewhere and McMahon’s sources are excellent guides for the enthusiast. These are, however, insignificant quibbles about what amounts to a very impressive study of the Irish language movement.

What McMahon does superbly is to quantify the movement in various phases in his chosen time-zone, and also to segment it thematically, and still manage the chronological narrative. Each chapter is a joy for the light it casts, often slant and unexpected, on its subject. To give some examples. Chapter 1 begins with the huge funeral procession (a mile and a quarter!) of Fr O’Growney in 1903, rivalling those of Terence Bellew McManus and Charles Stewart Parnell. Why did huge crowds turn out for a priest who wrote a grammar primer, entitled modestly *Simple Lessons* (known popularly as ‘O’Growney’s’)? Fr O’Growney had grown up English-speaking and acquired the language at Maynooth in the 1880s and had become one of its most effective advocates, arguing that saving the language was a work of both ‘patriotic and pastoral urgency’ (p. 41). McMahon reads those at the funeral as a representative cross-section of the movement: he notes the very high proportion of priests, the numbers of children from Christian Brothers’ schools (great supporters of Irish in the curriculum), but also the industrial workers bands—the slaters’ union, bakers and confectioners, pork butchers and labourers from Dun Laoghaire. He sees it as a symbol of both where the movement came from (with significant clerical investment in the Irish language, an impetus that was lost in O’Growney’s lifetime) and what it became (increasingly nationalist, despite the best efforts to keep it free of politics), and importantly, incorporating those a long way down the social scale. He draws on sources in Irish, does a lot of counting (a major virtue of the work), is sensitive to the vagaries of his sources (sometimes, ironically, the Constabulary monitoring the League for potential subversion), and endlessly scrupulous in interpreting them. One of his main endeavours is to question the middle-class complexion of the movement and to show how it gathered in the working classes, and especially those who were unionised.
Well aware of the highly privileged position priests held until well into the twentieth century in Ireland, McMahon gives a rich and surprising account of their roles in the branches of the movement. Priests were often called upon to act as leaders in local chapters of the Language movement because of the prestige of the priesthood, and also because of their literacy. The seminaries, especially Maynooth (until 1903 when Mannix dismantled the system of compulsory teaching of Irish to priests), were critical to the survival of the language. John MacHale, Archbishop of Tuam, a bullish supporter of the language, and prolific translator and teacher, refused to ordain priests who did not speak Irish. McMahon shows how the proportion of priests who were Branch Presidents expanded hugely after 1898, to a high of 82.4% in 1904, an extraordinary showing in a supposedly secular institution. But priests were both a blessing and a liability in the movement as lay people did not necessarily want to defer to their priests in a non-church context, and League organisers had to tip-toe around them, avoiding confrontations on matters of faith, or appointees to Irish-speaking parishes. Inevitably, if it came to a showdown between faith and language, the former was more compelling for many priests. The League was, nonetheless, an important forum for laity to register direct resistance to their clergy, or covert resistance, and undoubtedly one of the few fora in which they mixed socially.

McMahon derives quite a lot of his numerical evidence from the files of the Crime Special Branch who monitored the organisation, dividing 258 branches into those ‘under Fenian control’ and those ‘under clerical control’ in 1902. Most were considered to be firmly under clerical control, and therefore, presumably in this classification system, not Fenian. The League leaders, some of them Protestants of the stature of Hyde, often had to reaffirm the non-sectarian nature of the constitution of the Gaelic League.

One of the key debating issues within the League was whether or not Irish was a force for or against modernisation and modernity. Cardinal Logue, for instance, was one who saw the movement as a way to counteract modernisation. McMahon argues that it was a bridge to modernity, and that even when divided on economic issues, League members shared expectations that were millennial— that a free Ireland would enjoy a higher level of economic advantage than an Anglicised Ireland. The aim of preserving the language, even if misplaced and unrealised, and not personally followed or achieved by many League members, was nonetheless an impetus for social and political change.

One of the most fascinating and most quantitative chapters in the history is Chapter 3 where McMahon addresses the question of membership by class and creed, finding it was not as exclusivist (Catholic and nationalist) as some earlier commentators had assumed. He notes that
membership from the Gaeltacht was weak, and he explains that as to some extent understandable in that they did not have a ‘good’ to acquire, and were short of survival goods, and wary of the League’s political agendas.

He also addresses the issue of effectiveness of the League and again, the figures are discouraging: the number of Irish speakers declined in the period 1901–11. However, in areas where Irish was not spoken, there were higher numbers claiming to speak the language, especially in the northern counties (Antrim, Down, Tyrone and Fermanagh) and even in Belfast itself, though competence among these new speakers of the language was not high.

The language movement was a forum in which ‘different creeds [met] in friendliness’ (p. 114, 116), according to Rev. J.O. Hannay, Anglican rector of Westport, County Mayo. Although in the minority, Protestants were an important part of the Revival movement, even in places like Dublin and Tralee, though more significantly during the period in which the Feis of the Nine Glens operated in Belfast and County Antrim.

The teaching of Irish was made possible by a small number of full-time native-speaking timiri (organisers) drawn from the ranks of farmers, shopkeepers, labourers. From 1898 until 1915, they engaged in gruelling travelling by bicycle from class to class, often over huge territories of 100 square miles, for a meagre salary, working in national schools by day and League adult classes at night. With hard-headed realism, McMahon makes the point that these heroics were markers of upward mobility, and that one of the ambitions of the Language movement was to stem the tide of emigration, especially from the western counties. Certainly, such activities gave pride and meaning to speaking and being Irish in the period before the Free State, and were a step up on the social and educational ladder for those practitioners.

These Irish revivalists were also exposed to organisations only tangentially interested in the League and its linguistic agendas—like the Temperance and Total Abstinence advocates (popular with both the Catholic and Protestant clergy), those advocating Irish industries (some League activities mandated clothes of Irish manufacture) and protectionism of Irish produce, and Nationalists who covertly and overtly advocated their cause, organising lectures on literary, historical and contemporary issues. But the League also provided opportunities for fun and craic. There are several chapters dealing with feiseanna (eistefodds featuring competitive song, dance, language arts and even homespun drama) and monster processions, big public celebrations of Irishness. The language sometimes took a back seat to pure pleasure, and they were very popular, not to say, populist events, especially in the provinces.
This is a very challenging and enlivening discussion of the phenomenon of the processes of group identity and gives insight into the many ways in which identity can be spliced and re-woven. The intersections between churches, nationalisms, languages, modernities, traditions, free trade and protectionism that existed in Ireland in the period 1893–1910 are extremely well documented in this book, and the complexities adumbrated clearly, numerically (where possible) and engagingly.

FRANCES DEVLIN-GLASS

Deakin University