

# Notes on Gender and the Politics of the Irish Language in Northern Ireland

by Camille O'Reilly

*C'est la question des genres à l'intérieur du mouvement du renouveau de la langue en Irlande du Nord qui a inspiré cet article. L'auteure met en contraste*

*les observations faites par d'autres chercheurs qui font un travail analogue dans d'autres localités.*

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Over the past decade or two interest in the Irish language

in Northern Ireland has increased, particularly amongst the nationalist<sup>1</sup> community. The 1991 census included a question about the Irish language for the first time since Ireland was partitioned in 1921, with 37,253 people claiming to have some knowledge of the language in the Belfast Urban Area alone (West Belfast Economic Forum). Irish medium preschool playgroups, elementary schools, and secondary schools have mushroomed all over the North, especially in West Belfast, and the number of Irish classes for adults has also grown. There is an Irish language bookstore and a bilingual cafe housed in the *Cultúrlann*, an Irish language cultural centre in West Belfast. A week hardly passes without Irish language activities being held in the city, including music events, social evenings, lectures, and plays.

I have been involved in fieldwork with the Irish language movement in West Belfast since April 1992. My primary interest has been the social construction of the Irish language and its importance in the politics of identity in the north of Ireland. The most intensive period of research was from June 1993 to January 1995, but my involvement in Irish language circles has been ongoing. In addition to observations made in Irish classes

and at Irish language events and gatherings, I carried out 82 in-depth interviews with people involved with the movement in a variety of different capacities. I talked to activists, teachers, Irish language learners, and the parents of children in the Irish schools, and took an oral history of each person's involvement with the language.

It came as no surprise, though, that gender became an important consideration during my field research. While, as has been observed by so many female anthropologists before (Golde; Bell, Caplan, and Karim), my gender was important to my experience as a researcher, I also noticed gender patterns in the revival movement that were of interest not only because they contrasted with observations made by other researchers doing similar work in other locations (especially McDonald 1986, 1989), but because they both reinforced and broke certain western gender stereotypes.

## A woman in the field

The gender of the ethnographer is one aspect of identity which has come under increasing scrutiny (see Okely; Ardener 1975, 1984; Callaway). Hastrup (1987) discusses the significance of the sex of the fieldworker with reference to her own experiences during research in Iceland. She points out that when conducting fieldwork "at home," gender-markers tend to be the same for both the ethnographer and the group being studied. Whereas in "exotic" tribes the female ethnographer may lack such markers and therefore be treated as an "honorary male," at home she is more likely to be classified according to her feminine gender. For Hastrup, this meant taking part in the world of women, and encountering difficulties when she attempted to take part in traditionally male activities.

In Belfast gender roles are not so clear cut, and it has thus been more difficult to assess the impact of my own gender on access to certain circles and on other aspects of my research. The only domain to which I could not gain access was all-male socializing, for example, in the pub. But most Irish language social occasions involve both sexes, so this never really became an issue. While there are certain organizations or groups which tend to be male-dominated, none are openly exclusive.

My position in the community of *Gaeilgeoirt* (Irish language enthusiasts) and in West Belfast in general changed part way through my fieldwork when I married my partner. While people already knew me as a researcher and an Irish language learner, this was a new role which subtly (and not so subtly) altered my status. Irritating as it was at times to be referred to as someone's wife, instead of being identified as a person in my own right, it had certain advantages. I seemed to become more invisible in my role as researcher, and I seemed to stand out less as a stranger (on a number of occasions, it was

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apparent by what people said that they had momentarily "forgotten" that I was a foreigner). Marrying an Irishman legally changed my foreign status, and eventually I was able to obtain Irish citizenship. The fact that I married a *Gaeilgeoir*, however, was more significant in terms of my position as a stranger. In my encounters with some people, my status became

more ambiguous. In some ways and under some circumstances I was still foreign, but in other ways and under other circumstances I was considered Irish. Within my closest circle of friends I had crossed over an invisible line. The fact that I could speak Irish with relative fluency and had married an Irishman made me more Irish than foreign, especially in terms of the behaviour and beliefs that were now expected of me. Being connected

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to the community through marriage made me feel more accepted, but my ability to speak Irish and my lengthy stay in the "field" were important factors as well.

#### Women in the revival movement

It is interesting to note the symbolic importance of the metaphor "mother tongue" in the Brehon movement in relation to the emphasis placed on the role of women and mothers in the Irish revival movement. McDonald suggests that this metaphor evokes an "image of primitive primacy and primordial cultural attachment, and the notion has gathered an increasing moral imperative associated with the relationship of mother to child" (1986, 184). The equivalent term in the Irish language revival movement is generally "native tongue" (*teanga dhuchais*). In all my years of fieldwork, I cannot recall the term "mother tongue" being used in West Belfast, while "native tongue" or "our own language" are very common. Perhaps significantly, the mother-child relationship does not take such a central place in terms of strategies for passing on the language.

Yet, McDonald (1989; 1986) notes that Brehon language militants viewed women, and mothers in particular, as especially important in the passing on and survival of the language. She notes also that the few female activists with prominent roles in the movement "have first done their duty as Brehon-speaking wives and moth-

ers" (1986, 178). According to McDonald, a primary goal of the independent Brehon language nursery schools, set up by the organization *Diwan* (Seed), is "to realize the image of a rightfully Brehon-speaking childhood and a properly Brehon-speaking motherhood" (1986, 185). In 1980, a congress of all *Diwan* members urgently discussed the question of how to get more mothers to learn Brehon and speak it to their children in the home. Not surprisingly, mothers present at the congress protested, saying that they had jobs and no time to learn Brehon, and that in any case it was chauvinistic to expect mothers to bear the burden alone. While it was eventually agreed that fathers could help out, the notion of a "father tongue" rather than a "mother tongue" was met with some mirth (McDonald 1986, 186).

In contrast, the Irish language revival movement in Northern Ireland tends to emphasize the promotion of Irish as the primary language of the home. Since confining the language to the classroom is seen as one of the failings of past policies to promote Irish, great emphasis is placed on the language being used in as many spheres of life as possible. Many consider the home to be the most crucial sphere for the survival of Irish as a living language. It could be argued that the private sphere of the home is strongly associated with women and the family, and therefore an emphasis on the home is *de facto* an emphasis on the role of women in propagating the language. However to my knowledge, there has been no widespread effort to promote the idea that a woman must speak Irish to her children for the language to survive, as seems to be the case in McDonald's study.

The ideal situation is considered to be both parents fluent and speaking Irish in the home at all times. Less favourable but more common is one fluent parent using Irish as much as possible. Where neither parent is fluent, there is a strong push for them to learn at least some Irish and use it whenever possible, even if only in helping with the homework or

through the use of simple order form sentences commonly used with small children (for example, *Ith do dhinnear* and *Druid an doras*—"Eat your dinner" and "Close the door"). In the north of Ireland, the majority of parents sending their children to Irish medium schools have little or no Irish, so the final case is the most common.

At the time that the first Irish medium school was set up, however, this was not the case. The school was part of an ambitious attempt to establish an urban *Gaeltacht* (Irish-speaking area) in the late 1960s on the Shaws Road in what was then the outskirts of West Belfast. The *Gaeltacht* was organized to bring together Irish-speaking families into one area to provide mutual support. In the previous generation, there had been four or five families in Belfast who attempted to use Irish as the language of the home, but most failed to reach this goal due in large part to isolation. By bringing this new set of families together into one neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city, *Gaeilgeoirt* succeeded for the first time in creating an environment where Irish could be used not only as the language of the home, but as the language of daily communication between neighbours and friends as well. As the children grew up, the parents started their own primary school so that the children could continue to speak Irish in as many domains as possible.

The success of this is reflected in the comment of one of my interviewees who grew up on the Shaws Road in its early years. He told me he had mostly a passive knowledge of English until he was old enough to go to secondary school. He spoke Irish at home, in school, and with his neighbourhood friends. English came from the television, the grandparents, trips to the shops, and contact with local English-speaking children. Although he must have had a good command of the language, he never *felt* fluent or comfortable with English until well into secondary school.

Eleven families can only produce so many children, however, and by the late 1970s it became necessary to

bring in English-speaking children in order for the school to survive. The number of English-speaking children attending the Shaws Road *bunscoil* (primary school) required special measures to bring fluency up to the point where the children could learn through Irish. The solution was two years of nursery school education through Irish (starting around age two), and efforts to get the parents of the children involved in the school

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and in learning at least basic Irish. Even at this stage, no special emphasis was put on the mothers of the children over the fathers. In fact, as McDonald also noted in Brittany, men tend to know more Irish and attend Irish classes more frequently than women (1989; 1986).

This is not to say that it is considered unimportant for women to know Irish, only that little special emphasis has been placed on this aspect. One of my interviewees mentioned to me that her father had some Irish, but did not teach it to the children. When as an adult she asked why, he told her that he thought it was more important for the mother to have Irish and teach it to the children. The same woman complained about the difficulties involved in learning Irish for many women:

*It's important for the woman of the house, or whoever is home the most, to have it [Irish]. It's difficult for a woman with children to go to classes though. You need to get child care for the morning, school is out in the afternoon, and you have to put the kids to bed at night. There's not enough facilities, and when there is a creche it's always overbooked. It's badly geared for women, but if they're the ones with the children, carting them back and forth to school, it's very important for the woman to have Irish. You need to have classes that you're comfortable in to ask*

*questions. There needs to be something arranged for women, maybe while the children are at the natoscoil. Gaelscoil na bhFál is working on this, but the Bunscoil never seemed to get anything like that off the ground.*

Some provision has been made for women, with day classes occasionally being directed towards them especially. There has also been the occasional mother and child class, although not many compared to the overall number of classes available.

Another complaint is the lack of vocabulary for subjects of particular interest to women, since such things are rarely taught in ordinary classes. How do you talk about your menstrual cycle or the experience of being pregnant? What is the word for menopause? How do you baby talk to an infant in Irish? Not only are these topics not taught in the great majority of classes, most women would probably feel uncomfortable asking for information or lessons on these subjects in an ordinary class setting.

Because of greater responsibilities in the home and with the children, married women and women with families often have less free time to devote to learning Irish than men (see Okley; Jackson). One parent, commenting on her initial lack of interest in Irish, clearly did not have the same free time her unemployed husband had to pursue an interest in something as time-consuming as a language. While she worked part-time and looked after the housework and the children, he had the time to take numerous classes and develop his interest in the language.

The need for babysitters often restricts women's ability to attend night classes, or to attend with the frequency and dedication necessary to reach fluency. Many women I spoke to had been learning for years, yet still could not speak more than a few sentences. Often they would begin the same course or classes on the same level year after year, but would be unable to complete the course or advance to higher level classes due to

poor attendance and/or lack of time for study and revision. While this pattern is not unique to women, more men than women are able to break out of it and progress to greater levels of fluency. This is reflected in the relatively low proportion of women attending advanced classes in places like *Cumann Chluain Ard*, an Irish language club established in West Belfast in the 1930s. The same interviewee who complained about classes not being designed for women had this to say:

*Every time I went to classes I ended up falling pregnant. I have seven kids, but I would have had eleven but for miscarriages and two that died. For 12 years I haven't had a single year free. I keep having to start over from the beginning.*

During an intensive course which involved classes on two or three mornings per week, I met a number of women who enthused about the timing of the classes. They started at ten o'clock in the morning, and one woman was pleased that she was able to make breakfast, take the kids to school, do the housework and get the shopping before the class, and then get home in time for the children returning from school. Evening classes, she told me, were out of the question. However, the evening classes are more

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popular, and tend to run throughout the year instead of in short bursts like day classes (with the exception of courses which lead to formal second-level qualifications which can be taken during the day throughout the academic year). There also tends to be more socializing afterwards in evening classes.

By far the best way to become

fluent in Irish is to take a university degree in the language, or at least to study for a second-level qualification such as GCSE or "A" levels. Failing this, having a social life through Irish is considered to be a crucial part of obtaining fluency in the language. Classes alone are not enough. Women also tend to have less leisure time and are less able to socialize through Irish. In addition to this, in my own experience with learning Irish during my

made the space to learn Irish is by volunteering to work in the *nátonraí*, Irish medium nurseries. Volunteering as a nursery worker gives a person the opportunity to listen to and speak Irish for a number of hours every day, and provides an "excuse" to attend classes more frequently to improve the standard of their Irish.

During the 1980s nursery education was the biggest area of growth in the language revival. Small groups of people came together in many areas of the North to start their own *nátonra*, either to prepare their children to attend an established *bunscoil* or in the hope of eventually founding a new *bunscoil* in their area. Throughout the '80s, most *nátonraí* were independent organizations with little or no government funding.<sup>2</sup> Irish medium education was gaining in popularity, and being involved in setting the nursery schools up was a source of cultural capital.

During the 1980s, the West Belfast language organization *Glór na nGael* expended most of its efforts helping to start *nátonraí*, since this was the main focus of the revival movement at the time. Since a higher proportion of men worked in *Glór na*

*nGael*, perhaps this led to a larger number of men becoming involved in nursery work. There are still more women than men working in the *nátonraí*, but the unusually high proportion of men is an interesting deviation from the norm for nursery schools. Undoubtedly another factor is the larger number of male fluent speakers, making male teachers and nursery workers more common. Although there is little or no self-conscious feminism in the nursery schools movement, feminist ideology has nevertheless had an indirect impact. While caring for young children is still seen as predominantly women's

work, there is no perceived threat to masculinity associated with an involvement in the nursery schools and no special measures are taken by the men involved to assert or protect their masculine identity.

While many of the more high profile figures in the Irish language movement are men, there are quite a number of women in important and sometimes powerful positions. In Belfast as a whole there are 68 co-educational English medium primary schools, one-third of which have female principals (Morgan and Lynch). The six Irish medium primary schools in Belfast are also co-educational, and five are large enough to have a principal. Of these five *bunscoileanna*, four are headed by women. Both the Irish language bookstore and the cafe in the *Cultúrlann* are owned and run by women, the current administrator of the *Cultúrlann* is a woman, and the spokesperson of *Glór na nGael* was for many years a woman.

Other organizations are clearly male-dominated. For example, the editor and most of the staff of the Irish language newspaper *Lá* are men. *Cumann Chluain Ard* in particular has a reputation as a male preserve. In its early years it was heavily male-dominated, and it remains largely so today, particularly in terms of teachers and active members. The first woman chair of *Cluain Ard* was not elected until the late 1980s, and she did not remain in the position for long. A number of women attending classes there commented on the perception that *Cluain Ard* was male-dominated, and I noticed it myself when I first started attending classes. A comment made by one interviewee is illustrative:

*My mother was never really keen, well I won't say she wasn't keen about the language, but she didn't really have much time for it, and I think it was because my father spent so much time in the Cluain Ard. He was out every night of the week. The women were called the Cluain Ard widows.... Cluain Ard came first and everything else*



Mural in Ardoyne, North Belfast, depicting Éire, Queen of the Tuatha dé Danaan. The caption in Irish reads: "To Lift the Spirit of the People Through Culture." Photo: Camille O'Reilly

fieldwork, I found women to be much more shy about using what Irish they knew. They were afraid of making mistakes and looking foolish much more than men, and were more likely to underestimate their abilities. Men, on the other hand, tended to be less shy about attempting to speak and were more likely to accurately assess, or even to overestimate, their abilities with the language. Since the best way to learn is to speak and have your mistakes corrected, this tendency diminishes women's learning experience and inhibits their ability to reach fluency.

One way that some women have

was second. But my mother did go around to Cluain Ard herself. That's where she met my daddy, who was an Irish teacher.

During a discussion about Belfast in the late 1970s, another interviewee put it more succinctly. When I asked, "What was *Cluain Ard* like back then?" she replied, "Male."

### Concluding remarks

Even without the self-conscious adoption of feminist ideologies, the impact of feminist thinking is clear in many areas of the Irish language revival movement in Belfast. Women have taken on relatively powerful positions in the revival movement in spite of the difficulties in acquiring fluency encountered by many. In the case of primary school principals, women tend to dominate in Irish medium schools in contrast to their English-speaking counterparts. While it is difficult to say why this is the case, it may be linked to the fact that Irish medium schools are established independently. They almost invariably operate outside of the mainstream educational establishment for the first few years of their existence, until they succeed in obtaining government recognition and funding. The *bunscoileanna* tend to be quite small in the first few years until pupil numbers expand sufficiently to gain government support. In such a context there are, perhaps, fewer barriers to women gaining higher status positions.

Finally, the conceptualization of Irish as the "native" tongue of the Irish people—rather than their "mother" tongue—has significant implications for the way that the relationship between language and people is envisioned.

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*theme which will be published in 1998.*

<sup>1</sup>In Ireland, the term "nationalist" refers to those people, usually Catholic and ethnically Irish, who wish to see some form of a united Ireland or at the very least, the establishment of significant cross-border institutions connecting the north and south of Ireland. Unionists, on the other hand, wish to see Northern Ireland remain a part of the United Kingdom and are deeply suspicious of any kind of cross-border institution.

<sup>2</sup>Increasingly, *natonrra* are established as part of a particular *bunscoil* rather than as independent schools.

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**KATHRYN ALEXANDER**

### **Roots of My Language**

Where do the roots of my language come?  
Come a riddle, come a riddle,  
come a root root root  
come a wee wee man in a red red coat  
with a staff in his hand and a stone in his throat  
come a riddle, come

heart stones, the bitter root  
my grandmother speaks, fed by her stories.  
Our skin is tough and filled with memory.  
The root of the heart is blood red and biting  
memory breaks through, the thorns push from inside  
from inside bites off the artery  
archery of relations, I want to know where  
the arrows slide—taut uncertainty  
of connections, mothers daughters  
fathers sons, how much further can it go?

I want to know  
where does the cut come  
sadness feathers down  
the edges frayed but not bleeding

a child separates from her body  
a chorus of memories  
a century of weeping

a geranium, the washed out bones of a flower,  
that bird, "poor jim ... poor jim"  
gathered up in the ribbons of wedding guests.  
When Nana died I lost all the stories.

*Kathryn Alexander is a doctoral student in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, where she is exploring the politics of feminist literacy and textual "identity." When the occasional poem erupts from her weary soul, she is exceedingly glad of her brooding and fey Celtic inheritance.*