

## Ó Chéitinn go Conradh: The Revivalists and the 1916 Rising

Regina Uí Chollatáin

School of Irish, Celtic Studies and Folklore, University College Dublin  
Dublin, Ireland

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### Abstract

*“But never mind, when it comes to the end I’ll say – ‘English speakers to the fore, Irish speakers to the rear, charge.’”<sup>1</sup>*

*Was the Gaelic League the ‘breeding ground’ for the IRB? Was the Irish language the Language of the Revolution? These parting words from the O’Rahilly (Ua Rathghaille) border on absurd black humour but like so many other Gaelic Leaguers their journey to the Rising, which will be reviewed in this paper, was anything but humorous.*

*This title reflects the long heritage from which the Gaelic League and Language Movement emerged, emanating from Geoffrey Keating’s (Seathrún Céitinn) seventeenth century comprehensive history of Ireland, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* (c.1634) and resulting in a language and literary revival in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was in the spirit of this heritage that the Keating Branch of the Gaelic League was founded in Dublin by Seán Ó Ceallaigh in 1901, following on the inspiration of Father Peter Yorke’s rising speech entitled ‘The Turning of the Tide’ in 1899. The Branch title links the Gaelic League with this strong scholarly heritage but the Keating Branch would also take on another role in the run up to the Easter Rising in 1916, as it became known as a recruiting ground for Volunteers and IRB. However after the Rising the Gaelic League and Language Movement renewed the focus on Irish heritage and culture taking a new role in Irish society, forming the basis for a new Irish identity in twentieth century Ireland. This approach acknowledged the need for action linking the work of Keating with a new approach to literary practice and processes.*

*Keywords: Revival; Culture; Identity; Society; Irish language; Commemoration; Rebellion.*

### Introduction: The political and cultural milieu pre-1916

A school of thought prompting action rather than discussion alone defined a new Ireland on the move after 1912. With the promise of Redmond’s third Home Rule Bill, Ulster Unionists, under the leadership of Edward Carson, understood that Home Rule may be the equivalent of ‘Rome Rule’ threatening the fabric of their values and beliefs. The signing of the Ulster Solemn League and Covenant by around half a million Ulster Protestants in September 1912 indicated clearly that there was strong resistance to this Home Rule Bill. It was no surprise therefore that the foundation of Carson’s Ulster Volunteers ensued in January 1913. Under the auspices of the Gaelic League this prompted a major meeting of Southern Protestants in Dublin in early 1913 to show their support for Home Rule to Southern Catholics. In an effort

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<sup>1</sup> Desmond Fitzgerald, *Desmond’s Rising. Memoirs 1913 to Easter 1916* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 1968), 155.

to bring stability to the evolving sentiment, Douglas Hyde, the President of the Gaelic League at the time, said in his speech that he believed that it was not in the nature of Irish people to mistreat their fellow men. In *An Claidheamh Soluis agus Fáinne an Lae* (the organ of the Gaelic League – *An Claidheamh Soluis* henceforth) it was reported that the meeting was good but that it was a pity that there was any need for a meeting of this kind because Leaguers did not demonstrate any discord between Catholics and Protestants: “We in the Gaelic League, both Catholics and Protestants, are aware of the good will that we share.” (“Sinne i gConnradh na Gaedhilge, idir Chaitlicaidhe agus Protastúnach, is eol dúinn an deaghmhéin atá eadrainn”<sup>2</sup> [Translation by author].)

Despite Hyde’s efforts, further unease developed after Churchill’s speech in Dundee on October 8, 1913, as he indicated that there would be concessions for Ulster Protestants if they were to engage in meaningful discussion regarding the boundaries of East Ulster. This speech was analysed in detail by “Caor” in *An Claidheamh Soluis*, October 18, 1913, under the title “Éire gan Roinnt” [Ireland without Partition]. Irish Catholics were becoming uneasy and Eoin MacNeill wrote his famous article hailed as the catalyst for the founding of the Irish Volunteers, “The North Began” in *An Claidheamh Soluis*, November 1, 1913. Patrick Pearse’s “The Coming Revolution,” published in November 8, 1913, added to the debate. MacNeill’s article resulted in a monster meeting of the Volunteers on November 25, 1913, with thousands in attendance. Seán Ó Ceallaigh and Bulmer Hobson presided also but Eoin Mac Neill – the vice-President of the Gaelic League – was in charge of the main meeting. He connected this gathering with his first Gaelic League meeting in 1893 saying that for every person who attended the first meeting of the Gaelic League there were 1000 at this one. On November 29, 1913, the founding of the Irish Volunteers was announced on the first page of *An Claidheamh Soluis*, clearly linking the Gaelic League to this new movement:

The Irish Volunteers were founded in Dublin on Tuesday night. Eoin MacNeill was the first to advise this work in the *Claidheamh* and he was in charge of the meeting on Tuesday.

Cuireadh Óglaigh na hÉireann ar bun i mBaile Átha Cliath oídhche Dia Máirt. Ba é Eoin Mac Néill do chomhairligh an obair sa gClaidheamh i dtosach agus ’sé a bhí i gceannus ar chruinnighthe Dia Máirt.<sup>3</sup>

[Translation by author]

This attitude of action replacing words was evident in other spheres also. Dublin slums were considered to be among the worst in Europe which prompted the foundation of the Irish Citizen Army by James Connolly, Jim Larkin, Jack White, Micheal Mallin and Constance Markievicz on November 23, 1913.

The timing of all this was very important, creating new synergies linking culture, society and national sentiment in the public sphere within artistic ventures. These synergies were new to the Irish psyche where a common societal culture encompassing language, the arts and literature in oral and print contexts, regardless of geographical boundaries, had not been broached in any real sense prior to this. Jim Larkin’s Lockout, August 1913 to January 1914, reinforces the perception that October and November 1913 were months of vigour and energy. An analysis of the content and context of the print and literary material of this era is insightful in tracing the development of the platform creating links between the Rising and the cultural revival movement, prompting the subsequent thought to action process. For

<sup>2</sup> Fada Fánach, “Sgéala na Seachtmhaine,” *An Claidheamh Soluis*, February 1, 1913, 2.

<sup>3</sup> “Na hÓglaigh,” *An Claidheamh Soluis*, November 29, 1913, 1.

example, there is a considerable difference between this piece and Pearse's early writings pre-1912:

I do not know who among the Gaelic Leaguers that have joined the Volunteers has been foolish enough to suggest that he "cares for the language merely as a sort of stimulant in the fight for nationhood." Certainly not I; I have spent the best fifteen years of my life teaching and working for the idea that the language is an essential part of the nation. I have not modified my attitude in anything that I have recently said or written; I have only confessed (and not for the first time) that in the Gaelic League I have all along been working not for the language merely but for the nation. I now go further to say that anyone who has been working for the language merely (if there be any such) has never had the true Gaelic League spirit at all and though in the Gaelic League, has never really been it. I here protest that it was not philology, not folklore, not literature, we went into the Gaelic League to serve but: Ireland a nation.<sup>4</sup>

These final articles and his pamphlets resounded with echoes of the United Irishmen of 1798 and the Young Irelanders of 1840s, James Fintan Lalor, Thomas Davis, James Mitchel and Wolfe Tone as ghosts that needed to be appeased. In *The Separatist Idea* published in February 1, 1916, Pearse elevated Tone, Davis, Mitchel and Lalor as the "Fathers" of the Nation classifying others before them as the "commentarists."<sup>5</sup> He was anxious that the pamphlets be published before Easter stating that it would be too late after that.

In the context of political organisation the Irish Citizen Army, The Ulster Volunteers, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and The Irish Volunteers formed the backdrop for 1912-16. In a global context it appeared that the Great War was about to descend on Georgian Dublin.

The setting for the turmoil of this rebellious sentiment was a vibrant cultural environment dominated mainly by the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Gaelic League and the Irish Literary Theatre. The new Irish identity was founded on physical, artistic, and cultural development: the mind, body and soul. Eoin MacNeill summed this up in 1900:

One of the main roots of half of the bickerings, disunity, nonsense and all entanglements that for so long have characterised Ireland is the fact that the people don't know, never ask themselves, are never asked to ask themselves – What is Nationality?

The briefest definition of Nationality that I could attempt is, that a Nation is composed of a body and soul and that all efforts to nourish one or the other along natural and traditional lines make up the sum total of national endeavour.

All the eloquence that Ireland ever produced will not restrain an unfortunate hungry beggar from bending the knee for a copper and no sensible man will pour much wrath on the poor beggar for his lack of spirit.<sup>6</sup>

In 1887 Michael Cusack advocated the need for the physical strength, linking Gaelic character and social practices with the need to defend the Irish race and nation, predicting 'deadly struggles':

The people of this generation cannot know what may yet occur in the political world; generations yet unborn may have to maintain the national rights, and to defend the island homes with the strong right hand. Ireland, in future times, as it has so often been in the past, may be the arena of

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<sup>4</sup> Patrick Pearse, "The Psychology of a Volunteer," *An Claidheamh Soluis*, January 3, 1914.

<sup>5</sup> P.H. Pearse, *Collected Works of Padraic H. Pearse. Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin and London: Maunsel and Roberts Ltd., 1922).

<sup>6</sup> Eoin MacNeill, "The Blind pelting the Blind," *An Claidheamh Soluis*, March 31, 1900.

deadly struggles – let us hope if such an emergency arises, that Irish manhood will display the courage which their kinsmen did at Fontenoy and Fredericksburgh, and their ancestors at the glorious triumph of Oulart. If we see that the rising generation receives that athletic exercise and training which should co-exist with a bold and spirited people, and if we impress upon them the great necessity for vigorous and manly practices, we shall be doing giant work for the preservation of the Irish race and the future of the Irish nation.<sup>7</sup>

The Gaelic League and Language movement was rooted in a deeper mindset than that of merely resurrecting a declining language. It was a nationalist philosophy presented by European intellectuals including Fichte with his treatise *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (1807-8) and Wilhelm Von Humboldt's essays on language and national identity: "Language is the external manifestation, as it were, of the spirit of a nation. Its language is its spirit and its spirit is its language; one can hardly think of them as sufficiently identical".<sup>8</sup> Thomas Davis' writings on language and nation were also noteworthy, claiming that if societal practices and values are not communicated through the native language of the people then society is not only foreign in language but in values and culture. The cultural revival, which dominated the second half of nineteenth century Ireland, played a significant role in the development of a value system which was native to the Irish psyche. It was this environment which formed the background for the leaders of the 1916 Rising and these cultural organisations provided meeting points for fun and celebratory events. Tom Clarke's family returned to this "cultural revolution" from South Africa in 1864:

The Clarke family had arrived back to an Ireland which was more open to nationalist ideas than ever before. A cultural revolution was informing the population about the relics of ancient Ireland which still survived; archaeological remains were being studied; use of the Irish language was being encouraged; Irish music and dancing and games were being brought to the fore.<sup>9</sup>

This cultural dominance created a common thread of identity among a disillusioned generation of young people who were essentially characterised by a strong, committed cultural and societal value system.

## 1916 Rising and links with the Gaelic League

As a non-sectarian and apolitical organisation some scholars claim that much sacrifice was made with regard to the work of the Gaelic League through the creation of political links within certain branches. These links still create a complicated picture; six of the seven signatories of the Proclamation were members of the League, and the number of Volunteers who were also members of the Gaelic League at that time is noteworthy. As John Shouldice from the the First Batallion Company F stated: "Half of the Company were members of the Gaelic League and about a third were members of the GAA."<sup>10</sup>

This is not to say that the League as an organisation played an active role in planning the Rising. This view is supported by evidence of contemporary Gaelic League activity which sustained a purely cultural and linguistic approach. However the links function as signposts on the road of the Revivalists to the Rising.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Cusack, "The GAA and the Future of the Irish Race," *The Celtic Times*, February 19, 1887, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Wilhelm Von Humboldt, *Über den Nationalcharakter des Spraches* op.cit. Brian Ó Conchubhair, *Fin de Siècle na Gaeilge. Darwin, an Athbheochan agus Smaointeoireacht na hEorpa* (Conamara: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2009),13-14.

<sup>9</sup> Helen Litton, *16Lives. Thomas Clarke* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 2015), 96.

<sup>10</sup> Fearghal McGarry, *Rebel Voices from the Easter Rising* (Dublin: Penguin, 2011), 267.

As early as 1886 Douglas Hyde, the first president of the Gaelic League (1893-1915) linked language as a central element of Irish identity in a broad geographical context, regardless of boundaries:

A great part of the integrity of Irish nationality in the new world is due to the cultivation of Ireland's old language, which, *proh pudor!* has found a more congenial soil in the squares of New York than in the streets of Dublin. ... Have we lived to see it? Are they less materialistic over there beyond the seas than we are at home? Does the *New York Herald* actually do for us what the *United Ireland* obstinately refuses to do?<sup>11</sup>

The principles and objectives of the Gaelic League defined the concept of the “cultivation of the language” that Hyde refers to which provided the foundation for a “congenial soil” in Dublin:

1. The preservation of Irish as the national language of Ireland and the extension of its use as a spoken tongue.
2. The study and publication of existing Gaelic literature, and the cultivation of a modern literature in Irish.

However Hyde's actions prior to the founding of the Gaelic League and during his tenure as president somewhat contradict his apolitical approach. His diary entries in America in 1891 on his way home from his visiting professorship in New Brunswick University, Canada, demonstrate that he actively pursued a meeting with O'Donovan Rossa and met with prominent Fenians during his stay:

11) Russell breakfasted with me & I spent most of the day with him in Cumann na Gaedheilge & hunted in vain for O Donabháin Rossa 7 fear eile. Spent the evening with Pádraig very pleasantly ag ól 's ag caint. Abhaile ag an 12.

13) I went to O'Donovan Rossa in the morning and we had a long talk and drinks and he brought me to Patrick Forde's office and we had a long talk with him. I then came to Harlem to look at a baseball match but I didn't stay long.

21) I gave a talk there and a very good talk I believe. Many were speaking there. After than we went out to Tailtinn with O'Donovan Rossa and we were welcome

23) I went out to O'Donovan Rossa and had a drink with him and he brought me up to the top of the Heralde [?] building from which I saw the whole city.<sup>12</sup>

[Translation by author]

Hyde is noted as inspecting the Volunteers in Bray on July 5, 1914, saying: “I make bold to say that the way of the Volunteers has been made easier by the doctrines preached by the Gaelic League.”<sup>13</sup> Donnchadh Ó Súilleabháin, another former Gaelic League president claims that it is difficult to reconcile Hyde's speeches with his resignation in 1915 due to the passing of a political motion regarding Irish freedom:

It is difficult to reconcile Hyde's talk in Bray and Carlow, the direction of the Executive regarding voters' registration, and that motion of the Ard-Fheis [annual assembly] with the piece in the Constitution claiming that the Gaelic League would have nothing to do with any political question.

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<sup>11</sup> Douglas Hyde, *Irish University Review*, August 1886, quoted in Breandán Ó Conaire, ed., *Douglas Hyde: Language, Lore, Lyrics* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press), 89.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Hyde, “Mí Mheadon Samhruidh 1891,” National Library of Ireland, MS G 1043, 39-42.

<sup>13</sup> Proinsias Mac Aonghusa, *Ar son na Gaeilge. Conradh na Gaeilge 1893-1993* (Dublin: Conradh na Gaeilge 1993), 143.

Tá sé deacair caint an Chraoibhín i mBré agus i gCeatharlach, treoir an Choiste Gnó faoi chlárú vótóirí, agus rún sin na hArd-Fheise a thabhairt chun réitigh leis an mír sa Bhunreacht ag maíomh nach mbeadh baint ar bith ag Conradh na Gaeilge le haon cheist pholaitíochta.<sup>14</sup>

[Translation by author]

It wasn't long before this military activity took its toll on the Gaelic League's language agenda. Pearse Béaslaí noted "...with regret that the immersion in Volunteer work has tended to diminish the habit of speaking Irish among Gaels in Dublin."<sup>15</sup> The first edition of *An Claidheamh Soluis* immediately after the 1916 Rising (April 29, May 6, 13, 20, 27 1916) denies any links between the Gaelic League and the Rising. One piece states that the newspaper cannot answer questions "because we had nothing to do with the Rising nor with the Volunteers." "ós rud é nach raibh aon bhaint againn leis an Éirighe 'mach nó leis na hÓglaibh" [Translation by author]. This is in keeping with what was set out in the League constitution but the transformation between 1893 and 1916 is clear. The Gaelic League vision emerged from the cultural values of the latter half of the nineteenth century assisting the re-establishment of native culture in the new Ireland of the twentieth century. Nollaig Ó Gadhra, a former President of the Gaelic League states:

Although it is true that the League had no direct link with the Rising itself, no more than Sinn Féin, it is obvious that it was the League's vision that inspired many of the followers of the Revolution. Not only did they describe and outline the kind of Ireland that should be formed, in the context of scholarship and culture they trained the new young generation of the twentieth century on how to set it up, even if the greatest empire in the world was still in control.

...cé gur fíor nach raibh aon bhaint dhíreach ag an gConradh leis an Éirí Amach féin, ach oiread le Sinn Féin, is ríléir gurb í aisling an Chonartha a spreag formhór lucht na réabhlóide. Ní hamháin gur leag siad amach an cineál Éireann ba cheart a bheith ann feasta, ach chuir siad oiliúint ó thaobh léinn agus cultúir ar ghlúin óg nua na 20ú haoise faoi conas dul ina bhun, fiú má bhí an impireacht ba mhó ar Domhan i ngreim scornaí fós orainn.<sup>16</sup>

[Translation by author]

If the 1916 Rising played a role in the blueprint for the direction that Ireland would take in the twentieth century, then the Gaelic League contributed and helped in the drafting of the plan.

The Gaelic League had an added role in that it provided sanctuary to a disillusioned generation of young people, a 'mecca' in which they could engage in public discourse after Parnell's death 2 years earlier. As one of the Leaguers who met her husband, Éamonn Ceannt in the Gaelic League Áine Ceannt states:

After the Parnell Split there was no interest taken in politics by the young folk. There were too many divisions. The Gaelic League where there were no politics spoken was a mecca for everyone. The people learned that they had a country with a language; they learned the music, the dancing, the games, they were encouraged to use Irish-manufactured goods.<sup>17</sup>

However despite the 'mecca' in the early years, by 1909 a change in ideology ensured that some branches of the Gaelic League provided "cover", to allow space for the evolution of a

<sup>14</sup> Donncha Ó Súilleabháin, *Athbheochan na Gaeilge. Cnuasach Aistí* (Dublin: Conradh na Gaeilge, 1998), 257.

<sup>15</sup> Piaras Béaslaí, "The Volunteers and Irish II," *The Leader*, January 30, 1915.

<sup>16</sup> Nollaig Ó Gadhra, "Cad a d'imigh ar an "Irish" dimension? Éirí Amach na Cásca," *Feasta*, April 2006, 22.

<sup>17</sup> McGarry, *Rebel Voices*, 34.

new approach. While this was restricted to a few pockets around the country historical and anecdotal evidence attests to the interest and membership of Volunteers in the Gaelic League and the Irish language. The aforementioned Keating Branch often acted as the opposition to the Central Executive of the Gaelic League and provided some of the cover:

The Gaelic League naturally was in the forefront of the agitation with its IRB members concentrated in a couple of branches in Dublin. Clarke and Mac Diarmada joined the Keating Branch – the branch of choice for Dublin IRB men and later revolutionaries. In 1909 the branch president was Cathal Brugha. It was a safe place to discuss IRB business under Gaelic League cover. The final meeting of the IRB military council before the Rising took place in the Keating branch.<sup>18</sup>

Its membership included some imminent Irish language scholars including Patrick Dinneen known for the publishing of the first Irish language dictionary. Proinsias Mac Aonghusa, a former Gaelic League President describes the aims of the Keating Branch as multi-faceted:

Among those who were in the Branch were Cathal Brugha, Fionán Ó Loingsigh, Richard Mulcahy, Mary Kennedy, Conor Culbert, Michael Collins, Thomas MacDonagh, John Tracey, Martin Sabhaois, Kevin Barry, Gerard O’Sullivan, Tom Clarke, Pearse Béaslaí, Seán MacDiarmada, Thomas Ashe, Michael Lynch, Séamus Brennan, Father Dineen, the dictionary man and an excellent controversialist. ... There are few Irish men who know their history who would not recognise most of those names. They are the people who started the revolution against foreign rule and for Irish freedom. ... The reinstatement of the Irish language was not their only aim but they operated under the flagship of the Gaelic League. It appears that at least 85% of the members of the Keating Branch were among the volunteers on the streets of Dublin in Easter week 1916.

Ina measc siúd a bhain leis an gCraobh bhí Cathal Brugha, Fionán Ó Loinsigh, Risteárd Ó Maolchatha, Máire Ní Chinnéide, Conchubhar Colbard, Micheál Ó Coileáin, Tomás Mac Donnchadha, Seán Ó Treasaigh, Máirtín Sabhaois, Caoimhín de Barra, Gearóid Ó Súilleabháin, Tomás Ó Cléirigh, Piaras Béaslaí, Seán Mac Diarmada, Tomás Aghas, Micheál Ó Loingsigh, Séamus Ó Braonáin, agus an tAthair Pádraig Ua Duinnín, fear an fhoclóra agus fear aighnis den scoth... Is corr-Éireannach a bhfuil aon eolas aici nó aige ar an stair nach n-aithneoidh cuid mhór de na hainmneacha sin. Sin iad na daoine a chuir réabhlóid ar siúl i gcoinne réimeas Gall agus ar son saoirse Éireann; ... Ní athréimniú na Gaeilge amháin a bhí mar aidhm acu ach is faoi bhrat an Chonnartha a d’oibríodar. Is cosúil go raibh ar a laghad 85 faoin gcéad d’fhearaibh Chraobh an Chéitinnigh in Óglaigh na Saoirse ar shráideanna Átha Cliath Seachtain na Cásca 1916.<sup>19</sup>

[Translation by author]

Cathal Brugha, one of the presidents of the Keating Branch explores this saying that those with Irish in their hearts were wholly responsible for the Rising and that there would not have been a Rising without the Irish language.<sup>20</sup> In Ernest Blythe’s Thomas Davis lecture *Hyde in Conflict* in 1968, he states: “When I joined the IRB on the invitation of Seán O’Casey the majority of its members in Dublin, which was incomparably its strongest, came in through the Gaelic League.”

This was not the case for many of the other branches of the Gaelic League but it may have been enough to create the links between the political identity and the cultural heritage. The

<sup>18</sup> Brian Feeney, *16 Lives. Seán Mac Diarmada* (Dublin: O’Brien Press, 2015), 110.

<sup>19</sup> Mac Aonghusa, *Ar Son na Gaeilge*, 132-33.

<sup>20</sup> Seán Ó Ceallaigh .i. Scelig, *Cathal Brugha* (Dublin: M.H. Macanghoill agus a mhac Trór, 1942), 116.

leaders were an eclectic bunch and many of the links were initiated through their contact with the Gaelic League and cultural organisations. Examples of this abound, with references to the initial planning meeting for the Rising being held in the Library of the Gaelic League building on September 9, 1914, and the first convention of the Volunteers being hosted in the Abbey Theatre Dublin. It is unlikely however that they viewed the Gaelic League or other cultural organisations as a breeding ground for rebels as opposed to advancing Irish culture reinstating the identity that Ireland had lost. This was probably an element of an emerging greater societal value system which allowed them also to belong to something bigger than themselves.

### **The Signatories and the Gaelic League**

This group of signatories who were Gaelic League members identified with the values of the Victorian era and an Irish cultural heritage. However due to their diverse interests and backgrounds it is possible to assert that some of their paths may not have crossed were it not for the Gaelic League activities, trips to the Gaeltacht, and their common memberships of cultural organisations. They were seeking a very deep-rooted Irish identity in line with European philosophers where a national language was considered essential to reflecting the thoughts of the nation.

The most controversial and contested signatory is Patrick Pearse. Major General Charles Blackader, the Chair of the Courts Martial described how he felt after he had condemned Pearse to death when he had dinner with Elizabeth, Countess of Fingall, in 1916:

I have just done one of the hardest tasks I have ever had to do. I have had to condemn to death one of the finest characters I have ever come across. There must be something very wrong in the state of things that makes a man like that a Rebel. I don't wonder that his pupils adored him!<sup>21</sup>

This account correlates with studies of Pearse as a Victorian Gael.<sup>22</sup> He wrote the poems "To my Mother", "To my Brother", "A Mother Speaks" and "The Wayfarer" from his cells in Arbour Hill and Kilmainham. He gave these poems and the letter he wrote to his mother, to Brother Aloysius before he was executed. He signed the letter simply "Your son Pat" – a very different signature for Pearse, who was always conscious of his academic qualifications and who normally signed with the letters BA BL after his name. The simplicity of this signature is some indication of the side of Pearse's character as a man and a son as opposed to a man who is primarily recognised as a revolutionary, a teacher, a barrister, as a poet, and as a prominent activist in the Irish Language Movement – or as he was frequently referred to in the west of Ireland "Fear Bhaile Átha Cliath" [The Dublin Man].

The Patrick Pearse who Des Fitzgerald presents in his memoirs of the time in the General Post Office is more in line with the Victorian Gael and literary young 'Dublin man' than the well-known Irish rebel, for example:

I could not look at Pearse's face without being moved. Its natural gravity now conveyed a sense of great tragedy. There was no doubt in my mind that when he looked around at the men and the girls there, he was convinced that they must all perish in the Rising to which he had brought them. ... Plunkett could forget, in conversation, the facts that surrounded us. Sometimes when there were

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<sup>21</sup> Pamela Hinkson, *Seventy Years Young. Memories of Elizabeth, Countess of Fingall. Told to Pamela Hinkson* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1991), 376.

<sup>22</sup> Pat Cooke, "Patrick Pearse: The Victorian Gael", in *P.H. Pearse Life and After-Life. Pádraic Mac Piarais. Saol agus Oidhreacht*, eds. Roisín Higgins and Regina Uí Chollatáin (Dublin, Oregon: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 45-65.

only the two of us together, we would talk about literature and writers, and he would ask questions about writers who were friends of mine. But with Pearse it was different. Even when he spoke of what might have been, one felt that the major part of his mind was turning over what actually was. Time and again we came back to one favourite topic which could not be avoided. And that was the moral rectitude of what we had undertaken.<sup>23</sup>

Pearse provided further collaborative avenues as headmaster of St Enda's. When he was sworn in as a member of the IRB on his visit to the United States in 1914 his approach changed. His friendship with Thomas MacDonagh began when he met Pearse on a Gaelic League trip to the Aran Islands and culminated in his vice-principalship of St Endas. MacDonagh joined the Gaelic League "for a lark" to make fun of it but his aptitude and love of languages drew him in, and these links were strengthened further when he met Douglas Hyde as a student of Irish in UCD. Although he did not always agree with the leaders and policies of the Gaelic League, he was steadfast in his commitment to the ideology of the Revival movement.

MacDonagh was the casting influence on Joseph Plunkett as his Irish language tutor in 1910 and his father, Count Plunkett's presidency of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language would have motivated him also. As the youngest signatory of the Proclamation Plunkett's friendship with MacDonagh was pivotal, and "nurtured Plunkett's sense of intellectual self-confidence."<sup>24</sup> The oldest signatory Thomas Clarke, who was very friendly with Seán MacDiarmada was not very adept at speaking Irish but

was motivated by his awareness of changing attitudes in Ireland where organisations such as the Gaelic League reflected a rising generation's disenchantment with constitutional nationalism, political and cultural domination.<sup>25</sup>

Both Clarke and MacDiarmada were in the Keating Branch and 'For MacDiarmada the Keating Branch was an important entrée into the heart of the republican politics of the capital'.<sup>26</sup> Éamonn Ceannt's membership of the Gaelic League in 1899 shaped his future with his marriage to Áine (mentioned earlier), whom he first met as one of his pupils in 1907. Their marriage ceremony was conducted fully through the Irish language. MacDiarmada introduced Éamonn Ceannt into the IRB in 1913. While James Connolly, a Scotsman, was not a member of the Gaelic League, he believed that "Small nations should not consent to the extinction of their own language or culture."<sup>27</sup> He attended at least one meeting and spoke from the floor.<sup>28</sup> He said that he was for the language but that he didn't agree with the methods of the movement. Tom Clarke and Seán MacDiarmada formed a delegation to persuade Connolly to abandon his own Rising and join the Volunteers.

Much of this evidence is based on the way this thinking flourished in Irish and English in the Gaelic League publications.

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<sup>23</sup> Fitzgerald, *Desmond's Rising*, 144.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence William White, "Plunkett, Joseph Mary," *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 183.

<sup>25</sup> Litton, *16 Lives*, 87.

<sup>26</sup> Feeney, *Seán Mac Diarmada*, 110.

<sup>27</sup> Carl Reeve and Ann Barton Reeve, *James Connolly and the United States. The Road to the 1916 Rebellion* (Humanities Press, 1978), 262.

<sup>28</sup> *An Claidheamh Soluis*, November 13, 1913.

## Evidence of the cultural debate and the Rising: Language usage, memoirs and Gaelic League publications

Literary debate prevailed even in the midst of the devastation. Joseph Plunkett for example, maintained his poetic stance while directing manoeuvres during the Rising. Despite the links with the Gaelic League the Irish language barely features in the Rising. Was spoken Irish even a feature of the action in the GPO in a rebellious context? Also Irish language sources were not the first port of call for researchers. For example Liam Ó Briain's and Peadar Ó hAnnracháin's memoirs have now been translated but they were not the most frequently used sources prior to this. This passage from Ó Briain's memoirs indicates the lack of use of the Irish language and is more indicative of the consciousness of its speakers of the "moral rectitude", echoing Pearse's sentiments. Despite the gallant efforts of these Revivalists to make Irish a *living* language, ironically the association with *dead* martyrs seems to have taken precedence over the association with the *living* Irish language speaking public. The abstract is a conversation between Piaras Béaslaí (who fought in the Four Courts) and Liam Ó Briain (who fought at Stephen's Green) when he lost his Fáinne or Irish language emblem:

Piaras took me aside and said: 'Did you hear any Irish during the week?' 'No, I didn't. Not a word', I answered, 'the people I was with had no Irish at all.' 'I didn't hear a word either, and I didn't have that excuse because there were Irish speakers in the Four Courts,' he said, 'but they all must have decided to discard it for the week. Let us go for a walk, it will do me good to speak some Irish.' We walked up and down our own side of the room for half an hour, trying to make out, indeed, what would be the result of the actions we had taken on the work for the Irish language and the Gaelic League. But we couldn't find any insight on what was to come, or what would become of ourselves.

Thug Piaras ar leataoibh mé agus dúirt: "An gcuala tú aon Ghaeilge i rith na seachtaine?" "Ní chualas, ná focal," d'fhreagair mé, "ní raibh aon Ghaeilge chor ar bith ag na daoine a raibh mise leo." "Ní chualas-sa focal ach chomh beag, agus ní raibh an leithscéal sin agam mar bhí Gaeilgeoirí sna Ceithre Cúirteanna," ar seisean, "ach ní foláir a rá gur chuireadar go léir uathu í ar feadh na seachtaine. Téimis ag siúlóid, déanfaidh sé maitheas dom roinnt Gaeilgeoireachta a dhéanamh." Shiúlamar síos suas ár dtaobh féin den tseomra ar feadh leathuaire, ag iarraidh a dhéanamh amach ar ndóigh, cén toradh a bheadh ag an ngníomh a bhí déanta againn ar obair na Gaeilge agus ar an gConnradh. Ach níor fhéadamar aon léargas a fháil ar an am a bhí le teacht, ná cad a bhainfeadh dúinn féin.<sup>29</sup>

[Translation by author].

Further perceptions on the cultural and intellectual milieu are reflected in the following passage where Ó Briain refers to an incident where the rebels find themselves in the Advanced School of Irish Learning. He explains that he didn't recognise it as he usually came in from the lower levels as a student. This piece is a clear indication of the esteem in which these works were held and of the foundation of intellectual life in Ireland at the time despite the turmoil in which this incident took place. Print culture and media fora would have a significant role in this concept of Irish intellectual life but clearly this emanated from the writing content and the value placed on the written word, as a tradition and practice for centuries:

The heavy door was locked. One of the men looked in through the keyhole and he spoke to Bob: "Bob", he said, "there are massive old books in there, greater than I have ever seen before. Wouldn't they be good barricades?". "You couldn't find anything better", said Bob, "than thick

<sup>29</sup> Liam Ó Briain, *Cuimhní Cinn* (Dublin: Sáirséal agus Dill, 1974), 153-154.

books to stop bullets; break in boys”. “Wait” I said, “let me look in there”. I saw the books, not only that, but I recognised them. ... the Book of Leinster; the Book of the Dun Cow; the Book of Ballymote; Rawlinson B.112, the likes of those great old Irish manuscripts which had been put out for quite some time by the Royal Irish Academy! This was The Advanced School of Irish Learning. ... The School which my old master Kuno Meyer founded, the place where I heard so many lectures from Kuno, and Bergin, and Marstrander, and the first month of the war from Pedersen from Copenhagen, and Éamonn De Valera sitting beside me listening. I didn’t recognise the place in the beginning as I came down to it and not up from the street. I turned to the men: “Do you know boys”, I say, “what the old books you see in there are?” “No”. “They are the old books of Ireland, four thousand years old [sic]! Do you understand, it is for the content of what is in those old books that we are fighting, you could say!” They all swore and pledged that they would rather die than lay a finger on any of those old books. And they didn’t. We didn’t open that door. When the English soldiers came sniffing round the week after, they saw that we were not in there and they didn’t bother opening the door. ... The Advanced School of Irish Learning lost nothing as a result of Easter Week!

Bhí an doras trom fá ghlas. Bhreathnaigh duine na de na fir isteach trí pholl na heochrach agus labhair sé le Bob: “Bob” ar seisean, “tá seanleabhra millteach móra istigh ann, níos mó a bhfaca mé riamh. Nár mhaith iad mar bhairricáid?” “An rud is fearr amuigh” arsa Bob, “chun piléir a stopadh leabhra tiubha; brisigí isteach ann a bhuachaillí” “Fanaigí” arsa mise “ligigí dhom breathnú isteach ansin” Chonaiceas na leabhra, ní hé sin amháin é ach d’aithníos iad. B’shin iad iad; Leabhar Laighean; Leabhar na hUidhre; Leabhar Buidhe Leacáin; Leabhar Bhaile an Mhóta; Rawlinson B. 112; na macasamhla móra de na sean-lámhscríbhinní Gaeilge úd a bhí curtha amach le fada an lá ag Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann! B’í seo Scoil Ard-Léinn na Gaeilge. ... An Scoil a chuir mo sheanmháistir Cúnó Meyer ar bun, an áit ar chuala mé an oiread sin léachta ann ó Chúnó, agus ón Aimhirgíneach, agus ó Mharstrander, agus an chéad mhí den chogadh ó Phedersen as Copenhagen, agus Éamonn De Valera ina shuí lem ais ag éisteacht. Níor aithníos ar dtús an áit, de bhrí gur anuas a tháinig mé ann agus nach aníos ón tsráid. D’iompaíos ar na fir: “Bhfuil fhios agaibh, a bhuachaillí,” a deirim, “céard iad na seanleabhra a chionn sibh istigh ansin?” “Níl fhios” “Sin iad sean-leabhra Gaeilge na hÉireann, ceithre mhíle bliain d’aois! An dtuigeann sibh, is ar son a bhfuil sna seanleabhra sin atáimid ag troid, d’fhéadfá a rá!” Thugadar go léir a mionna agus a móide gurbh fhearr leo bás a fháil ná méar a leagan ar cheann de na leabhra sin. Agus níor leag. Níor osclaíomar an doras sin. Nuair a tháinig saighdiúirí Shasana timpeall ag smúracht an tseachtain ina dhiaidh sin, chonaiceadar nach rabhamar istigh ansin agus níor bhacadar leis an doras oscailt. ... Níor chaill Scoil Ard-Léinn na Gaeilge tada de dheascaibh Sheachtain na Cásca!<sup>30</sup>

[Translation by author]

The success of the fusion of the Revival and the Rising depended on the Gaelic Leaguers’ understanding that the jewels of heritage of Irish intellectual life, which had been preserved and nurtured through the nineteenth century, had to be preserved to ensure the continuity of culture and a progressive learned identity. The Irish language was a founding aspect of this which continued via Revival activities, regardless of the Rising.

One of the more absurd references to Irish language was uttered by the O’Rahilly as he bade goodbye to Des Fitzgerald leaving the GPO. Among the many accounts of the Rising this is probably one of the few which can be taken in the context of black humour:

O’Rahilly came to me to say goodbye. He was in charge of one of the bodies of men to be evacuated. He clasped my hand – “Goodbye Desmond” he said. “This is the end now for certain. I never dreamed it would last so long. The only thing that grieves me is that so many of the lads are good Gaeilgeoirí (Irish speakers). But never mind, when it comes to the end I’ll say – ‘English

<sup>30</sup> Ó Briain, *Cuimhní Cinn*, 120-121.

speakers to the fore, Irish speakers to the rear, charge.” Then as he turned to go, he said with a smile, “but fancy missing this and then catching a cold running for a tram.”<sup>31</sup>

In its link to cultural revival the Irish language created a deep sense of shared identity as part of Ireland’s ancient heritage as opposed to a modern language of the revolution. The emerging nationalist sentiment where cultural nationalism and political nationalism became fused was a catalyst for action, an aspect of the era which has been flagged by scholars as a trademark of the Revivalist era:

Many of the important contributors to the national conversation a century ago were characterised by a marked idealism but also by a conviction that ideas could become a basis for practical action; a deep investment in the future was born out of an intense engagement with the past. ... If anything characterises the era it is the belief that the gap could be closed between ideas and actions, between the aims of artists and the ideas of the wider community.<sup>32</sup>

Gradually the Gaelic League press and printed word from other cultural organisations took a role in promoting and fixing a mentality which signposted a pathway paving the way to the Rising. Eoin Mac Neill’s article “The North Began” in *An Claidheamh Soluis* November 1, 1913, is an example of this as stated earlier. By 1916 links between the political movement and the language movement were also more apparent in the Gaelic League publications. This editorial in *An Claidheamh Soluis* in March 1916 is one example:

Are the Irish people opposed to the adoption in a serious and practical way, of the Gaelic League programme to the Irishising of Ireland? The Irishising of Ireland means revolution, not necessarily bloody revolution, but revolution nevertheless. It means the substitution of native institutions for those which have been established here by the English ... We have always been frightened of “politics” in the Gaelic League but we cannot get away from the fact that foreign rule is the great compelling cause of Anglicisation here as in Scotland; nor can we believe that a free or partially free people would sever all limbs with the historic nation of their fathers, or meanly fawn on the England that has endeavoured to destroy them. The Gaelic League movement has been described by a political leader as a *red herring* drawn across the path of the political movement. The Language movement should be, as indeed it is the *realt eoluis* of the National movement. We cannot keep it apart from National politics without killing it, for it is the lack of political power that leaves us unable to be nationalised.<sup>33</sup>

This was written just before the Rising and after the Rising much of the reporting in *An Claidheamh Soluis* refers to the loss to the language movement as opposed to any in-depth political analysis; Patrick Pearse is the most revered figure. Even though the following article from June 1916 still focusses on the links with nationality and language, the issue immediately after the Rising denied any links with the events of the Rising as referred to earlier. This is another example of this reportage in the immediate aftermath of the Rising:

It is difficult to write anything at the moment. Our friend tells us that it is better to say nothing and that much is true. ... Dublin city is upside down and the whole country is the same. ... The soldier is king in the country and as long as he is king the people will be worried and fearful. We still do not have any accurate information on the Rising or on the war. .. It is not possible to review the full story and the events of Easter week. We do not have the information and maybe if we had we

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<sup>31</sup> Fitzgerald, *Desmond’s Rising*, 155.

<sup>32</sup> Declan Kiberd and P.J. Mathews, *Handbook of the Irish Revival. An anthology of Irish Cultural and Political Writings, 1891-1922* (Dublin: Abbey Theatre Press, 2015), 5-6.

<sup>33</sup> “Teuton Masters and Gaelic Slaves,” *An Claidheamh Soluis*, March 11, 1916.

may not be allowed to reveal all sides of the story. Fifteen of the leaders were sentenced to death and the sentence was enacted. The English themselves say that Ireland should not be ashamed of the way they fought and the manner in which they faced the guns at the end. Their courage is being praised all over the world and whether they were right or wrong, it is a source of strength for us that the Irish race still have courage and manliness. We must have some courage in this time of great sorrow. Another source of strength for us is that more people are supporting Irish at the moment than before the Rising. We will concentrate on our own business as soon as we can deal with the worry and the turmoil. Ireland is still here and she has a life and a reign before her. The League is responsible for reminding the Irish people of the story of Ireland and the story of the Irish language. Both of these, the Irish language and the history nurture our nationality, and with God's help nationality will not be removed.

Is deacair aon rud a sgríobhadh fá láthair. Deir cara linn gur binn béal ina thost agus is fíor dó an mead soin. Tá an chathair seo Baile Átha Cliath bonn os cionn agus tá an tír uile mar an gcéanna. .... Tá an saighdiúir ina rígh sa tír agus an fhaid is a bhéas sé ina rígh beidh imnidhe agus eagla agus tré chéile ar an bpopul. Níl eolus cruinn againn fós ar an eirghe amach ná ar an gcogadh. ... Ní féidir an sgéal go léir agus cúrsaí seachtain na Cásga do bhreathnú go fóill. Níl an t-eolus againn agus dá mbeadh an t-eolus againn b'fhéidir nach mbeadh an cead againn gach taobh de'nsgéal do nochtadh. Tugadh breith an bháis ar chúig fhear déag de na Taoisigh agus cuireadh breith i bhfeidhm. Deir na Sasanaigh féin nach cúis náire d'Éirinn an chaoi 'nar throideadar ná an chuma 'nar sheasadar os comhair na ngunnaí i ndeire na sgríbe. Tá a gcrodhacht ghá moladh ag an domhan mór agus pé aca go raibh an ceart aca nó nach raibh is adhbhar misnigh dúinn go bhfuil cródhacht agus fearamhlacht san gcineadh so Gaedheal go fóill. Ní mór dúinn adhbhar éicint misnigh a bheith againn agus a bhrónaighe is atá an uair. Tá ábhar eile misnigh againn chomh maith.

Tá níos mó daoine ar thaobh na Gaedhilge fá láthair ná mar bhí roimh an eirghe amach ... Dírighimís ar ár ngnó féin chomh luath agus is féidir linn an imnidhe agus an tré chéile do chur dinn. Tá Éire fós ann agus tá saoghal agus réim i ndán dí. 'Sé gnó an Chonnartha sgéal na Gaedhilge agus sgéal na hÉireann do mheabhrú do mhuintir na tíre. Cothuigheann an dá rud, an Ghaedhilg agus an stair an náisiúntacht, agus le congnamh Dé, ní leigfear an náisiúntacht ar ceal.<sup>34</sup> [Translation by author].

The most accurate summary of the link between the Gaelic League and the Rising is aptly described in *An Claidheamh Soluis* August 19, 1916, after the annual Ard-Fheis [Assembly]. While the role of Gaelic League members in the Rising is acknowledged, at this stage the distinction between their roles as national rebels and language revival activists is clearly explained and categorized:

The pleas of the leader writers are that the League has become virtually a political organisation. The revival of the native language in Ireland is, in the first place, a national question. Ireland is a small nation, which has had a language of her own as long as she has had a history. ... And if a member of the Gaelic League suffers death for his religious or political principles we mourn his loss, and cannot think less of his work for the revival of the Irish Language, because he has proved himself a man of courage in other spheres of action. The Gaelic League has always kept an open door for all Irish-born men and women who want to help the language revival and has never imposed any religious or political test. As a matter of fact Unionists have been and are amongst our most zealous workers. The Gaelic League might, if it chooses, at any time convert itself into an organisation of a religious or political character. And it has not done so, because its members believe that there is no religious body or political party in Ireland that should not feel it a duty to furnish its quota to the work of the revival of the national language.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> *An Claidheamh Soluis*, June 3, 1916.

<sup>35</sup> "The Gaelic League and its Critics," *An Claidheamh Soluis*, August 19, 1916.

## Conclusion

Proinsias Mac Aonghusa makes a strong case for the participation of the members of the League in the Rising and perhaps one of the most positive outcomes of the commemoration events is that it is now permitted to mention these names and the Gaelic League in the same sentence as the Rising:

Most of the leaders of that Rising were Gaelic Leaguers; Many who fought were Leaguers; Six of the seven who signed the Proclamation of the Republic which was issued at midday on Easter Monday were Leaguers; At least fourteen of the sixteen prisoners of war who the English executed, were Leaguers, Roger Casement among them ... Those who were immersed in the work included Eoin MacNeill, the main person in the League after Hyde left and of course the founder of the movement, Patrick Pearse, Éamon de Valera, Richard Mulcahy, Cathal Brugha, Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh, Seán Ó Muirthile, Michael Collins, Thomas Ashe, and Seán Mac Dermott.

Conraitheoirí formhór mhór cheannairí an Éirí Amach sin; Conraitheoirí a bhí ina lán a throid; Conraitheoirí a bhí i seisear den seachtar a shínigh Forógra na Poblachta a cuireadh ar fáil meán lae Luan Cásca; Conraitheoirí a bhí i gceithre dhuine dhéag ar a laghad den seisear déag príosúnach cogaidh a chuir na Sasanaigh chun báis, Ruairí Mac Easmhuinn ina measc. ... Orthu siúd a bhí sáite san obair bhí Eoin Mac Néill, príomhphearsa an Chonartha tar éis imeacht de hÍde agus ar ndóigh bunaitheoir na gluaiseachta, Pádraic Mac Piarais, Éamon de Valera, Risteárd Ó Maolchatha, Cathal Brugha, Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh, Seán Ó Muirthile, Micheál Ó Coileáin, Tomás Ághas, Seán Mac Diarmada.<sup>36</sup>

[Translation by author]

Micheal MacDowell's summary of the legacy in 2006 refers to "reconciliation" as the unfinished business of the Rising.<sup>37</sup> "Reconciliation" seemed a long way off in 1916, and during the War of Independence, and the Civil War. However landmark changes throughout the twentieth century, the Constitution in 1937, the ratification of the Treaty of Rome in 1972, the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 have all created milestones where the Irish people have avowed to make Ireland a better country and embraced European and international counterparts promoting it as a world class country as the Revivalists envisaged. They crossed cultural divisions on many levels, enabling a development of ways to interpret the ancient heritage of Céitinn through the work and activities of Conradh na Gaeilge / the Gaelic League. In this way the Revivalists rose to the challenge of the Rising and heritage preservation while providing accessible platforms for cultural cultivation in twentieth century modern Irish society. Yes, the 1916 Rising shocked not only Dublin, and Ireland's rural communities but the whole world; it was a monumental task; it was an ideal which could probably never have flourished but one which played a role in reclaiming the Irish Ireland society which D.P.Moran and the Revivalists sought.

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<sup>36</sup> Mac Aonghusa, *Ar Son na Gaeilge*, 154.

<sup>37</sup> Michael McDowell, "Reconciliation – the unfinished business of the Easter Rising" *Irish Times*, April 11, 2006.

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