

IRISH AMERICA

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Letters / readers forum

-Robert F. Lyons, Kennebunkport, Maine

Mother Teanga

Colin Lacey's story of the roots of the Irish language stretching back 5,000 years to India is a superb and informative piece of writing on a complicated subject. ([Mother Teanga, June/July 2017](#)). Lacey recounts how "the National School system, set up in 1831, educated hundreds of thousands of children through English only, and stigmatized Irish as the language of poverty."

An expanded account of this chapter in the Anglicization of Irish culture reveals how this parliamentary action systematically uprooted the native tongue, the link to Ireland's ancient culture and history. The British parliament voted the National School Act of 1831 "to enable the Lord Lieutenant of the Ireland to assist with the education of the people", but only if the instruction and textbooks were exclusively in the English language. This requirement contributed to the accelerated decline of the Irish language and had fatal effects on the old Gaelic traditions.

Thomas Davis observed that at this time the vast majority of people living west of the line drawn from Derry to Cork spoke nothing but Irish daily and east of that line, a considerable minority did so. He concluded in a famous speech in 1846: "There is a fine song of the Fusians, which describes 'Language linked to liberty.' To lose your native tongue, and learn that of an alien, is the worst badge of conquest – it is the chain on the soul. To have lost entirely the national language is death.... To impose another language on such a people is to send their history adrift."

While living in Ireland some years ago, I spent many pleasurable hours in the



Crawford Art Gallery in Cork where one particular painting caught my attention. It was "News from America" painted in 1875 by James Brenan, headmaster at the Cork School of Art for nearly 30 years. This poignant painting portrays a young barefoot girl reading a letter to her father in a stone cottage in West Cork. The caption reads: "News from America contains one of the strongest narratives, where the introduction of the government national school education system in Ireland has enabled the girl to read and write, while older members of her family remain illiterate".

"News from America," by James Brenan. Oil on canvas, 32 in. x 36 in., 1875. Crawford Art Gallery, Cork.

It is no whingeing on my part to observe that this caption distorts history. It implies that the native Irish, being illiterate, were given a great gift by the 1831 Education Act. It totally ignores the reality that "prior to the establishment of the national system of primary education in 1831, there was already in existence a vast network of schools, the great majority of them provided by a people who had been dispossessed of their lands and who were experiencing harsh penal legislation."*

Archbishop Richard Whatley, appointed Church of Ireland archbishop of Dublin in 1831 – the year of the National School Act - wrote: "What we want is to make these Irish children forget they have a land." He mandated that every Irish child begin each school day with this recitation:

***"I thank the goodness and the grace
That on my parents smiled,
And made me these blessed days
A happy English child."***

In *Michael Collins: The Man Who Made Ireland*, Tim Pat Coogan writes of the school experience of young Marianne O'Brien in 1859: "There is a well-attested story in the Collins family of how she took part when she was seven in a ceremony organized by the school at Lisavaird, West Cork.... [when] the children had to recite this [mandated] verse, Marianne suddenly piped up in front of visiting dignitaries, 'Thank God I am a happy Irish child!' She was badly beaten and sent to Coventry as a result." Marianne would become the mother of Michael Collins when she married Michael John Collins, a fluent Irish speaker, also literate in Latin, French and Greek, having been educated in the hedge schools in defiance of the Penal Laws.

In his *Dictionary of Hiberno-English* Terence Dolan writes: "Irish people use and speak English in a distinct way....Its characteristics reflect the political, cultural and linguistic history of the two nations, Ireland and England." It is ironic to note that after the Brexit divorce proceedings are finalized, when the UK leaves the European Union, Ireland will find itself the only English-speaking member among the 27 countries. English will remain an official language of the EU.

Perhaps, the linguistic wealth harvested from the 5,000-year old Irish language tree, filtered through today's Hiberno-English, will continue to enrich Western Civilization. Thanks Colin Lacey of County Kerry for presenting the portrait of this old gnarled deeply rooted tree so vividly. Agreed: "We have to be hopeful".

***A *Brief Description of the Irish Education System*, Department of Education and Science, January, 2004**