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**"Affirmed from Under"
The Irish Language Education Movement in Belfast**

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

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c Kevin Callahan, 1997



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ABSTRACT

"Affirmed From Under": The Irish Language Education Movement in Belfast

Kevin Callahan

In Belfast, Northern Ireland, an exciting experiment in bilingualism and alternative education is taking place. In the midst of a war zone, a predominantly working class community has constructed its own education system based on the Irish language. Approximately one thousand children are currently doing their education through the medium of Irish in community-run schools. In addition, adult Irish speakers are building an Irish language infrastructure that creates "social territories" for the language. The movement's overall objective envisages the extension of Irish horizontally in space and vertically in time to make the language an everyday means of communication. This education movement has blossomed despite a hostile or indifferent British state, which has been grudging in giving any recognition or support.

The present Irish language revival in Belfast represents a process of "decolonization", the breaking down of historically based relations of subordination, through the creation of alternative structures and the growth of an accompanying emancipatory world view. Popular involvement in committees, campaigns and language classes makes the movement an educational process on many levels beyond just learning Irish. The experience of the Irish language movement in Belfast offers a number of insights into the relation between language and identity, both at the level of the individual and the group. In addition, the language revival's interaction with the troubled political situation in which it takes place sheds light on the potential for education as a vehicle for community and personal empowerment.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The future lies with what's affirmed from under.
Seamus Heaney, "The Canton of Experience"

If most people were given a choice of major cities in the world to visit, Belfast, Northern Ireland, would probably not be high on the list. Mention of the word conjures up images of bombs, British soldiers, and bowler-hatted Orangemen; certainly not the most inviting prospect and certainly not a place where one would expect to find an exciting experiment in educational practice.

Belfast, with approximately half a million inhabitants, is the largest city in the state of Northern Ireland. Consisting of six of the nine counties of the historic province of Ulster, Northern Ireland is a profoundly divided society. The first thing that would come to the minds of most observers would be the so-called sectarian divide between the 900,000 Protestant majority and the 600,000 Catholic minority. However, there are also conflicting national claims as the British government calls Northern Ireland an integral part of the United Kingdom while the Constitution of the Republic of Ireland claims sovereignty over the same territory. For the last three decades, Northern Ireland, and especially Belfast, has been the scene of politically inspired violence that has left over three thousand people dead. West Belfast, where most of the city's working class Catholics live, is one of the most closely watched areas in the world. The British army has several forts at strategic points throughout the district complete with cameras and sophisticated surveillance equipment. British soldiers and the Royal Ulster Constabulary, an almost exclusively Protestant police force, patrol the streets in armored vehicles; shadowed by undercover agents from various Intelligence services in unmarked cars.

The present study will of necessity touch on certain aspects of the current political situation in Belfast because "The Troubles" affect every aspect of life there. The media have often adopted a shorthand explanation for the conflict by labelling it a "religious war". I believe such terminology to be misleading, so I will generally replace the terms Catholic and Protestant with Nationalist and Unionist throughout this work. I feel that this is not merely a cosmetic change because the latter terms give more political content to the differences that exist between the two groups.

Despite the grim picture given above, Belfast is a dynamic, fascinating city. I have visited it frequently in the last two decades and have witnessed many of the changes it has experienced over that period. One of the most visible developments has been the growth of an Irish-medium education movement and the vibrant presence of a functioning Irish-speaking community in the midst of civil strife.

Just a few vignettes taken from December 1995, when I was in Belfast doing research for this thesis, give some idea as to the dynamism of the phenomenon. Walking in front of Belfast City Hall, I came upon over two hundred children and adults gathered to sing Christmas carols in Irish. Later the same day, while I was having a pint with a friend in a pub, two women he knew came in speaking Irish to each other. They were sisters and both products of the Irish language schools. Walking around the Nationalist area of Twinbrook, I saw the street signs were all in Irish. All these examples are little things but indicative of something larger. One West Belfast resident summed it up nicely: "Twenty-five years ago, if you heard someone speaking Irish in Belfast, you would have been really impressed. Fifteen years ago, you might have thought they were showing off. Nowadays, you barely notice, it's that common." (Morgan interview 1994)

Irish language enthusiasts claim that an Irish language renaissance is taking place in the Nationalist areas of Belfast. Approximately one thousand children are currently being educated through the medium of Irish in twenty-one schools: sixteen nurseries, five primary schools, and one secondary school. In addition, there is an Irish language cultural centre, the *Culturlann*, which houses an Irish language bookstore, an Irish language newspaper, and a cafe where Irish speakers can meet. There are also approximately sixty adult education courses taking place outside the state education system.

Similar developments are taking place in other areas of Northern Ireland, but Belfast is the heart of this experiment in education and the creation of a bilingual environment. How has this come to be? The Irish language education movement has clearly established its presence in Belfast and appears to be growing stronger. It is the goal of this thesis to explore the motivations of those

involved and the reasons for their apparent success.

For many reasons, Belfast seems an unlikely spot for such an endeavor. Nationalists suffer from extremely high, structurally-based unemployment, a local state that continues to regard them with hostility, and a pervasive military presence (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988). Why would working class people, who are dealing with poverty, economic instability, and a war at the end of the street want to put scarce resources and precious time into learning the Irish language, a language most people in the world don't know exists? Moreover, why would they struggle to build, maintain, and expand structures to give their children the opportunity to be educated in Irish? Is it a futile yearning for a folkloric past? A symbolic gesture which will disappear once the present crisis is over? Or is it what its champions maintain: the first steps towards restoring Irish as a viable and vibrant living language?

On one level, the questions to be examined seem quite simple. What is happening? How is it happening? What does it mean? Nevertheless, as answers to these apparently straightforward queries are sought, new questions continually arise. What is the relationship between language and identity, and how does this relationship find expression at the individual and group level? How has the ongoing political conflict influenced the language movement, and has there been a reciprocal influence? What are the goals of and future potential for the revival?

Basing initial inquiry on the premise that all education is political, I will approach these questions from a perspective that interprets the promotion of the Irish language and the creation of a bilingual environment as part of a process of decolonization. Clearly, this is a term that requires some definition and will be dealt with in more detail later in the text. For now, I will simply say that the Irish-medium education movement in the Northern Ireland context represents the collective act of a community in the process of reclaiming cultural territory and creating possibilities of seeing and acting on the world in ways that are fundamentally different from those offered by the dominant culture. To this end, it will be important to examine the implications of both learning and living in Irish, and of what it means for the community to create and manage its own education system.

Thus, the simple questions posed earlier will involve an exploration of motivation on both the individual and group level, a reflection on the relationship between language and identity, and a discussion of the role of educational structures in the construction of a counter-hegemonic social formation.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

In Chapter 1, I listed several questions that arise from a study of the Irish language movement in Belfast. In order to treat these topics as fully as possible, I will adopt an eclectic methodological approach that will combine history, cultural and educational theories, qualitative research and a comparative analysis of current literature on the subject. This approach will allow a more complete picture of the phenomenon to emerge in the course of this investigation.

My analysis begins with an assumption drawn from an essay by Edward Said (1994), which examines the interaction between the global narratives of imperialism and emancipation. One particular passage strikes me as of crucial importance in understanding Irish history and forms a starting point for this study.

It is an amazing thing that the problem of Irish liberation not only has continued longer than any comparable struggles, but it is so often not regarded as being an imperial or nationalist issue; instead it is comprehended as an aberration within the British dominions. (236)

Using Said's insight as a starting point, I will approach the Irish language revival from a perspective that views the movement as a narrative of decolonization. Such a process, if it is genuine, will entail both a break in relations of subordination and the construction of an emancipatory project. The forms this process takes can mean different things for both the individual and the group depending on a number of factors such as class, gender, and age. In the context of decolonization, the extension of the Irish language through time and space can be seen as a reclaiming of previously surrendered cultural territory. Setting the revival movement in this framework can help provide a deeper understanding not only of the mobilizing power of Irish but also the different meanings attributed to the language.

The second major assumption with which I will approach my subject is that the Irish language revival, in all its aspects, is an alternative educational process. By this, I mean that both the form and the content of the movement are learning experiences for those involved. Moreover, this learning entails the creation of physical and mental spaces that provide alternatives to those offered

by the dominant society.

To elucidate this point, I will turn to the work of the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, from whom contemporary radical educational theory draws much of its original inspiration. One of his most important contributions to social theory is the concept of "hegemony" which is "The spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group." (Gramsci 1971, 12)

Gramsci wrote a large part of his work while in prison under the prying eyes of Mussolini's censors, so his style is at times dense and even arcane. Consequently, his concept of hegemony has provoked numerous interpretations and debates (Entwistle 1979, Adamson, 1980, Sassoon 1982, Scott 1990). For the purposes of this paper, I will use "hegemony" to mean a system of beliefs and practices that support the existing order of a society and the power and privileges of its elite: "the way things are and must be." This does not mean that subordinate groups are simply passive receptors which accept the social order without question. There is frequent resistance from below, so dominant hegemonic practice must be constantly reaffirmed and occasionally readjusted to meet new circumstances or challenges.

For Gramsci, an education system is an important factor in the creation and maintenance of hegemony (Mayo 1994). Consequently, an education system can also be part of a counter-hegemonic practice that seeks to construct a world view that challenges that of the established order. While Gramsci was writing with the class struggle in Italy in mind, his concept of hegemony and counter-hegemony can be usefully applied to the clash of cultures that occurs in a colonial situation. I will, therefore, approach the Irish language education movement as a counter-hegemonic movement which is building an alternative to the dominant culture.

An additional term that requires explanation is the currently fashionable word "discourse". Basing myself on Bruce Lincoln (1989), I will employ discourse to mean a mode of articulation that establishes and promotes a particular interpretation of social reality. A discursive structure may contain nuances and subtexts that alternate according to circumstances, but a given discourse will

ultimately seek to silence or subordinate elements which can not be accommodated within its framework. In the present work, discourses are the social practices which develop, express and support hegemony or counter-hegemony.

Within this framework of decolonization and hegemonic practice, Chapter 3 will provide a brief historical overview focusing on the role played by the Irish language in the long and troubled relationship between England and Ireland. I will give particular attention to developments in the six counties of post-partition Ireland which became the Northern Ireland state. Chapter 4 will provide a detailed description of the origins and growth of the current Irish language revival in Belfast. This portrait of the movement will be followed in Chapter 5 by a look at the stories of several people who are involved with the language revival at a grassroots level. This information was gathered in taped interviews during two trips to Belfast in 1994 and 1995 and will be supplemented by the results of a questionnaire answered by a class of adult Irish language learners in 1996.

Chapter 6 will discuss several elements of the complex relationship between language, identity, and politics in the Irish context. The question of the relationship between language and identity will initially be approached through a comparison of the conflicting positions of John Edwards (1985) and Seán de Fréine (1978) concerning attempts to bring back the Irish language. I will then turn to some contemporary studies of the language revival in Belfast to see how these writers, Gabrielle Maguire, Feilim Ó hAdhmaill, and Camille O'Reilly, treat the theme of language and identity.

The Irish language revival cannot be divorced from the political crisis that surrounds it. Consequently, the relationship between the language movement and the ongoing conflict will also be explored through a discussion of the above-mentioned writers and the work of Patricia Kachuk (1994). Some, both critics and supporters, view the language revival as intimately linked with the Irish Republican Movement. Sinn Féin, the Republican political party, has even been accused of "hijacking" Irish , and calls have been issued for the language to be "depoliticized". Such highly charged commentary suggests that the question of the language is a political one, and the reasons

for and implications of this require explanation. Therefore, the political aspects of the Irish education movement will be the second major theme of Chapter 6. Because the contemporary revival makes a specific appeal to Unionists (a community with its own questions of politics and identity) to acknowledge Irish as part of their heritage, I will conclude this section with a brief look at the range of attitudes in that community toward the Irish language.

The phenomenon of the Irish language revival is recent enough and small enough that it has not been widely studied. One book, one government report, two doctoral theses, some work done by graduate students, an NGO (non-governmental organization) document, and some surveys done by *Glór na nGael* account for the bulk of it. I was fortunate to be able to have access to most of the relevant information as well as other resources such as newspaper articles, leaflets, and texts of speeches. In addition, I was able to interview several of the people who have analyzed what is happening as well as those who are making it happen. The insights I have taken from their research will be complemented by information from taped interviews I did with Maguire, O'Reilly, and O'Hare.

The final chapter will assess the achievements of the educational formation that the movement has created. I will then try to interpret my findings in the light of critical educational theorists such as Paulo Freire, Stephen Brookfield and Jack Mezirow. It is my contention that certain features of the Irish experience resonate with the stated goals of progressive education, but other aspects lie beyond them and suggest potentially new directions. This section will end with proposing some tentative answers to the questions put forward in Chapter 2 and potential areas for further research.

CHAPTER 3: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The previous chapter outlined the basic theoretical elements which will be used to elucidate the Irish language revival in Belfast. This interpretation views the movement as emerging from a context of decolonization and representing a counter-hegemonic practice.

The present section seeks to situate the current Irish language education movement in time and space through a brief overview of the place of Irish in Anglo-Irish relations. In my opinion, the British imperial approach to Ireland from the 16th century to the present manifests a consistent, underlying pattern of hegemonic practice that assumes the superiority of English values, culture, and language and also has the power to project them. I will use the term "dominant culture" to refer to this phenomenon, and the term "British state" or "British administration" to describe the specific institutional apparatus responsible for implementing particular policies.

Recent Irish historical research has seen a heated debate between a traditional, post-independence school of historical thought which views the dynamic of Irish history from a nationalist perspective and the more recent, so-called "revisionist" school (see Berresford Ellis 1989). Simply put, the former celebrates (perhaps uncritically at times) the long, anti-imperialist struggle for independence from Britain. The latter, possibly in reaction to the contemporary violence connected with Irish nationalism, tends to interpret many aspects of the Ireland/England interaction as progressive or benign, and instances of nationalist resistance as reactionary or ill-advised.

This debate has had the effect of causing a healthy reevaluation of Irish history and engendering new approaches to questions as anti-colonial, nationalist historians and commentators have responded to the revisionist school. I will draw upon the perspectives of some of these latter writers (Canny 1973; Lee 1973, 1989; Cronin 1980; Curtis 1984, 1994; Rai 1993; Rolston 1993; Coogan 1995) in the brief account that follows.

Pre-Christian Ireland had a highly developed society with flourishing cultural, social, and legal systems. Ireland had avoided conquest by the Romans, and this permitted the survival of distinctly Celtic social forms that had been largely destroyed or altered in Gaul and Britain. The

arrival of Christianity in the 5th century was a remarkably non-violent process with Catholicism absorbing many elements of the traditional society to form a Celtic Christianity quite distinct from the Roman version (Maguire 1990, 20). Ireland's location also spared it the destruction and social upheaval provoked by the Germanic invasions in the so-called Dark Ages. As a result, Irish monasteries were instrumental in preserving and promoting much of Western learning in this period.

The richness of the Irish language and culture can be seen in the epics and legends written down by monks at this time, which made Irish the oldest European language of literature after Greek and Latin. However, traditional Gaelic society, and especially the intellectual centres (the monasteries), suffered considerable disruption from about 800 C.E. to 1000 C.E. due to the Viking raids. The Irish language underwent significant changes in this period, shifting from what linguists describe as Old Irish to Middle Irish.

Further political upheaval occurred with the arrival of the French-speaking Normans in 1169. (It is interesting to note that in neither England nor Ireland did the conquerors keep their native language, French.) Within two centuries, many of the descendants of the Norman nobles had "gone native". The influence of the English crown and the developing English language were confined to Dublin and its surrounding area, called "The Pale" (hence the expression "Beyond the Pale" to denote outside the bounds of civilized norms). Indeed, the British crown tried to curb the assimilation process of Anglo-Norman lords by means of legislation in 1366.

These laws, known as the Statutes of Kilkenny, vainly attempted to stop the Anglo-Normans from adopting the Irish language and culture. As Maguire (1991) notes, in 1541 (nearly two hundred years later), only one of the Anglo-Irish lords appearing at the English Parliament in Dublin actually spoke English. The speech proclaiming Henry VIII King of Ireland had to be translated into Irish for the Parliament by the Earl of Ormond (de Fréine 1978).

However, with the rise of the Tudor monarchy and the beginning of the colonial era, a new, more aggressive, world view began to take shape. Some scholars (Canny 1973, Rai 1993, Rolston 1993) have uncovered the striking parallels in English descriptions of native Irish and native

Americans as English adventurers and entrepreneurs developed an ideology that explained and justified conquest. The Irish were considered barbarians who required the civilizing mission of the English presence. The fact that the Irish resisted the Reformation and retained the Catholic religion was additional evidence for their essential backwardness. As in America, the English set out to colonize and extend English culture, laws, and language throughout Ireland. In theory, this meant that the Irish, *as Irish*, had to be eliminated either culturally or physically, and part of this policy was aimed at the Irish language. Kiberd (1995) quotes English poet and colonizer Edmund Spenser, who in his *View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596) stated:

The Gaels must be redeemed from their wildness: they must cut their glibs of overhanging hair (which concealed their plotting faces); they must convert their mantles...into conventional cloaks; above all, they must speak the English tongue.
(10)

Ironically, adherents of the current Irish language revival movement would probably agree with Spenser that "[t]he speech being Irish, the heart must needs be Irish". (Kiberd 1995, 10)

Gaelic culture resisted in a series of rebellions that culminated in the Nine Years War (1595-1603) where the Irish chieftains Hugh O'Neill and Hugh O'Donnell came within a hairsbreadth of defeating the Elizabethan army. Subsequently, the remaining Gaelic lords left Ireland in what is called "The Flight of the Earls". This was a turning point in the history of the Irish language as the intellectual supports for the language—monasteries, schools, and the aristocracy—were eliminated. The disappearance of the nobility meant that there was no longer patronage for the bards and poets, who were the main promoters and preservers of the language. Irish was now the language of the dispossessed (Ó Tuama and Kinsella 1981).

The 17th century saw a gradual extension of the colonization process as natives lost almost all control of land, the primary source of wealth. English nobles and officers expropriated large tracts of territory and tried to settle plantations with Protestant colonists from England and Scotland who were offered land. Plantations had been introduced in southern Ireland in the previous century but with little success. The Plantation of Ulster, however, established a concentrated settler population in the northeastern part of the island. The remaining native Irish were hired to work on the lands

they formerly owned or were pushed to the most infertile areas.

Rebellions were bloody and were joined to the "religious wars" that masked the European power struggles of the period. The 1649 arrival in Ireland of Puritan revolutionary leader Oliver Cromwell brought mass slaughter and further confiscations. One hundred thousand Irish were transported to the Americas as slaves (Curtis 1984, 27-28). The victory of William of Orange over the Stuart King James at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 further entrenched English domination and Protestant supremacy. The Penal Laws of the early 18th century denied native Catholic Irish almost all access to education, property, or political office. The Irish language was still the language of the majority of the population, but a majority that was almost completely disenfranchised and voiceless.

Throughout this period, Ireland was governed by its own parliament, which was controlled by Protestant/Unionist landlords and aristocrats. The developing Protestant middle class began to chafe at the corruption of the Dublin administration and the trade restrictions imposed by London. Failure to achieve reforms provoked the creation of the Presbyterian-led United Irishmen, who were inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution. Under the influence of Wolfe Tone, the United Irish Society planned an insurrection in alliance with the Catholic peasantry to establish an independent Irish Republic. Following the failure of this uprising in 1798, Britain assumed direct control of Ireland through the Act of Union in 1801.

The years that followed saw a gradual relaxation of discriminatory laws against Catholics because of the mass campaigns led by Daniel O'Connell, perhaps the first great populist politician in modern history (Hobsbawm 1962). As a new Catholic middle class began to emerge, however, the way to fortune was seen to lie through the English language. O'Connell, himself an Irish speaker, would address huge meetings of peasants in English and encouraged the promotion of that language (Berresford Ellis 1985). In 1831, the British government established a system of National Schools where Irish youth were to be educated in English. Students would wear the infamous "tally sticks" hanging from their necks, on which a notch was recorded for every word of Irish the child spoke. At the end of the day each notch was translated into a switch.

The 19th century saw a decline in the use of Irish and a growing sense of stigma attached to the language. What seemed to be the final deathblow occurred with "The Great Hunger" of 1845-48, when over one million Irish died of starvation and disease and another million emigrated in the space of three years. The areas most affected by the potato blight were the ones with the greatest concentration of Irish speakers, and the steady stream of language loss seemed to become a torrent as the census of 1851 indicated a drastic reduction in the number of native Irish speakers.

Throughout the 19th century, there were episodic attempts to rescue Irish, (Interestingly, begun in Belfast by middle-class Protestants.) but these efforts were mostly academic in focus, concentrating on the gathering of manuscripts and publication of texts. A serious revival attempt began with the foundation of the Gaelic League in 1893. The League aimed to restore Irish as a living language for the people of Ireland and thus prefigured many of the cultural concerns of anti-imperialist movements in the twentieth century. The League's founder, Dr. Douglas Hyde (a Protestant) had proclaimed "the Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland" in a famous speech shortly before the birth of the organization (Cronin 1980). The League had considerable success in making Irish a popular issue, and branches of the organization sprang up quickly as many young people took part in the revival.

While the Gaelic League maintained that it was not a political organization, it was difficult to keep aloof from the controversies of the time. In the late 19th century, Ireland seemed headed for a form of Home Rule, which would have given limited self-government to the island. In opposition, Irish Unionists and their allies in the British Conservative Party "played the Orange card" by making sectarian appeals to the Protestant population in Ireland, portraying Home Rule as a plot to abandon loyal British subjects to the mercies of priest-ridden superstitious peasants (Curtis 1994).

Despite the participation of a number of Protestants in the language revival, any manifestation of nationalist sentiment was regarded with increasing suspicion by the majority of the Unionist population as Home Rule seemed imminent. The Orange Order, a mass-based Protestant organization named for William of Orange, incited sectarian attitudes, and a Unionist paramilitary

group, the Ulster Volunteer Force, was formed for the purposes of resisting Home Rule by force. Meanwhile, leading figures in an increasingly radical nationalist movement turned enthusiastically toward Irish as an essential part of Irish identity. When the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army launched an insurrection at Easter in 1916, most of the signatories of the Proclamation declaring an Irish Republic were Gaelic League members.

The Easter Rising was crushed and its leaders were executed by British firing squads, but it sparked a huge outburst of emotion that led to the rise of the separatist Sinn Féin party and the Irish Republican Army (IRA). After a bitter political and military struggle, the British government opened negotiations which led to the partition of Ireland. The newly-created state of Northern Ireland, with a local parliament at Stormont Castle, remained part of the United Kingdom while the rest of Ireland became an independent country.

The boundaries of the area that became Northern Ireland had no real geographical or historical basis. They simply delineated the maximum territory that Britain could retain with a Unionist/Protestant majority population. From the British state's point of view, there were a number of reasons for wanting to maintain a presence in part of Ireland. Of primary consideration was the fact that the northeast section of Ireland was heavily industrialized and Belfast had huge shipbuilding yards. Another reason concerned national defense as Ireland was regarded as Britain's back door. In addition, leading Irish Unionists were related to the British ruling class by blood and outlook; both groups were imperialist and took pride in being the center of a great empire. For all these reasons, it was imperative that Northern Ireland be kept part of the United Kingdom.

To this end, the new state was constructed to maintain a permanent Unionist majority by denying "the natives" (i.e., Nationalists) access to political power, jobs, and housing. Gerrymandering and economically-forced emigration prevented a higher Nationalist birthrate from ever translating into political change. Nationalists in general and working class Nationalists in particular were relegated to an apartheid-like subordinate position in the new state (Farrell 1976, McCann 1974).

Northern Ireland was thus constructed as a divided society. The two communities, Catholic/Nationalist and Protestant/Unionist, lived apart; this resulted in a strong sense of unity within each group, as well as a clear feeling of difference from the other. Extensive kinship links bolstered the strong sense of group identity. The two communities, however, were not "separate but equal," no more than were whites and blacks in Africa or Reconstruction America. One group had power and the other did not. The legacy of the Nationalist community's lack of power and exclusion from state structures has been a crucial factor in the events of the last thirty years.

In terms of language, the new independent state in the South made Irish an official language along with English. Irish became a mandatory subject in school and a prerequisite for many civil service jobs. Steps were taken to support the rural areas where native Irish-speakers still lived (the *Gaeltacht*). Nonetheless, the results have been described as mediocre at best (Edwards 1985). The *Gaeltacht* continued to shrink and Irish was not restored as the language of daily use.⁶

The attitude of the new Northern Ireland state toward the Irish language ranged from neglect to hostility. This was part and parcel of the *raison d'être* of the new government, which was proclaimed a "Protestant parliament and a Protestant state" by its first prime minister, Lord Craigavon (Farrell 1976). Interest in the Irish language was linked with Irish Republicanism in the minds of many Unionists, and there was no place for perceived symbols of "the enemy" in the new state. Lord Craigavon's comments are indicative of the Unionist attitude: "What use is it...to teach our children the Irish language?... [W]e do not see that these boys (sic) being taught Irish would be any better citizens" (Maguire 1991, 44).

The Ministry for Education and the Northern Ireland parliament began to cut away institutional support for the teaching of the language in the education system. As Maguire (1991)

⁶While Edwards sees the revival attempt in the Irish Republic as a relative failure, Belfast language activist Seamas Mac Seáin (interview 1995), expresses a different perspective. He points out that there are more Irish speakers in the Republic today than there were one hundred years ago, even though most of them do use English far more frequently. According to Mac Seáin, there is a resurgence of interest in Irish in working class areas of Dublin. While the condition of the Irish language in the Republic lies outside the scope of this thesis, the subject merits further research.

elaborates,

The Irish language was perceived in political terms by the Government. Its propagation was considered a threat to the balance of power which was firmly controlled by the Unionist majority within the six counties. Schools were expected to play their part in propagating the cultural and political value system of the ruling party—a party which was to rule the Northern Ireland state continuously for fifty years. The Irish language could not be accommodated within that tight framework. It could not be accepted as the cultural heritage and right of all Northern Ireland citizens—and especially of those who desired to cultivate and cherish that aspect of their identity. (44)

These policies virtually eliminated Irish from the state educational system. The language, however, was still offered as a subject by the Catholic Christian Brothers, to whose schools most children of the Nationalist minority went. To many, this situation reconfirmed the perceived link between the Irish language and the Catholic/Nationalist community.

According to one analysis (Griffiths 1978, quoted in Kachuk 1993), during the period from Partition until 1969, the Catholic/Nationalist population remained largely quiescent. Catholics knew they faced institutionalized discrimination but believed that this would change when, some day, Ireland would be united. Whether unification would be achieved through the actions of the Irish government (the majority view) or the IRA (the Republican position) was debatable. Meanwhile, it was useless to make demands of a state which was viewed as both transitory and illegitimate. Most social organization was left to the Catholic Church, an extremely conservative organization that seemed more interested in preserving its power than in promoting the welfare of its adherents.

In 1967, a movement for civil rights in such areas as housing and jobs began in the Catholic community. It is important to note that at this stage the protestors were demanding equal rights under the slogan "British Rights for British Citizens." The national question and Irish identity were not explicit issues in this period (McCann 1974).

However, the equation quickly changed when peaceful demonstrations were met with state violence. Violent confrontations increased until August 1969, when Northern Ireland seemed on the verge of civil war, and the British army was sent in to restore order. A short period of calm was followed by an even greater outbreak of violence as conflicts between the British army and

Nationalist youth grew in intensity. Events spun out of control as Northern Ireland erupted into a bloody war between the British Army and the Provisional Irish Republican Army. Incidents such as the internment of hundreds of Nationalists without charge or trial and the massacre of 13 civilians on Bloody Sunday in Derry alienated the entire Nationalist community and led the British government to suspend the local parliament of Stormont in 1972 and assume direct control of Northern Ireland. Despite numerous political initiatives and three thousand deaths, direct rule by London through the Northern Ireland Office has continued to the present day.

CHAPTER 4: AFFIRMING FROM UNDER: THE BELFAST EXPERIENCE

From the foundation of the Northern Ireland state in 1922 until the start of the current crisis in 1969, British state policy toward the six counties was largely one of neglect. Successive British governments left the ruling Ulster Unionist party a free hand and ignored the institutionalized sectarian discrimination. While Scots Gaelic and Welsh were able to gain both official recognition and financial support in the United Kingdom, the Irish language in the six counties was virtually ignored by the British government, even until recently. One ostensible reason was the lack of large, visible areas where communities of Irish speakers lived. Nonetheless, the political dimension of the language as a nationalist symbol undoubtedly played some part in the British attitude.

It is important to reiterate that "...if the language has political elements to it, those were first drawn out in the context of the English 'civilizing mission' to eradicate Irish language and customs" (Committee on the Administration of Justice 1993, 11). This statement epitomizes an essential theme of the present thesis, because the attempt to revive the Irish language cannot be divorced from the attempts to destroy it as long as the two cultures remain in an ambiguous and, at times, antagonistic situation. The tensions between perceived expressions of Irish identity such as the Irish language and the state in pre-1969 Northern Ireland are illustrated by the following account:

Frankie Meehan... always resented the fact that he had to speak English to make himself understood in the area (the Bogside community of Derry). He ran classes in Gaelic for local children.... Few ever became fluent, but it was felt right to make the effort.... The Irish lessons...ended when Frankie was arrested one night in 1957.... He was coming home when a police car stopped and he was asked his name. He could have said "Frankie Meehan" but, being what he was, he said "Prionsias O Mianain, ta me ag dul abhail [I am going home]," for which piece of bilingual impertinence he was taken to Crumlin Road jail in Belfast and held without trial for seven months. (McCann 1974, 11)

In the eyes of the Northern Ireland state, Irish was something foreign and subversive that needed to be rendered invisible.

Within the Nationalist ghettos, however, the Irish language could maintain a lively, if somewhat erratic, presence. Some commentators suggest that the periods of increased interest in Irish can be linked to times of heightened political tension due to Irish Republican Army (IRA)

campaigns in the 1940's and 1950's (see O'Reilly 1992, 39-43). There certainly were ebb and flow periods, but continuity was maintained in Belfast by two institutions: the *Ard Scoil Ultach* (the Ulster College) and the *Cumann Chluain Ard*, which was founded in 1936 as a branch of the Gaelic League. *Chluain Ard* (meaning "High Meadow", the original name of the Clonard community where it is located) has been, since its beginnings, a place where Irish was taught and Irish speakers could gather for activities. Many of the people who started the current language revival learned Irish and met spouses at *Chluain Ard* functions.

The major difference between previous Irish language revival movements and the present one is twofold. In the mid-sixties, a number of young couples that had learned Irish as adults decided to form an urban Irish-speaking community (*Gaeltacht*), and they realized the need to provide an Irish medium education system for their children. This choice of a city setting is of vital importance because the restoration of Irish as a modern means of communication depends on its relevance in urban areas where most people and work opportunities are located. The decision to bring up and educate their children in an Irish language community also marked an important step as it envisioned raising a new generation of native speakers.

The Foundation of the Shaw's Road Community

[We wanted] to create an environment where children could grow up naturally speaking the language without being looked upon as strange.
Seamas Mac Seáin, founder/member of Shaw's Road *Gaeltacht*

In 1969, the first family of Belfast's *Gaeltacht* Community took up residence on Shaw's Road (then the outskirts of Nationalist West Belfast) in one of a small cluster of houses which they and their fellow Irish enthusiasts had built themselves. This move was the product of a series of discussions that had been going on for a number of years among some young couples in Belfast who had learned Irish as adults. Many had taken such steps as using the Irish form of their names, but they felt they had to go further if their passion for the language was to be something more than an exotic pastime. They decided to build an urban *Gaeltacht* where Irish would be the language of everyday activity. This would allow them to "live their love" as it were and give their children the

opportunity to have Irish as a first language.

While the project might sound relatively simple, an objective look at the situation would have discouraged most people. Of the nineteen families originally interested in the project, only five were left at the actual start. The tasks facing them were daunting as few had any experience in property management or running a school. What they lacked in expertise, however, they made up for with enthusiasm and determination.

The Shaw's Road settlers established a company, purchased the site, and built the houses themselves with the help of some Irish-speaking professionals. From the beginning, it was clear that the project had the support of the larger non-Irish speaking community as well, and this relationship was reciprocal. The original members delayed moving into the Shaw's Road houses in order to help build new homes for refugees from the Falls Road area who had been burned out of their houses by Loyalist rioters in 1969. This symbiosis between the Irish language movement and the larger Nationalist population has been a constant and crucial theme throughout the last twenty-seven years. In 1970, three other families built houses, and by 1976 the community had grown to eleven families and 33 children.

The question of education became crucial as children approached school age in the early 1970's, so the Shaw's Road *Gaeltacht* members decided to set up an Irish language primary school. A mobile hut was purchased and a native Irish speaker from Donegal was engaged as teacher. Thus, in September 1971, the first Irish language school in Northern Ireland opened its doors. The *Bunscoil Phobal Feirste* began with nine pupils, seven from the Shaw's Road and the other two from Irish-speaking families elsewhere in Belfast.

From the start, the involvement of the parents was a crucial factor in the seemingly impossible task of keeping the school going. As O'Hare (1993, 18) notes: "They [the Shaw's Road parents] raised finance, they maintained the building, they devised courses, they made teaching materials, and they taught in the school." This parental participation is a key element in the successes connected with the Irish language education movement. It helps account for the

accomplishments the students have made both in learning Irish and in overall academic performance. It also has been important in furthering the use of Irish among adults.

In 1978, the crucial decision was made to allow the children of non-Irish speakers to attend the *Bunscoil*. To this end, a full-time bilingual nursery was set up to operate as a feeder into the primary school for students with no Irish. This brought a huge increase in the number of children and by the mid-1980's, 162 students were attending the school.

Despite this showing, the British administration remained suspicious and obstructive. When the school was first set up in 1970, the organizers were warned of possible legal action by the state. However, the authorities soon found themselves too busy to carry out the threat as they were confronted by massive social upheaval and armed resistance from the larger Nationalist community. The efforts of Shaw's Road activists to obtain acceptance and funding for the school from the British administration went largely ignored. It was only in 1984 that the *Bunscoil*, after long lobbying efforts, was finally given official state recognition, which provided financial support and paid teachers' salaries. By then, the Irish language movement and Northern Ireland in general had seen some dramatic changes.

The Shaw's Road Community and its *Bunscoil* were an inspiration and structural catalyst for the Irish language education movement that blossomed in the 1980s. Dr. Gabrielle Maguire, a long-time observer of and participant in the language revival in her native Belfast, did a detailed study of the project (1991) which clearly traces the combination of elements responsible for the project's success. The young couples who began the Shaw's Road project decided that they had to create an Irish-speaking community, ensure that the language was transferred vertically to the next generation via an Irish-medium school system, and extend the use of Irish laterally by reclaiming public and private spaces for the use of Irish. To this end, they adopted an action-based philosophy which didn't wait for state funding or permits to get things done. The energy and creativity of these pioneers are some of the intangibles that defy analysis but often make the difference between success and failure in any endeavor.

In an interview in August 1994, Maguire outlined several factors that she feels were instrumental in the community's success to date. First, there were a number of very talented individuals in the original Shaw's Road group. Their dynamism and creativity were crucial in getting the whole project started. In addition, there was a tradition of efforts to promote Irish through institutions such as the *Chiuain Ard* which were useful points of reference as well as inspirations. Another important element lay in the political crisis that raised urgent questions about identity and culture. Finally, the social cohesion found in the special circumstances of the West Belfast community played an important role in the whole process. People had a long tradition of depending on themselves and each other without outside support. Maguire is quite clear about the importance of the inter-relationship between the school and the community. The school grew out of the Shaw's Road community which in turn grew out of the West Belfast community. All along the *Bunscoil* depended on the wider English-speaking Nationalist community for material, financial, and moral support. Now, the school, as well as the others that have arisen since, is giving much back to the community.

The Hunger Strike

Culture to us—the Irish language—was very important. The most obvious reason was that it's our culture. We are in prison for being Irish. We therefore felt it was our obligation to learn Irish. We never got the opportunity in school to learn Irish. So now we were in jail, we decided we should learn Irish.... The first reason we learned it (Irish) was the obligation, and the second reason was we were living in a totally hostile environment. For the blanket-men in 78 and 79...it was a way of communicating with each other that the screws wouldn't understand. We could build a defensive wall around ourselves.

(former Republican prisoner quoted in Kachuk 1993, 203)

It might seem strange to discuss the influence of prisoners and prison on a language and on an educational movement, but the struggle of Irish Republican Army (IRA) activists for political prisoner status clearly had a major impact on the status of the Irish language in Northern Ireland. Prisoners have always been a very emotive issue in Anglo-Irish relations. In the early 1970's, when hundreds of Nationalists were arrested without charge or trial on suspicion of participating in IRA activities, Republican prisoners went on hunger strike and won political status for themselves in

1972. In 1976, the British government, in an attempt to portray the conflict as a question of "law and order", rescinded political prisoner status for anyone sentenced for paramilitary activity after the first of March of that year. Republican prisoners resisted this policy change by refusing to wear prison uniforms. Before long, several hundred young men were confined naked in their cells except for a blanket. When prison officers refused to let the men go to the toilets without the uniform and wouldn't empty cell toilet pots on a regular basis, the "blanket-men" resorted to smearing their excrement on the cell walls (see Coogan 1995, 224-5).

The prisoners were denied all reading and educational material, but a few Irish speakers among them began teaching the language by the unusual method of shouting a word or phrase out the window to the next cell. Vocabulary and expressions were also scratched on cell walls. Eventually, most of the prisoners became more or less fluent in Irish. This was not just a way of fighting boredom. It was clearly seen as a means of resistance and an affirmation of identity in spirit-breaking conditions. In 1980, the prisoners even won the annual all-Ireland *Glór na nGael* award presented to the group that had done the most to promote the Irish language. With typical sardonic humor, the H-Blocks where the blanket-men were held were dubbed the "Jailtacht".

In his book *Formations of Violence* (1991), Allen Feldman records the experiences and perceptions of some of the former blanket-men. While the motivations involved in the use of Irish in the prisons were specific to that context, this process had powerful resonances for the whole Nationalist community in Northern Ireland. One ex-prisoner recalled:

The first time I heard Irish spoken in the H-Blocks, it was like magic.... The more you heard, the more incentive you had to learn it. There was something magic about listening to these guys waffling away with each other in a tongue that was once ours, that identified us as somebody separate.... But then it became something practical.... Going on a visit if you couldn't get up close to a guy to whisper a message to him you were beat. Whereas with Gaelic you could shout right across the visiting room and he would have got it.... You would get shifted into a new cell, and there was this massive amount of Gaelic on the wall. And you would add your Gaelic on the wall for the next guy who was getting all that combined.... Then it came to the stage that the biggest bulk of what was being spoke was in Gaelic. The cell door was no longer a door but a *doiris*. (211-12)

Feldman analyzes the prisoners' use of Gaelic in occasionally obscure flights of rhetoric, but he

clearly shows the social and symbolic power that Irish assumed in the prison context:

It is simplistic to view this process as cultural revivalism. On one level, the acquisition of Gaelic suggests the need to bridge the isolations and separations of the prison experience. Speaking Gaelic inserted the stigmatized and isolated prisoner into a historical lineage that endowed him with a crucial cultural identity, an identity that rectified his loss of self in the total institution. But to make this claim would be to identify as motive or rationale what was in effect one of the results of the acquisition of Gaelic. Gaelic speaking was born from the prison experience, and though it had a transcendental power, this power was first and foremost directed at the prison itself.... The prison cell...relinquished part of its wall space to the graphics of Gaelic acquisition. This transformation of the cell into a pedagogical space was...an act of personalized political appropriation.... (215-217)

While pre-1976 Republican prisoners, who had political status, frequently learned Irish, there was a qualitative difference in the use of the language during the Blanket Protest. It took on a liberating power that transformed the prison and the prisoners, both for themselves and the outside world.

In 1980, conditions had deteriorated to such a point that the prisoners began a hunger strike to put pressure on the British government. The strike ended in December of 1980 with a seeming compromise, until the British authorities reneged on the agreement (Coogan 1995, 232-3). This set the stage for another hunger strike in March 1981, led by a young man named Bobby Sands. Sands was a charismatic leader and a Gaelic enthusiast whose poems and writings (frequently in Irish) were smuggled out of prison and published to a wide audience. In April 1981, on his 40th day of hunger strike, Sands was elected to the British Parliament as the MP for Fermanagh-South/Tyrone, and this brought worldwide attention to his cause. Support for the hunger strikers in Nationalist areas was further demonstrated by mobilizations, in which tens of thousands of people took to the streets, and the establishment of support groups including "Irish Speakers Against H-Blocks". As first Sands and then nine more of his fellow prisoners died of starvation, the British government continued to insist that they were common criminals. The British policy had the additional unstated implications that both Nationalist aspirations and the Nationalist community as a whole were somehow illegitimate. The alienation of Nationalist working class areas from the British state became almost total, and one of the places where this anger came to be channelled was the Irish language.

Things Come Together

Gaelic gave us a language of our own.... The Gaelic was part of a whole education program that Bobby Sands initiated, and it was all done from the head and by shouting out the doors.... Bobby was the main advocate of cultural separatism. That was the message that came from inside the jails out to the whole community now. Bobby told us that the proof of the pudding was in the eating. The jails proved that when you become culturally separate it breaks the enemy, that it builds walls they can't cross.

(former Republican prisoner quoted in Feldman 1991, 212-213)

Following the 1981 Hunger Strike, several factors coalesced which were of crucial importance for the future development of the Irish language education movement. First of all, there was a tremendous sense of alienation from the British ethos on the part of working class Nationalists; people were angry and bitter and wanted both to defy the dominant structures and to assert their own Irish identity. Secondly, there was the inspiration of the blanket-men and especially Bobby Sands, for whom the Irish language was an important means of resistance and affirmation. The connection between the prison and the community took concrete form in the years following 1981 as a steady stream of Irish-speaking Republicans were released from the H-Blocks. A number of them wanted to continue their fight by non-military means and saw involvement in the Irish language movement as a natural extension of the struggle. Finally, the structures and the experience provided by pioneers such as the Shaw's Road *Gaeltacht* founders, were at hand to serve as a vehicle for these feelings. Without the previous work of the language enthusiasts, the emotional pull of the Irish language inspired by the prisoners might have dissipated. In the same way, without the passions generated by the Blanket Protest and the Hunger Strikes, the schools might have remained a marginal phenomenon.

The mid-1980's saw a remarkable development in local organization in West Belfast. Community and cultural groups, development projects, and human rights associations all began to flourish. In addition, Sinn Féin, a Republican political party which for years had been little more than a cheerleader for the IRA, became a genuine grassroots organization. This process epitomized a growing self-confidence in the community itself. Having been excluded and then besieged by the dominant structure, Nationalists began to organize their own alternatives, independent of the state

and even of the Catholic Church. This phenomenon was present in the 1970's, but the military conflict between the IRA and the British security forces was so pervasive at that time that there was little room for other developments. As the military struggle transformed itself into a low-intensity war, other challenges to the British state came to the fore. For example, the widespread job discrimination against Nationalists was challenged openly by the campaign for the affirmative action MacBride Principles, and Sinn Féin successfully contested elections and took seats on local bodies. Another area of development which reflected the growing sense of assertiveness and assurance of the community—and also became a point of conflict—was the Irish language.

To look at the motivations underlying the sudden surge of interest in Irish in the early 1980s, the Irish language group *Glór na nGael* did a survey during the winter of 1984-85 of some 223 Belfast adults who were learning Irish. The *Report of a Survey carried out on the Irish language in the winter of '84/85* (1985) by Feilim Ó hAdhmaill was revealing. Forty percent of respondents were female and learners tended to be young (74% between 17 and 35). Surprisingly, for an area with such high unemployment, 64% of respondents were working and only 11% described themselves as unskilled manual workers. Thus, the survey connects learning Irish with professionals or skilled workers though it should be noted that West Belfast, where most Irish language activities take place, is a predominantly working class area. Thus, even educated professionals from the Nationalist community usually have working class roots. A similar survey by Maguire (1991) of the Shaw's Road *Bunscoil* parents showed a high number of professionals but also an above average number of unskilled workers as parents of *Bunscoil* students. This suggests that people with less educational or technical background might be less likely to take a course themselves although they would support the movement by sending their children to an Irish-medium school. Forty percent of the learners first decided to learn Irish between 1981 and 1984 which suggests a growing consciousness of the language in the post-Hunger Strike period (According to Ó hAdhmaill, another 47% could be in this category, but did not specify a year.) In terms of motivation, the *Glór na nGael* survey seems to bear out Maguire's study of the Shaw's Road *Bunscoil* parents (1991). When asked

what had inspired them personally to learn Irish the most popular reason given was 'Irish identity/Irish culture' (23%) followed by "own language/culture", and "children at *Bunscoil*". "Bobby Sands/Hunger Strike" was the answer of 5% which also echoes the 9% for Republican/Nationalist tradition Maguire's survey of *Bunscoil* parents. When interviewees were offered a list of factors to choose from, 86% chose "to strengthen my Irish identity" and 74% "desire to promote the speaking of Irish in everyday life". In another question about who/what encouraged people generally to learn Irish, 38% listed the concern for "Irish identity", but this was closely followed by "Sinn Féin/Republican Movement" (33 percent). When they were provided with a multiple list of factors that encouraged Irish, there was again considerable agreement. Seventy-four percent chose the *Bunscoil* as promoting Irish with The H-Block Protests (61%), Irish language groups (59%) and Irish street signs (60%) all showing strongly. Somewhat paradoxically, the survey results show that many people credited Republican-related reasons for the overall increase in awareness about Irish, but fewer were willing to say that these had affected them personally.

Ó hAdhmaill attributes the dramatically increased interest in Irish to the political events of the period. The tensions engendered by the Hunger Strike crisis caused alienation from the British administration and the British cultural ethos. This manifested itself in a number of ways such as the increase in membership and votes for Sinn Féin and also the growth in interest in learning Irish, which Sinn Féin activists supported. In this perspective, Irish is seen as another means of resistance to British domination. The survey results lead Ó hAdhmaill to suggest that

whereas in the past reactions from nationalists in West Belfast ranged from calls for power-sharing to armed insurrection, at the present time another vehicle exists—the Irish language movement, through which some of the reaction to [British] Government policy is being channelled. (6)

I agree with Ó hAdhmaill that the Irish language movement did indeed become a channel for community feeling. I would emphasize, however, that the language movement was proactive as well as reactive in nature. Ó hAdhmaill does recognize outreach by the *Bunscoil* as an important step as it offered an infrastructure to absorb the energies of the period. He stresses that the organic links between the language movement and the larger community were essential for the former's growth.

The Growth of the Schools

In 1978, the Shaw's Road *Bunscoil* decided to open its doors to the children of non-Irish speaking families. This entailed the development of an affiliated bilingual nursery school which became a crucial feeder for the primary school. O'Hare (1993) found that

Children were taken into the nursery at three years of age and after two years had achieved a level of Irish sufficient to allow them to enter the *Bunscoil*. This step would result in a massive in flow of pupils to the *Bunscoil* and would also serve to focus attention on, and create support for, the Shaw's Road community in the non-Irish speaking population in Belfast. By September 1982 there were 45 children attending the nursery. By September 1986 this number had risen to 100 and since then, due to a lack of space, a limit has had to be put on the number of children being accepted into the nursery. (19)

Bilingual preschools began to spring up in many neighborhoods. These nurseries or *Naíonraí* encouraged parents to learn Irish and become active in running and supporting the schools (*Naíonra na Fuiseoige*, n.d.). With the growing number of nurseries, there was clearly a need for another primary school. Thus, in 1987, *Gaelscoil na bhFal* opened near the Falls Road. The following years saw the establishment of new schools in the Twinbrook, Ballymurphy, and (in 1996), Short Strand areas.

The example of Belfast began to inspire other Nationalist areas throughout Northern Ireland, especially in the cities of Derry and Newry. Current figures, with latest updates, show some thirty-six Irish language schools in Northern Ireland: twenty-two nursery schools, twelve primary schools, and two secondary schools (*An Phoblacht/Republican News* 16 May 1996). Leaving out the preschoolers, this means over 1,050 children are receiving their education in Irish. In addition, there are numerous adult language courses, with an estimated sixty in Belfast. Many of the adults in these courses have children attending the Irish-medium education schools.

The opening of an Irish language secondary school, the *Meánscoil*, in September 1991 with nine pupils, six girls and three boys, was a natural and necessary step in the burgeoning Irish language education system. In 1978, some members of the Shaw's Road community had attempted to establish an Irish language secondary school, but this had ended in failure. Despite considerable effort, the demand on resources was just too great, and the project folded in 1980. Aside from the

difficulties of finance, organizers also faced another problem in that there were simply not enough children from the Shaw's Road school to keep a secondary school going. However, Irish speaking children who went to an English medium secondary school were in danger of losing their language or, at least, the sense that Irish was "normal". The problems an *ex-Bunscoil* student faced in an English language secondary school are evident in the following account:

Another effect of the switch from the Irish language primary to an English language secondary school was to make the child self-conscious about her use of the Irish language. Because of the desire not to appear to be different from the rest of her English speaking class mates, she became reluctant to speak Irish loudly. As Nuala (the student's former classmate) recalls, "She began also to develop, what I consider a totally inexplicable idea, that you didn't speak Irish terribly loudly in public. This had a lot to do with the fact that she had new English speaking friends, and you don't want to be different". (O'Hare 1993, 28)

Language activists realized that an Irish language secondary school was crucial if the new generation of Irish speakers were to keep not only their fluency but also their pride in the language.

As Gabrielle Maguire noted:

The establishment of an Irish-medium secondary school would...[create] wider opportunities outside the school environment for speaking Irish. The various club activities which concentrate on skills developed through sport, culture, music, hobbies, debates, field trips etc. would be associated with the Irish language. This would in turn improve the teenagers' perceptions of the status and functional relevance of their language. (240)

With this awareness, language activists in the late 1980's felt that the time was right for another attempt. No government support was forthcoming for the project, so a scheme was developed where groups and individuals made monthly donations to provide the basic necessary finances.

The *Meánscoil Feirste* grew at a steady rate from its humble beginnings in 1991. By 1996, it had almost 200 students and nine full-time teachers. The Department of Education, however, continued to refuse funding by saying that the school needed at least 60 pupils enrolled in each grade and that this would have to be shown to represent a sustainable number. The rationale for these criteria, which were based on figures used for distant rural areas, seemed quite arbitrary to Irish speakers. Although the school was the first Irish language secondary school in the history of Northern Ireland, the British administration took no account of the school's unique nature. As the

Meánscoil grew despite official hostility, public pressure to give support mounted on the Northern Ireland Office. Finally, in 1995, the Northern Ireland Secretary of State, Patrick Mayhew, announced that £100,000 would be given to the school for that year and the next. While this was welcome news, the sum would still only cover about one third of the costs of running the school. Nonetheless, this was a major step forward, and now the debate on financing could concentrate on "how much" rather than on "whether or not". As of the 1996-97 financial year, the *Meánscoil* finally received full financial support from the British government, and plans are now afoot to move to new premises. This will certainly improve facilities but may cause some change in the atmosphere as the school will no longer share quarters with the other organizations of the language revival housed in the *Culturlann*.

Although the Shaw's Road school was able to obtain government funding in 1984, each new school has had to go through the same arduous process and the majority still do not receive aid from the state; of all the schools now established only five are fully or partly financed (Ó Donnghaile 1995). It is a remarkable tribute to the parents and the communities they live in that the schools have not only remained in existence but have even prospered in the face of official hostility and indifference.

A brief account of the experience of *Nálonra na Fuiseoige* (now *Scoil na Fuiseoige*) can convey some idea of the difficulties faced by language activists. In early 1984, a group of parents in the Twinbrook area contacted *Conradh na Gaeilge* and asked for help in setting up an Irish language nursery school for the local community. Discussions ensued, and, in September 1984, the *Nálonra* opened in a room loaned to it by a local community association. Enrollment was limited due to the extremely cramped surroundings, but by September 1985, there were already twenty children attending the nursery school. The first year's work was done entirely by volunteer labour, but the *Nálonra* later qualified for *Glór na nGael's* ACE scheme workers. As the nursery migrated to other temporary premises in a changing room in a recreation centre and an unoccupied room in a local school, the need for a building of its own became glaringly obvious. Requests for

government support met with refusals, so parents launched a fundraising drive that brought in over \$50,000. Most of this money came from the community itself, which is a remarkable accomplishment in itself considering that Twinbrook has an estimated unemployment rate of close to 70 percent. When in September 1988, construction began on the future school, the tremendous enthusiasm generated by the education movement in the Nationalist community was illustrated by the fact that much of the labour and many of the resources were donated. In September 1992, the new facilities were able to include a primary school and also adult language classes. In February 1997, *Scoil na Fuiseoige* received notice that it would receive state financial support.

The above example reveals several important aspects of the Irish medium school phenomenon. Although the short version of this story reads like a tale of unmitigated success, the school required incredible efforts to establish and maintain. The lack of backing from the Northern Ireland Office caused significant hardship and gave the school a precarious existence for a considerable time. Only the widespread support from the local people allowed the *Nálonra* to survive. This popular involvement from the larger community is a common theme in the development of the Irish schools and is clearly a major element in their survival and growth. There can be no doubt that the Irish language is important for a large number of Nationalists, even though many of them may not speak it themselves. The reasons for this attachment will be examined in later chapters, but the fact itself must be kept in mind throughout any analysis of the contemporary language revival.

Another important dimension of the *Nálonra* experience is the deliberate attempt to build links between adults and the schools. There is a conscious effort to involve parents in the running of the school, and the centre also offers adult language courses. This encourages democratic practices through popular participation and helps break down the divisions between a school as an institution and its community.

The experience as a whole raises hard questions as to what is required to establish the schools on a permanent basis. Can a school system depend on such popular support over the

long-term? How long can nursery or primary schools carry on in conditions like recreation centre changing rooms without the students suffering? If state support is finally forthcoming, what effect will this have on community involvement and the democratic management of the schools? The answers to these questions will depend on many factors, some of which are external to the language movement and others which will be explored in later chapters. One element, however, which is essential in fostering both the development of the schools and their popular nature is the creation of a supporting network of Irish language institutions.

Building an Irish Infrastructure

The 1980s also saw a number of concerted efforts to expand and increase the use of Irish in the larger society. These campaigns sought to make Irish more visible in addition to providing more linguistic opportunities for Irish speakers and learners. Certain actions also took on distinctly political overtones and offered a direct challenge to the dominant culture. Gaelic League (*Conradh na Gaeilge*) activists in the Twinbrook housing project (the home of Bobby Sands) decided to contest one of the most irritating expressions of anti-Irish bias: the 1949 laws that forbade the erection of street signs in Irish. Despite the fact that Twinbrook is an area with enormous unemployment (70-75%) and ubiquitous poverty, the community provided the resources for this project (*Náfonra na Fúiseoige n.d.*). Residents contributed money and made up some 160 signs giving the names of streets in the area in Irish. The signs were put up, but the campaign did not go smoothly at first. Organizers were arrested and signs removed by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the British Army. Local residents, however, replaced the signs.

Two commentators highlight different aspects of the relevance of this campaign. Gabrielle Maguire sees the positive advantages of Gaelic names as a means of putting people in touch with their history. Often English place-names are bastardized versions of Gaelic words which could give some indication of the place's history. She sees this as a potential bridge between the two communities:

[C]itizens in both Nationalist and Loyalist areas could benefit from a knowledge of the Gaelic origin from which their street or townland derives its name. Ironically, it is because the Irish language is often identified with the Nationalist section of the population that its use and propagation has been officially discouraged. In one queer sense, it is the people who have inherited this distorted vision of cultural values who lose most. (Maguire 1991, 65)

Another Irish activist emphasizes that people "on the ground" perceived these events as more overtly political:

Interestingly enough the Cumann Gaelach responsible for the signs actually went out of its way to try to assure people that their actions were not meant to be political. However, as far as most people in Twinbrook were concerned, while Irish remained less than legal in the eyes of the state, such action was extremely political. (Ó hAdhmaill 1990, 328)

These perspectives suggest two complementary levels of meaning in the discourse of the whole Irish language movement. On the one hand, there is the discourse of resistance where Irish activists struggle to claim and reclaim space for the language in the face of the dominant culture. As seen before, all parties are aware of the implications of such actions as the survival of the Irish language has been a political issue since the 16th century. However, for various reasons, this conflictual aspect remains more or less of a subtext that is not often expressed publicly by either Irish Nationalists or the British government. (Elements within the Loyalist community are sometimes less discrete as we shall see later). On the other hand, there is a discourse of affirmation that says the promotion of the Irish language is a positive experience for those who speak it, and that it offers a common heritage to both communities in Northern Ireland. This is the perspective most often expressed officially by Irish language enthusiasts.

The campaign for Irish street signs succeeded in raising the public profile of Irish. Today, one can wander through most Nationalist areas of Northern Ireland and see the concrete results of this project. Nonetheless, the terrain is still contested. The anti-Irish sign legislation has only recently been repealed in Northern Ireland as a whole, but the Unionist-dominated Belfast City Council passed a quite restrictive law to hamper the efforts of the Irish activists. In theory, one-third of the people on a street have to request that the street sign be put up in Irish. Then the motion has to win the approval of seventy-five percent of the residents, and this means of eligible voters.

Abstentions are counted as "no" votes.

Another campaign to get more Irish language programming in the mainstream media had considerably less success. Despite a 1985 Ulster Television survey that found 20,000 people fluent in Irish and a potential audience of 70,000 people, the station did not introduce any Irish language programs (Kachuk 1993). Relations with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) were slightly better. BBC plans to cut the amount of Irish language programs from one hour a week to fifteen minutes were stopped due to protest, and a slight increase in broadcast time was won.

Somewhat frustrated with the established media, activists began to develop their own systems. In 1985, Radio Feirste began as a pirate all-Irish radio station. It continued a somewhat sporadic existence until 1994, but was finally refused a license by the British authorities. (An offspring, Radio Fáilte, appeared recently but has yet to establish a permanent presence.)

On Halloween 1996, an important new initiative came from the Republic of Ireland with a state-sponsored Irish language television channel which carried five hours of television broadcasts in Irish every day. This development has ramifications for Irish speakers in Belfast because it gives greater media access for the language and a potential for Irish-based employment in broadcasting.

A local success story was the founding of *Lá* [Day], which started as a weekly Irish language newspaper in 1984, and eventually became a daily. By 1990, *Lá* had a circulation of over 1,000. Although it has returned to publishing on a weekly basis in order to consolidate operations, the paper represents a significant achievement. As Maguire points out, *Lá's* influence goes beyond its circulation and reporting capacities: "equally important is the degree of pride and self-esteem which is instilled in Northern Irish speakers by the fact that Ireland's only Irish language daily paper is published in Belfast" (58). In addition to *Lá*, a number of papers, including the daily *Irish News* and the weeklies *Andersonstown News* and *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, publish articles in Irish.

Glór na nGael

As the Irish education movement mushroomed, it became increasingly evident that some sort of umbrella group would be needed to coordinate activity. This task initially fell to the West

Belfast Committee of *Glór na nGael*, an organization set up in 1982. *Glór na nGael* [The Voice of the Gael] is an all-Ireland group which began in 1961 under the leadership of priests. Its aim was to award prizes for annual competitions for the promotion of Irish. According to Feilim Ó hAdhmaill (1985), not long after the West Belfast *Glór na nGael* branch was set up every language organization in the area was involved.

Glór na nGael became especially involved as the conduit for Action for Community Employment (ACE) funds. This was a government make-work program that encouraged employers to give on-the-job training to unemployed people with the government agreeing to pay one year's salary. Many of the workers in the new Irish nurseries were paid through the ACE program.

In addition, *Glór na nGael* set up a number of adult Irish language classes and was even able to provide instruction for people from the Unionist community through the Ulster People's College. So successful were the West Belfast group's efforts that it won a number of all-Ireland *Glór na nGael* prizes throughout the 1980's and was awarded the top *Glór na nGael* for 1989-90 for setting up an Irish language drop-in center as well as for cross-community outreach.

Despite the above-mentioned gains, the British government still mistrusted the Irish language and regarded it as highly political terrain. On August 22, 1990, *Glór na nGael* received a letter from the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) saying that it would no longer receive government funds via ACE schemes. The reason behind this decision was based on a 1985 statement by then-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Douglas Hurd, which said the British government might begin withholding funds from certain community groups because "to give support to these groups would have the effect of improving the standing and furthering the aims of a paramilitary organization" (Kachuk 1993, 333).

This came as a great shock to most people. *Glór na nGael* had been involved in agitational campaigns such as the erecting of Irish street signs and the opposition to proposed education reforms in 1988, but for the most part its focus was working with the nursery schools network and running adult education courses, some in the Protestant community. It was ironic that the same day

that *Glór na nGael* received word it was losing its funding because of so-called "paramilitary connections", it received another letter from the Royal Ulster Constabulary giving it permission to hold a street collection to raise money.

The NIO's decision was a double-edged threat. The loss of funding was potentially devastating to both *Glór na nGael* itself and to the nursery schools, but on a more sinister note, the public assertion of paramilitary links opened the organization's members to the threat of increased harassment from the security forces and possible assassination attempts from Loyalist paramilitaries. The NIO refused to justify its decision, so the Irish language community mobilized itself and launched an international campaign demanding that funding be restored. The affair was a severe embarrassment for the British government as support for *Glór na nGael* came from the Irish government, the British Labour Party, and American and European politicians. Finally, on March 27, 1992, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Peter Brooke announced that the circumstances behind the first decision had changed and funding would be restored. *Glór na nGael* members welcomed the decision but expressed bafflement over the whole issue. During this whole period, they did their best to keep classes and nurseries running with many people working without pay. While the NIO's original decision to cut funding seems to have been short-sighted and to have backfired, some saw a clear and successfully articulated message in the underlying discourse. Irish language activist Feilim Ó hAdhmaill wrote:

Few people involved nowadays in the community work/voluntary sector in Northern Ireland believe that the Hurd policy had/has anything to do with paramilitaries as such. It is largely believed that the policy was initially brought in to try to stem the growing tide of support for the Sinn Féin political party in nationalist working class areas in the early to mid-1980's.... In this respect, therefore, it is believed that the policy is aimed more at preventing people with particular political views from playing an active role in their local communities rather than at preventing "paramilitary" abuse of Government funds, etc. (quoted in Kachuk 1993, 356)

Ó hAdhmaill's quote suggests that *Glór na nGael* was targeted less for its work on the Irish language than for its perceived political slant. Such an interpretation would be a misreading of the situation, however, because it presents Sinn Féin as the cause rather than a consequence of the social dynamic which was happening in Belfast at the time. *Glór na nGael* was part of a growing

alternative social project in the Nationalist community, and its role as a promoter of Irish was an integral part of its nature. Thus, the attack on *Glór na nGael* can best be understood as an attack both on a certain discourse of the Irish language that proclaimed a separate Irish identity and on a new group confidence that was fostering the creation of power structures outside state control.

The British Response

It was only in the 1980's that the Irish language movement began to seek recognition and support from the British state in a serious way. As described above, such demands revealed a new attitude of affirmation among Nationalists. The Northern Ireland Office was suddenly faced with a series of demands from the Irish language movement. In addition, Sinn Féin, the Republican political party, had set up a Cultural Department and was becoming very active on the language question. The British were very much on the defensive and had to come up with some sort of policy on the Irish language. However, their response was, and remains, hesitant, contradictory, grudging, suspicious, and sometimes, as in the case of *Glór na nGael*, aggressive. Faced with demands that seemed eminently reasonable, the British government was caught in a dilemma aptly summarized by Fergus O'Hare, the current principal of the *Meánscoil*,

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Sir Patrick Mayhew, is on record as having said that "both traditions in Northern Ireland" should be "equally esteemed". He has also stated his opposition to the development of a bilingual society in Northern Ireland. It is impossible to reconcile these statements. By opposing bilingualism he is downgrading the indigenous language of the territory and placing barriers to its natural development. It is attitudes such as this which "brings politics into the language debate"—a charge often leveled at supporters of the language. To remove the Irish language from the arena of political controversy, and to show that "both traditions" are to be "equally esteemed"...steps should be taken to put Irish on an equal footing with English. (1993, 56)

By denying support for the Irish schools, the Northern Ireland Office seemed to be continuing a policy of discrimination against the Irish language and, by extension, the Nationalist minority. If it were to give support to the schools, it could risk alienating the Unionist majority and undermining its own rationale for remaining in Ireland, the idea that Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom. Even as recently as 1996, John Major, the British Prime Minister, stated

at a Conservative Party Congress that Northern Ireland was as much part of the United Kingdom as the English county of Surrey. If the Irish language and Irish culture grow stronger and challenge the effective power of the dominant British culture, statements like Major's would have little credibility (Bradley 1993). Support on the part of the British state for Irish would therefore weaken its own hegemonic practice which has been a basic fact of life in Anglo-Irish relations from the sixteenth century to the present. How the British government finally responds to this paradox will be a crucial factor in the ultimate fate of the Irish revival.

Awareness of the potentially subversive effect of Irish may be one of the reasons why state support for the language in Northern Ireland is considerably less than that given to Welsh or Scotch Gaelic in other areas of the United Kingdom. The comparison is quite striking:

The reality of overt discrimination is made clear when one looks at the provisions made for Welsh and Scots Gaelic. Both languages have parity of esteem enshrined in legislation. Local authorities play an active role in the setting up and the successful running of the schools. During the period of 1990-91 the Department of Education spent a total of two million pounds promoting the Welsh language, in addition to what it spent on Welsh medium education within the normal education budget. It is also significant that in Scotland schools with as few pupils as four can receive full grant-aided status. (*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 16 May 1996, p.11)

Further comparisons with the Welsh and Scots Gaelic, elaborated in a document by the Committee on the Administration of Justice (1993), make the double standard even clearer.

In 1991-92, the British government devoted £1,216,000 to Irish, a language which 142,000 people in Northern Ireland can speak, read and/or write. This figure does not include expenditures for the Irish-medium schools, which account for another £405,000. Nonetheless, the former figure does not give a true picture as it includes such things as one-time projects, funding for job creation that only marginally involves Irish, and the cost of censoring the letters of Republican prisoners.

During a comparable period, in 1992, Welsh (527,500 speakers) was given £7.6 million. In addition, parents in Wales have the right to have their children educated in Welsh, and Welsh speakers can obtain legal proceedings and many government services in their language. Similarly, in 1990-91, the British Government gave £1,505,000 for the promotion of Scots Gaelic (67,730 speakers). Another £4 million is spent annually for the production of broadcasting material in Gaelic.

One can only speculate as to the reason for this seemingly contradictory attitude towards Celtic languages within the United Kingdom. In the most cynical political terms, one might see the British policy towards Welsh and Scots Gaelic as an attempt to appease nationalist sentiment and dampen potential separatist tendencies by supporting certain cultural aspirations. A more generous view might see British policy as an enlightened tolerance for minority languages and rights. From either perspective, British Government attitudes and actions toward Irish seem counterproductive and hypocritical.

In spite of state antipathy toward Irish, the language movement grew too strong in the 1980s to be isolated or ignored. At some point in this period, the Northern Ireland Office decided to provide at least minimal support to the Irish language education system. The first sign of this shift occurred when the Shaw's Road *Bunscoil* was finally given approval and financial backing in 1984. This represented a sea change for the school and signified a new relationship with the dominant culture. For the first time, Irish in Northern Ireland was not treated simply as something "foreign" and the language of the Irish Republic to the south. By supporting the *Bunscoil*, the dominant culture was being forced to admit that the Irish language had a place within Northern Ireland. Further progress seemed imminent with the publication of a preliminary report on the Irish language which concluded that "the Irish language is known, is of interest to and is considered important by a substantial proportion of the Catholic community, and particularly its younger members" (Sweeney 1987, 24).

On the other hand, this change did not mean an overall uniform, coherent shift in British policy. Language activists who put up Irish street signs continued to be arrested and harassed, and new Irish schools experienced consistent difficulties getting financial support. Near the end of the decade, the Minister for Education, Dr. Brian Mawhinney, launched a bombshell with the 1988 Education Reform Report, which ostensibly wished to encourage the study of major European languages but would have had the effect of removing Irish as a core curriculum choice. Activists immediately launched a campaign against this downgrading of Irish, which, ironically, coincided with

legislation in Wales strengthening the teaching and use of the Welsh language. So strong was the reaction to the proposed changes that Mawhinney was forced to back down, and the Education Reform Order of 1989 confirmed the status of Irish as on a par with Spanish, French, and German. (Kachuk 1993, 304-305). Nonetheless, even this "victory" only kept Irish in the category of a "foreign" language.

In 1989, the Northern Ireland Office announced the establishment of the ULTACH Trust to promote Irish language and culture as part of the common heritage of Northern Ireland. ULTACH is a bi-lingual title; it stands for "Ulster, Language, Traditions and Cultural Heritage" in English and is an old Irish term for Ulster as well. On one hand, this was a positive development and represented a further recognition of the place of Irish in Northern Ireland. However, it could also be seen more cynically as an attempt to coopt the language movement within establishment circles and limit the influence of radical Republicanism in the whole language movement. ULTACH's stated objective was to "advance the Irish language, traditions and cultural heritage" (Committee on the Administration of Justice 1993, 10) with its mandate restricted primarily to funding and lobbying. Its executive board was to consist of representatives from both communities who were mutually acceptable. Although it is supposed to seek donations to finance itself, ULTACH also receives monetary support from the Central Community Relations Unit (CCRU), a government body. According to the Committee on the Administration of Justice's 1993 report on the status of Irish in Northern Ireland;

The CCRU only responds to demand, and does not take an initiative to fund its own projects. The objective is not the encouraging of Irish, but rather demonstrating the contributions of Irish to the cultural traditions of Northern Ireland. It is clear, therefore, that the [British] Government has no policy of promoting a bilingual society within Northern Ireland. (10)

Like so many other things in Northern Ireland, ULTACH seems open to a variety of interpretations, which may all contain elements of truth. On one hand, it represents formal recognition of a hard-won space for the Irish language. On the other hand, it could be also seen as an attempt at confining and taming the language revival by deciding who gets funding and

setting certain priorities such as cross-community relations. Since the IRA ceasefire from August 1994 to February 1996, language groups in the Nationalist community have increased contacts with ULTACH, consequently the organization has become a more neutral zone between the British administration and the language movement. In addition, ULTACH's influence has also been limited due to financial constraints and its own rather narrow mandate.

In the 1980's, the British state, in the form of the Northern Ireland Office, was forced to recognize and cede cultural territory to the Irish language. Nevertheless, the gradual, and grudging, increase in funding for the Irish schools did not entail a fundamental change in attitude on the part of the dominant culture. Despite the reluctant acknowledgement of the existence of Irish, the establishment of ULTACH and the attack on *Glór na nGael* seemed to be attempts to say that the British state would determine both the boundaries of permitted expression and the people permitted to express.

Towards a Bilingual Future

According to this [a statement of aims for the Meánscoil] the school would provide an education that would encourage the pupils to "see their language and culture and country as a valuable and living inheritance belonging to them as members of the Gaelic community of Belfast and of Ireland. An education that will make them proud of that inheritance, will enable them to derive pleasure and satisfaction from it, and will make them aware, tolerant and appreciative of other traditions, views and lifestyles."

(O'Hare 1993, 34)

While activity in the 1980s laid the groundwork for an Irish language infrastructure, the present decade has witnessed not only a significant expansion of the existing network but also new developments in a number of areas. A major boost came, ironically enough, through a 1991 government census of Northern Ireland. For the first time since 1911, the census posed questions concerning Irish, and the results were encouraging for language activists. The census found 79,012 people who could speak, read, and write Irish as well as an additional 45,338 who could only speak the language (Committee on the Administration of Justice 1993, 7). This made for a total of 142,003 or close to ten percent of the population, which was welcome news for those advocating more state

funding and media time for the Irish language.

Perhaps the most vibrant symbol of the dynamism of the Irish-speaking community in West Belfast is the *Culturlann* MacAdam-O'Flaich building on the Falls Road, a former church that was converted into a centre for the Irish language in 1992. It houses a coffee house, an Irish language bookstore, a theater group, the offices of *Lá* and the West Belfast Festival (which features many Irish language events), and, until 1997, the *Meánscoil*.

In the space of a single decade, the language movement saw rapid growth and numerous new initiatives based on building an environment for Irish speakers. By the end of the 1980's, the time had come for an umbrella group that could coordinate Irish language education projects throughout the Six Counties, and so in 1991 *Gaeiloilúint* (GO) was founded. GO quickly garnered affiliation from all the Irish-medium schools in addition to a number of independent groups and professionals. It was initially concerned with the lack of state support for most of the schools, but also wanted to build support networks for teachers and parents of the schools' children. GO felt that it was crucial to improve teacher training at all levels, because much of the language instruction, especially at the nursery and adult levels, had been done by well-intentioned individuals with little experience. The concern for developing professionalism raises the thorny issue of institutionalization. Many popular movements develop from scratch on a wave of enthusiasm and later are the victims of their own success by becoming bureaucratic and losing touch with the base. While this may be an eventual danger for the Irish revival, the close links between the schools and the community as well as the unresolved political situation guarantee the movement's popular nature for the foreseeable future. In the meantime, more resources and improved pedagogical methods can only be beneficial to the growth of Irish in the community. To this end, GO has also drawn up an ambitious five-year plan for the expansion of Irish-medium education, which has been submitted to the Department of Education.

For GO's planners, the schools are a source of inspiration and motivation for the communities of which they are part.

Many of the areas where schools have been established are socially deprived and under-privileged. The schools are a source of inspiration, self-confidence and hope for all the pupils, parents, teachers, auxiliaries and friends involved in them. As such, they provide the impetus and the climate necessary to revitalize the social, economic and cultural infrastructure of each area. (Ó Donnghaile 1995)

From this vision come two of the next steps being projected for the Irish-speaking community: post-secondary education in Irish and opportunities for working in the language. These objectives are both logical and necessary extensions of everything that has come so far, and the latter is absolutely essential if the language group is to maintain itself and not lose its newly-constructed community to economic emigration.

A 1993 study by *Glór na nGael* found that some 220 people in Belfast were earning their living through the medium of Irish. While this modest number represents a good beginning, more jobs in Irish language work environments will be a crucial factor in the future success or failure of this experiment in language revival. To this end, a new group called *Forbairt Feirste* was launched in 1995 with the mandate of Irish language job creation. It has given courses (in Irish) on setting up small businesses and on working in media as broadcasters, writers, actors and technicians. It is also investigating the possibility of developing "cultural tourism" to attract visitors who will come to learn about Irish culture and language.

The story to date of the Irish language education movement is an impressive one. Starting from a small group of individuals in the 1960's, it has grown to touch the lives of thousands of people and to become an integral part of a subordinate community finding strength and confidence in itself. During the 1970s, the Shaw's Road community and school grew slowly. When the Nationalist community was profoundly shaken by the political crisis engendered by the Hunger Strike in 1981, many people sought ways make statements of defiance and of assertion. The Irish language was an powerful vehicle to fulfil these aspirations, and the model of the schools offered the means to transform this wish into reality. Within a few years after the death of Bobby Sands and his nine comrades, the Irish language was a pervasive fact of life in the Nationalist areas and had begun to offer a serious challenge to the dominant culture.

CHAPTER 5: VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Over the space of two visits to Belfast in August 1994 and December 1995, I conducted twenty formal interviews with twenty-four participants in the Irish language education movement. Since a primary focus of this work is the motivation underlying their involvement, most people I spoke to were adults. However, I also interviewed three young sisters who are students in the Irish schools. Participants included residents of the Shaw's Road *Gaeltacht*, former Republican prisoners, academics, Sinn Féin members, teachers in the schools, parents of children in Irish schools and language activists. Interviews were open-ended with a focus on the personal experience of learning Irish and the motivation for involvement in the language movement. In addition to these taped interviews, I also observed an adult evening class organized by the students themselves and distributed a survey questionnaire to another group of adult language learners.

In this chapter, I will profile six adults and the three youth interviewed to give a grassroots perspective on the meaning of the Irish language education movement in the context of contemporary Northern Ireland. This will be followed by a brief account of the results of a small questionnaire distributed in November 1996. In the following interviews, the privacy of the participants has been respected through the use of pseudonyms and the deletion of certain personal details.

Interviews

"The impossible has been developed"
Seán, Shaw's Road *Gaeltacht* Resident

Seán, a resident of the Shaw's Road *Gaeltacht*, is in his thirties and works in Belfast. He also teaches evening classes for adults who want to learn Irish. Although his mother was a native Irish speaker from the Irish Republic, he did not learn the language as a child. In his early years, he had little awareness of the language, but his interest was aroused by a combination of events.

Two things came together in the [early] 1970's when there was more money about and my mother could travel with us down to Donegal...hearing the language there—among my mother and grandmother and aunts and cousins. And then coming along parallel with that was the outbreak of the Troubles when there was a greater awareness among us that there was a British force in the North of Ireland.

Although he was still very young at the time, these circumstances led him to take Irish as a subject when he entered secondary school. His memories of this experience are quite negative, however.

I didn't enjoy this language being pushed down my throat by a Christian Brother- quite often in a ... violent sort of way. I found myself frustrated.

The above passage is interesting and echoes the comments of many others concerning their educational experience at the hands of the Christian Brothers. Camille O'Reilly (interview 1995) suggested rather tongue-in-cheek that as the Irish language had been beaten out of the Irish youth in the National Schools, the Christian Brothers decided to use the same methods to put it back again. Seán was so put off by his experience that he actually switched to French in his last years of secondary. At the age of fifteen, he began to take evening classes at the *Chluain Ard* and there he could satisfy his ambition. This led to a new development in his relationship with his mother as she began to speak to him only in Irish. By the age of eighteen, he was able to teach others. He got married to another Irish speaker from the network of friends he had developed, and when they had their two children, it was assumed that they would have an Irish-speaking household.

There was no sitdown talk about how we would conduct our affairs with our children. It was just natural. We always spoke Irish together, so it was just natural we would speak Irish to our kids.

Both his children are attending the *Bunscoil*, and Irish is clearly their first language.

Seán feels that the school may have somewhat peaked in terms of the results it was producing simply because there are now more students, so the student-teacher ratio has increased from the early days. Indeed, The Shaw's road *Bunscoil* has become so popular that some parents register a child for a place in the school as soon as he/she is born. This situation raises the question posed in the previous chapter as to whether the schools will lose their innovative spirit and popular nature as they become institutionalized. Seán remains confident that the school will maintain high standards and quality education because of the commitment of the teachers and the involvement of the parents.

...parents are more actively involved in their children's education because of the nature of the language, because of the nature of the project, of the system that they are going through.

Parental involvement in the schools is clearly an essential point and a major factor in the success the movement has enjoyed so far. Parents have been closely connected with all aspects of running the schools and in the promotion of Irish itself. Their commitment is evident from the number of parents who take language classes at night in order to help their children with their studies.

Adult learners also benefit from their participation in the language movement, however. Speaking from his own long experience as a volunteer teacher, Seán has seen many adults develop their own potential and sense of self-worth.

What is rewarding, as well, are...people who maybe have left school, no real academic record at school, come along to an evening class get a flavour of conversation and then maybe feel the confidence to pick up an O-level (a degree) which is something you do at sixteen at school and that has pushed them into other subjects and I can name a number of people who would have then pushed themselves on as adults eventually taking up positions in colleges or universities in different capacities.

This sheds light on another important facet of the project that lies beyond the linguistic aspect. These classes are part of an educational infrastructure that the community has established for itself, and this network now reciprocates by enriching the community both on a group and an individual level.

Aside from wanting to support the children in Irish schools, Seán sees a common feature in the motivation that inspires the adult learners.

One of the common things, perhaps all of us would say, is our identity. It's something about our culture, it's something that belongs uniquely to Ireland.

This is a familiar theme: the Catholic/Nationalist community in the early 1970s wanted to affirm who they were, and the Irish language assumed a vital role in that process. In Seán's view, this assertion of identity has led to a new self-assurance in the community.

It has built up a confidence among us and pride as well.... I think to a degree people were very silent until the late 60's...and we find now in the Nationalist community strong, articulate people and a community which is very confident in themselves...and I think the Irish language has helped.

In his view, the successes of the language movement have sown the seeds for a bright future for Irish. While hoping to see a united Ireland eventually, Seán feels it is still essential to get

resources from the British to support the schools. The possibilities for living in Irish are increasing, but the Northern Ireland state must grant parity of esteem and provide bilingual services. Such demands seem quite reasonable to him and a logical extension of what has already been established.

We're not asking for the impossible. Indeed, the impossible has been developed by the Irish community. What looked like an impossibility back in 1970 has been realized by a community with little resources and a lot of enthusiasm.

***"The growth of the Irish schools has to be seen
in the context of total alienation from the state"***
Kieran, Former Republican Prisoner

Kieran is a former Republican prisoner in his late thirties. I met with him at his parents' house in West Belfast. He is one of the generation that came out of prison in the early 1980s and threw themselves into cultural work as a continuation of their struggle.

Kieran was imprisoned for Republican activity in early 1976 before the removal of political status in March of that year and placed in "the cages", the corrugated metal huts surrounded by wire fences and barbed wire that held special category (i.e. paramilitary) prisoners. Kieran found himself in the famous "Cage 11" which had previously housed such future Republican luminaries as Gerry Adams and Bobby Sands and which was renowned as a hotbed of political discussion and promotion of the Irish language.

Kieran had learned some Irish during his secondary education but left school at fifteen. Although Irish classes had long been part of the Republican prison ethos, Kieran and some others decided to actually create an entire Gaelic speaking area, a *Gaeltacht*, in Cage 11. He maintains that this was the first attempt to construct a prison *Gaeltacht* during the current IRA campaign. The motto (in Irish) on the entrance to the Cage-11 Irish-speaking area was "Irish if you can, English if you must", and Republican prisoners were told that they would become fluent within six months if they lived in the *Gaeltacht* section.

This development paralleled the beginning of the "Blanket Protest" in which the Irish language became an important means of both survival and redefinition of the prison environment

for the prisoners who had lost special category status. The *Gaelgeoiri* (Irish speakers) in Cage 11, themselves studying with few resources, organized to help their comrades in the H-Blocks.

When the Blanket Protest first started up, we spent a lot of our time sending classes by writing them down in coms [slang for communications written on sheets of toilet paper and smuggled into the prisoners] down to the Blocks. We had to make sure they were absolutely grammatically correct because we didn't want to send down a mistake and then suddenly three or four hundred people were repeating that mistake. So, a lot of our time was taken up with sending down classes to the Blocks.

For Kieran, the Hunger Strike was a seminal event whose full meaning and effects are still not understood fifteen years later. One area where its influence was clear, however, was culture.

From 1981 onwards, with the death of the ten hunger strikers and the steady release of prisoners who had become cultural activists there was a greater emphasis put on the cultural aspect of the struggle. In 1982, Sinn Féin set up a cultural Department and I was involved when I got out in 1983.

A committed Republican, Kieran places the Irish language education movement clearly in an anti-colonial context. He feels it cannot be examined out of the whole socio-historical context that is Northern Ireland.

The Irish language schools, I would argue, just didn't develop by themselves and cannot be looked upon as an individual manifestation of struggle but have to be placed in a wider context.... If you look at the development of Belfast in the last twenty-five years, the Irish language schools are only one aspect of an alternative education system. I mean you are talking about total alienation from the state....The growth of the Irish schools has to be seen in the context of total alienation from the British state.

He mentions a number of community-based adult education programs (conducted in English) such as the classes in the Conway Mill in the Lower Falls area of Belfast as examples of this process. While this English language adult education system lies outside the scope of the present thesis, Kieran's statement supports the idea of an alternative education network as forming part of a counter-hegemonic practice.

From this viewpoint, the concept of alternative structures is fundamental for understanding the Irish language education movement as well as the dynamic of the Nationalist community of Northern Ireland as a whole. According to Kieran, the community has developed structures ranging from education to transportation (the Black taxi system created when public transport in Nationalist

areas was temporarily halted due to rioting) to media (*La, The Andersonstown News*) to military and policing (the IRA). He says of the IRA,

Like it or loathe it, we have an alternative army in West Belfast; we have an alternative justice system. And there's not too many people from West Belfast clamouring for that justice system to be done away with.

The need to develop autonomous structures stems from the original exclusion of the Nationalist population from the Northern Ireland state and mainstream civil society. For Kieran, this alienation is a constant subtext of political and social life for most Nationalists and not just among Republicans or in the working class Nationalist ghettos. He cites the example of Nationalist lawyers who, in 1995, petitioned to remove an oath of allegiance to the Queen of England for barristers because it was "politically and morally offensive" and the poem written by Nobel Prize winning writer and Derry City native Seamus Heaney when he was included in an anthology of major British writers in which Heaney protests that "no glass of ours was ever raised to toast the queen."

Despite the alternative nature of the Irish language infrastructure, Kieran has no problem with seeking financial support or recognition from the British government. He actually sees this as more compromising for language activists who deny the political dimensions of Irish than for those who are unabashedly clear on their political aims. In his view, the British state can never give equal rights to Nationalists because Northern Ireland was founded on the basis of inequality. He supports a strategy of increasing demands on the Northern Ireland Office with the goal of bilingualism in state services and a fully-funded Irish language education system, coinciding with demands for economic and political equality. If this point of parity were ever reached, the rationale for the union with England would be completely undermined. Kieran does not personally believe that Britain will ever allow such a scenario and feels that the long-term future of Irish can only be guaranteed by a political solution based on a British withdrawal. His perspective suggests that the Irish language will not be depoliticized as long as the British state remains in Ireland.

Throughout the interview, Kieran reiterated two points that he felt were crucial for any analysis of the Irish language education movement: the impact of the Hunger Strike of 1981 and the

close links between the schools and the community.

Part of the philosophy behind the growth of the Irish schools is that they are firmly rooted in communities. That context is important. You can't just take them out of the communities. It's *our* school-not just a school. Our school situated in a central role in the community.

This comment encapsulates the organic link between the schools and the community and supports my contention that the schools are both an expression of the community's identity and a vehicle for the reinforcement of that identity.

***"I think we're on the verge of something big"
Sinead, Worker in Irish Nursery School***

Sinead is a woman in her late thirties whom I interviewed in December 1995 at an Irish language nursery school where she had been working for three years. She first began to learn Irish about eleven years previously because

I was on holiday one time in Germany and I met two Americans and they said "Do you have your own language in Ireland?" and I said "Yes" and they said "Well, you speak very good English." So I thought I should have been speaking in my own language, so I came home and did wee bits and started going to night classes and just got a love of it from there.

She still considers herself a learner and readily admits that this is sometimes a daunting project.

I still find it hard, very hard. I started and stopped a whole lot of times. It was like taking driving lessons—you know, you got to a stage where you thought you couldn't do it. And then my interest would be sparked again and I'd join another class....

The above passage echoes concerns expressed in Maguire (1990) about learning plateaus which many adults encounter and have trouble going beyond. Irish remains very much a "learner's language" as even most of the fluent Irish speakers acquired it as a second language. For adults, even with high motivation, learning any language is a major challenge. While the future of Irish clearly lies with the youth in the schools, the successful construction of Irish language environments requires fluent adult speakers. The children growing up as Irish speakers must see that the language has relevance to the older generation as well. Consequently, support for adult learners to get past these learning plateaus is not then just an academic exercise. The importance of having "linguistic

territories" for the language in order to encourage adult learners is underlined by Sinead's response to the question of what factors helped revive her interest in Irish.

If I heard somebody speaking it or if there was a bit in the paper I couldn't read or I put the television on and there was a program in Gaelic-then it renewed my interest.

She has seen tremendous change in the accessibility of Irish in the last fifteen years. Her own children did not go to the Irish schools in the early 1980's because she didn't speak Irish at that time.

Now they [my children] could quite happily go even if I didn't have Irish. There's just a difference now.... Fifteen years ago I felt, and I think a whole lot of other people felt, you needed Gaelic to send your children to a school, but that's not the way now. You can send them and learn it with your child.

This difference lies in the Irish language infrastructure developed over the last twenty-five years and the community pride in the project. This access to "Irish spaces" is clearly of crucial importance in encouraging people to begin and stay with the language. A *Glór na nGael* survey (1987) of the Ballymurphy area of West Belfast showed that 76% of the 167 households participating in the study contained someone who wanted to learn Irish, and 56% would put their children into an Irish school if one were available locally. Respondents listed a number of obstacles that hindered them from beginning language courses. These included not having enough time, feeling they were too old, being reluctant to return to a school environment due to bad experiences, and not having access to classes or babysitting services. The evident sympathy toward Irish and the kinds of factors that hinder involvement in the language suggest that if adequate facilities and support, both material and moral, are available, Irish will begin to take root in a given area. Ballymurphy, the object of study in this survey, now has a thriving *Bunscoil* (see Appendix 2). Maguire's (1991) concern that adult learners, and particularly parents of children at the schools, be given more support is relevant to this issue. Translating latent sympathy into linguistic reality is not a simple process; it requires commitment and support over the long-term. While Sinead's words reflect the progress that has been made, her previous statements concerning the difficulties she faced learning Irish may be far from unique.

Speaking when the IRA ceasefire was still in place, Sinead felt very optimistic about the future of Irish. She described a Protestant woman who had begun to come to the school twice a week to learn Irish as a positive sign. She stated that the language was a common heritage of all Irish people and the whole movement was gathering momentum. In her own words: "We're on the verge of something big."

"It has basically become a way of life for us"
Sile and Eamonn

Sile and Eamonn, interviewed in August of 1994, are a couple in their thirties whose children attend the Irish schools. Sile's story is especially interesting because she discusses the personal changes learning Irish has brought to her own life and that of other women.

Sile did not learn Irish as a child in Belfast and recalls being curious when her primary school teacher would have students use the Gaelic word for "present". At the age of ten, she began to go to the *Ard Scoil* with other children for song and music sessions but did not learn to speak the language. Sile only began to take an interest in Irish after her political involvement around the 1981 Hunger Strike, an event she feels sparked awareness in a lot of people. In the early 1980s, she and her husband decided to place their first child in an Irish nursery. While this action had political overtones, they also felt it would give their daughter the best education available because of the excellent reputation the Shaw's Road school had attained. Sile began to take Irish classes with the dual aim of improving her speaking ability as well as being able to help her child. She was quite clear about the difficulties adult learners faced in trying to get at least the basics of the language.

Once you start learning Irish some people say because it's your language, it should fall into place and it should be easy to learn but that doesn't always follow.

She recounts from her own experience that many people start, stop and start again. Some abandon it after a certain stage, but for those who continue there are rich returns.

Once you start learning it, it just overtakes your life...the strong feeling you have to learn and speak your own language and the pride you have in it...combined with the national feeling..it's part of your own culture and part of your own heritage-and those things combined make it very satisfying and rewarding.

Her daughter at the *Bunscoil* was an important learning resource for her in the beginning stages.

When she [the daughter] would come home, she'd be singing wee songs so you would hear and I'd say "What does that mean?"...so I started to pick up things from her. She actually helped me to learn basic words.

Sile's eldest daughter is now at the *Meánscoil* and this educational experience has been more than just "going to school".

My daughter's very happy at the *Meánscoil*. She's in a classroom with friends who she started off at the age of three with, and she's still with those people ten years later.... That's a whole culture in itself.

Sile was fortunate enough to get a job in the *Glór na nGael* office, and this helped her make considerable progress with Irish. Following this, she worked in an Irish language nursery for a few years as a teacher. She is currently doing a degree at university and is amazed at the changes her involvement in the language movement has brought into her life.

If you had said to me fifteen years ago that I would be at university, I just wouldn't have believed it.... It's changed the path for a lot of people and that seems to be particularly relevant for women...it's urged a lot of women to take up other education.

Sile's statement raises the issue of gender in the Irish language revival. While I have few statistics on the total number of women involved in learning the language or working in the infrastructure, anecdotal evidence suggest that women are very active in all aspects of the movement.

The experience of learning Irish in the Belfast community context clearly has the potential to be empowering on many levels. Learning Irish has strong symbolic meaning because it is perceived as a manifest connection with the national heritage, a touching of history as it were. However, it also opens a door for many learners to develop on a personal level, and this may be most true for Nationalist women, the disenfranchised of the disenfranchised.

The difficulties the movement faced were in some ways a source of strength that brought out qualities in people that might otherwise have gone unused. The rapid growth of the language infrastructure in the 1980s demanded considerable popular involvement and even larger community support.

Because there's been so many problems—we'd have to raise money—the teachers know the children, the teachers know the parents. We have all had to help out in different things. You call on people to do something and they do it. There is that link there. There has to be a lot of commitment or it wouldn't succeed.

While praising the schools, Sile also gives considerable credit to the *Culturlann* for the impetus it has given to the language and the support it has given to Irish speakers. The availability of a space where people could meet and have different activities in Irish represents a major step forward for the adult learners. She adds, however, that the political dimension cannot be forgotten; *Chluain Ard* has existed for several decades, so the mere fact of having a space is not in itself a sufficient explanation for the progress of recent years. When asked what was different today from the past, she replied:

The awakening of people's political awareness, that's how I would see it personally, just the feeling of nationality and being proud that you are Irish... It could be from the time of the Hunger Strike.... The interesting thing is that a lot of parents who maybe couldn't speak Irish themselves and would maybe not make any attempt to learn Irish were so determined to send their children to an Irish language nursery. I have the feeling that for an awful lot of them it was an awakening of the feeling of pride in being Irish and the whole political thing from 1969 to the Hunger Strike.

Eamonn, Sile's husband, grew up in Belfast speaking English although his grandmother was a native Irish speaker from Donegal, so there was a certain consciousness about the language in his family. Like Sile, his decision to learn the language was also tied to the Hunger Strike period.

We became involved in learning Irish really first through our political involvement in the early eighties. At that time, the language community in Belfast wasn't half as developed as it is now and my recollection of it is the explosion really came from prisoners coming out. Sinn Féin organized a lot of day schools in Irish and they had some really lively teaching going on...by (ex) prisoners who were not teachers...but who could organize good, lively basic classes.

This context led to the decision to put their daughter in the Shaw's Road *Bunscoil*. An additional factor was that the Irish school offered a much more democratic educational structure than either state or Catholic institutions. As described in the previous account of *Naíonra na Fuiseoige*, this democracy is based on the parents being closely involved in the actual management of the school as well as helping with fundraising. Consequently, close relations develop between teachers and parents as well as parents and their children, which activists feel contribute to the

organic growth of the whole educational process.

Eamonn is candid about the limitations of the use of Irish in the home. Both parents use as much Irish as possible with their children, but they often lapse into English when speaking to each other. Unlike Seán in the previous interview, Eamonn and Sile were not used to speaking Irish to each other before they had children. While their children are essentially native speakers, Irish is still a learner's language for the parents, even for Sile who has considerable fluency. Nevertheless, they have succeeded in passing on the language to their children and their involvement has also had deep effects on their own lives. As Sile said, "It has basically become a way of life for us."

"Irish is an expression of cultural identity which everybody wants to have some input into"
Fergus, *Glór na nGael* employee

When I interviewed Fergus in August of 1994, he was a full-time employee for *Glór na nGael*. He is one of the new generation of Irish speakers who have been able to earn a living in the infrastructure created around the language revival. Unlike many of the other people I interviewed, Fergus learned Irish at his secondary school and also went on to study it at university. At secondary level, the language was compulsory until the fifth year, but he was ready to drop it after third year as something useless. However, external events helped change his mind.

One of the factors would have been the Hunger Strike. My fifth year was also 1981 and there was quite a strong movement towards cultural identity at that time.

He was also good at languages and this led to finding work in Irish language-related fields.

I never actually thought I'd get a job out of Irish, but I've never worked in a sphere where Irish wasn't relevant.

In his mind, although the Hunger Strike was a turning point in the language movement, it is important not to overlook the work that went before.

From my own point of view it [the Hunger Strike] did affect most of the developments... but that doesn't mean nothing was happening beforehand. I mean the seeds were sown with the founding of the Shaw's Road *Gaeltacht*. The impetus and drive and increased manpower all came through 1981 to give it the additional push that it needed to go forward.

For Fergus, an essential fact for understanding the Irish language movement in Belfast is the strong link it has with the larger community.

The support is very widespread. It is a source of pride.... The language is an expression of cultural identity which everybody wishes to have some input into whether it's through funding it, sending their children to the schools, or attending classes themselves....

This popular support may explain the British government's attempt to cut off funding to *Glór na nGael* for supposedly being a source of support for paramilitaries. For Fergus, the whole issue had nothing to do with the IRA but with the autonomous nature of the movement.

The whole language initiative is community based and is run by the community. The government has no control whatsoever almost on the language development. For any government not having control over something would be worrying, but it's their own problem because they ignored it for long enough. In taking us out as the central figure in the language development at that time, I doubt very much they thought they were going to wipe it out, but they would try and take control. At the same time ULTACH was set up and in the exact same year, and it's a semi-state funded body.... It backfired totally and gave the language a fresh push and impetus.

For Fergus, the language movement's independence extends to the Catholic Church which is largely a non-player in the language revival in Belfast. Fergus feels that any attempt by the Church to extend its influence would be resisted by the community as an attempt to control the movement. This view represents a subtext to the argument that the language movement represents an emancipatory project. The new alternative structures of the Nationalist community challenge the traditional relations of subordination to the dominant power, but also express a shift in attitudes toward the Catholic Church. The Irish educational movement has developed without support from the Church's institutions, and activists seemed determined to retain this independence.

In speaking of the future of the language, Fergus is optimistic and makes an interesting distinction between the national and cultural aspects of identity.

Part of the revival, but only part, is based on the conflict and the heightening of identity and the spirit of nationalism but that is only part of it. The cultural identity as opposed to national identity is equally as strong an influence and much more healthy in that sense.... I would imagine that because the seeds have been thrown through the schools that the language movement should be able to continue healthily after the conflict's over. The schools are providing the children and if your child's growing up speaking Irish then conflict or no conflict you have that connection. That is, I would imagine, where other revival attempts failed because

for example in the 1920's it wasn't based on the schools; it was based on individuals learning the language in a heightened period of nationalism but that fell away.

From this perspective, the language is not simply a symbolic resistance to the dominant culture although that may have played a part in why people initially involved themselves in the revival. The goal of the movement is the restoration of Irish as a language of daily life. For Fergus, the work of the present is a prelude to the new generation of native speakers who are growing up in the education system.

"Irish is the language of this country"
Fiona, Maeve and Emer

Shortly before Christmas in 1995, I interviewed three young Irish speakers, Fiona 14, a student at the *Meánscoil*, and her sisters, Maeve, 10 and Emer, 8, both at the Shaw's Road *Bunscoil*. Although this study focuses more on adult learners and their motivations in learning the language and building the infrastructure to support this endeavor, the ultimate success or failure of the whole movement lies with the children currently growing up as Irish speakers. If, as adults, they accept the language as their rightful inheritance, are able to find the wherewithal to live in and through Irish in Ireland, and pass the language on to their own children, then the revival will have succeeded. These are large ifs for a movement which, while extremely dynamic and resourceful, is still small and struggling. Thus, I felt it important to speak to at least a few children to see how they see themselves in the plans and pronouncements of their elders. The adults I talked to repeatedly mentioned the children at the Irish schools and how the latter embodied new hope for the Irish language, so I wanted to hear first-hand what the new generation had to say.

The interview took place in their living room with their mother present. While this might be considered prejudicial to a candid expression of their views, the three were all quite comfortable and relaxed and did not seem the least inhibited in speaking their minds.

Their mother, Aine, spoke first about the motivation for placing the children in the schools.

Irish is their nationality. Why should our children not be given the opportunity to have their education through the medium of Irish? When I was a child, we didn't

have the opportunity.

She also spoke of the hard work and participation required of parents who choose to send their children to schools. She had been involved for some ten years in school committees and fundraising activities. The commitment this entailed was evident despite her nonchalant description.

I have been involved over a long number of years doing pub collections, selling Christmas cards, having fireworks displays, concerts, Christmas ballots, all sorts of things to raise money.... It is very financially difficult for a lot of parents.

She showed obvious pride in her daughters and often used the word "confidence" which seems to be a key word among all Irish activists when describing the children at the Irish schools.

There just seems a willingness on the part of the children, no matter what age they are to take part in things.... They just seem to have this in-built confidence.

This self-assurance was evident in the three youth I spoke to and may stem from a variety of factors: the social support and approval they get from the larger community, the tight-knit nature of the schools with their close student-teacher relationships, and the involvement of parents in the learning process.

Given the age differences, Fiona tended to speak more and be more articulate. However, between songs and poems in English and Irish, eight-year-old Emer did explain that she liked her school because they did Irish instead of English. Maeve, the middle sister, was preparing to play the role of Deirdre of the Sorrows, a heroine of Irish legend, in a school play the following day. She spoke with enthusiasm about the school, her classmates, and the language and seemed slightly incredulous that I did not speak Irish myself. Fiona spoke of the difficulties of living in Irish outside the school.

Sometimes some people would turn around and laugh at you (for speaking Irish) and you'd feel odd and you'd turn to English. A lot of times you just come out of school and you're just used to talking English all day so that you just go ahead with it.... There's the odd time when you speak English like you're getting on the bus home and you'll talk Irish but there's someone there that doesn't have Irish because you usually meet a lot of people out of other schools on the bus and you have to talk to them in English, so we will talk English sometimes out of school, but the majority of the time we speak Irish.

Fiona's account of how often the *Meánscoil* students speak Irish outside of the school echoes the

concerns expressed by Michael Bradley (1993) in his study on the importance of the *Meánscoil* in the development of the language movement. While Bradley sees the school's success to date as an inspiration and a strong argument for increased state support for the movement, he gives a more sobering view of its current influence in spreading bilingualism. His study indicates that attendance at the secondary school does not increase the use of Irish in the home or outside the school itself (1993, 41-43). In many cases, the parents' level of Irish may be adequate for a young child, but by the time a student reaches secondary school, his or her Irish has often surpassed that of the parents. Thus, there is little opportunity for advanced speakers to improve in the home context. Unfortunately, the use of Irish outside school and home is still limited due to the lack of Irish language "spaces". This underscores the ultimate limitations of a school system in promoting bilingualism if it is not closely linked to the needs and concerns of its community. Without the expansion of the social infrastructure and a linguistic support network, the schools alone are unlikely to make Irish a living language.

Fiona also finds the problems of using Irish compounded by a lack of resources in the language and of spaces for young people's social activities. She feels that adults have many more places where they can go and do things in Irish whereas teenagers have fewer opportunities. In addition, there is a lack of materials such as novels in Irish.

It is hard to get an interesting book in Irish.... You go down and look for a book and you wouldn't find any fiction. They'd be more facts and history and there wouldn't be very much fiction. I'm not very interested in the books in Irish. I'd do everything to help my Irish, but I wouldn't be very interested in them. There's not half as many good books in Irish as there is in English for teenagers.

This is clearly a problem that will require substantial financial investment to resolve. Writers need to be encouraged to write in Irish and the potential audience must be encouraged to read the works, which inevitably means that state support is needed.

Despite the difficulties, Fiona is very positive about her culture.

When you're young, you don't understand what you're doing studying Irish, but when you go on and are older you get to be proud of it. Irish is the language of this country.

Obviously, one cannot generalize about the approximately one thousand children who are currently being educated through the medium of Irish from this one interview. The self-confidence and intelligence shown by these three sisters could just as easily be attributed to a good home environment as to the effects of the school. However, everyone I met in the course of my fieldwork spoke with undisguised pride about the generation growing up as Irish speakers. If these three sisters are at all representative, then such feelings are both understandable and justified.

Profile of an Adult Irish Language Class

In November, 1996, an Irish language teacher in Belfast was kind enough to distribute a short questionnaire (see Appendix 3) that I had prepared to his class of eight adult learners: six men and two women, ranging in age from early thirties to over fifty. Five of the eight members of this admittedly small sample were employed at the time, which is in keeping with the findings of Ó hAdhmaill (1985). In terms of language skills, six ranked their ability as an Irish speaker as elementary, while two said they were functional in everyday situations. Six maintained that they had the opportunity to speak Irish every day outside of class; two said they had a chance two or three days a week. When asked where they speak Irish, six answered that they could speak it at home; interestingly five said they could speak it at work, and six at a pub or social centre. All eight had a network of friends with whom they could speak Irish socially.

Five of the class members stated that they only began to learn Irish as adults while two began as adolescents. One person answered both early childhood and adulthood, so I assume he learned some as a child but lost it later and had to take it up again as a beginner in later life. All of the respondents said they had at least one other family member who was studying Irish. In terms of connections with the Irish schools, three of the adults had children getting an education through Irish. When given a list of motivations for learning Irish the results were as follows:

Cultural Identity	8
Enjoyable Hobby	5
Political Statement	4
Support Child Attending Irish School	3
Personal Growth	2
Other (lack of opportunity to learn	

When asked which reason was the most important, the three people with a daughter or son in the Irish schools said supporting the child was their primary motivation while the other five all stated "cultural identity". These results seem to echo those of Maguire (1991) and Ó hAdhmaill (1985). The final question was an open-ended request asking what Irish meant to each respondent personally. Two people did not give any answer. Of the six others, two responses cited not being able to learn it at school as an important reason for learning it now. All the responses referred either to identity or nationality as elements of what Irish meant to them. One person even asserted that without the language the Irish had no nationality. Another answered that Irish allowed him to be a more complete Irishman, different from other nationalities, not to be trapped in a foreign tongue, and that it built pride. The idea of English as foreign was repeated in the response of another man who said that learning Irish meant reclaiming his heritage and something that had been stolen from his ancestors.

Conclusions

The questionnaire responses, combined with the information drawn from the interviews, present a broad portrait of the contemporary Irish language revival in Belfast and offer some insight into the movement. The Irish language is clearly linked with Irish identity in the minds of the participants. Moreover, this perception extends outside the movement proper to include the larger Nationalist community, which is willing to give time and resources to support the schools. This language/identity link has a long historical memory in addition to family connections such as Seán's mother who was an Irish speaker from Donegal. The felt need for this strong expression of identity appears to be related to the ongoing political crisis. This link between involvement in the language movement and the political situation is clearly stated in a number of interviews, and half of the respondents to the survey said they saw learning the language as a political statement. As people

sought new ways of both resistance and affirmation, the Shaw's Road community and school offered a relevant channel for these emotions. After the 1981 Hunger Strike, many people like Sile and Eamonn decided to learn Irish and put their children in an Irish school. In many cases, the growth of the schools demanded increased parental involvement both in terms of learning the language and running the schools. This indicates that, despite the evident political content of its social narrative, the language revival cannot be reduced to being a mere product of the crisis or an extension of the Republican Movement. While many of those questioned were convinced of the underlying political nature of Irish, other elements emerge from their experiences which have significance outside the conflict. When Kieran, an ex-prisoner and hard Republican, says that "it's *our* school, not a school", the word "our" does not refer to the Republican Movement. Rather, he sees the schools and the infrastructure that has grown up around them as being an organic part of the larger Nationalist community.

The development of the language movement has also seen a corresponding growth in pride and self-confidence on both the group and the individual level. All the speakers referred to this feeling of self-reliance and self-respect and some clearly manifested it in their own histories. The narratives show that involvement in the movement means far more than simply learning a language. Participation can bring new skills and confidence, which, in turn, can lead to other projects. In her interview, Sile suggests that the personal and social changes engendered by the language movement have been especially important for women. This process of individual growth finds expression on the community level, and the success and development of the schools indicate that this strengthened sense of self is being passed on to the next generation.

There is also a social dimension to the new structures being developed which is linked to the questions of identity and personal empowerment. The Nationalist community is creating alternative structures with a democratic form that challenge the old order. Kieran sees the language movement as inherently subversive because, in his analysis, the British state cannot grant parity of esteem without weakening its rationale for being in Ireland.

The dynamics and problems associated with the actual language learning process itself are important themes in several of the above accounts. Maguire's study of the Shaw's Road *Bunscoil* (1991) explores some of the key features of the relationships between school and home and parent and child that touch on the issues raised in the interviews. In her view, the schools were a response to the need for a nascent bilingual community to extend itself vertically in time. A repercussion of this, as non-Irish speaking families, began to send their children to the schools, was to extend the language horizontally into the homes. Parents started to take an increased interest in Irish and to use it more often in domestic life. Many parents were stimulated to take adult classes in order to be able to help their children. In some cases, children, who were sometimes more comfortable with the language than their elders, would also help their parents. The result was a considerable increase in the amount of Irish used in the home. Nonetheless, there are some cautionary notes to this picture. Many of the parents in Maguire's survey felt that their language use improved to a certain degree but then reached a plateau. Their vocabulary was restricted to certain topic areas and opportunities to progress much beyond this were rare. Thus, for adults, Irish is still very much a learner's language, and its use in the home is often restricted to basics. While there has been an undeniable increase in the use of the language, a number of factors such as the flood of English language media, normal parent/child tensions where a child may decide not to speak Irish to his/her parents as a gesture of rebellion, and the unnaturalness of speaking in Irish to a spouse that one has always addressed in English, are obvious impediments. According to Maguire, parents often use Irish in the home more for their children than themselves. She maintains that outside resources such as easy access to adult language classes with qualified teachers, and more Irish language media are essential to support the efforts of the parents.

The same pattern can be seen in the adult use of Irish outside the home. There are an increasing number of "spaces" where Irish can be used, but many of these are connected with the school in some way. Thus, Maguire's survey shows the following picture:

Some people become fluent and regular speakers of the language. The majority, though, seem to falter in their progress, once a certain level of achievement is

attained. As in the case of competence levels, usage patterns show a fair increase across the entire population; however, the increase stops short of balanced bilingualism. Nevertheless, the degree of progress achieved by parents on their own initiative....must encourage other communities, elsewhere in the world...This shift, in West Belfast, has been realized from a state of monolingualism towards a stage where the language has taken root within the family units themselves. The children are the vehicle and the hope; they open the door to the use of Irish. Parents' sacrifices are carried out with the next generation in mind. The bilingualisation process remains, for most adults, at the "practice" stage; the learner takes advantage of opportunities to practice that language, and his network of Irish-speaking friends is mainly composed of fellow learners. His endeavors to facilitate further usage of Irish are made on behalf of the children. They are given access to Irish, as a functional and natural medium, within at least one major social environment. The parents do not, generally, have a real grasp on the same goals for themselves and their peers. (146)

Maguire feels that structural supports can be provided that will encourage parents to pursue their interest in Irish for their own benefit as well for that of their children.

The experiences of several of the speakers illustrate the kinds of problems that occur for adult learners. Sinead and Sile both discuss the difficulties involved in learning the language and in staying motivated. Structural support seems essential to help adults cross learning plateaus and go on to greater fluency. Fiona's account suggests young learners also experience difficulties due to the vast social world of English around them and a lack of relevant and interesting material in Irish. Paradoxically, both these problems can present opportunities of a sort because solutions call for a greater investment of resources which could mean greater job opportunities for Irish speakers. Whether such support will be forthcoming is another question which depends on power relations between the language movement and the British state.

Seán also touches on the long-term question of the movement's future as it becomes institutionalized. In his opinion, state recognition will not hurt the quality of the education because the parents will still run the schools. Kieran argues that the language cannot become institutionalized as such as long as the British presence remains in Ireland. For him, the inherent political nature of the language in the Northern Ireland setting will keep it a popular movement no matter how much state support is forthcoming.

CHAPTER 6: LANGUAGE, IDENTITY AND POLITICS

The previous chapter gave the views and stories of a number of people involved in the day-to-day experience of the Irish language revival. While a number of issues emerged during these interviews and in the questionnaire, two themes which appeared frequently require further elaboration. The first is the relation between the Irish language and an Irish identity in the Northern Ireland context. The second is the connection between the language revival and the ongoing political crisis. To explore these questions, I will refer to literature both on the Irish language in general and on the present revival movement in Belfast in particular. I will first present the contesting theories of John Edwards (1985) and Seán de Fréine (1978) on language and identity in the Irish context. Edwards is a psychologist and linguist while de Fréine was the chief executive of *Bord na Gaeilge*, an Irish government agency established to promote the Irish language. With this debate as background, I will then look at the question of identity in the context of Belfast through the work of Gabrielle Maguire (1991), Feilim Ó hAdhmaill (1985, 1991), and Camille O'Reilly (1992). As the language revival is taking place in the midst of a violent conflict, the question of the relationship between Irish and the political situation is essential in any analysis of the movement. I will examine this theme using the above authors and Patricia Kachuk, a Canadian anthropologist. Although the present work is focused on the language revival in the Nationalist community, I will devote a section at the end of this chapter to Unionist perspectives on the Irish language. These are of interest in themselves but also help to elucidate the issues of identity and politics within the current revival movement in Belfast.

In *Language, Society and Identity* (1985), John Edwards purports to synthesize a variety of approaches to the question of how language and identity are related and to offer a "balanced" view of the subject. The section on the Irish language is a long one, for Edwards feels that Irish is a good case study of language decline and the possibilities of language revival. Basically, Edwards, who considers only the situation in the Republic of Ireland and not in Northern Ireland, argues that the attempt to revive Irish has been a failure. He distinguishes between the communicative and

symbolic aspects of language (61) and states that in the Irish case they are separable. Thus, the Irish regard their language as an important symbol of their ethnic identity, but have little inclination to translate this emotional attachment into practical usage. Despite its being a mandatory school subject and a requirement for the civil service in the Irish Republic, few people actually use Irish for communicative purposes. For Edwards, this is no surprise:

By the time the state was established, most people had been English-speaking for some generations and vague, abstract or cultural/traditional appeals for widespread change have not succeeded. Unless one is a fanatical revivalist, this is hardly to be wondered at; as in other matters, people are linguistically pragmatic. (62)

This last reference highlights a recurrent theme of Edwards' book. He asserts that language shifts occur on the basis of a number of socio-political factors, but that at the end of the day, it is a normal process which people go along with because it is the most practical choice.

By espousing this view, Edwards seems to see no more problem for individuals or groups losing their native language than if they were simply selecting a brand of shampoo on the basis of free choice in the marketplace. This view, however, ignores the coercive and traumatic aspects that can accompany the process of language loss. Edwards puts too much emphasis on individual decision without due recognition for the parameters in which the decision is made. The decline of Irish occurred in a context of conquest and occupation, and, I would argue, the effects of this salient fact remain up to the present.

Another idea that Edwards proposes is that the link between native language and identity is not a given. In his words:

There exists, today, a strong Irish identity which does not involve Irish, in a communicative sense, for the vast majority. At the same time, the language continues to serve a symbolic function for many. The revivalist error was to single out communicative language as the most important marker of identity, ignoring the evidence of history and daily life. Some would argue, I know, that existing Irish identity is less than it might be, because of the loss of the language, but this is a condescending and historically naive line to take. (64)

Edwards is correct in saying that a strong Irish identity exists today, but his conclusion that reviving the Irish language could not make that identity stronger does not necessarily follow. First of all, Edwards' statement raises the question of what elements of an Irish identity he would consider

indispensable. From his perspective, aspects of identity seem to be simply arbitrary and interchangeable pieces that can be discarded without any accompanying trauma. The second problem with Edwards' statement is that it is belied by the Irish revival in Belfast, where many working class people have decided that Irish, in both communicative and symbolic forms, is important to their identity.

De Fréine, in his book *The Great Silence* (1978), approaches the subject of the decline of the Irish language and its meaning through a social-psychological perspective. The title of his work derives from his thesis that historians have more or less ignored the effects of the decline of the Irish language on Irish society. According to de Fréine, the destruction was not a gradual process. Despite British government attempts to impose English throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, Irish was still the language of a large percentage of the Irish people in Ireland and abroad. From Irish religious colleges in Europe to Irish mercenary brigades in the service of France and Spain, Irish was the language of communication. In de Fréine's opinion, it was only in the middle of the 19th century that Irish suffered a sudden and severe crisis which marked a qualitative change. Within one generation, connected with The Great Famine, the language experienced a major decline and was, in fact, rejected by the Irish people.

Edwards agrees with de Fréine on this last point. As he puts it, "the mass of the Irish people were more or less active contributors to the spread of English." (Edwards 1985, 63) However, de Fréine differs from Edwards in his insistence that the decline of Irish was unique in its suddenness and that it had serious psychological effects on Irish society.

When, eventually, people believed they ought to switch to English, It meant a break with a cherished past of cultural achievement. To justify repudiation of the language it became necessary to contend that Irish, which had come to symbolize so much, was nothing more than a symbol. And because of the distressing circumstances, it was desirable to implement the shift as rapidly as possible.
(de Fréine 1978, 72)

From this perspective, the Irish speakers were not simply passive victims, but actively contributed to their own demise. That there were objective conditions that pushed this decision does not negate the above statement. The dominant British culture had so subordinated the Irish that they

willingly abandoned their own language as something backward and shameful. De Fréine argues that the psychological costs of this shift were enormous and have not been fully admitted. This accounts for the "Great Silence" in Irish history about the loss of the language, which he views as a form of denial. Consequently, de Fréine advocates the restoration of Irish as essential for the full flowering of Irish culture.

As noted above, Edwards asserts that the Irish language was abandoned in much the same way one might exchange an old pair of shoes for a new one, with little cultural or psychological cost. For de Fréine, however, a society is an ecosystem where a change in one area will affect all the others. Thus, he considers the loss of the language to be linked with the high emigration and stagnant economy endemic to Ireland from the 19th century until recently.

While de Fréine's work is thought-provoking, his interpretation is not open to empirical measurement. Nonetheless, his contention that Irish identity would be stronger if the Irish language had been retained or revived is persuasive. While Edwards rightly argues that the Irish people have a clear sense of identity expressed through the medium of English, to conclude that the Irish language can, at best, have only a symbolic value for Irish identity seems a rather big jump to make. It could just as easily be argued that a vibrant social space for the language would strengthen the already existing sense of distinct identity.

One other aspect of Edwards' views that can be examined in light of the Irish language education movement in Belfast is the statement that:

It is often the case...that strong ethnic and nationalist sentiments are urban phenomena, and that individuals (and groups) concerned with language maintenance and revival are middle-class, city-dwelling intellectuals. Such persons are generally atypical of the heartland native speakers, have in fact assimilated successfully into the majority mainstream...[and] have often romantically rediscovered their "roots." (71)

As O'Reilly (1992, 100-101) points out, this profile does not really fit the activists involved in the Irish language revival. Although the movement is centred in an urban area (Belfast), its members are not generally middle-class intellectuals and have certainly not assimilated into the mainstream majority, which has systematically excluded them. In addition, the activists have not "romantically

rediscovered their 'roots'". Irish language revivalists see their efforts as building on an already established sense of Irish identity and "romance" is not a word that comes quickly to mind when one sees the conditions in which they are trying to construct an Irish language environment.

Edwards (1985, 162) seems to associate the survival of small languages with "tradition" in opposition to "modernization". This is an important question and may ultimately determine the success or failure of the efforts described here. Certainly, the language activists in Belfast are aware of the need to make Irish relevant to the twenty-first century. They, like, many other groups such as Native Americans who are struggling to preserve and strengthen their indigenous cultures, pose the question more in terms of power relations than traditional versus modern. De Fréine (1978) offers a perceptive comment which is relevant to the Irish language movement in Belfast.

There can be no justification for language revival if it is merely an attempt to restore a vanished past. There may be a lot...to be said for it if it is concerned with the needs of the present and the hopes for the future. (116)

Irish speakers in Belfast would argue that the language revival has contemporary and future relevance. To explore this theme further, I will turn to the work of some contemporary observers of the Irish language scene in Belfast.

Identity and Politics: Contemporary Views

In *Our Own Language: An Irish Initiative* (1991), Dr. Gabrielle Maguire examines the motivation of the parents of the Shaw's Road *Bunscoil* students and how both they and their children see the language. Her study reveals that those involved in the school perceive a close link between Irish identity and the Irish language.

The *Bunscoil* parents represent a heterogeneous mix in terms of economic/professional status. While comprising a higher average of professionally-trained people than in Belfast as a whole, the parents also include a higher percentage of manual workers (Maguire 1991, 92-93). Nonetheless, a 1985 survey of 98 *Bunscoil* families on the advantages of sending their children to the school showed a remarkable homogeneity in that 73.5% of respondents gave the "quality of education" as an advantage and 71% gave "Irish identity". For Maguire, identity means

a sense of belonging to the Irish nation as opposed to allowing themselves to be perceived as members of a British province.... Clearly, parents felt that the Irish language would strengthen their grasp on that identity which provides a solid link with a rich cultural heritage as well as distinguishing them from the model of mainstream UK citizens which the media often promotes. (99)

This indicates that parents saw their children's attendance at an Irish school as a means of strengthening the consciousness of being Irish for the whole family. Before the former can be accused of making symbolic gestures with the lives of their sons and daughters, it should be remembered that the other advantage of "quality of education" shows a concrete concern for the children's well-being. Interestingly, only 9% of the parents in Maguire's survey gave a perceived link between the Irish language and "Nationalist/Republican tradition" as an important advantage. She had expected a higher figure because more than 25% of the fathers involved had learned their Irish in prison and interprets this to mean that the term "Irish identity" better encapsulated the spirit of the aspirations of the participants.

The title of Maguire's book shows a major and seemingly paradoxical finding of her research. Many respondents feel that Irish is "our own language" despite their having grown up as English speakers. While English is regarded as the dominant language, Irish is seen as the native language even by some monolingual English speakers (187). Children in the Irish schools also show a love for the language and it is becoming a natural way of life for them. On the basis of the results of her study of the Shaw's Road school, Maguire concludes that the activists have succeeded in making Irish more than a symbol. According to her, it has become a viable means of communication for many forms of social interaction.

Like de Fréine, Dr. Maguire feels that the loss of the language did have an effect on the Irish people. In a December 1995 interview, she commented:

I would feel that the loss of the language left its mark on the Irish psyche. What triggered that loss of the language wasn't the Famine but the whole colonial process, and I think that is really what has left its mark on the Irish personality...that deep within you do inherit through generations the original effect of that.

In Maguire's view, the psychic scar caused by the loss of the language is being healed for those youth who are growing up as native Irish speakers. She says that speaking Irish "does enrich their

sense of identity.... These children are growing up more complete as individuals." Maguire elaborates further:

If you go into the *Meánscoil*...it will become apparent to you that...children grow up very aware of who they are...of the contribution they can make as Irish speakers. And they have been very aware of the way in which the school has been discriminated against by the Department of Education. They have actively participated in demanding that their rights as children in this country be recognized.

If her observations are correct, then growing up in an Irish speaking environment does reinforce a sense of Irish identity. This does not imply a growing division between speakers and non-speakers of Irish in the Nationalist community, however. Nationalists who do not speak Irish also express pride in the growing Irish language community and support it in many ways.

Maguire's 1991 work, a ground-breaking study of the roots of the Irish language revival in Belfast, shows that "Irish identity" is a crucial factor in the efforts put into promoting Irish and building an education system to further that end. The relation between identity and language also forms a major theme in the work of Camille O'Reilly, an anthropologist living in West Belfast, who conducted a qualitative study of an Irish language class in the *Chluain Ard* (1992). O'Reilly argues that learning Irish strengthens an already existing sense of identity but does not engender it. The importance of Irish operates on several levels.

For the...students, the Irish language is a salient element of their sense of identity as Irish people. By learning it they are reclaiming a part of their heritage which was nearly lost, and asserting their position as a part of the Irish nation. Gaelic for them is not the only, or even, the primary component of ethnic identity, but because of its historical and symbolic significance it has become a crucial boundary marker distinguishing the Irish from the English. The Irish language "belongs" to the Irish people. Thus, when Catholics wish to include Protestants as a part of the Irish nation, they are keen to demonstrate that Gaelic is a feature of their heritage as well, both as Scottish descendants and because many of their ancestors would have learned to speak Irish when they first came over as part of the plantation. In the context of the current conflict and the fact of British rule, the Irish language has a key significance as an element of Irish culture, a communicative medium, and an emblem of a distinct and ancient identity. (144)

O'Reilly's micro-level analysis echoes some of the themes elaborated previously. Irish is an important element in the making of the Irish identity for the whole Nationalist community, and not just for Irish speakers. In an interview in December 1995, O'Reilly stated that Irish was a symbol that

could unite the whole community, because everyone could see in the language what it means to be Irish. Symbols are complex in that they bring together members of a group but also allow for individual perception and interpretation. In the case of Irish, it is both a link to the past, and a source of pride in the present. Many language activists also see it as a potential bridge to the future.

While recognizing the potential for Irish to strengthen Irish identity, O'Reilly aptly points out that even a unilingual Irish-speaking Ireland would still have to deal with internal social problems and external geo-political and economic factors. This seemingly obvious point can be easily lost in rhetorical flourishes and polemics on the nature and importance of identity.

O'Reilly's study reveals the question of the Irish language in the Northern Ireland context to be inherently political, which leads her to draw a parallel between the politicization of the language and religion in the Irish situation.

The Irish language has been drawn into Irish politics in much the same way as religion has. Religion was made a political issue long ago when the discrimination against Catholics was written into British law. The Irish language entered the political arena when English was made the official language in Ireland under British rule. In Northern Ireland people continue to pay the price for decisions such as these made centuries ago. No matter how hard one tries to make it otherwise, politics and the Irish language remain as inexorably linked as politics and religious affiliation in the Six Counties of Northern Ireland. (139)

This insight elucidates the political subtext of the Irish language movement in Belfast. The original British colonial project aimed for the disappearance of Irish, and the colonial vestiges of Northern Ireland maintain this legacy. As long as the structural and cultural subordination of the language remains, Irish will be a political issue.

Feilim Ó hAdhmaill, a Belfast activist, has written two works that focus precisely on the political aspects of Irish. *Report of a Survey carried out on the Irish Language in the Winter of '84/85* (1985, under the auspices of *Glór na nGael*) and *The Function and Dynamics of the Ghetto: A Study of Nationalist West Belfast* (1990) both provide valuable information and commentary from an insider's point of view.

In his *The Function and Dynamics of the Ghetto: A Study of Nationalist West Belfast*, Ó hAdhmaill reaches the conclusion that "ghettos" provide a base in which oppressed groups can

organize themselves politically and socially more easily than when group members are dispersed within the dominant community. This does not mean that there are no internal divisions within a marginalized community, but that a strong sense of unity and identity exists when dealing with the dominant culture. Certainly, Northern Ireland Nationalists have known bitter internal disputes, which have turned deadly on occasion during feuds between contending Republican paramilitaries. However, certain issues or symbols like the Irish language do foster a sense of group unity. When under perceived attack from the dominant culture, the cohesiveness of the ghetto plays a key role in linking Irish with identity.

For many people their Irish identity was important to them even more so because of the fact that they felt oppressed as a result of it.... Thus when youths shouted *Tiocfaidh ar lá* [Our day will come] at members of the security forces, the fact that it was in Irish was as much an act of defiance as the actual words. (99)

Ó hAdhmaill's point about the importance of the community/ghetto consciousness seems validated by his comparison to the mixed community of Greystone which had no sense of group cohesion. The dominant ethos was British and Catholics/Nationalists kept a low profile with little public expression of Irish identity. There was little interest or participation in the Irish language revival or other cultural activities. This suggests that minorities and marginal groups need organic internal bonds to successfully find a voice in society. Such group bonding does not mean a permanent state of exclusion, which would only increase the group's isolation, but that individual identity needs to be rooted in community if it is to survive in the face of an antithetical dominant culture.

For Ó hAdhmaill, the language is closely tied to the long British colonial presence, and all parties involved understand this implicitly: "Ireland is another example of how culture and language have historically been recognized, by all the protagonists, as weapons in the overriding conflict over control of the country." (227) However, he seems to see the language revival more as a symbolic construct than an actual exercise in bilingualism.

The language symbolized for many the concept of one Irish nation, providing a link between them and the south of Ireland.... The fact that State legislation and coercion had been largely or partly (depending on one's point of view) responsible

for the decline of the Irish language during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was also something many of the people could readily identify with. The importance of the language was therefore not so much in its use as a force of communication but as symbolic of a part of their personal and collective identity which had been taken from them. The fact that laws continued to exist against the language, that people were being arrested for speaking it to the security forces, and that the H-Block prisoners had made its use a form of resistance all contributed to making the Irish language even more important in the eyes of many people. (229-230)

While this reflects the resistance aspect of the power of the Irish language, the comments of Fergus in the previous chapter can help to carry this analysis farther. The *Glór na nGael* worker distinguished between national identity, which is linked with the present struggle, and cultural identity which is a long-term project of assertion. While there has been a mobilization around Irish as a narrative of resistance, the schools and the social infrastructure form the basis for a more permanent cultural affirmation. Consequently, the language movement can look forward to a post-struggle future.

Ó hAdhmaill's work is highly political and represents an essentially Republican analysis that seeks to contextualize the Irish language revival within the political crisis in Northern Ireland. It sees the growth of the movement as a form of symbolic cultural resistance springing from a tightly-knit community. While the relation between Irish as a cultural symbol and as an authentic means of communication is complex, there can be no question that the success of the language movement is due in large part to the characteristics of the Nationalist community and the highly-charged politicized atmosphere that has existed for the last twenty-five years.

In *Irish Language Activism in West Belfast: A Resistance to British Cultural Hegemony* (1993), anthropologist Patricia Kachuk offers a lengthy and comprehensive historical description of the relation between the Irish language movement and the British hegemonic presence in Northern Ireland. She begins with the premise that the Irish language movement represents a symbolic challenge to British cultural hegemony and describes the interaction of the two. In addition to this basic theme, she poses some questions about the internal dynamics of the movement: "Is Irish language activism in West Belfast solely connected to the armed struggle? Does cultural Irish language activism differ from politically motivated Irish language activism, if so how?" (1993, 2)

Kachuk's approach is based on the model of cultural hegemony elaborated by Raymond Williams (1977, 1980) and the concepts of "disguise and surveillance" developed by James Scott (1990) in his analysis of the "hidden transcripts" that take place between dominant and dominated. Basing herself on Williams (1980), Kachuk delineates two types of language activists: oppositional and alternative (15-18). The former want to see the Irish language as part of the revolutionary struggle for a united Ireland while the latter see the language as an end to itself and are working to promote Irish in the Northern Ireland context. Alternative language activists would be represented by such groups as *Glór na nGael* and the oppositional category would include Irish-speaking Republican prisoners and Sinn Féin members. In her own words;

Alternative Irish language activists are seeking a permanent space for the Irish language in Northern Ireland, regardless of the political outcome of the conflict. On the other hand, oppositional Irish language activists have made the Irish language an integral part of their struggle for self-determination. (1993, iii)

While, in my opinion, Kachuk's overall argument suffers from a number of flaws, her approach can serve as a useful foil for analyzing the political dimensions of the Irish language movement. Her theoretical framework becomes shaky as it is applied to actual events, and the distinction between alternative and oppositional activists becomes problematic in some cases. For instance, if an Irish-speaking Republican activist is released from prison and then works in an Irish-speaking nursery or a group that is putting up Irish street signs does she/he jump categories?

In Kachuk's work, the language revival becomes reduced to a rather Manichean struggle between the British Northern Ireland Office and Sinn Féin:

Therefore, alternative Irish language activists in mobilizing an ethnic group that is necessary to achieve their goal of a permanent Irish language infrastructure, are also creating a nation group which can be a pool of both latent and actual support for the goals of Sinn Féin. In addition, the cross-cultural efforts of alternative Irish language activists are of potential benefit to Sinn Féin because they may serve to re-spark protestant nationalism, thus making Irish-speaking Protestants more receptive to a united Ireland. (1993, 365)

I would argue that this perspective reverses cause and effect, and ignores the diversity within the language movement. For one thing, Kachuk does not investigate conflicts between Republican language activists and other Irish speakers within the Nationalist community. For example, one

Republican activist confided to me that some of "them" (non-Republican Irish speakers) wouldn't care about Republicans being tortured by the RUC "as long as it was done in Irish." It is impossible to verify this statement empirically, but the fact that it was made suggests tensions within the movement as a whole that lie outside Kachuk's construct.

Kachuk's treatment of the ULTACH Trust is another example of this process. In her view, the Trust is a state agent representing British attempts to control the Irish language movement. However, in an internal strategy review from 27 June 1991, the Sinn Féin Cultural Department made the following analysis;

- that the Ultach Trust had been set up as a response to Sinn Féin's successful agitation on the Irish language issue.
- that the Ultach Trust were actually making some in-roads into the Irish language community, mainly through the handing out of grants
- ...that they should be treated as any other government grant-aiding agency despite the fact that the *main personalities are local and have some credibility on Irish language issues.* (my emphasis)

The Cultural Department's conclusion was to seek a meeting with ULTACH on the basis that hostility between the two was hurting the language movement as a whole. This case indicates that the Irish language revival is more heterogeneous than Kachuk's analysis suggests. Sinn Féin's Cultural Department regarded ULTACH as a British response to its own initiatives in supporting the Irish language but also admitted that some ULTACH members were genuine in wanting to promote the language. Thus, Republican cultural activists could conceivably work with ULTACH representatives on certain language-related issues.

It is undoubtedly true that Sinn Féin's Cultural Department played an extremely important role in the rapid growth of the Irish language infrastructure in the 1980's. Nonetheless, this began to diminish by the end of the decade for a number of reasons. Partially, Republicans were victims of their own success. Many people who had become involved in Sinn Féin language classes went on to work on independent projects. In addition, Sinn Féin's efforts pushed other parties such as the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) to become more supportive of the language

question. The Northern Ireland Office had also been forced, however unwillingly, to adopt a slightly more sympathetic public face toward Irish, as evidenced by the Shaw's Road school receiving funding. Another reason for Sinn Féin's lessening influence was the increasing number of external demands put on Cultural Department activists. Many were also elected officials or responsible for other briefs such as building the party's electoral base and developing its peace strategy. It is no wonder that Sinn Féin, which was the first political party to take up the issue and was working off the emotions generated by the Hunger Strike, would have a reduced profile later when other players emerged on the scene and other issues demanded greater attention. This has led to some criticism (O'Reilly 1992, 56-57) that the party's intervention was opportunistic and motivated by the desire for political gain, but this seems unfair. Republican language activists want the Irish language to be revived for its own sake although they do see it as an integral part of the process of national liberation.

By the end of the 1980's, Sinn Féin's influence in the Irish revival had declined to some extent, but the language movement itself was flourishing. Such a scenario is difficult to explain using Kachuk's theoretical framework. I would propose that the Irish language movement, Sinn Féin, the IRA, the West Belfast Festival, and all the other social formations that have emerged over the last 28 years in West Belfast are the products of a marginalized community seeking social space and finding a voice. Some critics might object to such a neutral description of a guerrilla army like the Provisionals; however, leaving moral arguments aside, it is quite clear that without the base support from the community none of the above could exist for very long. As Ó hAdhmaill points out:

It must, therefore, be recognized that while only a minority of people are learning or speaking Irish, the growth in interest could not be maintained without general support, financial and otherwise, from the community in general. (1990, 239)

These different movements are best seen as the articulations of a community thrown upon its own resources and forced to formulate answers to critical questions of identity.

This perspective views both Republicanism and the language movement as responses that the Nationalist community in Northern Ireland, particularly in West Belfast, developed to face the

structural and existential crisis that emerged in the late 1960's. Its long and rich history notwithstanding, Republicanism was almost dead by 1969. The Republican Movement was reborn and revitalized in the way it was because it provided responses to the situation confronting the Nationalist community. While present-day Republicanism has been masked in traditions which form part of the cultural matrix of this population and which have directed the course of certain events and choices; nevertheless, the community itself and the contemporary context have also shaped the new forms that this ideology has assumed. This approach, which posits a dynamic interaction between community and tradition and between idea and social expression, seems more valid than Kachuk's rather arbitrary division of "alternative" and 'oppositional' activists and her tendency to focus almost exclusively on the Republican Movement's role in the language revival. In addition, her neglect of the educational infrastructure misses a key element in the creation of the very counter-hegemonic practice that she seeks to describe.

Unionist Responses

Although the focus of the present work is on the internal dynamics of the Irish language movement, it is essential to examine Unionist perceptions and reactions to the phenomenon. The dominant discourse of the Northern Ireland state from its origins until the suspension of the local Stormont Parliament in 1972 regarded Irish as a foreign and inferior entity with sinister overtones from its associations with radical Republicanism. No public space was given to the language and its use was largely confined to Catholic schools and small groups in the Nationalist ghettos. This coincided with the pan-class hegemonic perspective articulated by the Orange Order which saw the six counties ('Ulster' for the Unionists) as a Protestant State and organically linked with Britain. Nationalists were by definition excluded from this scheme except as an external menace used to maintain internal solidarity. This structure began to fall to pieces in the 1970's as its economic and geo-political underpinnings changed. The Ulster Unionist Party that had ruled Northern Ireland since Partition split into the Official Unionist Party, which favors the link with Britain, and the Democratic Unionist Party of Ian Paisley, which stands for Protestant supremacy. The fears and concerns of

working class Loyalists found expression through the actions of paramilitaries like the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). In the last few years, these armed groups have established fringe political parties which seek to challenge the electoral dominance of the two main parties. This ideological fragmentation has forced the Protestant community to reflect on and reconsider the nature of Unionism, and this process has caused a considerable amount of trauma. Some of this has been translated into the vicious sectarian killing of Catholics and a blind refusal to consider any change in the status quo. The supremacist elements in the discourse of Loyalism have led to hundreds of Catholic civilians being murdered because they were all part of a threatening and chaotic "other" which had to be put down at all costs. "No Surrender" is the most popular slogan of Loyalism as an ideology and it represents the mentality of the *Laager*, the colonists, besieged by savage natives, standing for God and country. The staying power that this system has shown is impressive, but it, like most ideological constructs, has always been fraught with contradictions.

In a sociological study of the political allegiances and identities of the two communities done at the beginning of the "Troubles", Rose (1971) demonstrated the confusion inherent in the Unionist position as to whether they are British, Irish, or inhabitants of Ulster. His survey as to national identity (208) showed that 20% of Protestant respondents thought of themselves as Irish, 39% felt they were British, and 32% felt themselves to be Ulsterites. This study was done before the political and ideological breakup of monolithic Unionism, but the issues raised are pertinent to attitudes about the Irish language.

One traditional Protestant response characterizes support for the language as just another weapon in the Republican arsenal. An article from the *New Ulster Defender* (see Appendix 4), a Belfast publication sympathetic to Loyalist paramilitaries, carried the following grim warning:

Loyalists should open their eyes and look at what is happening to their country. Little Irish republican states are being established throughout the length and breadth of their province....Loyalists would be well advised to monitor the encroachment of this alien culture and the likely effects it will produce on every facet of their every day lives.... Loyalist(sic) will have to identify this threat to their existence and put together a programme that will impede, stop, and reverse this

Irish process. (*New Ulster Defender*, 1990)

The serious potential consequences of these threats can be seen in incidents such as a hoax bomb placed at a County Tyrone Irish language nursery school in January, 1997. Such attitudes are also reflected in remarks made by DUP Belfast City Councillor Sammy Wilson, who insisted that there would be no "leprechaun language" in Belfast City Hall when a Sinn Féin councillor tried to address the council in Irish (Kachuk 1993, 325).

Others Protestants, looking for new ways of approaching their identity, developed a novel discourse concerning the Cruthin, a supposed pre-Celtic people said to be the original inhabitants of Ulster (Kachuk 1993, 326; Feldman 1985, 300). According to this theory, the Cruthin were displaced to Scotland by the invading Celts, so the plantations of the 17th century were in fact a return of the true natives.

An alternative narrative has also been developing that seeks to make the Irish language a tradition common to both communities. Ó Snodaigh's (1995) work details the use of Gaelic among many of the Scottish planters and the amount of intermarriage that took place between settler and native where Irish became the language of the household. Many Protestants were active in the leadership of the language revival of the 19th century, and this historical memory is evoked to assert that Irish is not antithetical to Protestantism or Unionism.

This is the message being promoted by such groups as the *Ultach Trust* and the *Committee on the Administration for Justice*, which noted:

Irish has not only been spoken by Catholics in Ireland. Many of the settlers were Gaelic speakers from Scotland. Furthermore, at the turn of the 19th century, the revival of Irish was inspired by Belfast Protestants.... [E]ven today there are people within the Unionist community who see Irish as part of their identity, and who favor increased support for the language. (*Committee on the Administration of Justice* 1993, 6)

The Irish education movement also puts great emphasis on being non-sectarian, though this can also be interpreted as representing a break from the Catholic Church as well as an opening to Protestants. Whether a tolerance of or identification with Irish will become part of popular Protestant consciousness or collective memory is open to question. Interest seems to be growing as Unionists

have attended Irish courses at the Ulster People's College, and language classes are offered in the Shankill Road area, a heartland of hardline Loyalism.

While these are hopeful signs, too much can be made of them as there have even been Protestant members of the IRA, and this in no way signals a mass conversion to Republicanism. The courses in Unionist working class areas are also not immune to the political context. When the IRA attempted to kill the UDA leadership, resulting in an explosion that killed several innocent civilians on the Shankill Road, Irish language classes there had to be cancelled.

Nonetheless, elements within the Protestant and Unionist communities are at least talking about the relevance of Irish, and some of them are doing it in Irish. In 1992, the Ulster People's College organized the third in a series of seminars on the Irish language with the theme "The Irish Language and the Unionist Tradition." Among the speakers were Dr. Christopher McGimpsey, a leading member of the Ulster Unionist Party, and William Smith, a community worker and trade unionist. Both are Irish speakers. Smith began to learn the language from a Republican prisoner while he himself was incarcerated in Long Kesh prison, presumably for Loyalist paramilitary activity. McGimpsey lauds the efforts of Irish activists but calls for the language to be depoliticized, saying that the responsibility for making the language acceptable to Unionists lies with these very same activists (McGimpsey 1994, 15-16). Smith talks about the identity crisis faced by Unionists.

Some people [Protestants] were saying they were Irish, some people were saying they were British, some people were saying they were Northern Irish, some people were saying they were Ulster people. You know, everybody had a big problem with their identity. (21)

Smith agrees with McGimpsey that the so-called politicization of the language is a problem, but adds that there is a growing interest in the Irish language and Irish culture among working class Protestants. Whether this will remain a marginal phenomenon or become a factor in weakening the legacies of colonialism is impossible to predict. It is possible, however, that the growth of Irish while strengthening the identity and confidence of the Nationalist community, may also play a role in breaking down pro-British, Unionist identities and in bringing the two communities together.

Conclusions

This chapter has sought to elucidate the themes of identity and politics in relation to the Irish language movement in Belfast. There is a debate over the connection between the language and Irish identity in the Republic of Ireland, which serves as a backdrop for an analysis of the Belfast situation. One view (Edwards 1985) sees the language as unnecessary other than as a symbol, while another (de Fréine 1978) contends that it is essential to an authentic Irish identity. Analysis of the language movement in Belfast shows a reality which lies outside this debate to some extent. All observers of the revival in the Nationalist community agree that a clear link exists between language and identity (Ó hAdhmaill 1985, 1990; Maguire 1990; O'Reilly 1992). There is a general consensus that the language plays an important role in the reinforcing of an "Irish" identity, extending even to those who do not speak the language. A general perception exists among Northern Ireland Nationalists that Irish is their native tongue to an extent that one prominent activist, Pat Rice (interview December 1995), told me he often heard non-Irish speakers say they were ashamed to admit they didn't speak their own language. This underlying communal identification with Irish is a crucial factor in the movement's success. Even people who do not speak it feel proud of the schools and are willing to support them.

Most observers agree that this felt need for a forceful expression of Irishness is linked to the ongoing political crisis. While the early work of the Shaw's Road activists laid the crucial groundwork and provided an available alternative structure, it was the intense alienation from the dominant society that pushed so many people in the community to seek new options. As the Nationalist community recovered from the trauma of the Hunger Strike in 1981, a tremendous communal energy was unleashed which was channelled into many different areas, one of which was the language movement. The underlying basis for the strong ties between the Irish language and identity lies in the subordinate status of the Nationalist community. As a result, Irish in the Northern Ireland context is fundamentally political in nature and can be a means of resistance to the dominant culture. Nevertheless, I do not agree with Kachuk (1993) who reduces the language revival to an

extension of the Republican Movement. While many Republicans have been active promoters of Irish, and both Sinn Féin and the H-Block prisoners were instrumental in building popular consciousness of the language, the literature (other than Kachuk) suggests that the two movements (Republican and Irish language) are best seen as parallel developments rather than the latter stemming from the former. The contemporary language movement presents an inclusive, positive vision of being Irish, which, while containing a resistance narrative, is highly affirmative.

The last section of this chapter dealt with the perceptions and attitudes of the Unionist population. While the Nationalist community appears confident and forward looking, the Unionists give the impression of experiencing an identity crisis. Whatever the reason, there has been some change in traditional attitudes an opening to the Irish language among Unionists. This is a positive development although declarations by Unionist Irish speakers indicate that they view Nationalists as responsible for bringing politics into the language rather than admitting the contextual roots of the matter. While interest in Irish on the part of Unionists is fragile and can be swept away by political developments, it does represent a hopeful element in the development of a new social dynamic.

In the final chapter, I will begin by leaving aside the message of the movement (the language) and looking at the medium through which it is transmitted, the educational network itself. Contemporary literature on the phenomenon has centred primarily on the question of language and identity to the relative exclusion of the nature of the educational vehicle which has been constructed. I feel that such an approach neglects a crucial element in why the movement has been so successful to date. Consequently, the final chapter will examine the education infrastructure of the Irish revival in the light of progressive/radical educational theory in order to see what lessons can be drawn from this experience. I will then present some insights that have emerged during the course of this study and also make some suggestions as to potential areas for further research into the Irish language movement in Belfast.

CHAPTER 7: EDUCATION AS COMMUNITY EXPRESSION

What we did here in the growth of the Irish medium education, allied with the ongoing struggle and other factors, has produced a confidence in the Nationalist population of Belfast that wasn't there thirty years ago when we used to accept our status as second class citizens. That confidence is a threatening thing as far as the authorities are concerned.

Seamas Mac Seáin, founder/member of Shaw's Road Gaeltacht

The first part of this final chapter presents the Irish language movement as an educational process and interprets it in the light of the work of three progressive educational theorists, Paulo Freire, Stephen Brookfield and Jack Mezirow. The analyses developed by these thinkers offer some insights into the educational aspects of the movement, which, in turn, present some challenges to certain elements of the theories. I will then join the various themes discussed in previous chapters to present an overall portrait of the Irish language movement, draw some tentative conclusions as to what it represents, and suggest some areas for further research.

The main contentions of this initial section are that the construction of its own school system allows the community to elaborate alternative ways of being and doing, and that the educational process extends beyond the schools themselves to empower at both the individual and group level. Thus, the Irish language educational movement represents education for emancipation, meaning that its structural and substantive goals seek to weaken and transform existing relations of subordination.

While the revival movement as a whole can be seen as a dissident voice to the dominant discourse, its constituent parts are crucial, and sometimes overlooked, factors in that articulation. Most of the current research on the Irish language movement has tended to focus on either the relation between identity and the language or the political aspects of the revival. Consequently, there has been little theoretical analysis of the role played by the educational infrastructure in the growth of the movement.

Many elements in the personal accounts of participants in the language movement resonate with the ideas espoused by progressive educational theorists (Mezirow 1978, 1981; Brookfield 1985; Freire and Macedo 1995). Paulo Freire calls for political approaches to education that break the

feelings of helplessness and marginalization which he calls the "culture of silence" (Freire 1970). For Freire, a pedagogical praxis should "point to the transformation or the reinvention of the world" (Freire and Macedo 1995, 395). Jack Mezirow (1978, 1981) identifies "perspective transformation" as a primary goal of adult education. He describes this transformation as

...the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings. (1981, 6)

Stephen Brookfield (1985) espouses a critical theory of adult education that seeks

the nurturing of self-directed, empowered adults; such adults will see themselves as proactive, initiating individuals engaged in a continuous re-creation of their personal relationships, work worlds, and social circumstances, and not as reactive individuals, buffeted by the uncontrollable forces of circumstances. (48)

While these thinkers advocate laudable goals for educators and provide a welcome critique of many current educational practices, their writings often remain at an abstract level and offer few practical guides for approaching specific cases. Even Freire, who has created a whole language of progressive pedagogy, has been taken to task for making sweeping, if lyrical, generalizations that avoid discussion of concrete contextual realities (Weiler 1996.) Nonetheless, some aspects of the Belfast experience reflect the values and aspirations championed by these thinkers. Clearly, over the last twenty-five years the culture of the Irish language has been transformed from one of relative silence in relation to the dominant culture to one of articulate voice.

There are several reasons why the Irish language education system has produced admirable results under difficult circumstances. The first important factor lies in the holistic nature of the phenomenon and the strong, organic links between the schools and the community which engendered them. The schools, the adult education classes, and the language infrastructure are the creations of people inspired by a vision which speaks from the past and looks toward the future. Time after time, they literally rolled up their sleeves and began to build and organize with few resources except determination and humour. Given the hostility of the state, these activists had to depend on their community for funding and support. The revival of the language then became a

point of pride for the community, which in turn encouraged further support and more involvement. In this way, the development of this alternative education network parallels the larger growth of self-confidence in the community as a whole.

This concept of transformation at the community level through education is rarely examined in the works of Brookfield and Mezirow, who tend to portray the learner as a decontextualized individual. The classroom experience of learners presented in their works often seems separate from the larger society. While the learner may acquire useful social skills and new perspectives within this framework, how this translates into communal projects remains unclear.

The tendency to abstraction is also evident in how the educator/facilitator is depicted in much of their work, and even Freire is not terribly clear on this point. In their writings, the educator often appears as someone from the outside who should initiate dialogue with or provoke critical thinking among learners. In the Belfast context, the teachers generally come from the community itself, and this explains much of the commitment they have to the revival. They are themselves part of the whole movement and share its aspirations. Nevertheless, it is not my intent to give an overly optimistic picture of these community-based educators. Several accounts (Maguire 1991, Bradley 1993, Ó Donnghaile 1995) discuss the need for professional training and more pedagogical resources to teach Irish because of the difficulties encountered by parents or untrained Irish speakers having to give classes out of necessity. Enthusiasm and dedication can go a long way, but do not eliminate the need for professionalism and expertise. To this end, the language coordinating body *Gaeilíúint* sees a complete training program for Irish teachers as a vital necessity (Ó Donnghaile 1995). Such developments should only strengthen my contention of the importance of the teacher-community link, because most of these trained teachers will still come from the Nationalist communities. In this area, the Belfast experience may offer some useful insights for other disenfranchised groups within so-called "developed" countries. While Freire's (1970) rural worker communities in Brazil may not have had access to formal education or resources, this is not the case for many groups in Europe or North America. Oppressed or marginalized communities may

often have the resources and skills within themselves to promote their own development. As the state, responding to the demands of neoliberalism, withdraws more and more from the redistribution of wealth in society and excludes ever larger sections of people, marginalized communities may have little choice but to create new social relations based on solidarity.

Another important element in the relative success the schools have enjoyed to date is the involvement of the parents. As the document from the *Nálonra* in Twinbrook states:

...the ethos of our *Nálonra* is to involve the parents in all aspects of its running. Parents elect the committee, raise the finances, help in the "classroom" etc, and learn Irish together with their children. (9)

When parents place their children in an Irish school, this step opens the door to a range of activities that are "educational" in the broad sense of the word. Aside from being encouraged to learn the Irish language, parents are offered the opportunity to involve themselves in a whole range of activities related to running and maintaining the school. This process teaches new skills and encourages personal growth at the same time as it contributes to making the school democratic and brings parents together to discuss issues of common concern. In this way, the entire school infrastructure can be considered educational and liberating, if by this we mean it encourages both a sense and a practice of empowerment.

Vision and determination have been constants in the Irish language revival in Belfast from its beginnings in the 1960s until today. Many adults are learning Irish because they see it as a value in itself, but another motivation is the desire to support their children and help the growth of a new generation of native speakers. As Sile describes in her interview, this can lead to an interesting educational dialectic where parent helps child, and child in turn helps parent in the learning process. This commitment to the future and dedication to the present on the part of so many adults is an element of the Irish revival that clearly links it to the emancipatory perspectives of radical education theory.

The revival's infrastructure has channelled communal aspirations to express and promote a specifically Irish identity, and this affirmation can be seen as the development of an alternative

world view to that advanced by the dominant culture. Several aspects of the language movement embody the values championed by progressive education theorists such as Freire. The schools are democratic structures with highly motivated teachers and considerable parental involvement. Parents are active participants in their children's education both at the level of learning and in the actual running of the schools. In addition, adult involvement in language classes or the schools often leads to the acquisition of new skills, a sense of empowerment, and, in some case, jobs. For some adults, learning the language gives them the confidence to return to the formal education system and do degrees in other areas. The self-assurance engendered by participation in the language movement is then reflected in the wider Nationalist community.

I would even speculate that the decline in political violence in Northern Ireland is due in part to the growth of confidence in the Nationalist community. In the early 1970's, the Republican military struggle was so intense that it seemed able to bring about systematic change. When it became clear that the British presence could not be ended and Nationalist grievances not redressed through the use of force, the armed struggle continued for want of alternatives. Nationalists may have been for or against the use of political violence, but few were able to propose other options. After the Hunger Strike, this changed as numerous political, cultural, and social initiatives developed which challenged the existing state of affairs. One component of this process has been the alternative Irish language education movement which has not only revived the native language but has also helped engender a language of new possibilities among Nationalists in Northern Ireland.

I will conclude this study with a brief review of the major factors that have inspired the present day attempt to revive the Irish language in Belfast. Then I will attempt to draw some conclusions as to the meaning that has been constructed around this experience and what educational theory can learn from it.

From the 16th century to the present, language has been a political question in the troubled relations between England and Ireland. As Edward Said (1994) points out, these relations have been too often misunderstood as an anomaly within the so-called civilized West rather than the product

of a colonial relationship. Failure to place questions in this colonial context leads observers to revert to sanctimonious clichés and stereotypes of the irrational Irish, which only contribute to further misunderstanding. The Irish language was one victim of this colonial process and its story has been largely mystified and silenced (De Fréine 1978). Nevertheless, the Irish were able to keep certain elements from the past and construct a distinct identity that both fueled and was nourished by a series of national liberation movements. The Gaelic League in the early 20th century succeeded in putting the language question on the nationalist (and, with the founding of the Irish Free State in 1922, national) agenda. However, the close association of the League with the goals and leaders of the 1916 Easter Uprising further identified the language with radical Republicanism in the minds of the Unionist population in Ireland. The new Northern Ireland state, founded on a supremacist and colonial ideology (Farrell 1976), regarded its Nationalist minority as menacing second-class citizens and discouraged any forms of cultural expression other than those related to the Catholic Church. The Irish language was taught as a subject by the Christian Brothers, but it was mainly kept alive among adult learners by groups such as the Gaelic League and the *Chluain Ard*.

In the 1960's, a small group of language enthusiasts decided to form their own urban, Gaelic speaking community on the Shaw's Road, soon followed by a school for their children. The founding of the Shaw's Road *Gaeltacht* in 1969 coincided with a political crisis that rocked Northern Ireland to its foundations as the Nationalist community first demanded equal rights and then, when met with police repression, challenged the legitimacy of the state itself. In 1972, the British government assumed direct control of the administration of Northern Ireland and responsibility for dealing with resistance. Faced with an authority that claimed them as citizens but denied them justice, many Nationalists turned to renewed expressions of Irish culture and traditions. After the trauma of the Hunger Strike in 1981, a multitude of community and educational groups sprang up in the Nationalist community that began to make demands on the British government. The Shaw's Road *Bunscoil* presented a model and potential vehicle for people who felt a deep need to express their identity. The nascent Irish language infrastructure met the emotional wave generated by the

Hunger Strike and from this mix came Irish language schools, nurseries, adult education classes, and street sign and media access campaigns.

The language revival grew strong enough to force some recognition from the British authorities, but this has been unwilling and slow in coming. A point has now been reached where activists are discussing the establishment of a post-secondary Irish language university and the creation of jobs where the language can be used for the upcoming generation of Irish speakers. Nevertheless, the movement is reaching a turning point. While it is continuing to grow, it must have more state support in the form of finance, materials, and recognition if it is to achieve long-term survival. The nature and amount of this support will be determined in the context of the decolonization process outlined in Chapter 2. Future developments in the Irish language revival will certainly offer an interesting area of study as Irish language activists are seeking to restore the language in everyday life and reclaim linguistic territory. To be successful, such a project entails fundamental changes in the relationship between Irish and the dominant British culture.

The movement has succeeded in reinforcing a specifically Irish identity through the promotion of the Irish language and in extending the language horizontally across such social spaces as the home, school, media, and, to a very limited extent, the work place. The language has also been handed vertically to a new generation who are growing up as native Irish speakers. That this could happen is due to the larger non-Irish speaking Nationalist community in Belfast, which clearly considered the language important enough to lend its support in more than a token way. The visible growth of Irish language spaces has become a source of pride for the community and inspires more people to take classes themselves, put their children in existing schools, and even set up new schools in their areas. The schools themselves require participation at all levels; partially because of their precarious financial state and partially due to an underlying philosophy of community control. They can thus be interpreted as counter-hegemonic formations on two levels: they are a popular alternative education system where power lies with the community, and they are promoting a cultural and linguistic alternative to that offered by the dominant society. These

interwoven webs of involvement link the schools with the community, learners (whether adults or children) with teachers, and parents with children in a very powerful way. In the words of Gabrielle Maguire, the children are growing up "more complete as individuals" (interview December 1995). For adults, learning Irish can foster a sense of self-worth and encourage the pursuit of other academic or social goals. Because the movement is so tightly connected to the community and a sense of national identity, this growth in individual confidence is reflected in the wider society.

Interestingly, just as the colonization of Ireland paralleled that of the native peoples in North America, the attempts to recover the Irish language find echoes in educational projects of some indigenous communities in North America. An account of efforts by the Quebec Cree for example describes the way that

Reversing language shift, in this case increasing the use of Cree in the communities, is essentially a collective action in which individual community members play an integral part. ...what is perhaps most striking about this transformation is the important role the community has played; their commitment has provided a firm basis on which to begin the process and their motivation continues to provide the momentum. (McAlpine and Herodier 1994, 138-40)

The Irish education movement, like other such movements, represents an emancipatory narrative that seeks, in the words of Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiongo (1993), to "move the centre"; to break down walls of restriction and exclusion and to validate the memory and aspirations of the marginalized and silenced. It is my belief that the Irish language revival in Belfast can be best understood as the movement of a community to claim its cultural space and voice through educational structures of its own making.

There are many areas in the rich experience of the Irish language revival calling for deeper exploration. The questions of class and gender come immediately to mind as important issues for research. The movement is based in working class areas, and has deeply affected the lives of many people in a positive way. The present work has suggested some explanations for this phenomenon, but more remains to be done. The accounts of Sile and Sinead suggest that the Irish language education movement has been especially important for women. A study specifically focused on women's experience and participation in the revival might be very worthwhile in further elucidating

the emancipatory nature of the project.

It will take several decades to determine the ultimate success of the Irish language movement in Belfast. The young people presently growing up as native speakers will have to stay in Ireland, find jobs in which they can use the language, and raise families in Irish. They will also have to use and expand the Irish language infrastructure which the adults of today have built. Although much remains to be done to guarantee the language's survival, the vibrant and visible presence of Irish in Belfast today gives reason for optimism. While it is still too soon to say whether the future "belongs" to Irish, the education movement in Belfast has clearly succeeded in affirming both the language and the community of which it is an integral part.

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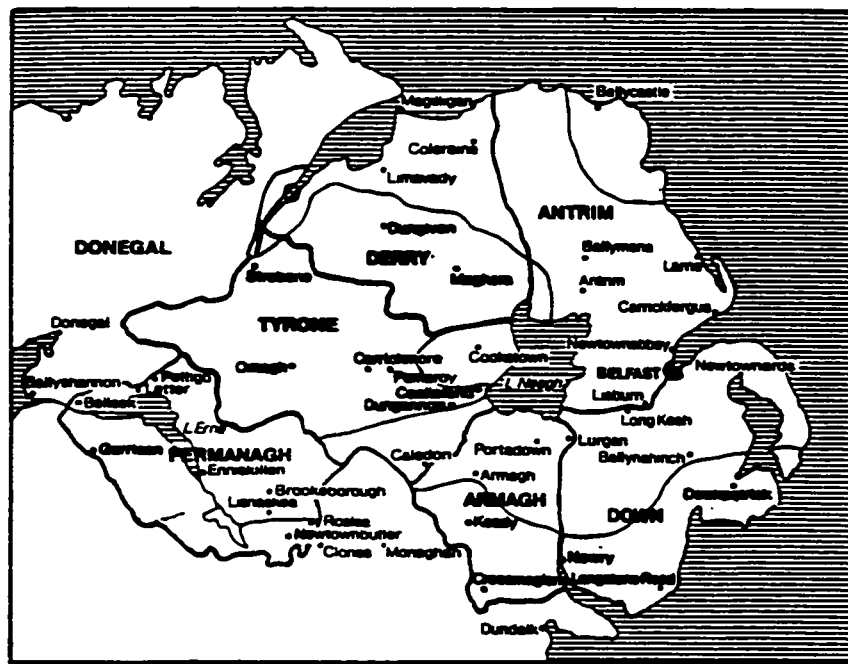
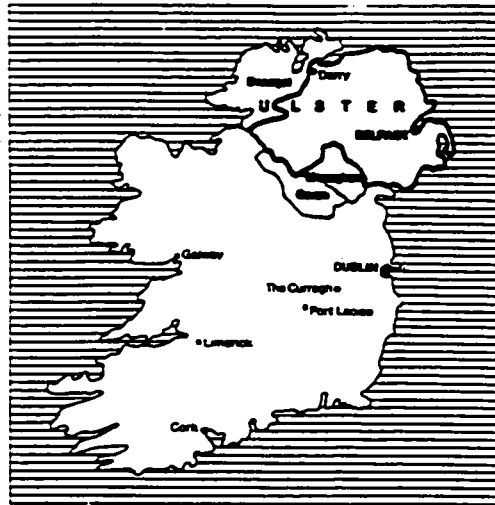
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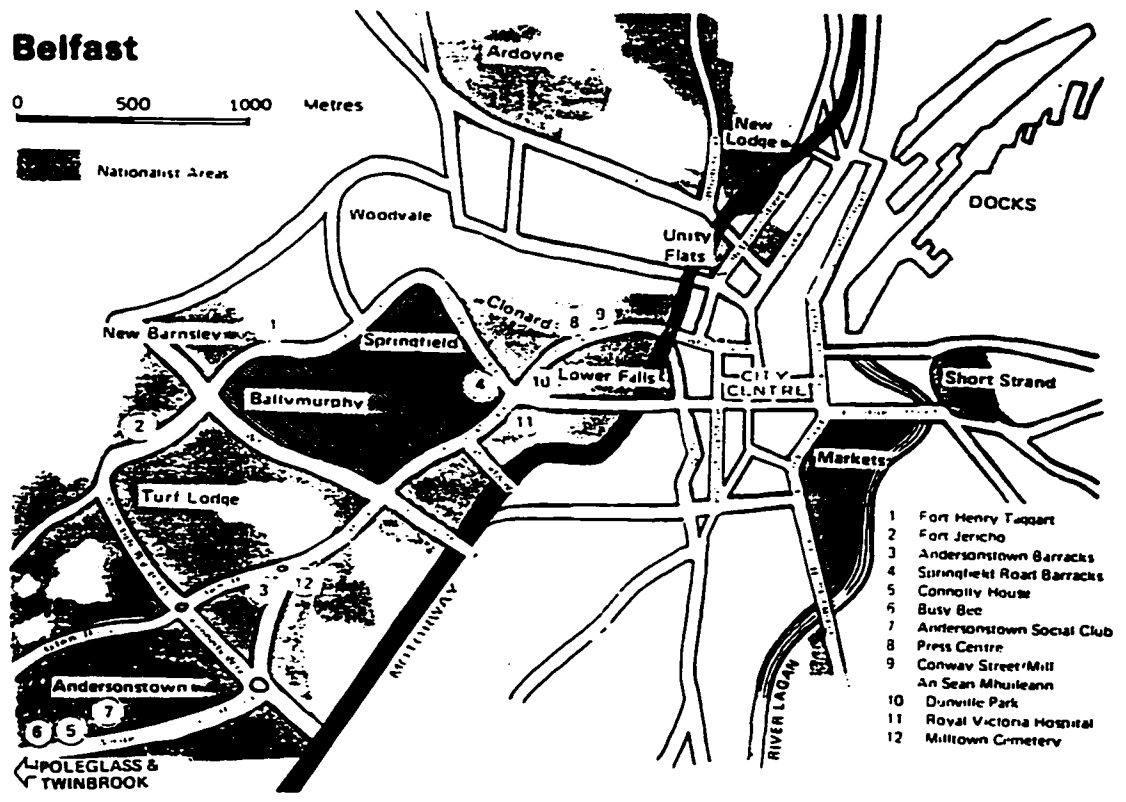
APPENDIX 1

Map 1:
Ireland, showing the six-county
state of Northern Ireland, plus
Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal,
once part of the nine-county
Province of Ulster



Map 2:
Northern Ireland

Source: Michael Farrell. The Orange State.
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Source: Ciaran de Baroid. Ballymurphy and the Irish War. London: Pluto Press, 1989.

Bunscoil an tSléibhe Dhuibh

**Why More And More Parents Are Choosing To
Have Their Children Educated Through
The Medium Of Irish.**

To Enhance The Sense Of Cultural Identity.

**Because Of The Many Impressive Benefits
To The Child's Education.**

**Because Of The Intellectual Advantages
That Bilingualism Offers.**

**Because Children With Two Languages Do
Better Than Children With One.**

**Because Employers Often See Bilingualism As
Positive Advantage.**

Enroll

**DO YOU KNOW THAT THERE IS
AN EXCELLENT IRISH MEDIUM
SCHOOL IN THIS AREA
Bunscoil an tSléibhe Dhuibh
Whiterock Close
Whiterock Road Belfast 12
327210**

Today

**As A Parent You Must
Give Your Child The Best Start**

(2)

10. Do other members of your family speak Irish? Yes No

If yes, please specify _____

11. Are other members of your family currently studying Irish? Yes No

If yes, please specify _____

12. Are you involved in supporting the Irish-medium schools and/or nurseries?

Yes No

If yes, in what capacity? _____

13. What motivates you to learn Irish? (check as many of the following as you wish)

1. cultural identity _____

2. political statement _____

3. enjoyable hobby _____

4. personal growth _____

5. advantage in finding a job _____

6. support children attending Irish school _____

7. other (please specify) _____

14. Of the above, which is the most important to you? _____

Why? _____

Republican / Nationalist and the Irish Language.

The loyalist community may scoff at and dismiss the current upsurge in Irish cultural activities, but they do so to their own detriment. The consequences of such a base, attitude will become all too apparent in the not too distant future, when loyalist will be made to feel alien in their own homeland. Loyalist may well ask where have all these Johnny come lately Irish patriots been these past 60 years? Why this sudden interest in gaelic tradition, after all these same Irish citizens have had ample opportunity, and the freedom it may be added, to pursue and exercise this legitimate interest, didn't the Catholic Church have complete control over their schools curriculum? Why now and with what intent, is this dramatic interest in everything Irish manifesting itself.

To understand why, loyalist need to look at republican history and in particular the Irish home rule crisis. They will see the relevance between that era and the present thrust towards Irish unification and how the gaelic culture has been used by republicans as a political weapon. During the Irish home rule era Irish politicians recognized that support for home rule was not as vibrant as it should be, faced with this spathy from a large section of Irish populace, a hearts and minds campaign was embarked upon. Using gaelic cultural activities to promote a greater sense of Irish Nationalism. It was hoped that this Irish identity would give a credibility to their demands to self determination. A people with a unique and separate culture set apart from that of the British. The British establishment, then as now, proved only too susceptible to the sweet smelling aroma of Irish blarney.

Ulster, as loyalist call their homeland, has never recovered the ground lost to Irish propaganda during the home rule crisis, evident by the British Government's reluctance to fully integrate Ulster into the British state. Today republican literature is advocating a more virulent approach in the use of the Irish language, stressing that the learning of Irish has only one objective : to be used. This republican strategy is shared by the so called constitutional nationalist, i.e., the SDLP and the Catholic hierarchy. The campaign to have the Irish language placed on an equal footing with English may have received a slight setback with new education proposals, but alas this proved to be only temporary, as the machinery is already being put into place, which will see the Irish language eventually becoming, as in the south, an officially approved dual language.

Loyalist should open their eyes and look at what is happening to their country. Little Irish republican states are being established throughout the length and breadth of their province. The sole purpose of which is to undermine the institutions of government, making the state of Ulster more Irish than Ireland itself. Unless Loyalist adapt to this new Irish state, their province will eventually be rendered ungovernable. The Irish language and it's use will signal a new era of nationalist disruption, generating the type of mass appeal that the "one man one vote" Civil rights slogan engendered.

Loyalists would be well advised to monitor the encroachment of this alien culture and the likely effects it will produce on every facet of their every day lives. Evidence as to the success of the Pro-Irish lobby in contaminating and eroding the once British institutions of government is there for all to see. Although gaelic was not promoted to the core subjects, it was however given a more prominent status, in that it has attainment targets, a programme of study, and an assessment criteria. The white paper on the new education proposals state that "the government fully recognizes the importance of the Irish language to

many people in N.I." To many people ? It is also widely discussed the whole subject of Irish culture is regularly discussed at Irish Intergovernmental Conference.

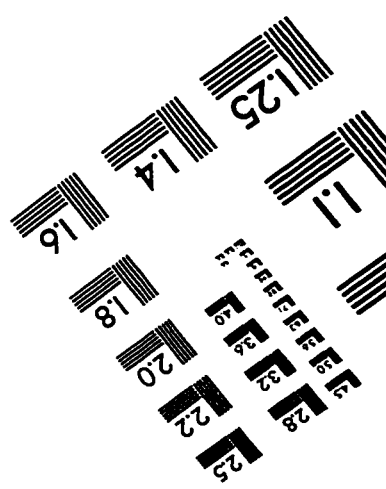
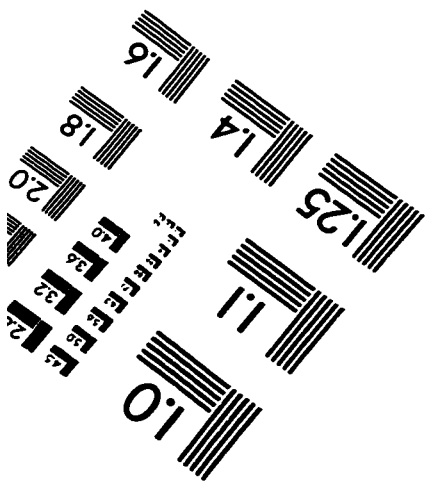
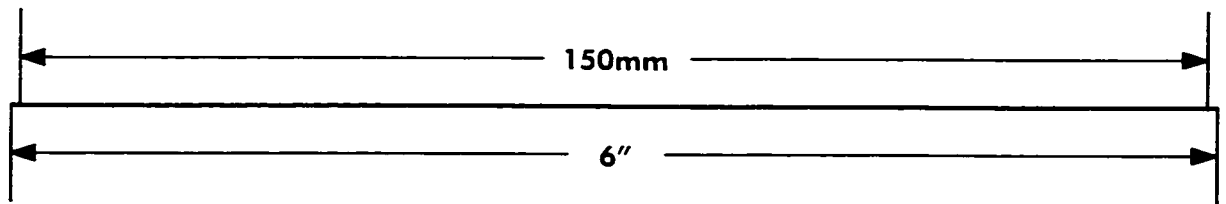
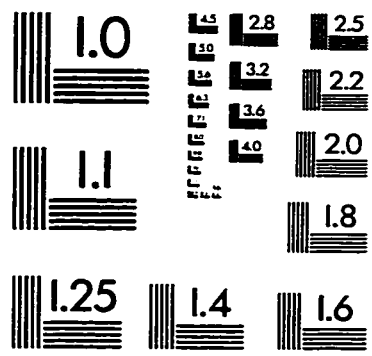
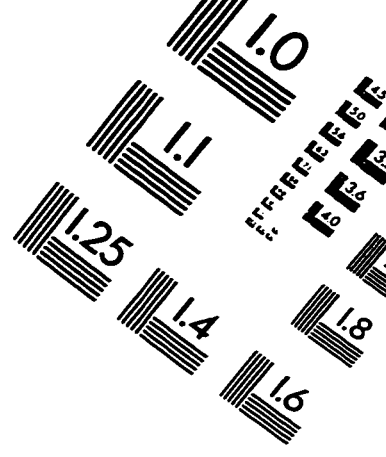
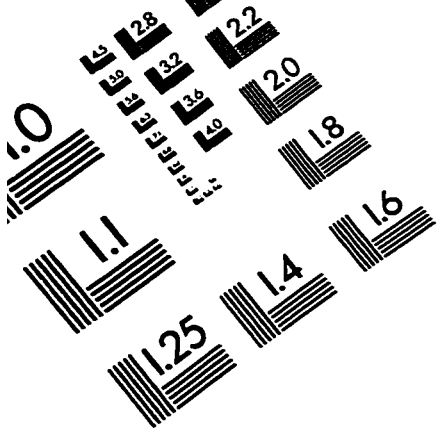
This recognition by the N.I office is to become a policy directed policy of promoting the Irish culture and more specifically the Irish language has already begun to filter through. A directive issued to the various departments within the civil service enquires written in Irish should be replied to. The Northern Ombudsman Dr Martin Hayes, who previously would only reply in English to complaints in Irish, is now replying in Irish to those complaints in Irish. The DOE, N.I has now begun to print maps of place names in Irish and English. The DOE by it's removing Irish street names would appear to be condoning the activities. The DOE was quick to remove, "Ulster Says No" anti agreement slogans.

Radio Ulster put's out on it's air waves Irish language programmes. BBC TV and UTV are well versed in promoting Irish historical programmes. When has a series of historical programmes the Protestant ethos in Ulster ever appeared on our TV screens is being bombarded with this island of Ireland propaganda. Haw style. When all this is linked to the Anglo-Irish agricultural political connotations are clear. A process whereby the Irish government in N.I. are moving more closely to their counter-republic. A process aimed to facilitate the unification of Ulster. Loyalist, as usual, have been slow to react and set in motion a programme to counter this threat, lacking the political foresight to see how such Irish activities could be used to disrupt and change the fabric of their society. What will happen for instance, when a cultural lobby begins to implement it's tactics of disruption and service will have to have an "Irish section." who will staff this section ? Civil servants of all grades will have to become versed in Irish if they are to become eligible for promotion and advancement unlike the system south of the border. What will be the effect on postal services if Irish take on a more prominent role? Will employees be required to read Irish? Will the ability to speak Irish become the criteria for employment in the D.O.E, Public Works Dept, of Education, for shop assistant's etc., etc.

Twenty years of republican / nationalist violence is testimony to their capacity to place their objectives on a long term basis no doubt their ability or their capacity to use the gaelic culture to it's most deadly effect, to further undermine the state of Ulster and endorse their view that N.I. is a political Non-Entity. Loyalist have always believed in equality and religious freedom for all. Loyalist never placed barriers in the path of Irish Nationalist culture. Loyalist do find disconcerting however is the hypocritical stance taken by this Irish culture lobby. On the one hand they claim the right to have Irish culture should be recognized by the loyalist community on an equal status with the loyalist traditions in the North, whilst on the other hand they are constantly campaigning to have loyalist marches and parades curtailed, as they find these loyalist traditions offensive. The sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. Loyalist will identify this threat to their existence and put together a programme that will impede, stop and reverse this Irish process. Two can play the game ! Apples and pears and all that !

GLOSSARY

<i>Ard Scoil Ulach</i>	Ulster college for the promotion of the Irish language.
<i>Bunscoil</i>	Irish language primary school.
<i>Chluain Ard</i>	Belfast Irish-language community centre.
<i>Conradh na Gaeilge</i>	The Gaelic League.
<i>Culturlann</i>	Irish language centre on the Falls Road in Belfast.
<i>Gaeltacht</i>	Irish-speaking district.
<i>Glór na nGael</i>	All-Ireland Irish language competition; also local Belfast section of the organization that sponsors the competition.
Irish Republican Army (IRA)	Guerrilla organization fighting for Irish unity.
Loyalist	Usually used to mean 1) working-class Unionist, or 2) more extreme Unionist who supports maintaining the status quo of Protestant privilege in Northern Ireland; the union with Britain is seen as a safeguard against absorption into the Irish Republic.
<i>Meánscoil</i>	Irish language secondary school.
<i>Náonra</i>	Irish language preschool.
Nationalist	Supporter of the unification of Ireland, obtained with the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland through constitutional politics. Invariably, though not necessarily, Nationalists are Catholic.
Republican	More radical than Nationalists, Republicans support a thirty-two county republic and oppose what they call the "Unionist veto" over Ireland's right to self-determination. The term has become synonymous with support for Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Army, although not all Republicans would necessarily support either. Republicans call for British withdrawal as a first step toward the creation of a united Ireland.
Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC)	Official Northern Ireland police force.
Sinn Féin	"Ourselves alone" in Irish; a political party, often associated with IRA.
Unionist	Loyal to maintaining the union of Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. Invariably, though not necessarily, Unionists are Protestant.



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