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The Gaelic Front Controversy:

The Gaelic League's (Post-Colonial) Crux

This essay will examine the debate concerning the use of Gaelic and Roman fonts for printing Irish language texts during the Irish Revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The rise in Irish language publications during this period sparked heated debate in the pages of Irish language journals and font choice became a persistent issue for editors, journalists, and writers. The issue of which font was appropriate for printing Irish language material was at the heart of the discussion, but to view it as a marginal debate within the Irish Language Revival is to misread its significance. This debate is wider than a specific debate on the proper font: it represents for the Irish Language Revival/Gaelic Revival a key moment and initiates a discussion which would be ongoing and ever persistent.

How the font controversy relates to the wider Language Revival and dictates the agenda for future debates is the focus of this essay. At stake for participants in this affair are the nature and orientation of the Irish language itself: is Irish to remain a seventeenth-century language, or is it to embrace nineteenth-century developments and become an early twentieth-century language? In the 'jargon' of post-colonialism this may be viewed as the post-colonial moment when the emerging indigenous culture debates whether to adopt an Appropriation or Abrogation stance. Post-colonial theory, however, rarely if ever, allows for appropriation as a cultural tactic within the native language. It is only perceived as the preserve of those who adopt the colonial language and this is one of the reasons why post-colonial theory offers little attraction for those who work in the Celtic languages and literatures. The appropriateness of the Roman font for printing in Irish is the appropriation/abrogation controversy translated into Irish Revival terms.

Critics of the Irish Revival, in both its English and Irish language expressions, attribute its genesis to the cultural nationalism that rose to fill the political vacuum in the wake of Charles Stewart Parnell's death and the subsequent implosion of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Gaelic font advocates who argued that only that font could do justice to the Irish language fall under the rubric of cultural nationalists. That language influenced thought constituted a central tenet of the Irish Language Revival; different languages influenced and generated the distinctions apparent between the races. The Gaelic font distinguished the Irish from other nations, on the written page, and therefore came to represent an important cultural marker. This view contradicts the ethic of typographic invisibility which has dominated western bookmaking and publishing for most of the twentieth century; namely, that typography should be invisible and should not attract attention to itself. The 'crystal goblet' typographical approach immortalized by Beatrice Ward in 1932 held that 'type should be self-effacing and supremely humble'; type that 'intrudes upon a reader's awareness', she warned, was 'bad; distracting, impudent, visible.' Type and fonts are tools through which one comprehends language. One does not see letters; one reads words. Typefaces that attract attention disrupt that process, and reveal the mechanics of the reading process.

Those promoting the Gaelic font understood Ward's logic but applied it differently. They used the power of a font to disrupt the reading process, and by implication to disturb the perception that England was Ireland, that English was Irish, or that the same rules of reading, interpreting, translating, and conceptualizing applied. The Gaelic font advocates bluntly flaunted the type to alert the reader that what s/he saw was distinct and different. Just as Irish sounded different to the ear, the Gaelic font appeared different to the eye; both marked themselves as different, unique, and un-English. Not only was this a different text, it was a different context: similar to English, admittedly, but sufficiently diverse to warrant distinction. This insistence on the Gaelic script as the written co-sign of the Irish language involves not alone an assertion of a distinct Irish mode of thought and writing, but a formal rejection of the notion that English, or any other linguistic system, could successfully enclose or translate the Irish mode. Other elements of this cultural nationalism manifested themselves when Com dáth na Gaeltaca/Gaelic League members demanded the General Post Office (GPO) accept telegrams in Irish, a feat they accomplished in 1901. The significance in forcing the GPO — Dublin's communications centre and the symbol of British efficiency and organization in Dublin — to accept telegrams in Irish, and later parcels and letters addressed in Irish, was immense, and explains Gaelic Leaguers' ecstasy at reporting from social events (Oícheán na Gaeilge, Provincial Féisanna, etc.) the arrival of a telegram in Irish.

The font issue was far more than a simple typographic debate as the attitude of the Royal Irish Constabulary and the courts demonstrates when rejecting a name and address in Irish letters on a cert in Dublin on the grounds that the lettering was not of a legal or acceptable nature, nor indeed worthy of description as a language. This attitude reinforced the cultural nationalists' perception of the value and
ideological advantage of the Gaelic font as a badge of cultural distinctiveness. The belief that English could not adequately express the 'Irish mind / spirit' underlies the argument that the Roman font fails to express Irish writing, just as one finds the argument that the sol-fa tonic notation was inadequate to represent traditional singing at Gaelic League sponsored Frisennn throughout the four provinces. The font controversy, therefore, initially appears as a manifestation of cultural nationalism, and might be seen to support a view of the Gaelic League as an archetypal cultural nationalist organization. That elements in the Gaelic League sought to promote the Roman font among Irish language learners, however, immediately challenges this interpretation and requires an alternative and more historically detailed explanation.

Gaelic font supporters may be construed as cultural abrogationists/nativists, but their attitude may owe more to the Arts and Crafts Movement and cultural anxieties of the fin de siècle than to cultural nationalism. The Gaelic font controversy arose during the printing revival championed by William Morris, whose lecture in Dublin in April 1886 was attended by the young Douglas Hyde. Morris, the great designer and printer, believed that the industrial revolution caused irreparable damage to craftsmanship, and he espoused a return to traditional craftsmanship and skilled labour in all crafts including publishing, printing, and bookbinding. In the words of Cumming and Kaplan, Morris 'wanted these books, like products of his firm, to be the antithesis of recent crude commercial production.' Megan L. Benton, writing on gender and typography, describes Morris's efforts to advocate older font types:

In proclaiming the tenets of what was soon considered the era's great typographic renaissance or Revival, they used gendered terms to describe both the faults of modern (that is conventional nineteenth century) types and the merits of the preindustrial type forms they advocated. They deplored the former as 'hussy, pale and feminine,' calling for a return to darker, heavier, more 'robust' letterforms, which they argued would restore vigour and 'utility' to the printed page. This belief that the redemption of printing as an art lay in a return to earlier values mirrors nativists' belief that Ireland's and the Irish language's redemption lay in a reconstruction of literary and linguistic values. The font controversy thus arose in Ireland at the same time as a wider debate on printing and type design across Europe and North America was taking place, and Gaelic font advocates may have drawn comfort from such beliefs.

Dermot McGuinness's highly informative Irish Type Design: A History of Printing Types in the Irish Character details the uses, misuses, and abuses of the Gaelic font over the centuries and provides a historical survey far beyond the scope of the present essay. Various individuals and groups produced Gaelic fonts throughout the eighteenth century, but at the close of the nineteenth century it became evident that no Gaelic font was commercially available. As E.W. Lynham, of the British Museum, notes in his slim but highly informative volume The Irish Character in Print, no font of Gaelic type was available to meet the Revival's urgent needs:

By 1897 the Gaelic League and the Irish national movement had revived Irish literature to such an extent that there was an urgent demand for fonts of Irish type. The original makers of the Keating Society's type seem to have gone out of business and apparently no Irish type-founder would risk the costly experiment of casting new types. Two fonts of Irish type, a Small Picca and a Reviver, which Sir Charles Reed & Sons made for the Dublin University Press in 1874 and sent over with the matrices, were not, it seems, available, and, indeed, have never been heard of as far as I can discover. A London firm, Messrs. Figgins, whose 1825 type had long been obsolete came to the rescue with a new type designed for them by a Professor O'Brien. Though I have not been able to identify this Irish scholar it is evident that while he modelled his letters on those of 1863, he made several small but well-chosen alterations. [...] Figgins's type became rapidly popular, and has been the standard Irish type since 1900.

Societies dedicated to the Irish language, its ancient literature and its history pepper nineteenth-century Ireland. Such societies came and went with alarming frequency, and despite varying names and ambitions, their tenure and terms of reference appear, politically and ideologically, uniform. Committed to publishing Ireland's ancient literature, groups such as The Celtic Society who listed amongst its aims the publication of Irish manuscripts in the Irish character, adopted the Gaelic font in order to reproduce faithfully such texts. In 1882 Aonadacht na Gaedheil / The Gaelic Union, a splinter group from the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, undertook to publish Irisleabhar na Gaedheil, a monthly journal to promote the Irish language. Little, other than 'Beirt Fhear's' recollection, is known of what editorial policy The Gaelic Union proposed as regards the Gaelic font when they embarked on publishing their journal Irisleabhar na Gaedheil, which would prove to be the main forum for the Irish language until Fíonam an Lá's appearance in 1898. The policy adopted by Irisleabhar na Gaedheil was straightforward and unproblematic; it printed articles in Irish in Gaelic font and articles in English in the Roman font. Such a policy, however, failed to stymie the inevitable wrangle.
The issue of the Gaelic font came to a head in Irish Academy's first edition when a poem in Irish entitled 'Go Mairíd Na Gaedhil!' appeared in Roman font. That an English text and Welsh text, both in the Roman font, preceded and followed the Irish poem in Roman font, may or may not be a matter of coincidence. Irish Academy's reviewers expressed their disapproval in the following issue, and insisted on identifying the Roman font as 'English' letters. The Casual Gazette considers the text printed in Roman font luscent with its 'h's to be an abominable substitute' for the Gaelic font. This referred to the replacement of the Gaelic font's diacritic marker 'ponc' (which appeared over lenited letters in the Gaelic) with the letter 'v', a change which led to a horde of 'v's in the Roman font. The Weekly Freeman also found the multitude of 'v's and the absence of 'sin fada' indicating vowel length to be distressful, and commented that:

The Irish type is clear and beautiful, and we find it much easier to read Irish in such type than in the English letters with their numerous 'h's and want of accents. We would advise the editor to cease using English type, as he has such a beautiful Irish type at his disposal.

And further criticism was delivered by the Irishman and United Ireland of 13 January 1883, whose reviewer wrote:

A very pretty poem by a contributor signing himself 'Leath Chuma' follows the article on Osraic poems. But why print this poem in English letters? Of course the accents have to be left out, and the words are full of 'h's, giving them a most uncouth length and appearance. This looks like inconsistency. It is well known that the outcry against the Irish characters comes from only a few lazy people, who if they get books in Irish printed in Roman type, would not be a bit nearer to acquiring a knowledge of the language. We therefore consider that the Gaelic Journal is acting wrongly in pandering to such prejudice by printing any of its Irish in Roman letters, and we would advise it to give up such a useless practice.

Tomas Ó Flannacail/Thomas Flannery, the principal intellectual figure of the early Irish Language Revival, professed himself the poet's author in Irish Academy's fourth number (February 1883), and disclosed his request to the editor that the poem appear in Roman rather than Gaelic font. Flannery's defence, in turn, sparked a response — to be discussed in more detail below — from the anonymous 'Claren Conchobhair,' who opposed the Roman font's use of Irish language material.

Outside of Ireland, Scottish language enthusiasts welcomed the Roman font innovation as they had used it for printing Scottish Gaelic since John Carswell published Fairm na n-Urmaragaidh in 1567. They welcomed the 'modernization' of the Irish language printing, thus removing the sole difficulty which Gaelic reading Scots experienced when reading Irish. Prior to the Gaelic League's foundation in 1893, the acceptance of the seventeenth-century literary language as the Irish and Scottish standard supposed the promise of a simultaneous language revival in both Ireland and Scotland. In the words of the Inversness Advertiser (reproduced by Irish Academy na Gaedhil in its February 1883 issue):

We hope it will not be considered impertinent if we might express the hope that the Irish department of the new periodical will be printed in Roman characters. The so-called Irish letters are no more Irish than are the Roman, and they are alienated with the very great disadvantage that they are unknown, or at least unfamiliar, to the Gaels of Scotland, and we should think also to many of those in Ireland itself. Moreover, the Roman letters are found perfectly sufficient to represent all the sounds of the language as used on this side of the Irish Channel, and the two dialects are to all intents and purposes, after all, but one language.

The publication of Irish in Gaelic letters, therefore, it could be argued, would alienate Scottish allies, and therefore undermine any future linguistic revival.

In July 1883, the conservative and belligerent Thomas O'Neill Russell wrote from the United States to Irish Academy na Gaedhil to support the Roman letters, a decision which seems erratic given his dogmatic stance in opposition to any issue which smashed of modernity:

Echoing the Inversness Advertiser, O'Neill Russell argued that any facet of the language that diluted its support or checked its popularity should be removed; he also expressed his fear that the adoption of the Gaelic font would drive a further wedge between the Irish and Scottish linguistic communities, and thus add to the physical division already existing.

Aon fhocal amos timcheall an eolas: Tociam, go mi-thorthunach, gur abh aill los in g-cuid is do d' headh beeainn, an sean-eol, acht na h-iar-ainn do shriobhadh na Gaedhil am. Oir gach am a dhuanam seo, airighim go n-deanaim micheart a' bhithir an traidh. Cad i an cine sa bhaine 'masair sriobhadh 's, go bh-airighite 'masair sriobhadh do dh'fhàin thuiscreachaidh? An i nach go leithidh an mhead is mo de dheasaithe na focal a sriobhadh cu? Cair i, gach nach Bh-fail acht doil mile duine 'san dothan a leigeas Gaedhilga, ta air an laghad, ma airidh na h-Albanaisge, leath dhiobh so nach
Language Revival is the apparent lack of continuity between generations. Each generation of critics acted as if they were starting from scratch rather than building on the foundation of previous generations. 'Clann Conchobhair's' reference to this argument being settled previously is unclear; it may refer to Ulick Bóurke's retraction in print of his stated position regarding the Gaelic font. It little surprised 'Clann Conchobhair' that the Scots would object to the Gaelic font, given the Scot's familiarity in seeing his Gaelic bible with its 'multitude of f's, its absence of ellipses, and its very modern spelling.' In support of the Gaelic font, 'Clann Conchobhair' states that its use since the fifth century provided continuity and bestowed legitimacy on it. Its eighteen-letter alphabet, six fewer than the Roman, renders it easier to learn, and casting new Gaelic fonts can satisfy aesthetic objections to current Gaelic fonts in use. He rejected Chisholm's assertion that previous Irish texts were printed with the Roman font because of their authors' wishes, and suggested instead that this was due to the lack of a Gaelic font. The errors that blight these texts, he argued, derive from the Roman font's use. 'Clann Conchobhair' also dismissed the use of the O'Reilly dictionary argument to prove the superiority of the Roman font: the repetition of each entry in Roman letters was but 'a piece of stupid and senseless folly. It served no conceivable purpose, and added considerably to the expense.' Irish material published in the Roman font proved easier to read, he claimed, as text in the Roman font lacks 'innit fada and suffers from a rift of 'k's'. While this final disadvantage could be rectified by the manufacture of a new Roman font which would incorporate the 'innit fada', it would prove prohibitively expensive and the issue of diacritic marker is severe, however, remain.

One might be to see, use it's for the aspiration marks, but look at the length and barbarous appearance of the words thus produced. [...] Why the word in Roman letters would frighten the ignorant Saxon back to the deepest mine of the Black country. Let our Highland brethren accommodate their s to their heart's content; we do not want to coerce them, even if we could, tastes differ, and there is no understanding their variety. But we prefer to stick to the characters especially designed and suited to our language.'

'Clann Conchobhair' concluded his attack on the Roman font by describing its proponents as ill-informed and lazy. He rejected the notion that those living abroad, in what may be an indirect jab at Flannery, should dictate to language enthusiasts in Ireland how language affairs should be managed:

We have used our own characters for fourteen hundred years, and it's too late now for well-meaning but mistaken friends over the
water, or the lazy and unpatriotic or thoughtless fellow-country men at home, to try to persuade us to change our ways, and abandon another portion of our nationality, another link with the noble past of our saints and scholars.\(^9\)

The reference to Ireland's glorious past illustrates the efforts of both sides in the font dispute to draw on 'tradition' — a perilous undertaking when one considers that literary history in the Irish language was in a pitiful state until Douglas Hyde's *A Literary History of Ireland from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* was published in 1899. The consequent absence of scholarship permitted both sides to lay claim to 'tradition' and facilitated the invention of traditions to sustain and legitimize their adopted positions.\(^9\)

The claim that the Gaelic font assisted Irish learners occurs frequently in the publications of the period. The Brooklyn Philo-Celtic Society insisted: 'As an aid to correct spelling of Gaelic words and to facilitate the writing of Irish characters, this committee regards it of importance that all written translations from English should be made in the Irish character.\(^9\)' An *Claddach na Seola*, the weekly organ of the Gaelic League, reported that a Gaelic League weekly meeting chaired by P.H. Pearse debated the Gaelic and Roman fonts. A Mr Charles Dawson claimed that, based on his observations while in Wales, the use of the Roman font contributed to the decline in children's ability to read Irish, while Mr John MacNeill responded and 'combated the objection to the use of the Irish characters'.\(^9\)

The (post-colonial) crux for nativists was to embrace the modern world, to be 'European', cosmopolitan, and outward looking without jettisoning all that they held dear and true, their distinctive language, literature, and culture. Abandoning the Gaelic font risked losing their distinctiveness on the written page, but retaining the font risked isolating them from the outside world and submitting to intellectual and cultural suffocation. The best illustration of this dilemma is in Boer War reports where the 'K' in Paul Kruger's name created difficulties for editors and writers in Irish, as the Gaelic font has no K. Creative responses included Pól Cráiga, Pól Cráigein, a Roman k, and a Gaelic *ruiger* (Krüger/Krüger) or a Gaelic *Pöl*, and an entirely Roman Krüger. Similar difficulties arose with the word *Zulu* which appeared in various guises.

If 'Cuar Cnocbheann' represented the Gaelic font's defender-in-chief in the face of the ubiquitous Roman font, then Flannery represented the Gaelic League's 'progressive' wing and challenged the thinking of the nattivist/traditiona wing whose legacy finds such favour in Revival histories. To hail Patrick Pearse, Padraig Ó Conaire and Liam P. Ó Riain/W.P. Ryan as the radical progressive leaders of the Gaelic League and as the founders of Modern Irish criticism belies the central role played by Flannery across a broad array of issues. The origins of Irish language critical debate lie, not in Pearse's editorials nor in Ó Conaire's articles and essays, but in Flannery's essays and letters. Flannery exemplifies the attitude which sought both to adapt the Irish language to the modern world and to repair the damage which occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by adopting the Roman font and embracing modernity. Flannery stoutly defended his poem's printing in the Roman letters in an April 1887 article to *Irishador na Gaeilge*.\(^9\) The Roman font was cheaper than the 'Irish' letters, he notes, as the Gaelic font required manufacturing. In a response to the *Irishman and United Ireland* review, he rebuked critics for labelling the Gaelic font as 'Irish' letters and the Roman font as 'English' letters:

But why does the reviewer speak of these ordinary Roman characters as 'English letters'? Surely, they are no more 'English' than they are Welsh or French or Spanish. And as ours is a Celtic language, and as our Celtic kindred in Scotland, Wales and Brittany all use this same common Roman character, would not this fact itself be some reason for so writing and printing Irish?\(^9\)

In addition to the financial benefit from publishing Irish language texts, the Roman font's availability in the United States, Australia, Argentina, and countries with an Irish concentration would enable printing in Irish. Such reasoning clearly reveals Ó Flannnaile/Flannery's attitude: the Irish language is not restricted to Ireland, nor is it merely the key to ancient manuscripts, but a language that may thrive and prosper wherever the Irish congregate. Irish, for Flannery, is a living language, and this distinction separates him from the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language whose members strove to educate a generation of scholars in order that the finest of them might edit, translate, and reveal the manuscripts' linguistic treasures. Flannery contends:

The second reason why I consider the Latin characters preferable for work in Irish is that foreign names, foreign words, and quotations from foreign languages could be easily and conveniently used without giving a strange and grotesque appearance to the Irish text in which the [sic] occur. This I feel to be not so weighty as the first, but it has its weight. Living in the nineteenth century, and wishing to interchange nineteenth century ideas, we cannot be eternally talking about Flinn mac Cunhaill and Brian Bormhma. We must often speak of the outer world, and if the older characters are used, words and sentences from foreign
languages — which in many cases cannot be rendered by Irish letters — having to be written in Roman letters, would certainly give an oddly confused appearance to the whole. Of course this difficulty might be obviated by inventing and striking off eight new characters to be made after the analogy of some of the other Irish letters; but no one as yet seems to have proposed such an innovation as this."

Few familiar with the now canonical phrases from Patrick Pearse’s criticism will fail to recognize the similarity between Flannery’s writings and Pearse’s famous lines. Ruth Dudley Edwards’s biography Patrick Pearse: The Triumph of Failure testifies that Pearse won a copy of Flannery’s essays as a school prize and that he corresponded with him on occasion."

For O’Flannagain, there was a simple choice. Either the language must turn its back on the modern world and cannibalize its own literary produce from the fifth to the seventeenth centuries or it would serve as a conduit for thoughts and ideas conceived outside of Ireland and the Irish language creative dynamic. The latter approach accepts and anticipates the promise of potential gain and benefit, the acceptance of foreign ideas and fruitful practices which would accrue to the language from this outward attitude. Such an attitude would form the central thesis for Pearse’s argument opposing a native folklore model in favour of a European model in his infamous 1907 clash with Fr Richard Henebry, formerly Professor of Critic at the Catholic University of Washington, D.C. An ancillary benefit of the Roman font, according to Flannery, was that it licensed the use of italics, a facility lacking when the Gaelic font alone was employed. Flannery’s conclusion pinpoints the central argument concerning the font dispute that would dominate the Irish language debates throughout the Revival:

"Of course, if Irish is not merely to be written — if we are merely to be arraying ourselves in the plumage of our ancestors, if no more is sought than the publishing of our tales and old poems, or at most, the use of the language for an odd epigram, as the dead languages are used to this day — if this is all that men want, let them tell us so at once we shall understand them. To such, no doubt, the question of the writing or printing of Irish is simple enough. I am aware that many good Irishmen, lovers of Ireland’s living language, stand by the old characters because they are Irish because for some centuries at least they are exclusively our own. The love for things Irish — this respect for things national, is really so new and refreshing that it deserves all possible consideration, and to those of us who prefer the Irish characters on that ground, I pay the utmost deference. Yet, even on them I would respectfully urge — is not the Irish language more ancient and more national than the Irish character, and as the letters are not absolutely necessary to the writing of the language, might they not give way if they hinder the freer cultivation and prorogation of the Irish tongue?"

This distinction represents the first of many schisms within the Irish language movement. For Flannery, the language was not only a tool to be employed to argue Ireland’s distinctness from England, but a living language to be cultivated.

Thomas O’Neill Russell, who had earlier expressed concerns that forced innovations might damage the language movement, supported Flannery in the Roman font’s promotion. It was the learners’ plight that motivated him to champion the Roman font and lament that such ‘medieval views’ be expressed in the nineteenth-century:

"If we are really in earnest about the resuscitation of the National language, if we are not merely a lot of dilettantes — and I fear many of us are — we should try and make the acquisition of the language as simple an affair as possible, and I maintain that the use of the Roman, instead of the so-called Irish letter, would vastly simplify the task. [...] Italics cannot be used in the old letters. Printers charge more for setting up Irish type than for Roman, and are more liable to make mistakes in the former than the latter. [...] If we are to use the old letter simply because it is the one in which our ancient literature exists, why not also employ all the con-trat-ions (sic) which exist in those old manuscripts? Those who uphold the use of the old letter in Gaelic should, to be logical, also uphold the use of all the contractions which are to be found in all those manuscripts."

The concern for the learner marks a new departure for the Irish Language Revival where the beginner would receive precedence in all publishing and educational endeavours at the native speakers’ expense. A radical proposal relating to the font debate and concerning learners’ concerns came from Boston, Massachusetts. Seaghdh Ó Dálaigh, an Irish language instructor, who had recently edited a textbook Tilingual na Gaoidhlig for Irish learners, proposed that just as England had manipulated both the Irish language and characters in order to entice Catholics to Protestantism, Ireland was therefore justified not alone in using the Roman font to teach Irish, but also in the use of hieroglyphics to teach Irish to the Chinese in Eastern Asia."

Yet, in spite of Flannery’s stout defence of the Roman font, the publication of Irish material in Gaelic font persisted as standard policy in Irischeilbh na Gaoldhilge and regional newspapers. In a second foray, in April 1883, he concentrated on ‘Clann Coinchobhair’ protestations. This begins with a dismissal of the description of the Roman letters as ‘English’.
Let me, in the first place, protest against Clann Conchobháir's calling the ordinary Roman characters 'English' — a mistake made also by the reviewer whom I have already answered. To speak of the characters which are used by a dozen different nations in Europe, and by all the nations of America, from North to South, in the literature of the four chief languages spoken on that continent as 'English' in any way or under any condition, is certainly out of all reason, and looks like an attempt to create, or rather perpetuate, a foolish and groundless prejudice.

Similarly, the Gaelic letters are not 'native':

Neither can I allow your correspondent to speak of the Irish letters as our 'native,' characters. Let us say all we can within the bounds of fact for the Irish character, but Clann Conchobháir himself admits, both in his letter and elsewhere, that it was not really 'native', as was thought so long. It was common in early Christian ages all over the West of Europe: Christian Rome being the source whence the western nations all got it. After all other nations had discarded it for a newer and more convenient style of writing and printing, the Irish retained it; and so at this day it is 'Irish' only by survival. The name will do well enough, and it is pretty generally understood now throughout Europe; our alphabet certainly has more right to be called 'Irish' than any certain style of old character has to be called 'Old English' — a term which is allowed, and which is generally understood. But to speak of the Irish characters as being 'native' is misleading, and, like the mistake about the 'English' characters, only tends to confirm old prejudices.

The close of this debate came in April 1883 with a note from Irisaidh na Gaedhilge's editor, as follows: 'Our contributors are free to use their own judgement as to the characters in which they write Irish. — Editor G.J.'

Efforts at a compromise held little effect: an ideological split had arisen which further divided antiquarianist members of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language from the progressive-minded Revivalists who would later found the Gaelic League/Comradh na Gaeltithe in 1893. Ideological friction stemming from the font controversy appeared again in Irisaidh na Gaedhilge in April 1895:

The use of the Roman characters in printing Irish is becoming daily more prevalent, and has been adopted in a number of journals. We confest personally to a strong preference for the Irish characters — a preference based on a number of reasons, sentimental and practical. But we have no sympathy whatever with those who object in toto to Roman type, which is just as Irish as it is English, French, Italian or American. A language is made up not of strokes, curves, and dots, but of words, sounds and idioms... To our...
battleground of the Irish Language/Gaelic Revival and identified the issues which later ignite the passions of Patrick Pearse, Pádraig Ó Conaire, Peadar Ó Laoghaire, Pádraig Ó Duinnín, Richard Henebry, Norma Borthwick, Agnes Ní Fhliaranaghale, W.P. Ryan, Seosamh Mac Grianna, Stíamsa Ó Grianna ("Máire"), Liam Ó Ríon, etc — issues over which much ink and no little energy was to be consumed.

This controversy also questions our perception and portrayal of the Gaelic League/Comrádha na Gaeilge's ideology and its development as a cultural force in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Gaelic League did not definitively side with the Gaelic font over the Roman font in Írleabhar na Gaedhilge's learners' section, but adopted the Roman font because its primary objective was to promote and popularize the language as a spoken language. This aspiration required attracting as large a number of active members as possible and making the language accessible to them. For the Gaelic League the language itself, once mastered by sufficient numbers, would secure cultural (ultimately more important than political) independence. What were considered to be superficial and cosmetic matters such as font choice were dismissed only to retake centre stage with the Free State's foundation. With Fianna Fáil's ascension to power in 1932, the Gaelic font was, once again, pressed into service as a broader guard on the pages of Irish language texts, ensuring that all those who attempted to enter this distinct territory were aware that they were crossing into a distinct and different realm.

This essay contends, in summary, that the traditional depiction of the font debate as a marginal and inconsequential side-show is flawed. The perception of the font controversy resulting in 'a polarisation, with very little give in either side' fails to appreciate the ideological forces at play in this seemingly simple struggle, and the significance of the Gaelic League's realignment in the learners' section of Írleabhar na Gaedhilge. Critics and literary historians of the Irish Language Revival have ignored the Gaelic font controversy as a minor matter of trite importance in comparison with issues of dialects, grammar, anglicization, and literary forms. The font controversy produced, however, not alone the first serious ideological battle of the Irish Language Revival, but the central and definitive debate which set the agenda for all subsequent debates and set in motion an argument which may be seen as leading to Comrádha na Gaeltacht/Gaelic League's foundation in 1893. The existence of such a debate would suggest that Douglas Hyde's famous speech 'Or the Necessity for De-Anglicising the Irish People' in November 1892 was not the original call to arms, but arose within a particular context and was addressed to a certain audience within the Irish language movement who were dissatisfied with the agenda pursued by the Society for the Preservation of the Irish language and The Gaelic Union. The correspondence in Írleabhar na Gaedhilge's pages was not, as orthodox dicta, a marginal debate in the Irish Language Revival about whether to print Irish in the Roman or Gaelic font. It is the first key debate in the modern language revival, one which went to the heart of the Irish Language Revival and sets the agenda for future, and ongoing, debates.

NOTES
1. My thanks to Seo Nogent, Caoimhín Ó Tíomán, Michael Ó hOgain, and Nollaig Mac Conaill for reading various drafts of this paper and for their helpful comments.
4. Such a strategy of bringing Irish to prominence in public areas may be viewed as a continuation of the process described by Joep Leerssen in Hidden Ireland, Public Sphere (Galway: Arlen House, 2002).
5. See Dónal Ó Murchú, 'Tír Chóis Dhí an Fhírinne agus Feachtas na GCEartachta', Teicos — Eagraíocht Spáinniúla, 32-31 (October 1979), 5-10. My thanks to De Caoimhín Ó Tíomán for bringing this article to my attention.
9. Such an attitude is common in debate regarding spelling, grammar, sport, literary forms etc.
12. 'Beirt Fhor' (J.J. Donle) noted in the Irish language newspaper Miúinacha (13 January 1921) that the Gaelic Union's older scholars favoured the Gaelic font, but were opposed by younger scholars disposed towards the Roman. A compromise was eventually reached and Fowler's Gaelic font was employed for printing. Máirtín Ó Murchú's recent study of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language refers to the Society avoiding argument on the font issue, butickering over what type of Gaelic font to use before selecting the font used by the Royal Irish Academy. See Máirtín Ó Murchú, Cuimhne Fear Cadhlaíochta Gehaigh: Fuáil an Altnimhe (Baile Átha Cliath: Coimheataacht, 2001), p. 242. For an account of the font controversy in the USA, see Florence Ó Fhliaranagh (Michael Ó Luchtach Abhainn) As Gaeltacht (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clochmór Tis, 1993), pp. 88-96.
13. 'May the Irish Live/Survive' by 'Lochta Chaínne' appeared on page 11 of the first numbers of Írleabhar na Gaedhilge (1.1, p. 12) published on November 1892. The title indicates the anxiety of racial and cultural demise prevalent during the Revival. The poem exhibits the orthographic features of the time and tone endorsed by the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, namely the use of a hyphen to separate an eclipse for the initial letter. The text is also devoid of any stilt hada as a result of the decision to print it in the Roman font. A poem by Douglas Hyde in praise of Aedhachta na Gaedhilge/The Gaelic Union, the organization responsible for Írleabhar na Gaedhilge appears on pages 6-7, but in the Gaelic font. Flannery also published several Irish prose pieces in Roman font.
14. The Gaelic Gazette, cited in Iris na Gaidhilse, 1.4 (February 1883), p.136. It was customary for weekly newspapers to reprint articles from daily publications especially if the material pertained to an ongoing dispute between newspapers or correspondents. Iris na Gaidhilse frequently reprinted reports from English and Irish provincial papers.


17. The literary language as found in manuscripts and as promoted by the various scholarly groups throughout the nineteenth century, was common to both Ireland and Scotland. Any revival in fortunes therefore would impact on both countries. The Scots, however, adopted the Roman font for printing in the sixteenth century while the Irish persisted with the Gaelic font, thus causing difficulties for Scots attempting to read Irish language publications in the Gaelic font. Force ne air d’oimhneachd was the first book in the Irish language published in print. Force ne air d’oimhneachd’s printer, Robheid Lekneckh, employed the Roman font to print the book, and Scottish publishers followed his example when printing Gaelic since then. See Nicholas Williams, ‘I’Brànaich: Na Proctainn agus Pòs na Gàidheilte 1547-1724’ (Buile Átha Cliath: An Clachdhearnais Tha, 1980), pp. 13-20.


19. Editors of Gaelic League publications were abomirond by O’Neill Russell correspondence in the early years of the Revival, but were forced to placate him on the grounds that he was believed to be a wealthy businessman who might donate large amounts of cash to the fledging Gaelic League to promote the language.

20. Prior to the Gaelic League’s foundation in 1893 and their adoption and aggressive promotion of the three major dialects of spoken Irish, all efforts had focused on the seventeenth-century standard which was common to both Ireland and Scotland, hence any revival would be shared by both countries.

21. Tomás Ó Risiúil (Thomas O’Neill Russell), Iris na Gàidhilse, 5.7 (July 1883), p. 293. The orthographic irregularity of this quotation illustrates the Irish language’s unsolved nature at this period and suggests the contention that typesetters experienced great difficulty in setting material in the Gaelic script, and frequently erred in their work, thus increasing the likelihood of errors in material printed in the Gaelic font.

22. The translation is my own.

23. Dermot McGuinness suggests that O’Reilly’s dictionary was intended for both Irish and Scottish readers, hence the two fonts. See McGuinness, pp. 70-80. O’Reilly’s Irish-English dictionary was first published in 1872; a revised and expanded edition, edited by John O’Donovan, appeared in 1864.

24. Colm Chiche, Iris na Gaidhilse, 1.2 (December 1882), pp. 5-5.

25. See Ulrich J. Bourke, The Orphan Origins of the Gaelic Race and Language (London: Longmans Green, 1875). pp. 302-3. Bourke also refers to Lady Wicker’s (Speranza) review of Professor of Westwood’s book on this issue in 1869. Bourke initially argued that the Gaelic font was the only correct font for printing Irish language material, but later retracted and argued that the Gaelic font was only a modification of the Roman.

26. ‘Clann Choobhchaí’, Iris na Gaidhilse, 1.3 (January 1883), pp. 103-4.

27. Chichehad critiqued the Gaelic font’s visual aesthetics.

28. ‘Clann Choobhchaí’, Iris na Gaidhilse, 1.3 (January 1883), pp. 103-4.

29. Iris na Gaidhilse, 1.3 (January 1883), p. 103-4.

30. Irishman and Ulster, 13 January 1883, p. 103-4.


32. ‘Central Branch (Dublin),’ An Clachdhearnais Solus 1.30 (7 October 1899), p. 473. Such evidence is of interest as we know little of Mac Neill’s early attitude towards the font issue, and given his centrality in Irish language affairs during the early years his opinion would have carried weight. Castlhelm Nic Phudlach, in her important study of the Irish language newspaper Féinse an Lá, entitled Féinse an Lá a bhfuil an Clachdhearnais Solus (1848-1902) (Baili Átha Cliath: Cois Life Timeasanta, 1999) notes that Mac Neill refused to purchase the Gaelic fonts offered to the Gaelic League by the bankrupt Bernard Doyle, despite the acute shortage of Gaelic fonts and the Gaelic League’s intention to establish a printing press of its own.


41. ‘Correspondence’, Iris na Gaidhilse, 1.9 (July 1893), p. 292.

42. Iris na Gaidhilse, 6.1 (11 April 1895), p. 12.


44. Castlhelm Nic Phudlach, Féinse an Lá a bhfuil an Clachdhearnais Solus (1848-1902) p. 111.

45. Iris na Gaidhilse, 8.94 (February 1899), p. 167.

46. This list, which represents the standard line-up of Revival critics, is decidedly male, and occludes the valuable contribution, both as critic and author, of Norma Berthezine. Berthezine’s role was marginalized in the post-Revival period and is due a serious study that would re-evaluate her role and the role of the ‘New Woman’ in the Irish Language Revival.
