Barra Ó Donnabháin Symposium:
Where Did You Get Your Irish?

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“Where did you get your Irish?” This question is often put to me when I’m in Ireland and it’s found out that I’m an American. Because I’m able to converse comfortably in Irish and I look Irish, it’s assumed that I’m from Ireland.

I’m not Irish-born. I’m an American who was born and raised in New York City, but I’m a Gael to my very marrow. It’s no wonder that I look Irish because my parents were from West Limerick in Ireland, my mother from Athea and my father from Newcastle West. Although they had no Irish, they had the cúpla focal (couple of words) and their English had a very strong trace of Irish in it. The rhythm of their speech and the construction of their sentences were very Irish. That may be gone out of spoken English in Ireland today, but in their generation it was very common.

I heard those cúpla focal every day of my life when I was a girl. The small words my mother would use around the house, especially in the kitchen: “Be more féitbhuidiúil (generous) with the butter,” or sometimes, “Don’t be so féitbhuidiúil with the butter,” Tansán (a good amount); thomhaisín (a small amount); bráilíní (sheets); smdíriní (smithereens); and bínseach (foolish woman/girl), as my mother had four girls. This was also evident in the affectionate names they had for us: a stór, a chraí, a chuisle. Alana was the pet name given to me.1 The adage in Irish my mother recited in the sing-song manner of a nursery rhyme: “Nil aon tinteán mar do thinteán féin?” (“There’s no hearth like your own hearth”). In a way, I’m able to say that I have Irish from the cradle, or at least a few words of it. But really, where did I get my Irish?

Irish people are always a bit surprised when I tell them that I got my Irish right here in New York. Irish isn’t new to this country, of course; it’s been heard here from the time the first Irishman landed and there have been Irish language movements in New York for generations.

When my children were young, I decided to escape from the house one a night a week by going to an adult education class at a local college. It happened that there was a course in beginning Irish being offered. The teacher was Jerry Dunbar. Although born in Michigan, Jerry was raised in Belfast where, at Holy Family School, he got his Irish from the Brothers. “Canas atá tú?” (“How are you,” in Munster dialect) Brother Burgess, a Corkonian, would greet him with. “Cén chaoi bhfuil tú?” (“How are you,” in Connacht dialect) another brother would say. When Jerry asked his teacher which of these was correct, his teacher said, “Cad é mar atá tú?” (“How are you,” in Ulster dialect).2 In spite of the confusion, Jerry fell in love with the language and kept up with it after he left school. He found an old Irish book when he came here to America and would read it when he had a break from work.

With Progress in Irish in my hand,3 I started learning the language of my people with Jerry as my teacher. I had a few advantages over the other students in the class. The first was that I knew the language existed. I knew that I wouldn’t be learning to speak English “with a brogue,” as one woman said to me. Because of the strong trace of Irish in my parents’ speech, the sentence structure and the idioms were not at all strange to me. I had heard them in English every day of my life. All the same, I found it very difficult to speak with only

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1 All three are common terms of endearment.
2 From a leacht (child).
3 Irish has three major dialects which are commonly referred to in terms of the province in which they are spoken.
4 Máireád Ní Ghráda, Progress in Irish: A Graded Course for Beginners and Revision (Belfast: The Educational Company of Ireland,1980).

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Jerry often mentioned Irish language weekends he attended at Deer Hill in Wappingers Falls, New York. He used to say about the weekends, “It’s not like real life at all.” Although intrigued, I had no intention of attending any of these weekends as I had plenty to do at home. But another woman in the class asked me to accompany her and off we went.

I was amazed when, for the first time ever, I heard people speaking Irish fluently and naturally, enjoying themselves immensely by being together and talking away. My sister, Pat Collum, and her friend, Liam Guidry, were at that first weekend, too. The three of us stuck together like glue and stayed out of the way of the native speakers lest someone would address us and we wouldn’t know how to answer. This shared traumatic experience left us as fast friends from then on. I would make many lasting friendships at that first fateful weekend. I met people who put me on the right road to learning the language with great patience and kindness, through friendship and cooperation.

I met Ethel Brogan for the first time that weekend. Ethel got her Irish in Armagh City, where she was born and raised. She said that, at that time, the people in Armagh were strongly identified as either Catholic or Protestant. The two cultures co-existed uneasily and the distinctions were made. Therefore, Ethel thought it important to be aware of, and to promote, her own rich heritage. She and her brother, John Mathews, and their cousins attended Irish classes at Conradh na Gaeilge regularly. There they met Father John Quinn, or Wee Father John, as he was called. Father Quinn understood that the Irish language was an integral part of the children’s heritage and that it would be the youngsters who would keep the language alive. He encouraged them in every possible way. If only Wee Father John knew just how intently young Ethel was listening!

When Ethel came to this country she became an active member of the Gaelic League in St. Matthew’s Parish on West 67th Street in Manhattan. It was a lively group of young people, according to Ethel, young people who had great pride in their heritage and who knew how to have fun as well. In addition to the study of Irish, there were all sorts of social activities to enjoy: horseback riding in Central Park, boating, dancing, and picnics. It was here that Ethel met with Bill Brogan, a first generation Irish-American. Ethel and Bill married and had a family. After a while they moved their young family to Fishkill in New York’s Dutchess County where Ethel kept up with her Irish by offering classes to adults. These young Irish Americans were very interested in the language and the class enrolment steadily increased.

Ethel noticed that the students had one particular difficulty with learning Irish: they had no one to speak to on a day-to-day basis, no chance to practice. It was then that she decided that her students needed the opportunity to be in an environment where only Irish would be heard and used. She arranged to spend a weekend with a small group of her students at Blue Mountain in Saugerties, New York.

Blue Mountain is a very rustic state-owned camp near the Catskill Mountains, about 115 miles north of New York City. There were no phones, televisions, radios, or children to distract the attendees. They did their own cooking and catering and everything was done through Irish to the best of their ability. As Jerry said, it was another world. That was the beginning of the movement which would become Conradh na Gaeilge (Students of Irish).

That first weekend was such a success that it was followed by others. After a while, Ethel had to find a larger facility because of the demand for these Irish weekends. She found a rambling old house in Deer Hill, New York, which was rented out for retreats, seminars, and so on. It was at Deer Hill that I first attended an immersion weekend. I enjoyed it immensely. Joe McCloskey, an American, was my first teacher. Joe is a quiet man with a dry wit and a great love of the language. When I heard this American speaking Irish so comfortably I thought perhaps it was do-able after all — perhaps not easily done, but do-able. I decided I’d give it a try. It wasn’t easy initially; but, when I started to become discouraged or distracted, there was another weekend on the schedule and I’d come home from it encouraged again.

The teachers at these weekends were indeed special. Because each teacher had his or her own approach, classes were varied and interesting. Greg Brennan, another American, had beautiful, fluent Irish. Greg got his Irish when he spent a summer working on the fishing boats in Carraroe, Co. Galway. Greg had no interest in grammar or the mechanics of the language. He was, however, a wonderful teacher — lively, funny, helpful — who emphasized role playing and

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Footnotes:
1. Conradh na Gaeilge is the Irish for ‘The Gaelic League,’ an organization founded on July 31, 1893 by Douglas Hyde. Its purpose is to keep Irish spoken in Ireland.
conversation in his classes. We had so much fun we hardly realized how much we were learning with him. (By the way, Greg now writes for TG4 from his home in Connemara. He married a native Irish speaker and they have a large, young family whose first language is Irish.)

I met Junior McKinney at Deer Hill as well. Junior is a proud native of Derry City. A product of the Seán Dolan Branch of Conradh na Gaeilge, Junior attended Coláiste Ild each (Ulster College) in Gortahurk, Co. Donegal, during summers when he was young. When I met Junior I was all over the place trying to learn Irish. He advised me to keep it simple. He said if I learned the past, present, and future tenses, I'd be able to converse fairly well. I did as he suggested and developed a foundation on which to build my skills. He didn't want to hear about our books, our grammar lessons. He just wanted us to talk to him, and when Junior wants you to talk to him, you talk to him. He advised us to say as much of the sentence as we could in Irish. If we hadn't the Irish word, he advised us to use an English one and he supplied the one we were lacking. With his coaching, the timidity left me and I felt comfortable enough to venture into conversations, simple as they were. Junior's generosity with his time, his knowledge, and his gifts of books was, and is, a huge help to me.

In a way, I also got my Irish from the renowned author Máirtín Ó Cadhain when I met with Joe Bray at those Irish weekends. Joe was a native of Limerick City and got his Irish in the “Gaeltacht” as he called it, that is, the prison located at the Curragh in Kildare. Joe was there as a guest of Éamon de Valera because of his activities after the Civil War in Ireland. Joe and his fellow prisoners had Máirtín Ó Cadhain for a teacher. A strong-minded sincere man, Joe never forgot those days or the Irish he learned. He, too, was very generous with me, putting me on the road to fluency. Joe advised me to concentrate on Munster Irish, the dialect of my own people, and above all else to avoid the deadly sin of Béarlachas (Anglicism) like the plague: never, ever translate word for word from one language to the other. Initially I didn't understand what he meant, but as I came along a bit, I could see what he meant by appreciating the beauty of each language's particular idiom. Among the many books that Joe so generously gave me is the notebook he kept while learning Irish in the Curragh. Among many other things, it contains Brian Merriman's “The Midnight Court” in Joe’s own hand. Joe could and would recite verses of the poem by heart to us at the drop of a hat.

I also picked up a few words right here in Glucksman Ireland House with a fellow by the name of Pádraig Ó Cearnúil. As you know, Pádraig is a native Irish speaker from Gaith Dobhair, Co. Donegal. He emphasizes the spoken language as well, though we also read many of the Ulster classics in his classes.

Last but by no means least is my beloved friend, Barry Donovan. Wasn’t I fortunate when I was invited to take part in classes being held in Barra’s home? Barra’s friend, Pádraig Ó Tuairisc, a native speaker from Arán in Co. Galway, was the teacher. Barra was a big-hearted, open-minded man with a wicked sense of fun. There was no end to his stories or to the stories I can tell of the friendship we shared. Once Barra realized I was serious about learning Irish, he couldn’t do enough for me. The books he gave me are a great help to me but his friendship was invaluable to me. His early death is a huge loss to us all.

So — where did I get my Irish?

Well, I got my Irish right here in New York City for the most part. And I got it in some instances from people I never met. The language came down to me through the generations: from Wee Father John through Ethel Brogan; from Coláiste Ild each through Junior McKinney; from Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s lessons in the prison camp through Joe Bray; from the fisherman in Galway through Greg Brennan; from University College Cork through Barra Ó Donnabháin; and through our many happy adventures together. I have a tremendous respect for the beauty of the language and the kindness of those people who so generously helped me to learn it.

According to Brian Ó Conchúir at the University of Notre Dame, any place in which people are gathered together speaking Irish is a Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking area). I’m very honored to be a part of this symposium honoring my friend, Barra Ó Donnabháin, and I’m certain that the Irish spoken in this Gaeltacht here today would delight him.