Barra Ó Donnabháin Symposium:

Me and the Irish Language

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It's a wonder to me that I have been learning Irish getting on nearly thirty years now. When I was younger, I was interested in different types of music. I happened to be at the annual Old Fiddlers Picnic, which used to be held in Lenape Park in West Chester, Pennsylvania. As I was wandering about listening to small gatherings of musicians playing here and there, I happened to hear the uilleann pipes being played. Drawn to the music, I soon met the piper Thomas Standeven, may God be good to him. He died five years ago.\footnote{Thomas Standeven (1931-2002) was the first person born outside of Ireland to win the Eamonn Kennedy Award for Senior Uilleann Piping at the 1969 Oireachtas. For a tribute to Standeven by one of his students, Seamus Taylor, see http://blastfromthepastrocketry.net/TStandevenObit.htm (accessed 15 July 2008).} It wasn't long before I was learning traditional Irish music from Tom on the tin whistle. He was the one who encouraged me to learn the Irish language to better understand the music, especially the slow airs. An Irish language class was to start shortly thereafter and I was in it.

It was a series of classes once a week that lasted ten or twelve weeks in the fall and again in the spring. This lasted about a year and a half until the teacher gave it up and, around the same time, Tom, who was a fluent Irish speaker, moved to Washington State in northwestern USA. I was stranded. But then, a young man who learned his Irish from Tom started an Irish class at his home in the center city of Philadelphia. In the beginning there were six or seven in the class, but after a few months, as often happens in Irish classes here, attendance declined and I was the only one left. I attended this class for two years.

The instructor used to give out copies of pages from a grammar book, as he was of the opinion that all one had to do was learn the grammar and then you had the language (I hope he doesn't still think this!). I thought this was unnatural. I didn't succeed in learning Irish grammar through the English language, alas, and in the end he declared me a bad student. I must admit, though, I did learn words and phrases over three and a half years between the three ten-week courses and the two years with my man in center city but I still could not speak the language. Then, the president of the Gaelic League, the singer Albert Fry, came to Philadelphia and this changed the course of my life.

The Irish American Cultural Institute used to bring people from Ireland on lecture tours, such as musicians, poets, singers, and so on, and they would go from city to city with their presentation.\footnote{This was the Irish Fortnight (forerunner of the Irish Perceptions Series), a program of the Irish American Cultural Institute, http://www.iaci-usa.org/} I heard Albert's mini-concert and there was a small party afterwards. I spoke to him about learning Irish and he had one question for me: was the class that I attended conducted through the use of the English or the Irish language? When I told him it was all in English, he said that I hadn't a chance of learning Irish while listening to English all the time. He invited me to come and stay with him in Belfast for a while. He was surprised when he received a letter from the crazy Yank. He didn't think he would ever hear from me at all. Before I went over to Belfast, I thought that he would send me to the Gaeltacht to stay with a farmer there, to work with him on the farm and learn Irish at the same time. Boy, was I mistaken! That's not what Albert had in mind at all. I learned later that there were few farmers to be found in the Gaeltacht, as that was the worst land in the country.

Anyway, I arranged with Albert Fry to come to Belfast and I was off in search of Irish. It was the summer of 1980. When my uncle picked me up at Shannon Airport, he wondered why I brought a bicycle with me. I was thinking that it would be useful in the
Gaeltacht where there wouldn’t be any local transportation system or even many vehicles. Wasn’t I the foolish one?
I called Albert from Galway to tell him I would be coming into Belfast on the bus the next day at a certain time and he said he would be there to meet me that afternoon. Early next morning, off I go to Galway city, five mile away and me on my bike, a backpack on me, on a lovely sunny day, and they wouldn’t let me on the bus on the excuse that there wasn’t enough room in the luggage compartment (and there was, as the bus wasn’t half full, and I watching the luggage going in). There was nothing to do, but go on the train to Dublin. From there, I was on my bike again, through the city center with my backpack on my back, to the other train station to get the next train to Belfast.

I reached Belfast around 5 pm, and of course Albert was already back at home when the Yank didn’t arrive on the bus. So now, here I am in the center of Belfast, near the height of “The Troubles,” asking where was the Falls Road? I may have been ignorant, but I wasn’t foolish. I got directions from an old couple, and away with me up the Falls, trying my best to avoid the dangers of Belfast, i.e. the holes in the road (thanks to the Troubles), the black taxis that give ‘not an inch’ to anyone, and the rough young punks of the big city throwing stones at me as I went by. Welcome to Belfast! But I was on a pilgrimage and I wasn’t going to let them distract me from my mission. Cycling along, I went by the hospital, the park, the house, thanks be to God. After settling in and getting a bite to eat, we went down to the Cumann Chluain Ard that night. This is an Irish club where speaking English is forbidden. Albert took me behind the bar and the lessons in speaking Irish began. First, I had to learn how to draw a pint of Guinness, and then how to make change, all in Irish of course. I already knew how to clean up. From that time on, until I left Belfast, I was the object of ridicule, teasing, fun, and the butt of all jokes. Did you hear what the Yank did last night? And if this happened once, it happened a hundred times. I was asked a question and, in starting to answer, I had only three words spoken when Albert stopped me to correct me. Starting again with at least three words correct, I had two or three more words added to the answer (if I was that lucky), when Albert stopped me to correct me again. And again after that. And not only corrections, but teasing, as well. This provided great fun to the others there, but it annoyed me greatly. Not only did I not have enough Irish to hold up my part of the conversation, but I didn’t have enough to defend myself from frequent verbal attack. I knew that Albert was only trying to help me and that I had to have patience and put up with the teasing. This was the way it was nearly every night in the Cumann for the four months I spent in Belfast that year. Albert, may God grant him a long life, is on the pension for a number of years now. But back then, when he was working every day, I would be cleaning up around the house, putting things in order (a real bachelor, Albert), doing the laundry, etc. Young lads from the Cumann would come around to visit me often and I’d be making tea and something to eat for us and learning at the same time, just listening to them speaking Irish and trying to have a part in the conversation.

Poor Albert! “My heart is broken trying to teach you Irish,” he would say to me frequently. I remember once, when he caught me reading (or trying to read) a beginner’s Irish book, he took it from me because he didn’t want me reading until I had a speaking ability first. And, of course, I wanted both speaking and reading ability right then. One day it happened to be raining heavily — no wonder that, I was in Ireland — and the drain pipe was stopped up with the remnants of a bird’s nest. This could be seen from a window upstairs. And the rain was overflowing from the rain gutter and pouring down onto the window of the sitting room. When Albert mentioned this to me later on, I told him I knew why this was because there was a NED (rhymes with TED) on the roof. He didn’t understand what I was talking about because I didn’t have the
correct pronunciation of the word “NEAD” (the ‘n’ sounds like the ‘ng’ in running and then ‘ead’ sounds like ‘yadd’, therefore ‘ng-yadd’). I took him upstairs with me to show him the nest blocking the pipe and him asking me, “Who is this guy NED? And what’s he doing up on the roof?” He knew right away that I was reading again. And up to this day he recalls this story as an example that one should learn to speak the language first, before learning reading and writing. That was another point of ridicule, as if they didn’t have enough already!

I didn’t think that I had enough time to learn as much as I wanted to. I knew the time would come when I would have to leave, either when the money was spent or Albert was tired of me. But I must say that Albert was very patient to put up with me for all that time.

On the day I was leaving Belfast, Albert encouraged me to start teaching a beginners’ class as soon as I got home or I would lose whatever Irish I had, just as fast as I had learned it. That’s what I did. Also, a short while before this, Albert made a tape for me that has been a great help to me since then. He read the first chapter of one of the Irish books that I had bought. I listened to that tape every day for more than a year even though I didn’t understand much of it at all in the beginning. But as the proverb says, “Gradually the castles are built.” After putting in a lot of time and work, between listening, reading, and searching for words in the dictionary, I understood it in the end. After that year I had almost the whole chapter memorized.

Shortly after getting home I started a beginners’ Irish class three nights a week. It was based on the method in use in the Cumann, that is, not using any English at all. First there is an hour of class, then a half hour of tea time, and then another half hour of class again. I had seven or eight in the class. At first, I let them speak English during tea time only, but I was putting Irish on everything as it came up in conversation. Then they were required to use that Irish instead of the English from then on. Among the people in the class was one man who spoke German, one woman who spoke French, and another woman who spoke both German and French, as well. Since only English was forbidden at tea time, the second woman would speak German with the man and French with the other woman. After a while they were putting Irish language words in their German and French conversations as they were forgetting the words that they used to have in the other languages. I was getting the upper hand. I was constantly pushing them to use whatever Irish they had, to think in Irish, to be speaking to themselves in Irish. One of the women in the class baptized the classes “Kamikaze Irish.”

This lasted nine months until I went back to Belfast to spend three more months among Irish speakers. During those three months I took advantage of an opportunity that arose to spend three weeks in the Gaeltacht with the Irish language club of the New University of Ulster at Coleraine. Every year they go to the Gaeltacht to improve their Irish and that year they went to Rannafast, near Annagary in Co. Donegal. We used to have one of the well known townsfolk come in every day to talk about life in the area when he was young, about the weather, and a wide range of subjects.

I went back home about November and back to teaching Irish classes again. This continued until September of the following year, 1982, when I went back to Ireland to have another drink from the well. What I had in mind was to get lodgings in Rannafast for about six months or so. First I went to Belfast to seek advice from the Master about the best place to search for lodgings. He said that he thought that the townsfolk would think that the houses would be too cold for a Yank who was used to lots of heat in the house during the winter. Then he offered the use of the schoolmaster’s house until the Germans came back in the spring. This was an old house that the Cumann used to own for many years, but had done nothing with and let it decline. A group of Germans bought it from the Cumann to settle down in the Gaeltacht, but first they were to go home to Germany to get their things together, settle all their accounts, and then return the following spring. I accepted the offer. The house was in bad shape, but it did have an old cast iron stove with which I could have heat and do cooking and, with pots full of water always on top of it, I had hot water almost all the time (as long as there was a fire on, anyway). It all worked out fine until the Germans came back in the spring and then I got another place to stay at the other end of town, where I spent three more months. As far as learning the Irish language goes, spending a long time in the Gaeltacht was a great help to me. What I did the most was go visiting with the townsfolk both day and night, listening and writing down notes, and an odd time spent in the pubs. I came back to the States.
in August of 1983 and right back to teaching Irish classes.

From then until now, I’m still learning. I have some Irish language every day in my life, either listening to CD’s or reading some, even if it’s only one or two pages. The more often we hear Irish, the faster we will learn it. As those of us who were born and raised with English, we heard it every day of our lives. Though we didn’t understand it as infants, over time we understood it, and started to speak it and could speak it when we went to school. There we learned to read and write it, and then the grammar was explained to us. The grammar is already in the language in how it is spoken. So, too, with Irish.

Of course it is understood that there is other work to do in learning another language; for example, getting to know and knowing how to use the dictionary and to use it often. But above all else, the thing I most encourage people who come to me for help in learning Irish is to hear it every day. It makes no difference what they’re hearing, whether a story being told or songs being sung, on tape or CD or on the radio or computer, but to hear it and to listen attentively. And have no fear, we will surely make mistakes. If we’re not making errors, we’re not learning. I remember a big mistake I made in Belfast. I was not very long there at the time. A friend of mine and I were in his house watching a Gaelic football game on the television. One of the players made a big error and I said to my friend in Irish, “Look at that. He made a bollix of that.” Everyone in the room went quiet and they were all staring at me. His mother says to me, “We don’t use words like that in this house.” I was embarrassed even though I didn’t think I’d said anything out of line. I was surprised that she knew the Irish language! Well, of course, she didn’t. After we left the house, my buddy explained things to me. I had never heard the word ‘bollix’ before in English, but I had surely heard it a lot in Irish since I arrived in Belfast! I understood it to mean a big mistake. Apparently it has many meanings!

Now, as I approach the end of my story, I have to say that I have really enjoyed the time spent learning Irish and all the people I’ve met over the years. As a word of encouragement to those who are still learning Irish, and to those who are teaching it as well, keep the faith. Don’t lose hope. For, if the likes of myself can learn it, no one else will have any problem.