

# Ballymoney surgeon highlights benefits of Irish language

## Language: Local and Global

BY DR. JOHN ROBB

**IT is more than ten years since I gave a lift to two young people on the road between Galway and Clifden. They told me they came from the island of Lettermore.**

As children they had spoken Irish at home as they had no English. Whenever they had travelled with their mother to Galway to shop, they were conscious of being perceived as 'backward' because they spoke Irish rather than English!

In other words the process of colonisation was on the verge of completion. Little wonder that David Hammond, in a personal communication in the 1970s, suggested that "language is an expression of power."

We have come a long way in the short span of years since that young couple went to school in Lettermore.

In the course of only two decades many negative attitudes which were once commonplace with regard to the Irish language have been turned round and there is now a mood of cautious optimism for its revival.

No longer is it either 'quaint' to be learning it nor 'backward' to be speaking it. Less and less is it associated with perjorative political overtones and signals. Once identified with poverty, its revival is now bringing new richness to the lives and economy of those who have it as well as to those who are seeking to acquire it.

Thomas Davis, the Famine and the Language:

In 1995 Irish people commemorated the life of Thomas Davis who died in the advent of the great famine:

"A Nation should guard its language more than its

territories -  
'tis a surer barrier, and a  
more important frontier,  
fortress or river"

In pre-famine Ireland of the early 1840s, over half of the people living west of a line drawn between Derry and Waterford would have spoken Irish in everyday life.

A year after his death, the Famine was to take thousands of native Irish speakers to their grave, to the workhouse and to the emigrant ship, so making the decline in spoken Irish all the more poignant in the memory of those whose forbears would have spoken it.

There is bound to have been a feeling of guilt among those who survived who one way or another and regardless of background, survived because whatever food, shelter and care had been available had not been sufficiently shared with those who were taken.

The blind eye, even if the stomach was only half-full, must surely have been a potent source of guilt. We who are the descendents of survivors, have it in our power, however, to give back to Ireland what the destitute took with them, their native language, and through such restitution to create a fitting memorial to them.

Effect of Imperialism and Colonialism - Reaction and Revival:

In the imperial order of things empires were held together by controlling language, were it Portuguese, Spanish, French or English; the languages of the powerless people were designated as un-useful or backward; their customs were often derided and the people deemed to be in need of a colonising civilisation

'superior' to their own.

Late into the last century a school child in Brittany had clogs hung round its neck if it was heard speaking Breton. In Ireland those who spoke Irish had the tally rod hung round their necks. Following the Education Act of 1870, children in Wales had the infamous "Welsh Not" bord hung round their necks if they were caught speaking in their native tongue.

Then in 1872 came the founding of the University of Aberystwith which gave the Welsh Language a new lease of life; in 1886 the Crofter's Act gave the Highlands and islands of Scotland legal protection against Clearance and in 1893 the Gaelic Revival began in Ireland.

Responding to the question: why learn a language spoken at present in every day life by so few people?

In a book written for the invasion, in 1987 into North Antrim, by the 'Viking Surgeons' - surgeons working in degrees of isolation on islands, in isolated communities, and in Ballymoney - a response was given to the question as to why we should re-capture our ancient Celtic languages and heritage.

"Without our ancient language, part of us is missing. The meaning of the place names, the understanding of the old stories, the feeling for how our ancestors would have looked at the world, completeness in our pride of place, all are impaired and we are left with an impoverished awareness of ourselves as a result.

Had the ancient Celtic/Gaelic language of Ireland or Celtic/Gallic

language of Scotland been lost we would have lost connection with our remote past, the key to why we look at the world the way we do, a key to help us to know better why we feel as we do about life where we live.

On the other hand, with our ancient language restored to us, the very rocks come alive through their descriptive names. The old stories light up with new dimensions in their telling. Failure - or disinclination to speak the Queen's English, can be perceived in a fresh light.

Our distinctive Irish Language is a repository of the values, interpretations, ways of looking at things, the means of storing in a unique manner the heritage of our

people.

Minority languages are particularly precious at this time if we are to preserve the diversity on which human, biological, psychological and social good health and ultimate survival are so dependent.

Acknowledgement of this challenge and determination to do something about it has never been so necessary as it is today.

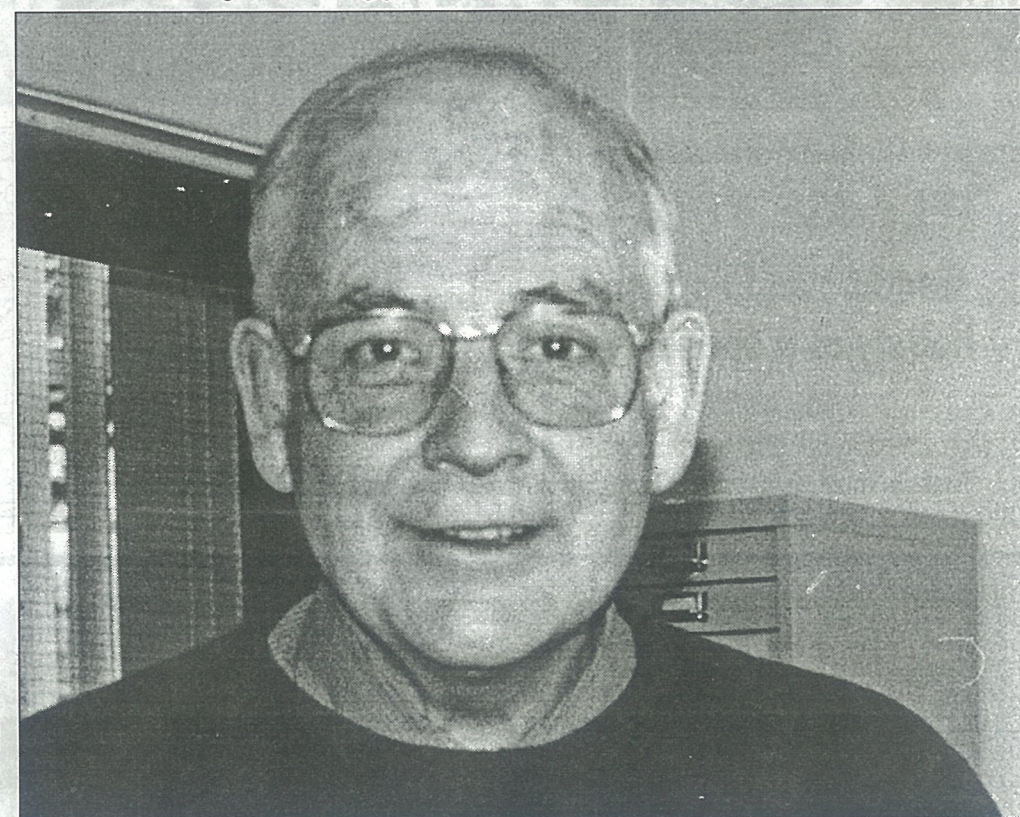
The right of people to be different-so glibly affirmed - should underpin the need of people to preserve and to use the means of communicating the colour and nuances of life which are unique to them.

In face of the contemporary challenge of nuclearism, gigantism and centralism, the

potential of language and the images invoked by it provide us with a powerful weapon with which to diminish the arrogance of others who might seek to control us through the imposition of alien values communicated exclusively in 'global' language.

In writing to the Soviet leaders in the early 1970s, Alexander Solzhenitsyn was right in his statement that "the centralisation of all forms of life of the mind is a monstrosity amounting to spiritual murder."

It is not a question of local language or global language, rather it is the need to have both - in our case, both the Gaelic of Ireland as well as the English of the global village.



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