

Decline of the Irish language

Irish language had been declining all through the 19th century, and Irish speakers mainly lived in remote areas around the coast. Most users were elderly.

Why did English replace Irish?

English was the language of power, used by landlords, police, courts. Only Davitt among the political leaders could speak Irish.

Only Irish books were expensive and in ancient Irish. Difficult to learn Irish.

Irish was associated with poverty and ignorance.

English was needed because of high possibility of emigration.

Rediscovering old Irish literature, making new literature

No one knew about the richness of Irish literature - 3rd oldest written language in Europe.

European scholars began to come to Ireland to study the old manuscripts, and Irish scholars followed.

The Bardic History of Ireland was published – written in English, told old Irish myths.

Irish people read these stories for the first time and realised the richness of Ireland's history and culture.

Scholars began to take an interest in Irish folklore – Douglas Hyde went around Ireland, writing down stories and poems that people told him. He published them.

Saving Irish

This new interest in Irish prompted a desire to stop the language from dying out.

Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language was set up.

Michael Cusack and several prominent IRB men were members.

It published the Gaelic Journal and a First Irish Book and tried to get Irish included in the new Intermediate Examination in 1878, but failed.

It fell apart as a result of internal quarrels.

National Literary Society was set up by an old Fenian (John O'Leary), Douglas Hyde, W.B. Yeats and others. Its aim was to publicise the literature of Ireland.

Hyde challenged the Society in a speech – an Italian had said that Ireland was not a nation as it had lost its language and culture.

People took up the challenge – Eoin MacNeill and Hyde founded the Gaelic League.

The Gaelic League

It planned to reverse the anglicisation of Ireland.

Encourage Irish people to take pride in their language and culture.

Stop decline of Irish and restore it as a spoken language.

Publish books, newspapers etc in modern Irish.

Progress of the League:

Slow at first, but sped up when Simple Lessons in Irish was published (easier to learn).

League spread rapidly – 43 to 600 clubs in 7 years (by 1904).

Creating modern Irish literature – An Claidheamh Soluis had articles, poems etc. It published books and encouraged new writers. It was something to read in Irish.

Social aspect.

Dancing and singing classes (feiseanna and céilidhe).

Annual festival of culture – 'An tOireachtas'.

Summer courses in Gaeltacht areas.

It attracted young people as men and women couldn't meet otherwise.

Campaigning for Irish:

Got the Post Office to accept letters addressed in Irish.

Got the law changed so shops could have Irish names.

Got the new National University to make Irish compulsory for admission.

It started off not being nationalist – branches everywhere, both unionists and nationalists, both Catholics and Protestants. But then:

Unionists believed it undermined the union between Britain and Ireland because it stressed their differences.

Nationalists believed that a republic was necessary to save Irish culture and language.

This change suited the IRB, who took it over and made it republican.

This upset Hyde – he wanted it to be neutral, a bridge between enemies. He resigned.

Many of the leaders who fought for Irish independence developed their republican idealism there.

