

Gaeltacht

On January 1, 2007 Irish Gaelic became the twenty-first official language of the European Union. With the many local Irish organizations in America sponsoring Irish language classes, the news from the EU projected an optimistic future for Ireland's native tongue, news much welcomed by supporters of the language who hope to expand the use of Irish. However, as the year closed, a government report on the state of Irish Gaelic in the Gaeltacht presented a picture of the decline in the use of Irish in the heart of the Irish-speaking area of Ireland, An Ghaeltacht.

"Gaeltacht" is an Irish word for an Irish-speaking region. The boundaries of the Gaeltacht were drawn by the new Irish Free State in 1925. These Gaeltacht areas are located along Ireland's western coast in counties Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Kerry and Cork. Small areas in Waterford and Meath are also recognized as Gaeltacht. Some of the familiar towns and villages of the Gaeltacht are Spiddal, Dingle, Ballyvourney, Gortahork, Aughleam, and Rossaveel. Many of the early leaders of the new Irish government were driven by a strong nationalistic fervor for all things Irish, language being a principal cause. Eoin Mac Neill, founder of the Gaelic League, was Ireland's first Minister of Education who used his position to promote an Irish Ireland policy. Douglas Hyde, Ireland's first president, and Eamon De Valera, always close to power even when not in power, were fierce language advocates. In fact De Valera once said that if he had a choice between a free and English-speaking Ireland and an English-governed but Irish-speaking Ireland, he would elect an Irish-speaking Ireland. Would not an Irish-speaking Ireland be ultimately an independent Ireland?

That Ireland has identifiable areas where its native language is concentrated is resounding evidence of the cultural devastation which the Irish language suffered under English rule. In the early sixteenth century, the population of Ireland was almost universally Irish speaking. But the cultural heritage of Ireland was put under siege by the Tudor and Stuart conquests and plantations (1534-1610), by the Cromwellian settlement (1654), the Williamite war (1689-1691), and the Penal Laws (1695). With English as the language of government and commerce, Gaelic Irish became identified as the language of the rural folk and was associated with poverty and social disadvantage. Other factors which contributed to the decline of the number of Irish speakers were the Great Famine with its effect on the emigration of many Irish speakers and the exclusion of the language from the national school curriculum. Indeed, students were punished and victimized for speaking their native language. From 100% fluency in Irish in the early sixteenth century, that percentage declined to 45% by the middle eighteenth

century and to 30% in the mid-nineteenth century. As Irish nationalism revived in the late nineteenth century owing in no small part to the Gaelic League (established in 1893), the threatened loss of Ireland's native language became a topic of great concern. Language advocates had some notable successes: In 1900, Irish was an optional course in the British national school system. In 1906, Irish became the language of instruction in Gaeltacht schools. In 1913, fluency in Irish Gaelic was made compulsory for entrance to the National University of Ireland. Those successes, unfortunately, were paralleled by 1911 census data which showed a decline in Irish speakers in Connacht from 44.6% in 1881 to 31.9% and in Munster from 33.5% in 1881 to 20.4%. The Irish language was in steady decline: Would the new Irish Free State be able to stop the decline of Ireland's native tongue as the first language of its people?

Maps showing the area of the Gaeltacht in 1926 at the birth of the Irish State and thirty years later in 1956 show a significant reduction in size of those areas recognized as Irish-speaking areas. The new government had tried zealously to expand the use of Irish throughout the land. In many areas school curricula embraced Irish as the language of instruction, but often parents of school children complained about the inferiority of instruction in the all-Irish schools. Civil service examinations required fluency in Irish, but in the 1960's governments were able to soften that requirement without paying a price at the polls. Feedback from emigrants who fled Ireland for work in English-speaking countries underscored the value of English over Irish. With little popular support for an Irish Ireland, Irish governments shifted focus to the Gaeltacht. In 1956 the Department of the Gaeltacht was formed with its brief, the preservation of the Gaeltacht. To address the economic decline of the areas, the Department promoted an industrialization scheme for the Gaeltacht. Industrial Estates were built, banks were established and tax incentives were promoted to attract industries and jobs. The scheme worked in so far as the Gaeltacht population rose, but most of the new residents were not Irish speakers. The Department's duty of "preservation and extension of the Irish as a vernacular language in the Gaeltacht" was overwhelmed by the good news of a strengthening economy in the Gaeltacht.

Over the years public efforts have expanded in an effort to maintain Gaelic Irish as a language of heritage in the country as a whole. There are the TG4 TV channel, Raidió na Gaeltachta, the newspapers Foinse and Lá, and an on-line magazine, Beo! added to cultural centers, degree programs, and the successful Oireachtas Irish language festival. These efforts are helping to achieve a bilingual Ireland, not the Irish Ireland dream of the country's founders. In a time when Irish-English bilingualism is an achievable goal,

what is the state of Irish in the communities where Irish is the historic first language, An Gaeltacht?

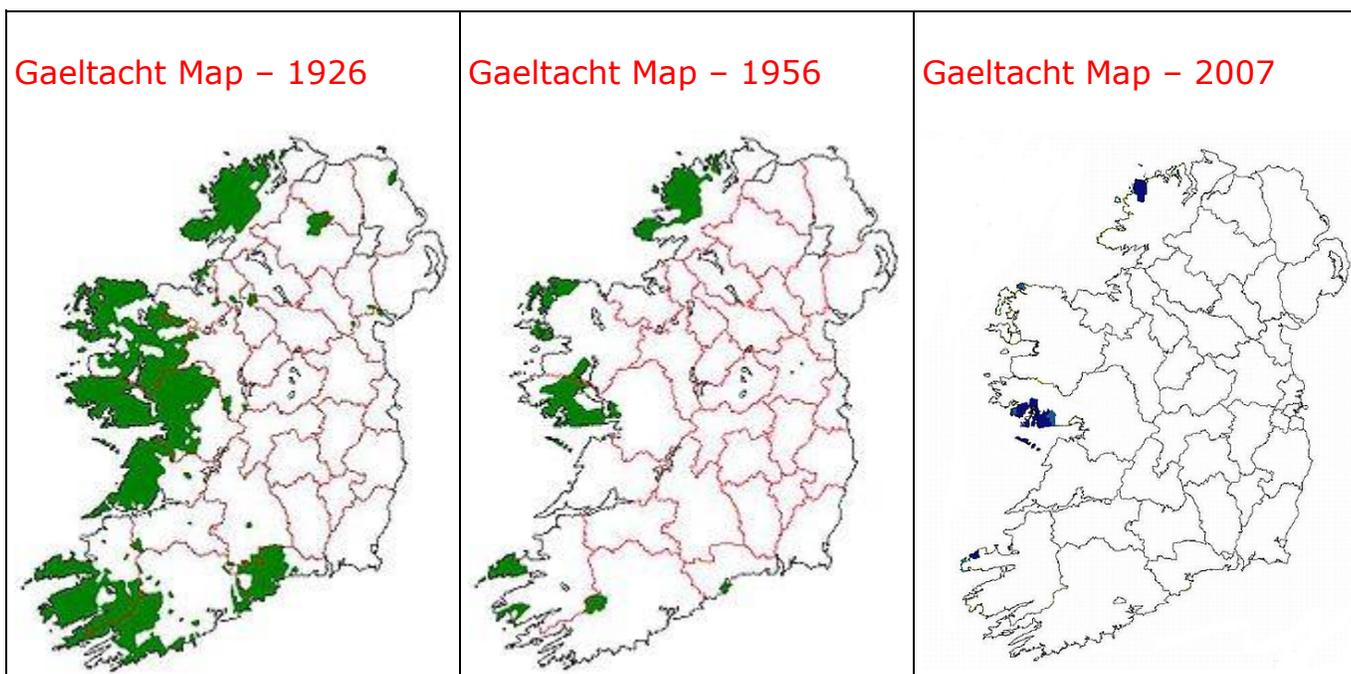
In November 2007 the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs released its report entitled *Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht*. It is not an optimistic report on the state of Irish in the Gaeltacht. The study delineates the impact of social dynamics, education and housing policies on the decline of the areas that can still be legitimately called Gaeltacht. Many of the favorable changes in Ireland's economy are having deleterious effects on the use of Irish as a first language. Booming urban centers like Galway are spawning suburbanization of agricultural areas which were the heart of the Gaeltacht. Spiddal (An Spidéal) is good example. A traditionally Irish-speaking village, Spiddal stands between the heartland of the South Connemara Gaeltacht and the expanding suburbs of Galway City. The report tells us that Irish is no longer Spiddal's community language (only 44% of its residents identify Irish as the first language) and that demographic pressure from the city will continue to erode the place of Irish as the community language unless there are changes in policies. The study makes no reference to the effect of EU immigration on the Gaeltacht.

Another good that has had a bad effect on the Gaeltacht is the natural beauty of the west coast of Ireland. As the Irish economy created wealth for many Irish, they sought beautiful places for new homes. As we have seen in America, acreage on water or even with a view of water has leaped in value. So too with the acreage in the Gaeltacht with its stunning views of the wild Atlantic. The in-migration to the West attracted by the location and made affordable by the Celtic Tiger was an English-speaking migration, reducing the Irish-speaking dynamic in the Gaeltacht communities. Housing policies in the Gaeltacht do not restrict home ownership to Irish speakers. An instance of a housing plan with unintended consequences was reported on in *Irish America* (February-March 2008). In Ballyferriter, an Irish-speaking community in Kerry, twenty-one council houses were built presumably for Irish speakers, but only seven homes were sold to Irish speakers. The linguistic study report suggests housing policies be changed but does not specify the changes: Would Ireland impose a language test for home ownership in the Gaeltacht?

Education in the Gaeltacht continues to be a disappointment, the report says. Oddly, children who study Irish in schools outside the Gaeltacht outperform Gaeltacht students in some Irish language ability tests. Parents complain, as they did years ago, that the schools which use Irish as the language of instruction are not as good as those schools whose language is English.

Furthermore, the 46% of English-speaking students who enter the Gaeltacht schools are more likely to reinforce the use of English among the Irish speakers than that the Irish speakers transform the English speakers. The study urges a continuation of Irish-only instruction in Gaeltacht and a system of pre-school Irish language training for those children who come from English-speaking homes. These measures are to be supported by youth clubs, camps, athletics and other social gatherings where Irish immersion would be the rule.

The map of the Gaeltacht produced for the report shows a very much reduced Gaeltacht. The report identifies Gaeltacht areas as A (at least 67% Irish speakers); B (44% to 66% Irish speakers); and C (fewer than 44%). In the A category there are only twenty-four communities and twenty in Category B. We can assume that government efforts to support the Gaeltacht will be aimed principally at Categories A and B. The report's sad conclusion is that "without a major change to language use patterns, Irish is unlikely to remain the predominant community and family language in those areas with the most widespread and inclusive Irish-speaking networks (Category A Gaeltacht districts) for more than another fifteen to twenty years."



As maps of the Gaeltacht from 1926, 1956, and 2007 clearly show efforts to protect the Gaeltacht areas as Irish-speaking communities have failed. To many the loss of the Gaeltacht would be a cultural calamity. To many others, a bilingual Ireland is a desirable and an achievable goal. Gaelic Irish is not on any endangered language list. Like Breton in France and Western

Frisian in the Netherlands, Irish is enjoying a revival. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, a fine poet, is being published in Irish; all of us with Irish backgrounds know people who are taking classes in Irish; award winners at recent Academy Awards have said "Mo chuisle" and "Go raibh, míle, maith agat" and an all Gaelic film starring Colm Meaney is about to be released; and every document produced by the EU has to be translated into Gaelic Irish.

(Written by John Walsh)

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