

## History On Our Tongues

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There's a word for it in Kilkenny – often several words. Thirty years ago Bishop Peter Birch listed some of them,<sup>1</sup> and concluded that “There must be countless . . . similar to those I have mentioned; it would be a thousand pities if they were to be lost”. He urged that these native idioms be collected and systematized, adding that “the first step towards this must be the compilation of local usages”.

The first step has already been taken by Eoghan Ó Ceallaigh in his *Review* (1954) and now by this writer in a study ready for publication. Entitled *An Anglo-Irish Lexicon of County Kilkenny*, it is a glossary of dialect terms, together with analysis and background. The lexicon or vocabulary proper contains approximately 2,400 articles.

Dialect, or local speech, has been called ‘the mark of history on our tongues’. The most obvious mark in the case of the majority of Irish people is the fact that they speak English – but that English is a special variety. To quote Dr. Birch again:

English as spoken in Ireland has many interesting peculiarities. Some of these arose from the fact that the language spoken here has not altered . . . at the same rate as the parent language did in England; other[s] . . . are due to the fact that English as spoken here is modified by Gaelic modes of expression.

Conservatism and interference, then, are the marks of Irish English idiom (Anglo-Irish). The following brief review of the *Lexicon's* contents will show these characteristics at work, and at the same time illustrate the creative side of our vernacular.

The language of any area can be expected to reflect the characteristic pursuits of its speakers, so it is not surprising that much of our Kilkenny dialect vocabulary is connected with agriculture, animal husbandry and other rural occupations. One of the most prolific concepts is ‘smallest pig of the litter’ – the *arkin*, *bainbhín*, *bockeén*, *cailleach*, *caoirsheen*, *crowly*, *cull*, *luchán*, *orcachán* or *rut*. Such synonymic variety is particularly noticeable in the areas of personal reference, where local speech is at its most exuberant. Again and again one is struck by the creativity of an idiom which, drawing on the combined resources of colloquial English and inherited Irish, is within certain notional categories productive to the point of prodigality. Thus *dhiúra dheára*, *randycantan*, *raia bata*, *ropadh ceilte*, *shevandy*, *sioboc*, *telemachus* and *torc sa chró* all describe noisy confusion or hullabaloo. Another prolific concept is ‘miser’ – *cníopaire*, *piosguirt*, *scaiste*, *scrios*, *sprionlóir*, *stinger*. Fools of different kinds are well represented, e.g. *áilleán*, *amal*, *amadán*, *bumán*, *ceolán*, *larry*, *leábharaic*, *lúdaí*, *bod-* or *stol-óinseach* (which is even worse than *óinseach*), etc.

### CORN CULTIVATION

Our speech may be at its most inventive when censuring, disparaging, or

describing alleged human failings and abnormalities: however, it is also rich and creative in non-subjective spheres. A lexical group such as that of corn-cultivation will give something of the flavour of traditional word-stock drawn from two languages. Corn-grass may be called *geamhar*, the standard Irish word, but in Templeorum a man will tell you that "the corn is *spéac-in*" (that is, appearing above the ground), and a Tullogher farmer may remark that it is "puttin' up the *gráisín-s*". What keeps the crows away is the *fear bréige*, *crow-man* or *mock-man*; or it may be called *dídeog*, a form of *brídeog*, the little effigy of St. Brigid: here the word has undergone a change of meaning as well as appearance. Of course *scarecrow* is used more widely than any of the alternatives given above, but that is the standard English word, and we are dealing here with dialect, i.e. local, non-standard terms. The corn used to be cut with the scythe, the handgrips of which are called variously *crannán*, *dornán*, *dornóg*, *dúirnín*, *neb* and *sned*; the handle itself is the *scythe-tree*, a reflex of Irish *crann speile*. The last sheaf standing may be called the *cailleach* or *rabbit-sheaf*. Hares and rabbits in the corn-field retreated to the shelter of the last bit left standing; superstition identified one as the witch-hare (*cailleach* = witch), so here folklore helps to illuminate a problem in lexicography.

Irish words tend to have many variants; a fairly common type is that formed by the addition of an initial *s-*, as *scroisín* for *croisín*, *sluichín* for *luichín*, *spéac* for *péac*, etc. *Gráisín* also seems to be a localized form: the nearest Dinneen's dictionary has is *gráisíneach fir* 'insignificant man'. It is indeed a measure of the localness of the *Lexicon* that several hundred words in it are not recorded by either Dinneen or Ó Domhnaill; and the Oxford English Dictionary was consulted in vain almost as often for items in the English segment of the glossary.

### "SAVING THE HAY"

The versatility of the corn vocabulary in repeated in spheres such as hay-making, potato cultivation, cattle production, fishing, flora and fauna. A few examples from these groups will illustrate. "Saving the hay" begins with the mowing. The swathe has a variety of Irish names, including *láithreach*, *láthair*, *raonán*, *rianán* and *réilin*. The drying and cocking process throws up mainly English terms, e.g. *duck*, *lap*, *peb*, *twister*, *halfling*, *hobbler*, *field-cock*, *grass-cock*, *weather-cock*, etc. For the *súgán*-twister Irish words are found, e.g. *baictín*, *dornóg*, *filbín* and *minicín*.

"The devil a bit but the cow is a miracle entirely" said the Tailor to Eric Cross; her importance to the rural economy is reflected in the language. The *cow-tie* for use at milking time is the *buarach*, which has the variants *buarán* and *buaircín* as well as the synonym *crobh-nasc* (also meaning 'fetter'). For foot-rot (a disease of the hoof) we find *gág*, *scall* (a northern English and Scottish word) and the interesting South Kilkenny terms *treas-lobhadh* and *ladharnach*.

Our local names for birds, wild animals and insects are characterised by a whimsicality which sometimes borders on the lyrical. The heron is called

the *corr-iasc* or, more familiarly, *Paddy of the bog*; the curlew *cúrlíúin*, *whistler* and *whistling duck*. The jacksnipe is the *gabhairín* or *gabhairín gan meig*, *may-goat* and *minny-gabhar* – all probably suggested by the goat-like ‘cry’ (effected by the drumming of air through the wings in descending flight) of the bird. The owl is otherwise known as *brabhaiste* and *mouse-hound*, the hedge-hog as *gráinneog* and *Our Lady’s apple picker*.

### OSSORY DIALECT

The most obvious feature of any form of speech is accent or pronunciation, so we should say something about that side of our subject. The phonology of Anglo-Irish is a half-way house: the clash of sound-systems (English and Irish) has produced a compromise. A typical interference is the substitution of the Irish sounds *t* and *d* (as in *tá* and *dá*) for the English sound *th* (as in *thin* and *then*), especially before *r*. Unique to Kilkenny is the development of Irish ‘slender’ *r*-sounds into *sh* or *zh*, e.g. *bosheen* or *bozheen* from *bóithrín*, *ramazha* from *ramaire*, *grabazha* from *grabaire*, etc. Eoghan Ó Ceallaigh described this sound-change as a feature of ‘Ossory dialect’ – a term which implies linguistic homogeneity throughout the old Irish kingdom (coterminous with the modern diocese). Undoubtedly there are many linguistic features common to all of Ossory, but in one important respect the area is not homogeneous. In the extreme north of Kilkenny the preference for initial stress in Irish words, e.g. *deisealán* ‘cow’s lick’, *caisearbhán* ‘dandelion’, suggests that Northern or Connaught Irish extended to this point. In the rest of the county Irish words have Southern stress patterns, proving that Irish-speaking Kilkenny was an extension of Munster.

Our pronunciation also reflects the conservatism mentioned above in relation to Anglo-Irish, which tends to retain features of early modern English (the language of Shakespeare) that have undergone change in most modern varieties. A good example is the realisation of the *ea* in words such as *eat*, *speak*, *tea*: *ate*, *spake*, *tay* instead of *eet*, *speek*, *tee*. The ‘Irish’ pronunciation finds corroboration everywhere in the works of Shakespeare, e.g. Hamlet, III ii 196-97 where *speak* rhymes with *break*. Nowadays this pronunciation is recessive, but anyone who, like myself, considers *tay* a more sustaining drink than *tee* finds support in modern European languages and the original Chinese as well as in the Bard – from whose contemporaries, the Elizabethan and Jacobean colonists, our ancestors learned English.

*Signs on it* : *tá a shliocht air*. The influence of Irish can be so strong that many of our local idioms might be described as ‘Kilkenny remoulds’. Good examples are the numerous prepositional phrases which show the transfer of Irish structures into English. For instance, the complex functions of *i* ‘in’ (to denote existence, presence, comparison and inherited traits) are lifted bodily out of Irish and transposed onto English. *Is the child in it* (= born) *yet?* *Were there many in it?* (*ann* ‘in it’ = ‘there’). *There were a great crowd in it* (Nowlan Park, for instance). How did Ollie Walsh play? *Sure there’re none of ‘em in it with Ollie!* i.e. none comparable to him. The scope and semantic function of *ar* ‘on’ (which in Irish stresses damage or

detriment), *ag* 'with' (expressing agency, the doer of an action) and *faoi* 'under' are likewise carried over into Anglo-Irish. *What's on him* (= wrong with him)? *A big stone fell on his foot.* (*On* here is standard English.) *He could be a long time under that*, i.e. suffering from the effects of it. *'Twill be the dear stone on him!* (because of the suffering, loss of time or income, etc.). *He'll never be let at the stones again with the wife* (= by his wife).

### ENGLISH WORDS GROW TAILS

P. L. Henry has remarked that English words in Ireland tend to grow tails. The one that grows fastest is *-een* (Ir. *-ín*); the reader is invited to check the anatomy of his vocabulary for this appendage, a transistorized linguistic resource denoting smallness and having overtones of affection or (more generally) contempt, e.g. *maneen*, 'precocious boy', *Jackeen* 'conceited little Dubliner' (the counterpart is, of course, *culshie*, and is always *big*). The *Lexicon* offers *clouteen* 'diaper', *supeen* and *draughteen* (*o' tea, o' whiskey*), *kitteenen*, *robineen*, *scuteen*, 'little scut', *sizeen* (*the sizeen of her!* 'how small she is!'), and many others.

Some words undergo a change of personality in local conditions, e.g. (Ir.) *gadaí*, 'dawdler, slowcoach', *múirín* 'dejected person', (Eng.) *annoyed* 'worried', *canter* 'fall' (n.), *dangerous* 'treacherous', etc. *Maiseach*, as in the phrase *a fine maiseach woman*, has undergone a semantic transformation which reflects the values of a rural community: by contrast with Dinneen's definition 'decorous, handsome, graceful' the Kilkenny sense is 'well-made, tidy, capable-looking' – that is, the stress is on utility and practicality rather than appearance, although beauty is not ruled out.

The search for intensity takes many forms, including swearing, hyperbole, invective, the piling up of synonyms, or – to cite a particular instance – the systematic correlation between the concepts 'blow, punch' and 'abundance (especially of food and drink)': *a clipe/douse/skelp/wallop o' bread, a fli o' meat, fops o' money, pucks to eat, slammin's o' milk, etc.*

An essay about words runs the risk of being garrulous, so this synopsis must be concluded even though many themes have not been touched upon. However, enough has been said to show something of the character and ambience of our local idiom. If, as P. W. Joyce said, 'the life of a people is pictured in their speech', the volume surveyed here is at least a partial image of some of the typical concerns and activities of people in this county. It may be that John Steinbeck was right when he said:

The idioms, the figures of speech that makes a language rich and full of the poetry of place and time must go.

And in their place will be a national speech, wrapped and packaged, standard and tasteless.

Localness is . . . going.

Perhaps our *Lexicon* of Kilkenny will help to prove that it is not gone.