# THE GAELTACHT, THE IRISH LANGUAGE, FOLKLORE AND VERNACULAR CREATIVITY

**RIA**

Angela Bourke with Diane Negra

In the light of government's Culture and Creativity Capital Plan, which details an intent to fortify investment in a range of cultural activities and enterprises, the Royal Irish Academy's Culture and Heritage Working Group has undertaken to generate position papers highlighting modes of creativity associated with public culture, public institutions and vernacular culture. Written by senior academics with strong ties to many of the state's cultural institutions, these papers constitute a set of reflections regarding the necessity for and social benefits of supporting enhanced attention to the creativity of Irish life.

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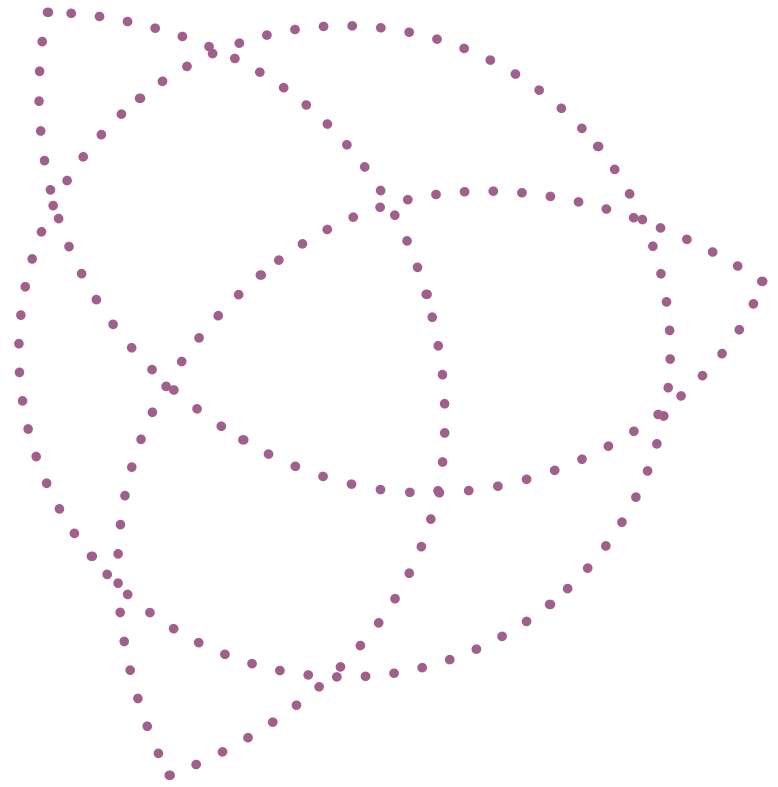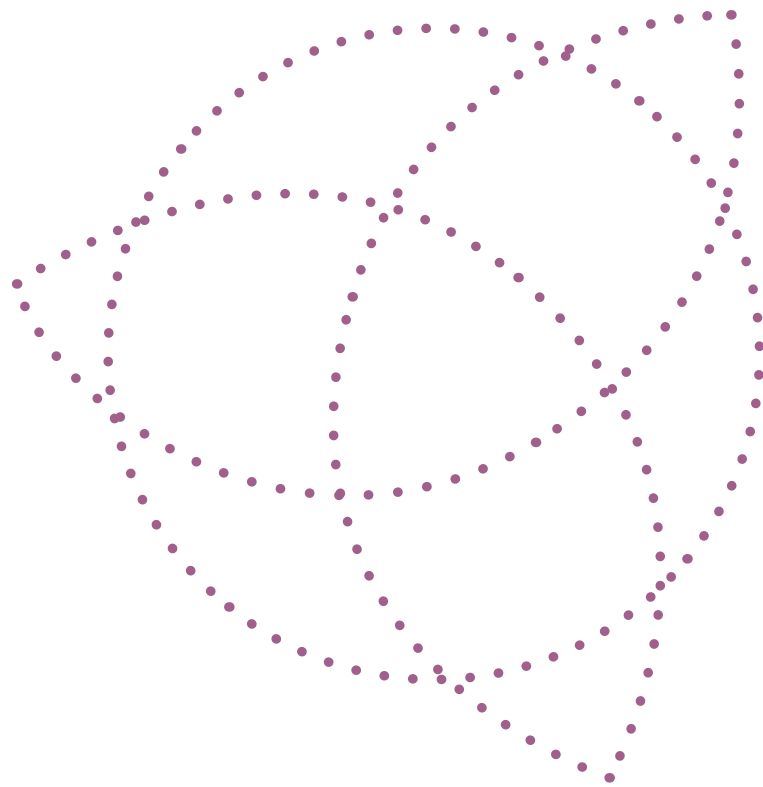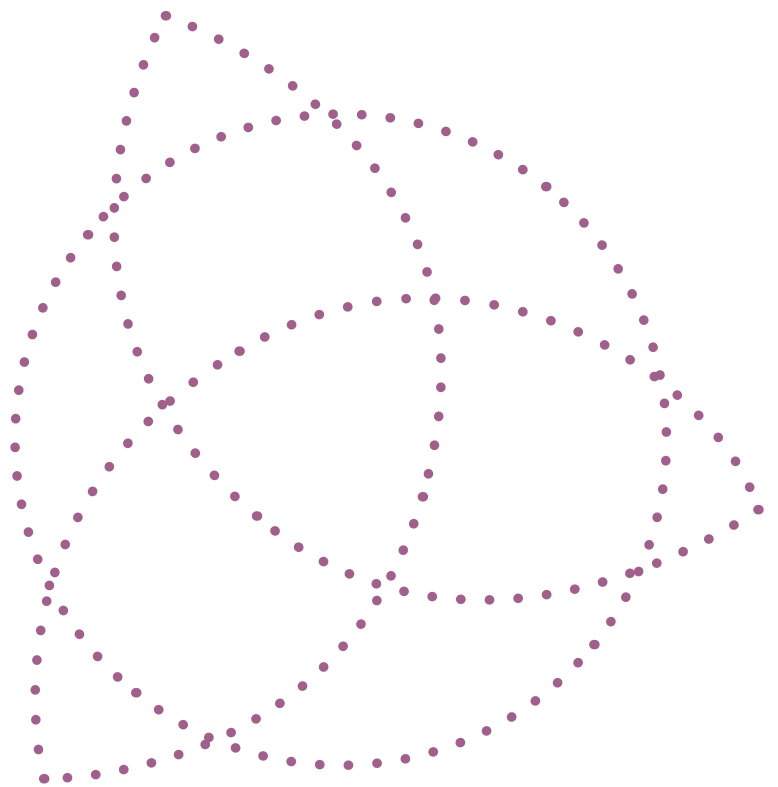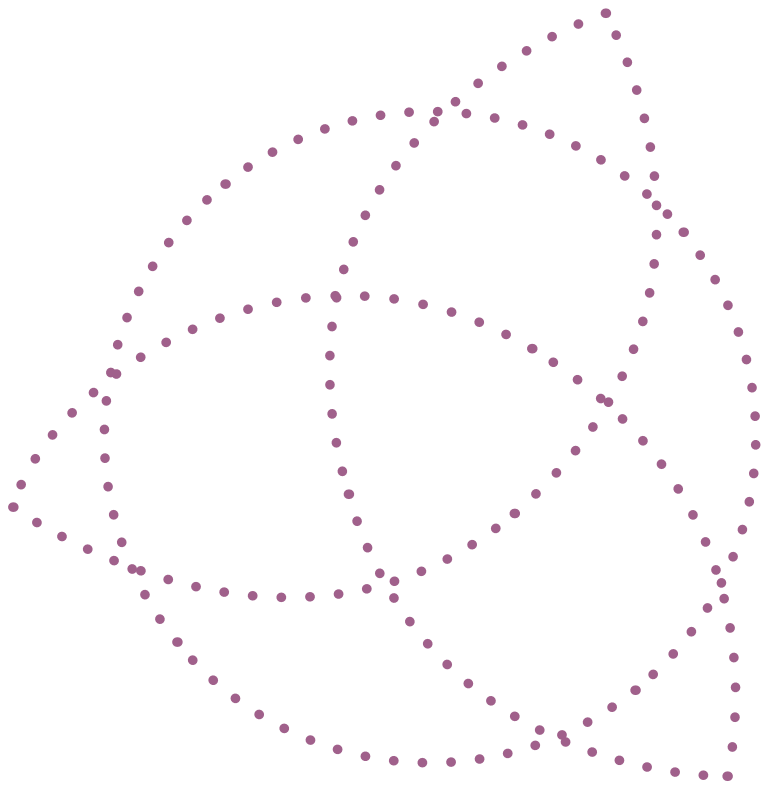Angela Bourke, MRIA with Diane Negra, MRIA.

Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann
Royal Irish Academy

# CREATIVITY

is a function of being human: a common thread that can make sense of individual experience and communicate it, even in immensely complex forms, over great distances and many centuries. The Royal Irish Academy, Ireland's leading body of experts in the sciences, humanities and social sciences, has a long tradition of investigating, communicating, celebrating and supporting creative work in culture and the sciences on the island of Ireland, and representing it internationally. While recognising that creative expression can have significant economic importance, the Academy warmly welcomes the Creative Ireland initiative as an investment by the state in humane values, independent of commercial consideration.

Every culture finds ways of encoding hard-won wisdom, humour and expertise as resources for individuals and communities; every generation finds new ways to understand and use its heritage. Long famous for creative output in the form of books and film, Ireland has adapted quickly and flexibly to new forms of media culture, in rural as well as urban areas. Irish traditional music now has players and audiences across the globe, as the Irish language has speakers and learners. Meanwhile, research demonstrates that the Ireland of the past was much more receptive to in-migration, and to music and other cultural influences, than has been generally understood.

A major challenge in our globalised world is for encounters between cultures to be peaceful, respectful and mutually enriching. Diverse forms of national creativity deserve our fullest support. It should be noted, however, that creativity resists codification and commercialisation. The Royal Irish Academy, a hub of critical thinking, brings together expertise in many areas. It sees in Creative Ireland an opportunity to dig deep into that expertise, integrating the aims of celebrating Ireland's cultural heritage, honouring the cultural capital and creativity of in-migrants, and enhancing our country's international standing. The Academy offers these short papers on aspects of culture and heritage as discussion documents for Creative Ireland.

# THE GAELTACHT, THE IRISH LANGUAGE, FOLKLORE AND VERNACULAR CREATIVITY[1]

The *Creative Ireland* programme lists the 'importance of the Irish language, our cultural heritage, folklore and the uniqueness of our Gaeltacht areas' as one of its seven key values.[2] The recognition of these aspects of Irish life as crucial to creativity in society is very welcome. There is a risk, however, that they could be walled into separate domains and left to designated specialists and interest groups, or that 'culture' in this context might be narrowly interpreted to mean popular ephemeral events, confined to particular times or places. Along with its immensely rich literary and oral traditions, the Irish language needs to be imaginatively and practically integrated throughout *Creative Ireland*, with significant historical awareness, a holistic appreciation of the contemporary Gaeltacht with its economic and infrastructure needs, input from recent and emerging scholarship, active use

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[1] The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht issued its *Statement of Strategy, 2018–2020* in July 2018, after work on this discussion paper had been completed. In relation to this paper, thanks are due to two anonymous peer reviewers, whose expert observations on an earlier draft are reflected here.
[2] Government of Ireland, 2017: *Clár Éire Ildánach/The Creative Ireland Programme, 2017–2022*, (Government of Ireland, Dublin), 9; available at: https://creative.ireland.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2017-12/Creative%20Ireland%20Programme.pdf (24 September 2018). This passage also mentions games and music, which lie outside the scope of this paper.

of new media and a commitment to cross-fertilisation. This will deepen creative citizenship and enhance critical thinking and mutual understanding for citizens, in-migrants, the Irish diaspora and that larger global community of people who wish to know about or engage with Ireland. The current policy of making digitised content freely available online must be central to the project,[3] placing priceless cultural resources in the realm of the public good, beyond the reach of the commercial forces that compound inequality and of the rampant globalisation that generates so much anomie.

In the early years of independence, stigma still attached to Irish, at home and abroad, as the language of starving refugees from the Great Famine. Resources were scarce; the scars of civil war ran deep and stagnation resulted. The idealistic plan of the revolutionary generation to restore Irish as a living national vernacular frayed into the use of a ritual *cúpla focal* in public life. The compulsory status of Irish in education and the unpopularity of the conservative, authoritarian administrative elite that promoted it led to sharp polarisation in popular culture. Later, identification of the language with one side in the northern conflict deepened that division and made discussion of it a pervasive taboo until the late twentieth century. Hostility to Irish was widespread; commitment to it became restricted to special-interest groups, individuals and families. Deeper exploration of its resources was left to specialists, while the lack of attention to economic development in Gaeltacht areas left native speakers feeling increasingly marginalised.[4]

Much has changed since then: Irish people are widely travelled and dozens, if not hundreds, of new languages have become established here, together with skills, foodways and other aspects of cultures recently arrived. A fast-expanding virtual global Gaeltacht complements, complicates and facilitates the face-to-face culture of the places on the map.[5] In 2018 Irish has come to stand for a new kind of engaged, place-based, secular citizenship, urban as well as rural: often as a counter-movement to the steep decline in the influence of the Catholic church.

[3] Pioneered by the National Archives with the 1901 and 1911 censuses, this policy continues in bilingual and Irish-language initiatives, especially those hosted by Dublin City University, as discussed below, in the section dealing with resources and possibilities.

[4] For the origins of policy on the Gaeltacht, see John Walsh, 2002: *Díchoimisiúnú teanga: Coimisiún na Gaeltachta, 1926* (Cois Life, Baile Átha Cliath); Caitríona Ó Torna, 2005: *Cruthú na Gaeltachta 1893–1922* (Cois Life, Baile Átha Cliath).

[5] For an early discussion of this phenomenon, see Angela Bourke, 2006: 'ReImagining the Gaeltacht: maps, stories, and places in the mind,' in Andrew Higgins Wyndham (ed.), *ReImagining Ireland* (Charlottesville and London, University of Virginia Press), 82–98.

For decades, thriving Irish-language subcultures have been driven and sustained outside the Gaeltacht by the Gaelscoil movement.[6] More recently, a relaxed Irish-English bilingualism inflects a distinctive cultural identity within the global anglophone community, while writing in Irish displays a preoccupation with social justice, in Ireland and globally. These phenomena are extensively reflected in vernacular culture and new digital media.

Research demonstrates that children fluent in more than one language do better at school. Irish-language schools, preschools and classes for adults are oversubscribed, and in-migrant children, many of whom already speak more than one language, show themselves well able to engage with Irish in the classroom and outside it. Queen Elizabeth's gracious words in Irish during her state visit in May 2011 made clear, as did the response to them, what cultural potency still attaches to this language, and how many valences of creativity reside in it, its speakers and its resources, oral and written.

[6] In the 1960s, a group of committed young couples established an urban 'neo-Gaeltacht' in Shaw's Road, Belfast, which is now home to three generations. The late Aodán Mac Póilin wrote about it as 'The universe of the Gaeltacht', in Wyndham (ed.), *ReImagining Ireland*, 99–102.

# Irish-language culture and the revolutionary imagination

The cultural heritage whose transformational power inspired Ireland's revolutionary generation[7] was founded on the Irish language, as promoted by the Gaelic League (now Conradh na Gaeilge), with many references to the then recently rediscovered saga literature of medieval Ireland. The Royal Irish Academy is proud to be custodian of some of the most significant manuscripts of that literature, and to have been instrumental in enhancing their value through creative and critical scholarship for almost two centuries.

In the nineteenth century it was this work, by Academy scholars and others, that eventually brought Early Irish literature, with its vivid, eloquent tales of a rich, pre-Christian Irish life, to the attention of W.B. Yeats and Patrick Pearse, among others.[8] Both men were hugely influential in determining Ireland's understanding of itself, although their paths diverged early and remained largely separate in a polarising society.

Later scholarship has deepened and refined our understanding of medieval and early modern Ireland and the recent past, integrating interpretations and offering increasingly nuanced narratives of political, economic and social factors affecting all aspects of life on this island. Experts in Early and Middle Irish offer authoritative interpretations of our early texts, unlike the million-selling authors of fantasy and modern paganism who have appropriated this material. Investment may be needed to bring their findings to a wider public, but their scholarly work ought to be central to *Creative Ireland*. Textual scholarship in Irish also has much to offer in terms of local history, pinpointing where, by whom and in what context texts were written, copied and revised.

[7] *Clár Éire Ildánach/The Creative Ireland Programme, 2017–2022*, 5.
[8] Sylvester O'Halloran, the Limerick surgeon whose *An introduction to the study of the history and antiquities of Ireland* appeared in 1772, was an early member of the Royal Irish Academy (RIA). Eugene O'Curry, an employee, then member of the RIA, became professor of Irish history and archaeology at the new Catholic University, Dublin, in 1854. He delivered his influential *Lectures on the manuscript materials of Early Irish history*, in 1855 and 1856, and published them in 1861; O'Curry's *On the manners and customs of the Ancient Irish* appeared posthumously in 1873. Both presented saga material in appendices, with English translations.

# A vibrant cultural ecosystem: the Gaeltacht

Gaeltacht areas face many challenges in 2018, not least the inadequate, potholed roads and patchy internet access that compound their marginality. The present generations of *Gaeltacht* people are well travelled, however. Many speak third and fourth languages, or have personal experience of indigenous communities and environmental crises in other parts of the world. They know what it is to be different—at once celebrated and stigmatised. Many have campaigned for equality, human rights and sustainability, or added to earlier income streams in innovative ways. Some have left lucrative modern jobs in metropolitan areas to return to a more humane and integrated way of life: they represent a reservoir of talent, open to negotiation. It is difficult to be creative, however, in a region that is socio-economically defunct: emigration and economic malaise persist, especially in the west and northwest, following the 2008 crash, even as Dublin fortifies its position as a site of transnational commerce.

The natural environment of most Gaeltacht areas includes large uncultivated areas whose dramatic scenery reflects fragile ecosystems of mountain, bog, lake and seashore, often home to rare species of animal and plant life, where damage to one element can have far-reaching consequences for all. The cultural ecosystem encoded in the Irish language is similarly unique in global terms, and similarly fragile. Long expert at what the Irish philosopher and management guru Charles Handy calls 'portfolio working', Gaeltacht people retain traditional skills of sea and land, alongside newer ones associated with film, TV, radio and new media; specialised food production; and eco-tourism. Shared creative preoccupations attract many incomers, as do the humane values that sustain community, and the language itself. Like the Burren, Co. Clare, with which they share many characteristics, Gaeltacht areas are at the forefront of place-based education, valuing cultural identity, traditions and history as springboards of individual well-being, along with biodiversity, sustainability and deep connections to place.[9] Enterprises established in these areas conform to the '6-L' framework advocated in recent work on visionary entrepreneurship that expands the idea of 'value' beyond the definitions imposed by globalised finance: Long-term orientation; Lasting relationships; Local roots; recognition of Limits; Learning community; and Leadership responsibility.[10]

[9] Laurie Lane-Zucker, 2004: 'Introduction', in David Sobel, *Place-based education: connecting classrooms and communities* (The Orion Society, Great Barrington, Mass.). See also the Burren Beo Trust website, at: https://burrenbeo.com (25 September 2018).
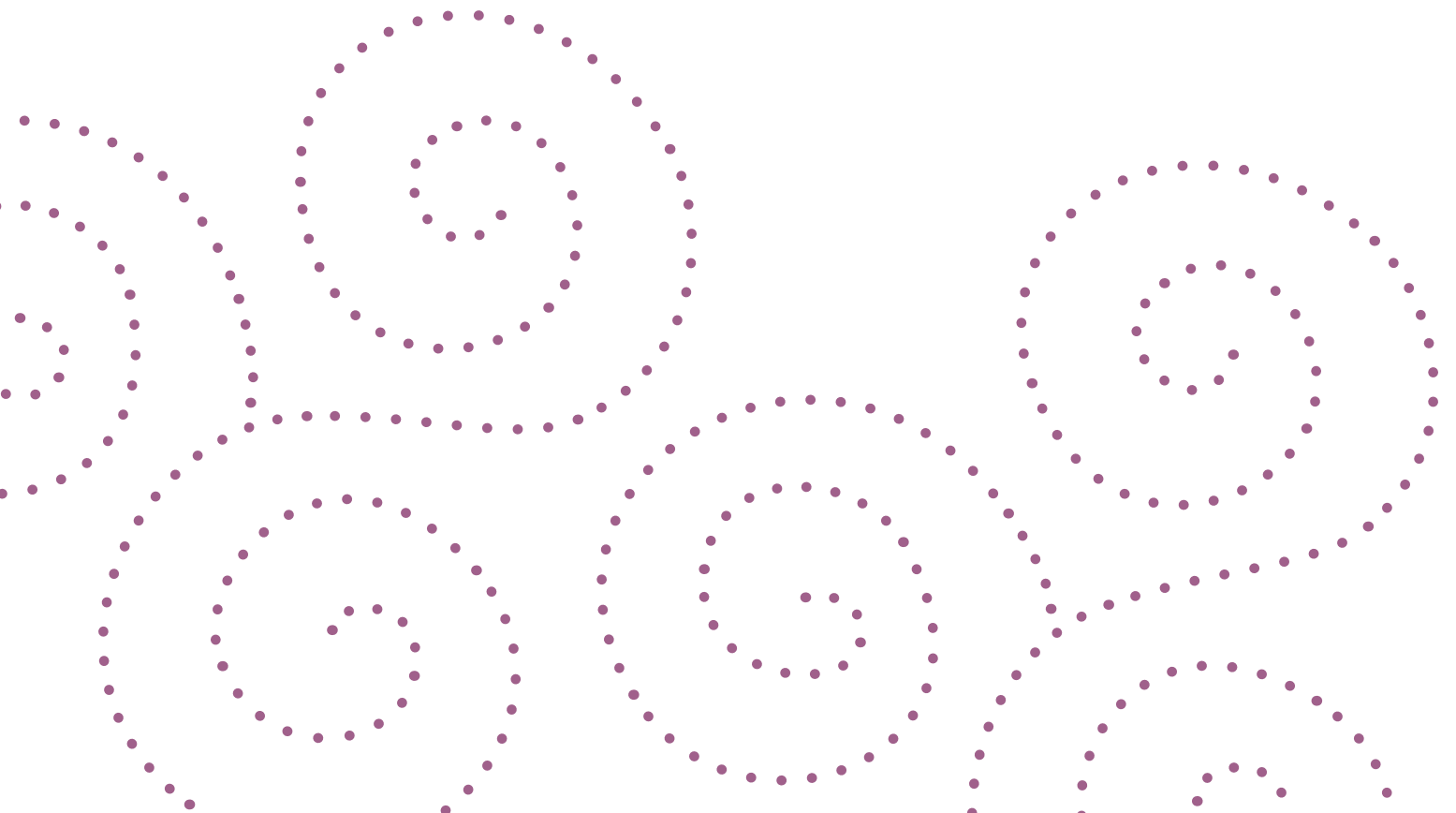[10] Dietmar Sternad, James Kennelly and Finbarr Bradley, 2017: *Digging deeper: how purpose-driven enterprises create real value* (Routledge, London), builds upon earlier books by Bradley and Kennelly on Irish culture and economics in the wake of the 2008 recession.

Gaeltacht communities are often imagined as holdovers from the Middle Ages, unsuited to modern life; most, however, are less than three centuries old.[11] Most Irish-speaking communities of the northwest, west and south represent the creative response of resourceful individual settlers and their descendants to cycles of food abundance and famine. The potato did not become a staple food in Ireland until the eighteenth century, when reliance on it led to a huge increase in population, with migrations to marginal land.[12] Tim Robinson's hand-drawn maps and award-winning accounts of the Aran Islands and Connemara have documented the minute naming of those environments since then, and the way history is mapped onto the landscape. Life-stories of noted storytellers in Gaeltacht areas of Galway, Donegal and the Blasket Islands include accounts of how their recent ancestors migrated into the places whose whole topography they themselves knew so intimately.

Irish-speaking settlers along the Atlantic coast were accustomed to frugal living. Crucially, unlike their contemporaries who migrated to America, Britain or Australia as teenagers, they could continue functioning in their native language and contribute as adults to its resources. They transmitted values and skills to their children in a language they spoke fluently, with free access to the stored wisdom of their ancestors through its oral tradition. Densely settled,

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[11] Ireland's newest Gaeltacht was established in the 1930s in Co. Meath, with settlers from the west.
[12] Kevin Whelan, 1997: 'The modern landscape: from Plantation to present', in F.H.A. Aalen, Kevin Whelan and Matthew Stout (eds), *Atlas of the Irish rural landscape* (Cork University Press, Cork), 67–103; see, especially 79–88.
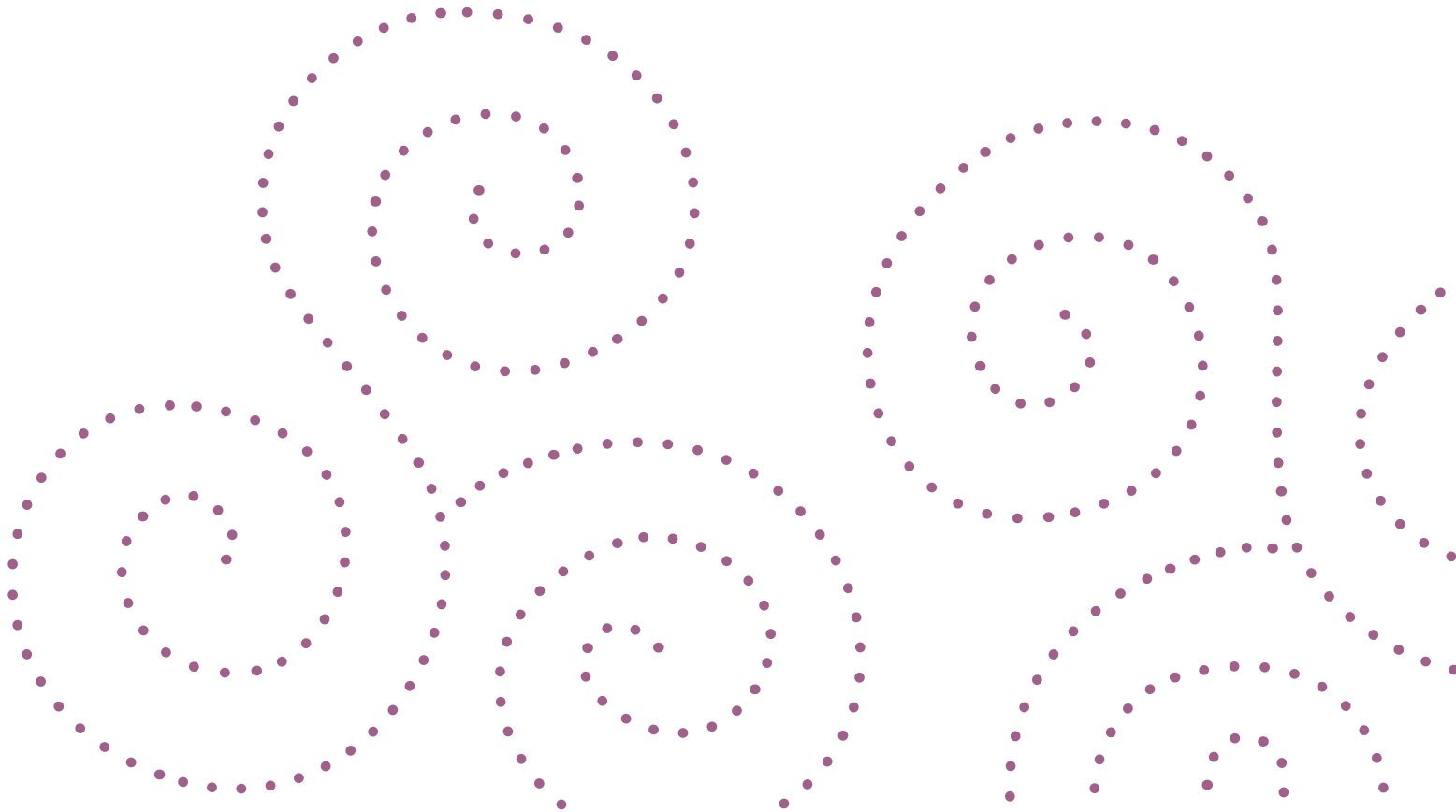
their new communities developed robust social bonds, shared values of mutual support, and rich traditions of oral history, storytelling, singing and dance, even as famine ravaged inland areas. Disastrous harvests in the late 1870s, however, led to mass evictions from better land and sent another wave of migrants westward, just as a rapacious shopkeeper class took control of coastal economies.[13]

Most Gaeltacht areas are now linked by the spectacular Wild Atlantic Way, but it is no coincidence that almost all of them were designated in the 1890s as Congested Districts, standing for destitution, deficit and mass emigration. By 1893, when the Gaelic League was founded, parents who struggled with English wished only that their children might master it: one young girl told an American visitor to Co. Kerry that she didn't like to speak Irish, 'because it is so common in itself.'[14] In 1926, after decades of grinding poverty and rampant emigration, the Free State government's Gaeltacht Commission reported that 'in prestige, the position of the Language in the Gaeltacht is low' and that it had come to be accepted that 'the language was destined to pass'.[15]

[13] Rev. Thomas A. Finlay, 1898: 'The economics of Carna', *New Ireland Review* 9, 65–77. The bad harvests of the late 1870s also led to the Land War, and indirectly to the apparitions at Knock, Co. Mayo.
[14] Milwaukee County Historical Society Archive, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 'Diary of Alma Cardell Curtin', 9 August 1893 (in Cahersiveen, Co. Kerry).
[15] Quoted in Walsh, *Díchoimisiúnú teanga*, 116.

As Gaelic League members, the revolutionary generation worked to combat the efforts of colonial authorities and parents to stop children speaking Irish. They were charmed in return by the hospitality they encountered, and by a prevailing receptiveness to new ideas. Unlike rural communities east of the Shannon, Gaeltacht areas remained largely outside the commercial and industrial world. They retained Irish, and the strong local identity expressed in it, without espousing the conservatism that became characteristic of more prosperous areas. Their people were familiar with the modern world through seasonal migration, and in many cases by crossing the Atlantic, while tourists who came to fish or to sketch were a recurring source of supplementary income for the bilingual. The Gaelic League adopted the word *Gaeltacht* for the vibrant cultural ecosystem its members encountered and imbibed—as much a state of mind as a place on the map—and laid the foundations for later state support, however half-hearted that turned out to be.[16]

In the absence of any coherent economic policy for the Gaeltacht, the demands on its people to 'stay quaint and stay put' for the sake of national ideology led to the gradual attrition of communities over generations. It is of vital importance that state support in the twenty-first century is fit for purpose and not based on ideas proposed a century ago. A clear contemporary vision of the Gaeltacht must take stock of its relative fragility as a social and cultural ecosystem and its importance as a reservoir of inspiration for the whole country. This importance extends to the diaspora and the wider, Irish-connected world, where the teaching of Irish is thriving, and to eco-tourism. Awareness of what Irish placenames mean unlocks the first stories about where we or our ancestors live/d, or where we visit.

Most areas of comparable indigenous culture are situated at great distances from metropolitan centres, and many find their natural environments threatened with destruction. Ireland's Gaeltacht can be reached with relative ease, in person or via the internet. Its people and their intellectual property add layers of meaning and value to the Wild Atlantic Way, but its significance for bilingual awareness and national well-being is inestimable. Archive and scholarly resources are already available, many in digital form. They only require linking into the many systems that already connect Ireland with its diaspora, and put individuals in touch, through local history, genealogy, walking and other activities—and especially through smartphones, GPS and related technologies—with places. Tenders could be invited for the development of appropriate apps.

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[16] Ó Torna, *Cruthú na Gaeltachta.*

# Folklore and critical thinking

Already in the 1830s, the Ordnance Survey was instructing its field workers in Ireland to gather information about local housing, clothing, foodways, calendar customs and funeral rites, among other matters.[17] A century later, this became part of the Irish Folklore Commission's brief, along with the collecting of oral history, folktales, legends, songs and proverbs.[18] Both organisations recognised that when people do not write, or write much, it is necessary, as Walter Ong reminds us, to 'think memorable thoughts'.[19]

Folklore encodes important knowledge in stories of human action, creating patterns of language that enable information and ideas to be retained, transmitted and tested. Legends about 'the good people', or fairies, are still told in English as well as Irish.[20] Intensely local, they strain credulity, but their fictionality and excellence of construction mean they gain listeners' attention, and endure in memory. Fairy legends connect with each other in a vast, reticular retrieval system, storing knowledge about skills, geography, weather, hygiene (physical, social and mental), and numerous other areas of human engagement. Perfecting an ability to find one's way around such an intricately connected set of narratives is the kind of intellectual training at which oral traditions excel.[21] In the storytelling economy, land- and seascapes are work environments, but they also function as shared maps of memory, emotion and imagination.[22]

Vernacular education of this kind is the source of 'mysterious', yet sometimes vital, knowledge, such as where drowned bodies may be expected to come ashore; which places are subject to once-in-a-lifetime flooding; which wild plants are edible or have healing properties; or which families are too closely related for marriages between them to be advisable. Lifetimes of kitchen sessions lie behind the music of international groups like

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[17] J.H. Andrews, 1993: *A paper landscape: the Ordnance Survey in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Four Courts, Dublin; reprinted 2001), 147–8.
[18] The Irish Folklore Commission (1935–1970) was succeeded by the Department of Irish Folklore at University College Dublin. The National Folklore Collection at UCD continues its work of collecting, archiving and curating.
[19] Walter Ong, 1982: *Orality and literacy: the technologizing of the word* (Routledge, London), 31–6, also available at: http://dss-edit.com/prof-anon/sound/library/Ong_orality_and_literacy.pdf. For more in an Irish context see Angela Bourke, 1996: 'The virtual reality of Irish fairy legend', *Éire–Ireland* 31 (1 and 2) (Spring–Summer), 1–25; reprinted in Claire Connolly (ed.), 2003: *Theorizing Ireland* (Palgrave Macmillan, London), 27–40; 174–8.
[20] See, for example, Eddie Lenihan, with Carolyn Eve Green, 2003: *Meeting the other crowd: the fairy stories of hidden Ireland* (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin).
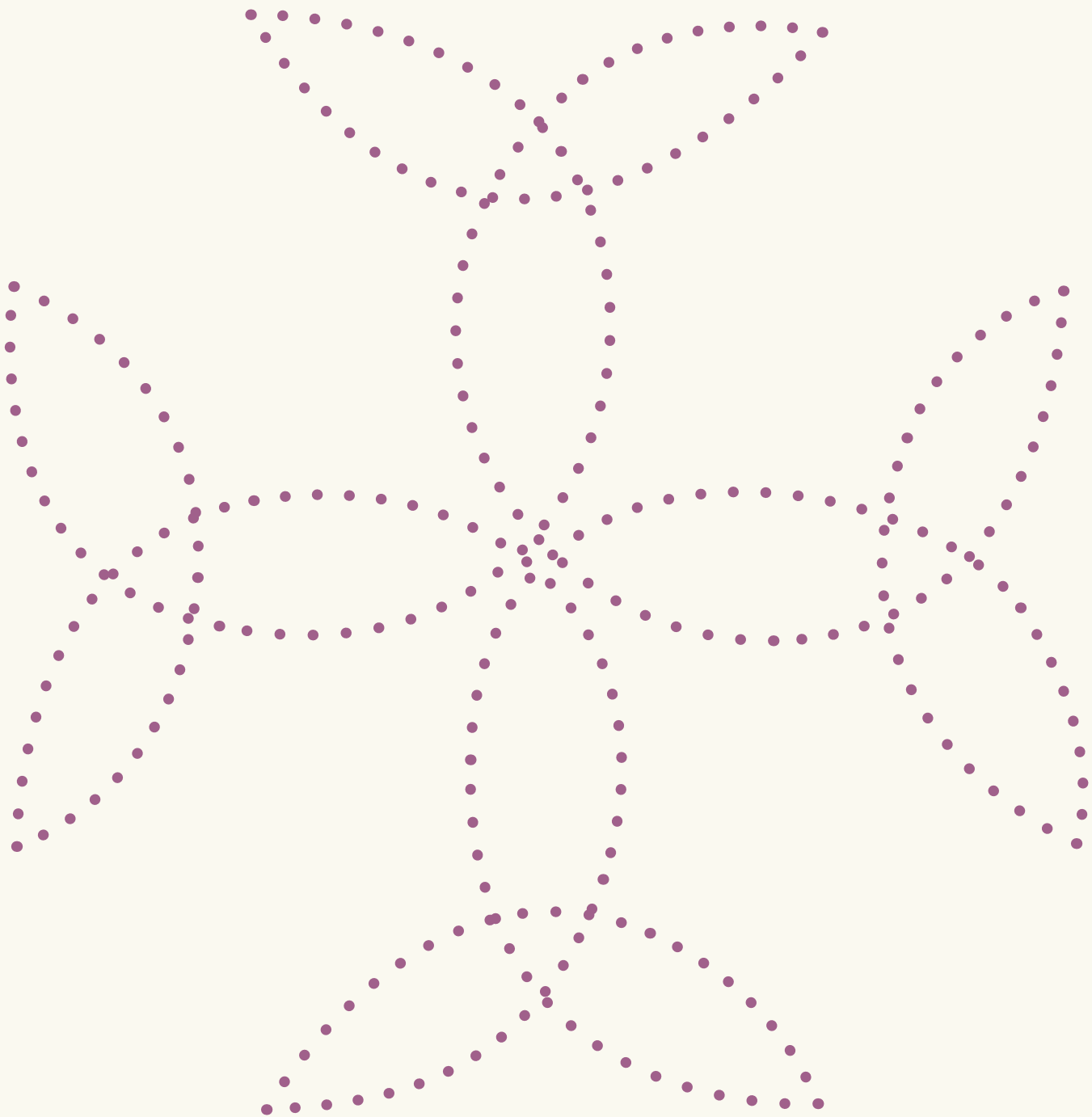[21] Bourke, 'The virtual reality of Irish fairy legend', 16.
[22] Bourke, 'The virtual reality of Irish fairy legend'.

The Gloaming, Clannad, and Altan; while Enya, born Eithne Ní Bhraonáin in the Donegal Gaeltacht, is Ireland's biggest selling solo musician, with 75 million albums sold. All these artists have fans worldwide, eager to know more about the culture they come from, and happy to spend time and money in pursuit of that knowledge.

Contrary to certain mass-media images, the magnificent, complex oral tradition documented in the National Folklore Collection (NFC) was not kept alive by choruses of happy peasants, or by the mindless repetition of pieces learned by heart, but by committed performers and listeners, operating in an informed critical environment to hone skills, deepen knowledge and refine a shared aesthetic. The phrase *ag ceartú an tseanchais*, 'correcting oral history' sums up the activity of recognised tradition-bearers when they got, and get, together, although their meetings now are as likely to be in Tokyo as in Tourmakeady.

The vibrant song tradition celebrates individual artistry, but no one person can 'own' traditional knowledge, or have the kind of 'star' status that removes many commodified, commercial performances from scrutiny. New songs are still being made and sung, and the *sean nós*—'old style'—tradition of unaccompanied singing in Irish is stronger and more widely appreciated than it was fifty years ago, when Seosamh Ó hÉanaí (1919–84), from Carna, Co. Galway, worked as a doorman in New York, because no position could be found for him at home. He sang in Greenwich Village, where he was a major influence on the young Bob Dylan and on the Clancy Brothers, initiators of the Irish folk revival. In 1979 he collaborated with the composer John Cage on *Roaratorio*, described as 'an Irish circus on *Finnegans Wake*'. After spending his final years as Artist in Residence at the University of Washington, Seattle, he was brought home for burial in Carna, where many hundreds gathered to pay their respects and where *Féile Joe* Éinniú, an annual weekend of traditional music and song, with concerts, sessions and workshops, was instituted in his honour. Two books have now been published about his life and art, while the acclaimed *Song of granite*, a lyrical feature documentary film about his life, sensitively portrays his vernacular education in An Aird Thoir, Carna, where his interest in the old songs was nurtured in the same kindly, gradual way as he learned to fish, work on a turf-bog and grow potatoes.[23]

[23] Liam Mac Con Iomaire, 2007: *Seosamh Ó hÉanaí: Nár fhágha mé bás choíche* (Cló Iar-Chonnachta, An Spidéal; book and CD); Sean Williams and Lillis Ó Laoghaire, 2011: *Bright star of the west: Joe Heaney: Irish song man* (Oxford University Press, Oxford); Pat Collins, 2017: *Song of granite* (Amérique Film, Marcie Films Limited, Roads Entertainment), 'an audacious exploration of the man and his music'. See also http://www.joeheaney.org (24 September 2018), for materials from Ó hÉanaí's archive.

The NFC, at University College Dublin, is one of Europe's largest archives of oral tradition and cultural history. Inscribed into UNESCO's Memory of the World Register in 2017 as a resource of world significance and outstanding universal value, its documents and other records show how much more than memory is involved in the transmission and performance of long songs and complex folktales, including the prized hero-tales that take an hour or more in the telling and are now seldom heard. The voluntary apprenticeship undertaken by singers and storytellers trains the imagination and sharpens critical thinking. These faculties, much prized by vernacular local communities, are increasingly important in a fast-changing, globalised world, and are most clearly seen and articulated in Gaeltacht areas. They will be as vital to new political, economic and environmental debates and to a newly energised national identity in the wake of recent referenda as they were to the vision of the late T.K. Whitaker in the 1950s.

Folklore scholarship and 'history from below' based on Irish-language sources provide versions of the past that are usually local, and illuminate emotional and social life as well as 'facts'.[24] Along with work on Irish-language texts, they merit a more prominent, academically informed, position in public life and discourse, especially as interest in genealogy, local history, place-based education and eco-tourism gathers pace.

[24] See work by Guy Beiner, Breandán Mac Suibhne, Cormac Ó Gráda and Cathal Póirtéir, and, for example, Angela Bourke, 1999: *The burning of Bridget Cleary* (Pimlico, London).

# The Irish language today

The future of Irish lies in creative bilingualisms, in the Gaeltacht, elsewhere in Ireland, and beyond our borders. The state must pay urgent attention to the legitimate and serious concerns being raised about the future of Irish as an everyday community language in the Gaeltacht; however, some half of the world's 6,800-or-so languages are more likely than Irish is to disappear forever.[25] In strong contrast to the pessimism of 1926, an increasingly pervasive latent bilingualism is being celebrated, while defensive hostility to the language has all but disappeared.

Along with designated places on the map, Irish has strong state support, dynamic radio and TV stations, dedicated schools, a lively publishing sector, a committed cohort of writers, and a growing number of enthusiastic learners and advanced academic students, at home and globally.[26] New generations of sophisticated native speakers and Gaelscoil past pupils post and tweet in and about the language, innovating terms like '7ain' and 'an t7ain' for '[the] week'.[27] Apps and websites give learners and researchers instant access to vocabulary, sample sentences, native-speaker pronunciation, general knowledge and the kind of esoterica that used to require expensive travel.

Fifty years ago, most native speakers of Irish could not converse easily outside their own dialect, resorting to English when they encountered speakers from other areas. That began to change when Raidió na Gaeltachta was set up in 1972, with stations in Donegal, Connemara and West Kerry. Native speakers and learners of 'book Irish' used to occupy separate spheres, linguistically, educationally and socially, but that too has changed. Irish e-books, RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta, on air and online, and an expanding spectrum of new media help to create a virtual Gaeltacht wherever the speaker or learner happens to be.

*Súil Eile*, 'a different eye', is the motto of TG4, the Irish-language TV station founded in 1996 as Teilifís na Gaeilge; it sums up the ways this first official language adds another dimension to a life lived in Ireland or otherwise connected to our country. It invites participation, at whatever level feels comfortable, in our evolving bilingualism.

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[25] James McCloskey, 2001: *Guthanna in éag: an mairfidh an Ghaeilge beo/Voices silenced: will Irish survive* (Cois Life, Baile Átha Cliath); Michael Cronin, 2005: *An Ghaeilge sa aois nua/Irish in the new century* (Cois Life, Baile Átha Cliath).
[26] At a public discussion hosted by the Fulbright Commission in Dublin's Mansion House on 5 March 2018, to highlight the popularity of Irish in the US, Dublin's Lord Mayor, Mícheál MacDonncha, announced that the Duolingo app for Irish has 4.2 million users, 60% of whom are in the US. University and outreach classes are also heavily subscribed internationally.
[27] Dr Teresa Lynn, of Dublin City University's ADAPT Research Centre for Digital Content, noted at the Mansion House discussion, 5 March 2018, that the number of Irish-language tweets sent has reached 2.6 million, and that Twitter's informal platform is generating new linguistic usages. See, for example, the award-winning publication by Darach Ó Séaghdha, 2017: *Motherfoclóir, dispatches from a not so dead language* (Head of Zeus, London); his Motherfo-clóir podcasts (https://player.fm/series/motherfocloir); and his Twitter account @theirishfor. See also the section on resources and possibilities below for some other relevant websites.

## Vernacular Irishness and the new emigration

The rich forms of vernacular Irish-language culture have significant English-language analogues, in film and other media, with comparable global impact. Home-based innovations, in the Gaeltacht and elsewhere, lend themselves to online marketing, global touring (especially among musicians), and highly specialised niche promotion. Gaeltacht people's long tradition of emigration—now more commonly emigration-and-return—also means they are uniquely connected to the Irish diaspora. The ties that most closely bind these communities now are likely to be electronic, often expressed on social media with wit and panache.

A complex popular culture of emigration that assesses the bonds of home and the travails of separation has emerged in recent years. Its vernacular forms include YouTube videos of Irish homecomings that inflect the nineteenth-century trope of the American wake with its grieving Irish mother to show hip, smiling young people arriving home unexpectedly on modern Irish doorsteps to rapturous welcomes. Such videos have been identified as 'works of emotion in which the act of leaving is nullified by the ecstasy of return'.[28] They register ambivalent responses to the latest, continuing, wave of emigration and constitute an important form of amateur cultural production. These stand in contrast to emigration-related representations produced by corporations including Kerrygold, Lidl and Home Store +

[28] Eleanor O'Leary and Diane Negra, 2016: 'Emigration, return migration and surprise homecomings in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland', *Irish Studies Review* 24 (2), 127–41: 138.

More (whose ads are also likely to include a 'Mammy' figure either living or dead and a heavy emphasis on the restored comforts of home).

Youth-oriented mobilisation in the face of a globalised economy has ranged further, from protest movements like 'We're Not Leaving' to films such as *Eat your children*.[29] A short film like *The Omega male* thematises the generational impact of emigration by focusing on Conor, a fictional young man who is the last of his cohort left in Ireland, and spends the film wandering around an empty Dublin.[30]

These examples show the vernacular as a frequent site of counter-discourse. That it can also be the site of reclaimed language, and assertions of national identity, was demonstrated in March 2018, when a large snowstorm hit Ireland and a proliferation of tweets circulated under #sneachta to document the impact of the storm and people's responses to it. The word for snow in Irish was seen to operate not only as an interpellation but also as a kind of cultural trademark over vernacular creativity. Such forms of creativity constitute meaningful forms of social communication, modelling an essential capacity to float free of the constraints of market economies. With some mediation, resources like these can be expanded beyond a model of streams flowing in different directions, to different destinations, to constitute something more like a cultural delta: a vibrant global ecosystem of the real and the virtual, humming with connections.

[29] Treasa O'Brien and Mary Jane O'Leary (Dirs and Writers), 2015: *Eat your children* (Underground Films Ireland; Dartmouth Films, UK).
[30] John Hozier-Byrne (Writer and Dir.), 2014: *The Omega male* (Stoneface Films).

# Only connect! Resources and possibilities

Irish-language organisations and Irish-language officers elsewhere have raised the profile of Irish in public spaces throughout Ireland and abroad, updating its image and channelling funding to creative new initiatives. Government funding has enabled British universities to offer outreach classes in Irish for local communities and aided the Fulbright Commission to facilitate the teaching of Irish in US universities.

This sort of activity, while very effective, is only one layer thick, reflecting an ideology that learning or speaking Irish is an end in itself. As this paper has attempted to show, a language is much more than a political position, and Irish has a great deal to offer, even to people who may never speak a word of it, or set foot in Ireland. Even a small amount, or a minimal level of awareness, can reveal depth, texture and complexity in almost every aspect of our culture, environment and history. As suggested in the section above on 'Irish-language culture and the revolutionary imagination', investment in PhD-level specialists to interpret recent and current scholarship for interested general readers, viewers and participants could pay rich dividends, as could the development of computer games based on authentic indigenous material.[31]

Placenames are an obvious starting point for bilingual awareness: the vast majority come from Irish, and most are descriptive in origin. Logainm.ie, the Placenames Database of Ireland, created in 2007, describes itself as 'a comprehensive management system for data, archival records and placenames research conducted by the State'.[32] Drawing on many decades of work by public servants, the earliest of whom were employed by the British Ordnance Survey in the nineteenth century,[33] its interactive maps and other features operate in Irish and English to provide easily accessible information on over 85,000 townland- and street-names in Ireland, among other categories. Since 2015/16 its crowdsourcing initiative *Meitheal Logainm* has enlisted members of the public, including schoolchildren, to upload minor placenames in English or Irish, along with other data, to further enrich this global electronic version of the medieval *dindsenchas*.[34]

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[31] *Glas Ghaibhleann*, the wonderful cow of Irish literature, folklore and landscape, is already a (non-bovine) character in the role-playing game *Vindictus*, produced in Korea.

[32] See https://www.logainm.ie/en/; this database was created as a public resource by Dublin City University's Fiontar and Scoil na Gaeilge in collaboration with the Placenames Branch of the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

[33] As dramatised by Brian Friel in his 1980 play *Translations* (published by Faber and Faber, London, 1981). See also Andrews, *A paper landscape*.

[34] The *Meitheal Logainm* resource can be accessed at: https://meitheal.logainm.ie/en/ (27 September 2018).

A related website, Dúchas.ie, has been set up as part of the project to digitise the National Folklore Collection, and this was already well advanced in early 2018. At time of writing, 250,459 stories collected by schoolchildren throughout Ireland in 1937–38 have been uploaded to the site, along with 9,771 images from the related Photographic Collection.[35] *Meitheal Dúchas*, a similar initiative to *Meitheal Logainm*, which launched in spring 2015, already has some 2,000 members wordwide. To date they have transcribed 22% of the Irish-language content and 25% of the English: a total of over 100,000 pages.[36] Complemented by a website for biographical names and a blog, these sites offer a range of educational resources for schools and continue to add layers of content.[37]

For learners of Irish, or those simply curious to know what a word means, a website and a related app (*Teanglann*), recently developed by Foras na Gaeilge in parallel with the New English-Irish Dictionary project, are available for phones and computers.[38] Other such apps include *Enjoy Irish!*, developed by Oideas Gael, Co. Donegal, for adult learners, and *Cúla 4*, developed by television station TG4 for preschoolers.[39] The New Corpus for Ireland is a large collection of texts in Irish, from fiction to government documents, containing some 30 million words.[40] Designed to be used for linguistic research, it was created as part of the New Irish Dictionary Project in Foras na Gaeilge, and is available for use by members of the public on registration. Those interested in Ireland's rich medieval culture can access texts and translations on University College Cork's Corpus of Electronic Texts (CELT),[41] the free digital humanities resource for Irish history, literature and politics, while eDIL is the free dictionary of medieval Irish, based on the RIA's comprehensive *Dictionary of the Irish language* (1913–76).[42] Taking a different approach, Darach Ó Séaghdha's *Motherfoclóir* announces: 'Behind the wall of grammar homework lies the amazing world of the Irish language, and Darach … wants to take you there'.[43]

[35] The folklore digitisation project website is available at: https://www.duchas.ie (25 September 2018).
[36] The *Meitheal Dúchas* project website can be accessed at: https://www.duchas.ie/en/meitheal/ (25 September 2018).
[37] See https://www.ainm.ie for the biographical names element of the project, and https://www.gaois.ie for the blog (both accessed 25 September 2018).
[38] The *Teanglann* website can be accessed at: https://www.teanglann.ie/ (25 September 2018).
[39] These apps, and others, are listed on: www.Gaelport.com, an Irish language news and information website (25 September 2018).
[40] This corpus can be accessed at: http://corpas.focloir.ie/ (25 September 2018).
[41] The Corpus of Electronic Texts project is available at: https://celt.ucc.ie/ (25 September 2018).
[42] The online dictionary of the Irish language is available at: www.dil.ie (25 September 2018).
[43] See https://www.headstuff.org/motherfocloir/ (25 September 2018).

Government funding helps people trace their ancestors, and aids local communities to raise their international profile, through the 'IrelandXO: Ireland Reaching Out' project, but this otherwise excellent site does not appear to have any Irish-language content, or to mention that Irish may have been the first or only language of the ancestors being searched for, many of whom grew up in an environment made legible and navigable by that language.[44]

Original research in the academic areas discussed here is often written up in language intended for specialists: most of its authors are busy academics with other demanding roles as teachers and administrators. As suggested above, it would greatly enhance the aims of *Creative Ireland* if resources were allocated to making their findings accessible to the interested public, at home and abroad—again, place could be the starting point—and to ensuring that all government-sponsored websites include as many as possible of the relevant links to Irish, Irish folklore and the Gaeltacht. Meanwhile, a strong counter-measure to the commercialisation and commodification of culture and creativity would be a similar focus on vernacular creative expression in English as it manifests itself in an ever-expanding array of twenty-first century technological forms.

[44] This project can be accessed at: https://www.irelandxo.com/ (25 September 2018).

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