



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Meeting with Risteard MacGabhann, Derry, 19 February, 1986.

I met with Dick MacGabhann, who is a Lecturer in Continuing Education at the Magee campus of the University of Ulster, in Derry on 19 February, 1986. MacGabhann is a native Derryman and very active in cultural affairs generally (he is an organiser of the annual November arts festival in the city) and in adult education and has long been associated with Irish language affairs. Some years ago he was a member of Bord na Gaeilge and he has recently finished a term on the Northern Ireland Arts Council. He is a member of the Schools Broadcasting Council. Among the points he made were the following:

- The University of Ulster at Coleraine now has a strong Irish studies department but the original intention in the 1960s of the Northern Ireland Department of Education had been that the Coleraine campus should have no Irish language courses. However, it was found in visits to secondary schools that there was a demand for Irish and this forced a fairly quick re-think on the part of the then NUU authorities. MacGabhann himself at the time was a secondary teacher and had a diploma in linguistics. He was the first person recruited (in 1969) to lecture at Coleraine on the Irish language and taught it initially as a linguistics element within a broader modern languages course. There are now five or six lecturers in Irish at Coleraine. MacGabhann transferred to his present post at Magee in 1973.
- We spoke about the Northern Ireland Arts Council's role vis-a-vis Irish culture. MacGabhann who was involved when the Council decided in the early 1970s to set up a Traditional Arts Committee and appoint an officer in that field, is disappointed with the performance of the person then appointed and who has held the post since, Ciaran Carson. MacGabhann feels that the Arts Council took a brave step in agreeing to finance a "traditional arts" function and that Carson has failed to develop its potential. The latter has, in MacGabhann's view, not done enough to give direction to a broad range of Irish cultural activities and has taken a narrowly "antiquarian" view. MacGabhann and others on the Arts Council board had suggested to him that he develop relations with the music officers of the various Education and Library Boards but he had failed to follow up on this suggestion which was intended to promote Irish music in the schools. In recent times the Traditional Arts area in the Arts Council has become even less defined and is now subsumed in a broader literature division under Michael Langley. MacGabhann

clearly feels that Carson's approach had a lot to do with this slippage. He emphasised that he likes Carson personally but is clearly disappointed with how little has been achieved since the initiative of the early 1970s.

- Somewhat reluctantly then, MacGabhann sees little prospect of the Arts Council as such being developed into a really effective mechanism for recognising specifically Irish cultural activity in Northern Ireland. He suggests that in the context of the new situation created by the Anglo-Irish Agreement (about which he is very positive - he sees it as a real change) a separate body should be set up to promote Irish language and culture. This new organisation could interact with all the existing structures that might be used to recognise the Irish cultural identity e.g. broadcasting media, the schools and the Arts Council itself. MacGabhann would consider it particularly important that the Education and Library Boards should be tied into the new body by being represented on its board. He thinks this new body might be structured along Bord na Gaeilge lines. As a former member of the Bord he feels that the body has been successful in some areas, less so in others. He is inclined to feel that very much depends on the calibre of the personnel involved in each area.
- MacGabhann, in discussing the general question of recognition of the Irish language and cultural identity in Northern Ireland, cautioned against seeking progress that would be too dramatic or too quick in this area. He thinks it important not to alienate the majority community but at the same time is very pleased that it may now be possible to make steady progress in provision for the language and other cultural activities. He is fairly dismissive of what he would see as those committed to pure revivalism in Comhaltas Uladh and feels that there are very few left with this kind of attitude, which he views as unrealistic.
- As a member of the Schools Broadcasting Council he recalled that the original decision in the early 1970s to go ahead with an Irish language educational programme had only been questioned (but not opposed) by 2 out of the 15 or 16 members. The rest had supported the concept. He is confident from his present contacts that there will soon be a daily output in Irish on BBC Radio Ulster. Some of this output will be taken from Radio Foyle which is being integrated more and more into mainstream Radio Ulster broadcasting. Foyle has a more flexible format and fewer restrictive practices than Radio Ulster and BBC management, seeing the advantage of this in meeting the twin challenge of cutbacks and Independent broadcasting, are clearly anxious to use more of its output across Northern Ireland. MacGabhann was definitely inclined to see the improving situation regarding Irish in the BBC as a consequence of the climate created by the Anglo-Irish negotiations of the last two years and the Anglo-Irish Agreement itself. He even sees the appointment of the Welshman Arwell Ellis Jones

as head of BBC radio in this light. There is a greater consciousness of the need to do something about Irish language programming in the BBC now he feels.

- MacGabhann mentioned two other ways in which recognition could be given to the Irish language, which would have a strong impact but not cost very much. Giving examples in recent years of court cases in Derry where defendants had not been allowed to use Irish as they wished, he felt that provision should be made for such cases. Few people would actually want to use Irish in court so a step that would be important symbolically would cost relatively little. MacGabhann also felt that it would be a very positive thing if the NIO press office had someone on their staff who could discuss issues on the BBC Irish language programmes and elsewhere.
- MacGabhann referred to two centres of Irish language activity in Derry. One is at the Irish speaking school in Steelstown. The Chairman of the Committee there, Gerry O'Hara, is a member of Provisional Sinn Fein but MacGabhann stressed that the school generally is run in a non-political way and he gave me some names of non-PSF people involved. The other centre is at Dove House where some ex-prisoners are involved in ACE (Action for Community Employment) schemes. Some of those involved at Dove House are currently undertaking an attitudinal survey in the local community to the Irish language.

We are to keep in touch and MacGabhann will give further thought to positive steps that might be taken in the cultural area. In view of his strongly supportive attitude to the Agreement and his realistic and balanced approach on cultural and identity questions his name might be borne in mind as a candidate for existing bodies dealing with these fields or for any new structure that may be set up.



Colm O Floinn
25 February 1986

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