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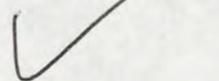
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Meeting with Seamus MacMathúna, Professor of Irish in the
University of Ulster at Coleraine

I met with Professor MacMathúna on 6 March 1986 in Coleraine. As well as being Professor of Irish he is head of modern languages in the University of Ulster. A native of Co. Tyrone he has been six years teaching at Coleraine and was previously at UCG. An old Irish specialist he spent some years in the Celtic Studies field in Sweden. He has a teaching staff of five in the Irish department at Coleraine. Among points of interest which arose during our discussion were the following:

- He is involved with the Ulster Placenames Society with Professor Gearóid Stockman of Queen's and Ruairí O hUiginn an Irish lecturer in Stockman's department. For many years the real force behind the Society had been Deirdre Flanagan of Queen's but since her death a few years ago it had been less active. Ruairí O hUiginn had now taken on the job of editing the Society's occasional journal and it was hoped that there would be greater activity in the future.

- He has himself put proposals for collaboration on the study of Irish placenames in five of the six Northern counties to the Ordnance Survey in Dublin. Apparently the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland are already involved in placename work in one of the six counties and MacMathúna proposes to start his studies in Co. Derry. He has estimated the staffing and other costs of completing the study in that county at Stg.£76,000 and has already applied to the University Grants Committee (UGC) to fund the project. A decision by the UGC on the overall application for research monies from the University of

Ulster is imminent but MacMathuna feels that it is unlikely that his project will receive an allocation from the block of monies eventually given to Coleraine because of the current emphasis within the University on conflict and peace studies in the humanities area.

- Some work has been done in his Department on a possible Irish Studies course which could be used in schools across the community divide in Northern Ireland. However, this has been suspended for the present due to staffing and budgetary restrictions. MacMathúna himself, while he acknowledges the fears of those who feel that the introduction of a broadly based Irish Studies course would lead to a further loss of interest in the study of the Irish language as such in schools, nevertheless feels that the promotion of Irish studies in schools in the Northern Ireland context "would be a risk worth taking". He says that there are about 20,000 pupils studying the Irish language in 110 second level schools in Northern Ireland.
- He remarked that in modern languages such as French and German teaching assistants who had these languages as their mother tongue were appointed for two year periods in Northern Ireland. He was not sure how such appointments were funded but felt it might be through a combined or reciprocal arrangement on the part of the Department of Education in Northern Ireland (DENI) and the French or German Governments as the case may be. MacMathúna raised the possibility of appointing teaching assistants in Irish from the Gaeltacht and saw no reason (apart from the attitude of DENI) why this could not be done.
- His own children attend what he described as a "liberal" controlled school in Ballymoney (Dalriada). Senator John Robb, who has children there too, and he jointly tried to persuade the school's management to include Irish on the

curriculum but with no success so far. They had quoted the UN Charter in support of their case and he agreed that they would now be able to quote the Anglo-Irish Agreement! MacMathúna who favours the provision of integrated education as a "middle ground element" in the circumstances of Northern Ireland had taken a conscious decision to send his children to a controlled school. After an experience of some years he regretted having to say that the whole ethos of the school was indeed predominantly in conflict with his children's identity though he feels this might have some positive side-effects in terms of honing their own capacity to assert their identity and put their case.

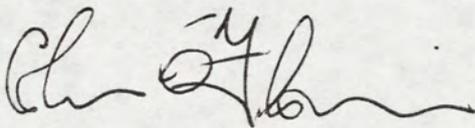
- Professor MacMathúna says that he has had a tough enough time at Coleraine since his arrival there six years ago. It was well known that the candidate first proposed for the post of Professor of Irish, who was from Belfast, had, on mature reflection, decided that Coleraine did not provide a congenial climate for Irish studies. MacMathúna says that he has thus had to constantly assert the position of Irish on the academic curriculum. Linking study of Irish with other modern languages as he has done has, he feels, been good for his status in the University. A further burden has been the tremendous job of re-organisation at Coleraine in the last few years with the implementation of the Chilvers Report. MacMathúna feels that overall the way ahead is now fairly clear for the University of Ulster but there are still risks in the innovative academic approach being adopted in many areas. The faculties at Coleraine supply teachers for the Magee campus in Derry. Professor MacMathúna remarked in particular on the current strong interest being shown by students from the Republic in the new International Business Communications course to be taught at Magee which will combine computer, office administration and language elements.

- In the Irish department at Coleraine they take a modern applied approach (despite his own background in Old Irish!) Some of the most committed students are ex-prisoners (MacMathúna remarked the checks are made to ensure that there is "no prior claim" on these persons). There is a fair number of mature students because the Diploma in Education course in Irish Studies at Coleraine provides another channel of entry (apart from normal school-leaving criteria) for such people into the three year honours undergraduate course in Irish. However, with what MacMathuna sees as an increasingly utilitarian attitude on the part of parents and pupils there is a real worry that not enough applications are coming forward from the schools for the Irish departments at both Queen's and the University of Ulster.

- Professor MacMathúna spoke of the potential role of Scots Gaelic in stimulating an interest in Irish studies in the majority community. In 1982 the University at his instigation had hired an American, Virginia Blankenhorn, specifically to teach Scots Gaelic in the Irish Department. However, demand for her course as a separate option had been low and he now intended to integrate Scots Gaelic into other elements of the overall Irish course.

- The Professor spoke of the huge demand for Irish language classes at adult level in Northern Ireland and said that there was great scope for development in this field. He felt that it was culturally important to provide full reception of RTE Television and Radio and Radio na Gaeltachta throughout Northern Ireland. Finally, he wondered whether it would be possible to provide special bursaries to students from the South to study in Northern institutions.

At the end of our conversation, Professor MacMathúna emphasised that he was very glad to have had the opportunity of this discussion. He praised the Taoiseach and the Minister in the context of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and said that this was the first contact he had had from an Irish Government source in his years at Coleraine. Further talk without some real progress would be fairly futile but he also felt that the very fact of our contact was important in itself. He would be forwarding papers on some of the ideas he had raised and other areas. He invited me to return on another occasion to meet a number of cultural contacts in the north west of Northern Ireland and some of those involved with conflict and peace studies at Coleraine.



Colm O Floinn
13 March 1986

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