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Modalities of Revival

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Children and the Irish Cultural Revival

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When we think of the Irish cultural revival, we tend to think of the instigators of the various revivalist movements, people like W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, Douglas Hyde and Michael Cusack. Or we might think of the enthusiastic groups of Edwardian twenty-somethings who staged new Irish plays in dingy halls in their spare time or spent their summer holidays in the Gaeltacht practising their cúpla focal. We are less likely to think of children and youths under the age of eighteen, even though there is ample evidence in memoirs and Bureau of Military History witness statements[1] to suggest that the Irish cultural revival helped to influence the upcoming revolutionary generation. This is possibly because the history of Irish children and childhood is still in its infancy as an area of academic study.

In recent years historians have started to excavate the experiences of children and ideas about childhood in Ireland's past. This is certainly true of the revival period, though plenty of work remains to be done. This podcast offers a taste of some of the research undertaken by myself and others touching on the theme of children and the Irish cultural revival. I will discuss how and why various Irish nationalist individuals and organisations attempted to engage children and youth in the Irish cultural revival, particularly in the early twentieth century. I will also explore the link between the promotion of a specifically Irish cultural identity and the political socialisation of Irish nationalist youth in the same period.

[1] These witness statements form part of Military Archives' Bureau of Military History collection, which covers the revolutionary period of 1913-21 in Ireland. They can be accessed online at www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie.

The Irish cultural revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought to combat the growing cultural assimilation of Ireland into Britain. The revival also bolstered calls for increased or outright political independence for Ireland by emphasising the uniqueness of Irish culture and by extension its separate nationhood. Many Irish nationalists saw children as having an important role to play in the revival and promotion of indigenous Irish culture. At a practical level it was easier for a child to gain fluency in Irish or to develop skill as a hurler. At a metaphorical level children were the embodiment of Ireland's future. They could be utilised as valuable symbols of the future nation state. One day they too would be in a position to shape the country's destiny as political and community leaders, policy-makers, voters and parents. Thus, organisations like the Gaelic League, Inghinidhe na hÉireann and Na Fianna Éireann, certain schools, such as those operated by the Christian Brothers and Patrick Pearse, and nationalist newspaper columnists actively sought to engage children in aspects of the Irish cultural revival. These aspects included language, literature, sport, theatre, music, dance and even needlework.

This focus on children was not unique to Ireland. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was a growing perception in the western world of children as a national resource and a group within society in need of legal protection. The years leading up to the First World War were characterised by a pervasive anxiety about the future. Older European powers feared being overtaken by new rivals. Western countries became increasingly concerned that industrialisation and urbanisation had contributed to degeneration of the physical and moral condition of their populations. One response to this anxiety was to take action to improve the health, education and moral welfare of the rising generation. The idea was to mould children's minds and bodies as a future resource for the state (Heywood 2005, 29-30).

This can be seen in a variety of initiatives, such as campaigns to improve children's health, the introduction of compulsory education, the addition of physical education to the school curriculum, and increasing concern about children's literature and pastimes. The efforts of Irish nationalists to engage and socialise children must be seen within this wider context.

Many of the Irish nationalists of the early twentieth century who worked with children were mindful of the importance of their own childhood experiences in the development of their cultural and political views as adults. Ríona Nic Congáil has highlighted the link between the young members of the Irish Fireside Club in the late nineteenth century and the future Gaelic League activists of the early twentieth century, most famously Patrick Pearse and Éamon de Valera. The centre of the Irish Fireside Club was a newspaper column for children that appeared for most of its existence in the *Weekly Freeman*. The column sparked the formation of self-governing branches of the club around the country and abroad. The Irish Fireside Club fostered a spirit of self-education and co-operation amongst children and provided a forum for the discussion and debate of various issues including cultural nationalism. The column offered children the opportunity to compete for prizes, for instance by submitting stories and letters in Irish. Experience gained through participation in the club helped to prepare many members for their future roles as cultural and political activists (See Nic Congáil 2009).

Another example is Bulmer Hobson who established two nationalist youth groups called Na Fianna Éireann, the first in 1902 and the second in 1909. Although he came from one of the oldest Quaker families in Ireland, Hobson grew up to become a leading republican nationalist in the years prior to the 1916 Easter Rising. His neighbours in north Belfast, the poets Alice Milligan and Anna Johnston were

responsible for introducing him to the Irish cultural revival in the 1890s. When he was in his early teens, Milligan loaned him books by Standish O'Grady. As a result, heroes like Fergus MacRoy and Cúchulain peopled the world of his imagination. They became his constant companions, more real to him than the town in which he lived. While he was a student at the Friends' School in Lisburn, the centenary of the 1798 insurrection took place which kindled his interest in Wolfe Tone and the Society of United Irishmen. Johnston, who wrote under the pseudonym Ethna Carbery, encouraged him to join the Gaelic League where he met like-minded adolescents, like Denis McCullough who recruited him into the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a secret society that advocated the establishment of a separate Irish republic through the use of physical force if necessary. Hobson later asserted that O'Grady's stories pointed him in a pro-Irish direction while the teaching and example of Tone and the United Irishmen charted his future course as a republican nationalist (Hobson 1968, 1-3). Hobson in particular illustrates the way in which a youth's engagement with the Irish cultural revival might help to influence their political views.

The Gaelic League began to cater to children and youth around 1899 (Nic Congáil 2009, 113). Its efforts included Irish language classes, children's literature in Irish, and campaigns for the inclusion of Irish in the school curriculum and provision of bilingual education in the Gaeltacht. Promoting the revival of the Irish language was only part of what the Gaelic League offered young people. It also nurtured Irish music, dance, literature and drama through its support for local and national cultural festivals, some of which featured a competitive element. Local branches hosted concerts and *céilidhe* and established hurling teams.

Research undertaken by Timothy McMahon shows that Gaelic League members could range in age from six to 76 years and that Irish language classes might

cater for people of all ages, as in South Galway where young schoolchildren studied alongside people in their seventies. On Achill Island old men helped to teach children's classes, providing guidance on pronunciation and grammar, while in Dublin one might hear children correcting adults' mistakes during language classes (McMahon 2002, 134). In some cities, such as Belfast and London, there were classes set up specifically for children. When the energetic Fr Matthew Maguire became parish priest in Kilskeery, Co. Tyrone around 1906, he formed a model branch of the Gaelic League in his area. Within four months of his arrival he had 230 boys and 180 girls attending Irish classes in the national schools under his management. He also urged local protestant clergymen to set up Irish classes for the children in their schools. Furthermore, he supervised four night schools in which children and adults took Irish language and history classes (McMahon 2002, 152-3). These are just a few examples of children's involvement in the Gaelic League.

As Joost Augusteijn has noted, Patrick Pearse, in particular, was an advocate for the Gaelic League's engagement with youth. He encouraged local branches of the Gaelic League to set up junior branches or Éire Óg clubs. Pearse also took responsibility for ensuring that the Gaelic League generated publications in Irish aimed at children after he became the general secretary of its Publication Committee in June 1900. He was keen to see a new, modern literature being written and published in Irish. Concerned that too many writers in Irish were just retelling folk tales and writing in a seventeenth-century style, Pearse wanted to offer readers alternatives to this outmoded approach to writing in Irish as well as to popular British literature in English. In 1905 he began publishing stories for young boys written in simple Irish. One example is his short story collection *Íosagáin agus Sgéalta Eile*

which sold 979 copies in 1909, two years after its initial publication (Augusteijn 2010, 90-4).

The Gaelic League also undertook campaigns in relation to children's education. For instance, it produced various penny pamphlets that advocated the upgrading of the position of Irish as a subject taught in schools as well as bilingual education in the Gaeltacht. These were sent to the members of boards and commissions responsible for education policy, to bishops, members of parliament, heads of schools, and the press. As result of the Gaelic League's efforts, more schools began to teach Irish and bilingual education was introduced in Gaeltacht areas, which meant that students in Irish-speaking parts of the country could be taught through the medium of Irish. The league followed up the curriculum concessions it gained with an appeal to school managers and teachers to implement them. It later successfully campaigned to have Irish accepted as a compulsory matriculation subject for the new National University of Ireland established in 1908 (Augusteijn 2010, 87-90, 117-8).

The increased demand and availability of Irish as a school subject meant that teachers needed more training in the Irish language. The Gaelic League responded by setting up summer schools for teachers and other interested language learners in Gaeltacht areas. Initially these were aimed at adults. In 1907, however, the London Gaelic League awarded nine children a fortnight at Ring College, which would enable them to have a holiday in Ireland while improving their Irish language skills (Ó Fathaigh and Ó Síochain 1908, 9). This may have been the start of the modern custom of sending Irish teenagers to Irish college in the Gaeltacht in the summer.

In comparison to the 1901 general census, the 1911 census indicated a growth in the number of people living in English-speaking parts of Ireland who claimed knowledge of the Irish language, which suggests that the Gaelic League's endeavours

were having some impact, particularly in relation to children. Timothy McMahon reports that Belfast saw an increase of over 4,000 Irish speakers across the age spectrum while Dublin had more than 2,400 additional Irish speakers. Outside of Belfast and Co. Antrim, the growth in new speakers was mainly amongst school-aged children. The accuracy of these figures is open to question, however, as people may have been over-estimating their proficiency in Irish in their census returns (McMahon 2002, 166-7).

When Bulmer Hobson joined the Tír na nÓg (or Land of Youth) branch of the Gaelic League in Belfast in 1901 at the age of eighteen, he met a group of young people who worked 'enthusiastically together' to revive not only the Irish language, but also Gaelic games and traditional Irish dancing. A year later Hobson founded the first incarnation of the nationalist youth group Na Fianna Éireann in Belfast as an umbrella organisation for junior hurling clubs, some of which had grown out of Irish language classes for boys in west Belfast. He decided to form this youth organisation after the first Antrim County Board of the Gaelic Athletic Association refused to organise competitions for the junior hurling clubs. Hobson recognised the importance of training hurlers at a young age. He observed that adults who took up hurling were positively dangerous while young boys possessed a natural grace and acquired skill relatively quickly. Hobson thought that the only way Antrim would be able to compete with other counties was to train the young boys and make first-class hurlers out of them (Hobson 1968, 3, 14-16). This first incarnation of the Fianna organised inter-club hurling competitions and offered classes in Irish language and history. It later expanded to include Gaelic football and possibly a drama group (Hay 2009, 28-9). For Hobson, these first Fianna boys had the potential to be moulded into a strong force to help in what he saw as the liberation of Ireland. One of them, Seamus

Robinson, did just that through his later involvement in the Irish Republican Army (Hay 2011, 442).

Some schools, most notably the Christian Brothers' schools and Pearse's schools, promoted the playing of Gaelic games, though this wasn't developed on a mass scale for boys or on any scale for girls until after independence in 1922 (Coldrey 1988, 194; Nic Congáil 2013, 179, 183-4). For instance, the year 1903 saw the first Schools Shield competition being held in Cork and the formation of the Tipperary Schools Championship Committee to promote Gaelic games in that county. This was followed in 1904 by the foundation of the Dublin Schools League, which stumbled for a few years before really getting up and running in 1911 (Coldrey 1988, 192). The prominence of sport in Irish schools, particularly Gaelic sport, would increase in the coming years.

For Irish nationalists, youth participation in Gaelic games served three main purposes. Firstly, from a cultural nationalist perspective it promoted an indigenous Irish pastime amongst the young. Secondly, following a trend pioneered in British public schools in the nineteenth century, it fostered the healthy development of a child's body and character. Finally, it built social bonds in much the same way as memberships in organisations like the Gaelic League did. Thus, playing Gaelic games could help boys in particular prepare for their future roles as virile citizens and soldiers of the Irish nation.

The recognition that children were the future of the Irish nationalist movement fuelled initiatives to prepare young people for their forthcoming roles within that movement by educating them along nationalist lines. Aspects of the Irish cultural revival played an important part in this education. For instance, when the nationalist women's organisation Inghinidhe na hÉireann (or Daughters of Ireland) was

established in October 1900, one of its first initiatives was to offer free classes in Irish language, history, music, dancing, and needlework for children over the age of nine. These were held mainly in Dublin, although about one hundred children attended language and history classes in Cork. These classes were designed to address the perceived shortcomings of the national school curriculum, which Inghinidhe na hÉireann did not deem Irish enough in content. Money was tight so Dublin classes were held in a loft on Strand Street with little or no equipment. Sometimes dancing teachers had to sing or hum an accompaniment because there were no musical instruments or musicians available. Among the teachers were Maud Gonne, who taught drama when she was in Dublin, and Marie Perolz, who held lantern-lit classes in history and Irish. Ella Young's approach to teaching history was to share her passion for Ireland's sagas and heroic tales with the children. She recalled teaching about eighty children who stood closely packed in a small room at the top of a wobbly staircase that overlooked a narrow, noisy street. She described the children as a collection of newsboys and patriotic children of both genders who had spent their lives playing in the streets and who could hardly write their own names (Ward 1995, 52-3). The participants in these classes had opportunities to display their new skills in public. Some won prizes at the Gaelic League Feis (or festival), while others displayed articles of needlework at Sinn Féin's annual Christmas Fair. In June 1909 Inghinidhe na hÉireann's organ *Bean na hÉireann* (or Woman of Ireland) boasted that hundreds of children who took their free classes later began working in the nationalist movement (8).

Inghinidhe na hÉireann also urged nationalist women around the country to find ways of educating children informally in their own communities. In her June 1909 editorial for *Bean na hÉireann*, Helena Molony pointed out that it was not

enough to teach Irish language, history and economics in school if children were not imbued with a love of Ireland and anything Irish. In order to inspire this love, she urged Irish women with leisure time ‘to spare a few hours every week trying to bring some brightness into the lives of the little children of the very poor’. As an illustration, she raised the example of ‘one young lady, who, although one of the busiest and most hard-working of Nationalists, has a little gathering once a week in her sitting room, where they learn Irish, some simple stories from history, and a verse or two of National songs’ (8).

Molony later reported that Inghinidhe na hÉireann ‘abandoned its boys’ classes because they were too hard to manage’, and instead welcomed a new nationalist youth group established by Constance, Countess Markievicz and Bulmer Hobson in Dublin in August 1909 (Molony 1950). The pair founded Na Fianna Éireann as an Irish nationalist antidote to the growing popularity of Robert Baden-Powell’s burgeoning Boy Scout movement and the continuing existence of the Boys’ Brigade in Ireland. This second incarnation of the Fianna offered a blend of scouting, military training and Irish cultural activities to boys as well as some girls in Belfast and Waterford. Markievicz and Hobson envisioned the youth group as the nucleus of a future Irish army. Upon reaching the age of eighteen, many Fianna members transferred to the Irish Volunteers, an adult paramilitary organisation formed in November 1913, which was later known as the Irish Republican Army (or IRA). Furthermore, many current and former members of the Fianna served as commanders, fighters, dispatch carriers and scouts during the 1916 Easter Rising and the Irish War of Independence, which took place between 1919 and 1921 (Hay 2011, 442-6).

Although the main focus of the Fianna was on scouting skills and military training, there was a strong cultural element, particularly in the period prior to the

1916 rising. Fianna members were encouraged to participate in the Irish cultural revival in the areas of language, sport, theatre and music. Participation in such activities helped members to cultivate a sense of a separate Irish national identity. Members had to pass Irish language tests in order to progress upwards in the organisation and earn their colour-coded shoulder cords. The boys honed their Irish language skills through classes offered by their Fianna troops or by the Gaelic League (Hay 2011, 446-7). Some Fianna troops started their own hurling teams and in early 1914 a hurling league for Fianna members was established in Dublin, echoing Hobson's earlier efforts in Belfast. Fianna members with the requisite talent and inclination also had opportunities to develop and display their dramatic and musical talents. Some Dublin members formed a drama group called the Fianna Players and performed a number of Irish plays including Padraic Colum's *The Saxon Shillin'* (Mac Caisin 1947). Colum's play had been rejected by the Irish National Theatre Society, a forerunner of the Abbey Theatre, on the grounds that it was merely anti-military recruitment propaganda, but this suited the Fianna Players because the play's theme chimed with the promise made by Fianna members 'never to join England's armed forces' (Hay 2008, 60). The Fianna also lent their talents to fundraising events around the country, such as the Lang Benefit Concert held in Dublin in early 1915 at which members were among the performers of Irish songs, dances, recitations and sketches.

Alongside the informal educational initiatives of Inghinidhe na hÉireann and the Fianna were formal educational institutions that incorporated aspects of the Irish cultural revival into their curricula. For instance, the Christian Brothers schools taught Irish from 1878 and by the turn of the century were considered *the* Irish-Ireland teaching institution in the country, espousing an Irish cultural nationalism grounded

on Catholic and Gaelic values. The Christian Brothers' overtly nationalist approach to teaching Irish history and geography also helped to foster this reputation. Past pupils of Christian Brothers' schools are notable for the leading roles that they played in the Gaelic League, advanced nationalist organisations, and the events of the Irish revolution (Coldrey 1988, 9-10, 272).

Another example is Patrick Pearse's schools St Enda's for boys and St Ita's for girls, which were established in 1908 and 1910 respectively. Pearse sought to combine a more progressive, child-centred way of teaching with a curriculum that was truly Irish. He not only fostered bilingualism at his schools, but also ensured that Gaelic games, musical evenings, and the production of Irish plays and pageants were an important part of school life for boys and girls (Walsh 2009, 224, 227-9).

Irish nationalists often utilised children in different types of public displays, recognising their value as potent symbols of the future nation state. As an organisation, Inghinidhe na hÉireann had grown out of the Patriotic Children's Treat Committee, which is reputed to have entertained an estimated 20,000-30,000 children in Clonturk Park in Drumcondra on 1 July 1900 as a counterblast to the free children's treat held in the Phoenix Park in April of that year in honour of Queen Victoria's visit to Ireland (Ward 1995, 50; Condon 2000, 173-5; Hay 2012, 148-9). Children were again utilised in the propaganda war between Irish nationalists and British imperialists during the July 1903 royal visit when Inghinidhe na hÉireann staged a less successful children's treat to counter the one held on the same day in the Phoenix Park. The plan was for the children to meet in Beresford Place and then parade to Jones's Road Park. Though rainy conditions led to the cancelation of the procession, the planned picnic in the park still took place (Ward 1995, 64-5).

Elaine Sisson has noted the way in which Pearse's St Enda's educational project associated Irish national identity with young male bodies, which were exhibited 'as a visual metaphor for the nation state' either on stage or in picture postcards to promote the school (Sisson 2004, 113). Na Fianna Éireann also exhibited young male bodies 'as a visual metaphor for the nation state' during stage performances, route marches, nationalist parades and public demonstrations of the practical skills that the boys had gained through camping and military training. For example, at the St Enda's fundraising fête held at Jones's Road Park in June 1913, St Enda's students performed in a pageant entitled 'The Fianna of Fionn' while Fianna boy scouts provided a different type of performance – a display of tent-pitching, camp work, skirmishing and military drill (Anon. 1913, 46). Female members of nationalist uniformed youth groups, such as Belfast Fianna girls and Clann na Gael Girl Scouts, also participated in public exhibitions and parades (Hay 2008, 61).

Organisations and schools were not the only vehicles for exposing children to cultural nationalism. Continuing the tradition of the Irish Fireside Club, children's columnists in Irish advanced nationalist newspapers also urged their young readers to engage with the cultural revival. *Bean na hÉireann* featured a regular column for children entitled 'An Grianán' (or the Sunroom) written under the pseudonym Dectora by Madeleine ffrench-Mullen, the co-founder of St Ultan's Hospital for Infants, while the Irish Republican Brotherhood's paper *Irish Freedom* included a children's column called 'Grianán na nÓg' (or the Sunroom of Youth) contributed under the pseudonym Neasa. Both columns featured monthly competitions in which children competed for book prizes by Irish authors such as Lily McManus, Alice Dease, William Carleton and Sheridan Le Fanu (Hay 2012, 155-7).

Some of Dectora's competitions were designed to foster Irish language skills. The first prize she offered in April 1909 was for the longest list of Irish words formed from the letters making up the paper's title 'Bean na hÉireann' (11). However, in July of that year she expressed disappointment after her request for letters written in Irish generated only one missive, which arrived after the deadline. 'Perhaps it was too much to ask, as I suppose the majority of you are only beginners,' she lamented (5).

Neasa's monthly essay competitions gave her young readers a chance to display not only their knowledge of Irish history and heritage, but also their ability to write nationalist propaganda. Contest entries even had to be submitted on Irish-made paper. In addition, she encouraged budding writers to send their poetry, short stories and articles to her for 'fair, candid, kindly criticism' and, in rare cases, publication (November 1910, 3). In September 1911 Máire Ní Cheallaigh wrote to Neasa about the necessity of rejecting foreign dances because they were 'an Anglicising force' (3) while Séumas Ó Connghalaigh urged his fellow readers in June 1912 'to dance no English dances; play no English games; and sing no West British ditties' and instead to 'form hurling clubs and join the Gaelic League' (3). We cannot know whether young Máire and Séumas sincerely believed this or were just telling Neasa what she wanted to hear in order to win a prize.

These columnists recognised that children and adolescents had an important role to play as revivers and promoters of Irish culture, consumers of Irish goods, and nationalist propagandists, which would prepare them for becoming citizens of an independent (or partially independent) Irish state. Writing in *St Enda's* magazine in April 1921, Maureen Shannon noted that her readers might regret that they were 'too young to take an active part in the great struggle' of the Irish War of Independence, but reminded them that the time would soon come when 'the shaping of Ireland's

destiny' would be in their hands too. In her view, 'the present generation of Irish children have one particular duty towards Ireland resting on them – the saving of her language and the restoring of it to its proper place in the national life' (9).

Not all Irish adolescents were content to spend the years of the War of Independence honing their Irish language skills. According to former member Charles Meaney, Fianna boys in Cork not only volunteered as scouts and dispatch carriers for the IRA, but also raided private homes for arms, destroyed the stores of crown forces, and attacked individuals whom they deemed 'enemy personnel' (Meaney 1957). Not surprisingly, the cultural content of the Fianna's training programme diminished as the Irish revolution heated up.

To conclude: the Irish cultural revival bolstered calls for increased or outright political independence for Ireland by emphasising the uniqueness of Irish culture and by extension its separate nationhood. At a time when societies in the western world increasingly saw children as a national resource, many Irish nationalists recognised that children had an important role to play in the revival and promotion of indigenous Irish culture. At a practical level children were more teachable than adults. They were easier to influence and mould. At a metaphorical level children were the embodiment of Ireland's future and could be utilised as valuable symbols of the future nation state. One day they too would be in a position to influence Irish culture and politics. Thus, organisations like the Gaelic League, Inghinidhe na hÉireann and Na Fianna Éireann, certain schools, such as those operated by the Christian Brothers and Patrick Pearse, and nationalist newspaper columnists actively sought to engage children in aspects of the Irish cultural revival. For some of these children, an engagement with the cultural revival helped to influence their political socialisation as Irish nationalists, fostering their willingness as adults to support the Irish struggle for independence. After the

achievement of independence in the 26 southern counties in 1922, the connection between Irish cultural revival and a new generation of children continued through the strong association of education policy with the Irish language, the increased promotion of Gaelic games amongst schoolchildren and the continuing production of children's literature inspired by Irish heroic tales.

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