

The Irish Alphabet

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Abstract

The origin, history and present-day usage of the Irish typeface. The brighter future due to `TEX` and `METAFONT`. Irish types in a range of sizes and weights unimaginable a generation ago are now being designed with `METAFONT` and will shortly be ready for use.

In a recent article in the *TUGboat*, Yannis Haralambous made the statement that the Irish language has its own, most beautiful alphabet. I do not disagree with him as regards the beauty. His assertion does, however, require some qualification. Firstly, the use of this alphabet for ordinary printing purposes has not been widespread during the past twenty years. Secondly, what we call the Irish alphabet is no more than a simple variant of the roman one; certainly it has its own distinctive features, but these are not so obtrusive—in the later typefaces, anyway—as to hinder speedy recognition of the letter forms by anyone familiar with standard roman types, or to inhibit comfortable reading by those who know the language.

The Roman Empire never extended as far as the shores of Ireland. Nonetheless, there was considerable traffic by Irishmen across the Irish sea in the days of Roman Britain. The very name by which we Irish call ourselves, Gaeil, and the name of our language, Gaeilge, are in origin Welsh names. Indeed there were Irish settlements and strongholds in Wales during most of the period of the Empire, and it would have been surprising if the Irish had not been affected by some aspects of the roman culture. One of the most important concepts transmitted by that culture was that of writing. The Romans wrote not only for their own benefit, but also for posterity. They erected stone monuments and inscribed on them. The ancient Irish copied the practice. The Irish however preferred in most cases to write their own language in their own alphabet. Their language has survived the mighty Latin of the empire as an everyday tongue, and there is some evidence that their alphabet, known as Ogham, was never completely forgotten.

Each character of the Ogham alphabet consists of strokes, or sometimes dots, numbering one to five, written to the left or the right of a vertical

baseline, or across that baseline. That the Ogham alphabet existed before it was put to use in the medium of stone can hardly be doubted. It may have been a finger alphabet used for sign language; its ultimate origin may even be in the use of fingers for counting. Whatever its early history, it was used during the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries A.D. by Irishmen in south-western Britain and in the south of Ireland to make inscriptions on stone. Many of the Ogham stones have been uprooted from their original locations; several are preserved in the cloisters around the quadrangle of University College, Cork.

The Ogham alphabet in its written form is distinctly Irish; but as a written alphabet it is rather clumsy. It has more in common with the finger signs of the american baseball player than it has with fine literature. In the fifth century Christianity came to Ireland, and with it came book-writing. Ogham was not very suitable for writing on vellum or parchment, nor indeed for writing very much more than the terse memorials for which it was used. It is not surprising, therefore, that by the end of the sixth century it had generally fallen into disuse.

By that time, the seeds of Christianity in Ireland had begun to bear fruit. Irish missionaries were already spreading across Europe. They not only took with them the Christian faith; they had also become custodians of a culture which was centred around the written word. For a thousand years their mission continued. It extended from Iceland to the Mediterranean and from Scotland as far east as Kiev. Irishmen were in the forefront of the Christianization of half of Europe, and Europeans in turn travelled to the great monastic universities of Ireland to receive education.

The writings of Irishmen, mostly in Latin but sometimes in Gaelic, are to be found scattered

across the vast territory of their missionary activity. These men brought their own particular genius to the way in which they used and ornamented the roman alphabet. The hand of the Irish monk is distinctive; latterly it developed, as did other national hands, alongside of, but separately from, the Carolingian. That it was a neo-Carolingian hand which eventually dominated in Europe is a matter of history; but that the Irish hand still flourished at the advent of printing was important for the future of Irish typography.

At home too, Irishmen were at their books. They committed to writing the early Irish legal system and their medical knowledge, together with some of the folklore of the Irish people. They copied religious works. St Columba, usually known in Ireland as Colm Cille, who, in the sixth century, established the famous monastery on the island of Iona and became the patron of Scottish Christianity, once borrowed a book from Finnian Droma Fhinn and spent days and nights making a copy of it. When Finnian learnt of this, he was outraged and staked his claim to the copy. The case was brought before the King, Diarmaid Mac Cearbhaill, whose judgement that "every calf belongs to its mother, and every copy of a book to the owner of the book" constituted Ireland's first copyright law; its harshness no doubt evokes a variety of responses from today's listeners.

It is to the English reformation, and to the Privy Council of the English Queen Elizabeth I, that we owe our gratitude for establishing Irish letter forms as those proper to the printing of the Irish language. In the hope that "God would, in mercy, raise up some to translate the New Testament into their mother tongue" that Queen ordered that a special typeface be designed, cut and sent to Dublin for use in publishing religious material. The typeface was to be based on Irish written letter forms. She also ordered that an Irish grammar be prepared in order that she herself might learn the language.

Matthew Parker, the man to whom the idiomatic expression 'Nosy Parker' was first applied, had been Elizabeth's Archbishop of Canterbury since the first year of her reign. Anglo-Saxon fonts had already been cut for him by John Day, and it is probable that it was the archbishop himself who determined that a new typeface should be designed to accommodate the Irish language. A brief glance at the hand of the *Book of Kells* and that of the *Lindisfarne Gospels* is sufficient to convince us of the similarity between Irish and Anglo-Saxon

manuscript writing*; since the Anglo-Saxons had been taught to write by the Irish, the likeness is not surprising. The wheel turned full cycle with the advent of printing, and it seems that it was Day's Anglo-Saxon typeface which became the inspiration, though not the model, for the new Gaelic one.

Elizabeth's interest in the Irish language may seem strange. Her father, Henry VIII, had issued a statute demanding that all the English living in Ireland learn the English language within a year. The statute, which was translated into Irish for their benefit, had had no noticeable effect. He had also ordered that they shave off their moustaches and wear their beards after the English fashion; one wonders if they were willing to comply even with this much simpler command. Now, Elizabeth was promoting the language! Certainly it was not as remote from her as it had been from her father, for there were Irish nobles at her court who spoke it. She was probably motivated primarily by the desire to save the souls of the Irish people from popery. In England, *The Book of Common Prayer* had replaced the Latin liturgy of the Catholic church by one which the ordinary people could understand. Elizabeth was simply doing the same thing in Ireland.

The new type was cut in London and was in use in Dublin from 1571. A religious poem by Philip Mhac Cuinn Chrosaigh, dated for that year and now preserved in Cambridge University Library, is the oldest surviving document printed with it. The typeface is strong and well-balanced, and the overall effect is extremely neat. However, on closer inspection, it displays better than any of the other early Irish typefaces how slight the differences between the Irish letter forms and the more standard roman ones really are. Some ligatures were cut, but it is doubtful if more than half of the letters were new designs; several clearly belong to a roman typeface, and the 'a' belongs to an italic one. Indeed, it should have been possible to print Irish language material without any new type design, and we are very fortunate that Queen Elizabeth's administration ordained it otherwise.

Thus it was English Protestantism that first made use of printing in the battle for the souls of the Gaelic nation; but its adversaries on the continent eventually became stronger and more determined in their continued use of it. Some of Ireland's greatest scholars were Catholic priests

* Examples of these hands and of some of the Irish typefaces are shown on separate pages.

living in exile. In about 1611, the Irish Franciscans in Belgium designed a thoroughly Irish type, based on Irish manuscript letters, which for over a century kept a steady stream of Catholic religious material flowing from Louvain to Ireland. Around 1675, a new Irish type was cut in Rome for Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide and the Rome press became engaged in a like task. In the eighteenth century, a new Gaelic type was cut in Paris and that city too became a centre for the publication of Irish language material. It is curious to read in the preface to the first English-Irish dictionary, that published at Paris in 1732, an apology for any errors that might have resulted from the printers' ignorance of both languages. In 1804, the Rome type of 1675 and a much later one also from Rome were used by J.J. Marcel of the Imprimerie Nationale in Paris. They had been carried off from Rome as part of the booty of Napoleon and deposited by him at the Imprimerie. Had it not been for Napoleon they may well have been lost, as are so many of the other early types.

In time, Queen Elizabeth's prayer that some Irishman might translate the New Testament into his mother tongue was answered. That and *The Book of Common Prayer* were translated by Nicholas Breatnach, Bishop of Ossory, and by Uilliam Ó Domhnuill, Archbishop of Tuam. But it was left to an Englishman, William Bedell, to embark on the task of translating the Old Testament. Bedell arrived in Ireland in 1627 at the age of 56 to take up the post of Provost of Trinity College, Dublin. He set to work at once to learn the language, and he insisted that students who proposed to be clergymen should do likewise. He engaged competent natives to work on the translation, and he himself was responsible for the final form of words, which was approved on a chapter by chapter basis only after careful comparison with the Hebrew and with a polyglot Bible.

Bedell's Bible was subsequently to be used everywhere the Gaelic language was spoken: in Scotland, in America and in Canada. It is said that it was used even in Catholic liturgy in Ireland during the 1960s and 1970s, before the first complete approved Catholic Bible in Irish was published in 1981. Though Bedell's work was probably finished not long after 1630, and though he himself died in 1642, his Bible was not published until 1685. Indeed, it might never have been published had it not been for the good services of the illustrious scientist Robert Boyle. Boyle was the seventh son of Richard Boyle, Earl of Cork. It appears that by the time of Bedell, the brief affair of the English court

with things Gaelic was over. Bedell's Elizabethan frame of mind was out of step with the time, or at least with the attitude of those in power in his day. When Boyle set about printing the Old and New Testaments, Bedell's manuscript was in a sorry condition. Parts of it were illegible, having become damp. Boyle had another difficulty: the Queen Elizabeth type had disappeared. He was informed that the fonts of this type had been stolen by the Jesuits and were being used at Douai to publish Catholic propaganda for shipment to Ireland. In fact, there is no record of any Catholic material printed with that type. Nonetheless, the fonts and all that went with them were gone. Boyle had a new set of Irish characters cast in London. Moxon was the cutter of this type, and it is thought that the model for it was the first Catholic type of Louvain. Boyle footed the entire bill for the printing of the Bible, around £330.

Although some copies of the Boyle printing were used in Gaelic Scotland, it is of interest to note that it was deemed necessary to create a new edition of the Bedell Bible, printed in the Roman character, for that part of Gaeldom. The Scots were never subsequently exposed to Gaelic printing based on the letter forms which their early saints had helped to create.

All the types we have mentioned, and indeed all those designed before 1840, were based on a spiky manuscript hand. It was not representative either of the best or of the most widely known of Irish letter forms. The beautiful writing in the *Book of Kells*, for example, is in a neat round hand, which displays moreover some features which have never been included in any Irish type. In the year 1841, the Irish Archaeological Society was founded. It was devoted to the study of the language, literature, history and antiquities of Ireland, and to the publication of material in those areas of interest. The Society arranged for the design and cutting of a new series of types for its publications. The designer of these is thought to have been George Petrie, and they were probably cut and cast in Dublin by James Christie. These fonts were based on the round hand, suitably modified to the medium of printing. They are clean-cut and easy to read, and owe little to the Irish types that preceded them; they can boast both originality and artistry. Moreover, they made a considerable contribution to the design of the important Keating type of 1863 and, through it, to the design of all the Irish types which followed. They were probably also the model for the very attractive twentieth century Colm Cille Gaelic type of Colm Ó Lochlainn.

;alsg. cni os o rli o he. 67
~~=====~~
 2116.
 Maria.
 bhealchra
 1 Me. 7c.
 :hean and ro
 ankungil 84-
 :Muirne anean
 riosfo na bion.
 eá Cni os na abeóroo a gairí,
 fo ríu, 7 ancaé; gonaó a ríe sñ
 an niamáó an náccumzúó q an
 nácaim lé c fcaíó cni osfo, do
 beir mto a gáó an ? Muirne, ioná r
 go ceumíó impróe an amac, 7 q
 ácaim an meic é óna, fca náccum
 zúóib do tabairt dóm: ar
 gnáicébf a g doimib anean ían-
 aó áccumzúó q p míoíra, labá q
 m r na doimib ar tneí do éto
 ran éúire ná díu g sñ, ioná r go
 mbiaó animpróe lé. U deim mto
 do céroneribh, 'Ora do b fca
 dá óo accéill 2 ab cance. 7

Part of a very common catechism printed in Antwerp with the Louvain type of 1611.

a M anm óe t ion r g an e á n
 n i á g a n l t r e r u i r o . s .
 f r o m r a r , o á r o i r t e r i
 ó n o n a h a i t r i g e .
 a l m c h e u o c h a l b i o i e .
 D o n m o o a n a n c o i n e u a r t e u g
 a o , n o m a n n r u g a o h o o o e u n a n i
 a n a n m u i n e r i l e u n a b t o i l t e a c u
 i r n n o r o r a .
 Religious material printed using the Louvain type of 1641.

Religious material printed using the Louvain type of 1641.

Do Sacramajne na hajt r i j e .
 D. Cneuo ar Sacramajne na hajt r i j e
 a n e
 M. leijor Sbjonaolta na bpeátaib oo
 nimjo iq mbaisfoó.
 D ga meuo a za oo nja r a n a r q an ze
 glaca r i .
 M 2 r i : t n r e é r o i d e , f o i j i d e n g l a n
 í r n a f e a d a j b e f o n a , 7 l o j n g n i o m o o
 o f m a m i o n t a .
 D. Cioñar ar coim an t n r e s i n oo
 bejt .
 The Rome type of 1676.

The Rome type of 1676.

a n f o n a l a o a n D a i r i o , n o a n
 d o (') D h e j b b r e j t e r n l d o t r g a o é a
 m a r t a j o , o i r d e a r b t a g r n a b é D j .
 n j a n b j a o f e j n , d o f o n a l a o d o D h e j b l
 a g r r g o b r n l r e m a j t a n n f e j n ; a c t
 r e i r a n a r c e r o n a , d a n j n u j r e a o
 n e a c d o n C h r i s t o r n j , g r n t o j n b r e a o .
 d o D h e j b b r e j t e , g r n e o j n d o a n r o
 " h j , g a n a r e ; n a c n a j b r e t a j n b
 " f o l l a m n a c ; a g r r n a c a n e c a r t a d i
 " b e j m e d o t a b a j n t d o n a h j r o n g e a d n l
 " n a C m e d e a c a j b , n a d ' e a g l n r D e . " j
 m a j r e a o d a n A r r d o l e v n a n A g a j o z
 t a o n a h e a g l n r e , a g r r a t a r e c o
 r n n a d a , g o n o m o n g e a n n r e d h n n " l
 " d o t a b a j n t d ' a r n l l a c t a r a n n b , a g i
 The Paris type of 1732.

The Paris type of 1732.

Do tonerao me zoll na nairn nájg
 mac nájg na Soncha zer cás cruaio
 ar mág calam pátajne an bean
 nér ént anéar sñ fa ccaan
 2. d lajete ar mñ an eaf
 an laoc fan teann tpejre j gñíom
 curtar an fa bnaóajo hac méoim
 fajne óim anonoim mo Nájg
 Déj t n r e m a n f h j n m o j n
 q boro an éuaim, trjá g an ééim
 The large well-formed Brooke type of 1789.

The large well-formed Brooke type of 1789.

XXXV 2313.
 1 20AS é n k i j g f i a o i r e c o m e r n h j u g a o é l o i n e
 I r r a e l n e a g c i o i n a c e j l e , 7 d o n a j o n i u , 2 e
 [r i a d] r o n b r i a e m a d a i e i n a I j e r n o i b h , 3
 u d e m u a d [r b] i a d .
 2 2 e l a d o d e n t e q o b y , a f a r e j m a o l a b i a j o r e n
 l a r a o i r e a z n b , r a b o j o r f u a j m n e r a d o n I j e r n n :
 g j o o b e q b i e o i b n i g e r a n n , e n r e j e r e u m b a j r e .
 3 2 i j d e m j r i d e t e j n e q r e d b u r n a i r a j b * a l o n
 r a b o j d e .
 4 2 e j u r l a b y f i a o i r e n e c o m e r n h j u g a o é l o i n e
 I r r a e l n e , d a n a o , [2 r] e r o a n o d a i e i n a I j e -
 5 r n n , 2 a n a d , . . I d o b n o d e o n n b o r n a j l d o n I j e r n n :
 g j o o b e q b i e [2 a] b r n l e n o i d e t o i l e m n l , e u g a o r e
 l e j r i , o r n a j l d o n I j e r n n ; o j n , 7 a i n z e o , r p a r , . .
 Fry's type, 1819.


Fry's type, 1819.

CAIB. I.
POL, abrcal, (ní ó édoih-
 iú, ná epé éhne, acó epé
 jóra Chrioto, 7 epé Dhjá
 an Tacaip, hoc to éós
 rúar é ó mhárbh);
 2 Ásur na ceapbáir-
 neáca nie atá maile
 nrom, érim eazhnead ná
 Jaláca;
 3 Spáca maile núb 7
 rjóccáihó Dhjá an Taca,
 roirzéi Chrioto to
 a neimhbhí;.
 8 Acó boiró 3o ne
 amáoirne, no aihze
 neam, roirzéi eile
 feanmhóir édoib tair
 [epoirzéi] to nifea
 to feanmhóir édoib é
 bjoó ré mallhíte.
 9 Ámhí a érbha
 noime, a ceirim a no
 níj [man an xévt

The Watts type of 1818.

Crech lá h. Féelán dar eluáin ipáiré, an
 dízail ná epéiche Ym. Yluáiz lá me
 neocáca 7 lá me Máelnámbó a Mídi, cor
 loipe ret cellá r. Mídi uile r. mád becc.
 Záirbet h. Cátharáiz .p. Dpez do zábail
 do Conchob. h. Máelr co roirzáib um. neci
 áize. Táneácori .p. dámhna .h. Máine 7.
 h. Máelr. 7. h. Féandácan 7 an Cleipeac.
 h. ráidz 7 me bháddácan r. dámhna
 Delbna, cor bhíj roiró 7 cor máirb uile.

The rather unattractive Figgins type of 1825.



PS IN NOSTRA INSOLA QUE UOCATUR HIBERNIA
 ostensus est hominibus maximis mirabilibus
 que perperit per felicem celestis uite uirginem
 precellentem pro merito magno in mundi circulo

SMHUS iste angelice summeque sancte brigite
 pari non ualet omnia uirtutum mirabilia
 que nostris nunquam auribus si sint facta audiuimus
 nisi per istam uirginem marie sancte similem

Capitals of one of the Irish Archaeological Society's types used as ordinary type, 1855.

Peachtar do Dhuaire Aíone 7 do Chumáin
 Foda 7 do Caimin innri Cealera ipin ecclair
 i nimir Cealera for loé nDeirce-éirce,
 ebon in ecclair móir do ronaó la Caimine
 ann. baccaptoih bin ag cabare anncair-
 deira for Dhuaire. Maie a Dhuaire, ol
 Caimine, ció beie maie lae do lionad na hec-
 clairi i eéám. Fneccapuir Dhuaire he, 7 ipéó
 a dubaire, po ba niaie lim a lan di or 7
 dapceate, 7 ni ar paine an doihainri, acó
 dia eioblacáó for manmain do naemhábh,
 7 do eccalraib, 7 ba gaé nech do iarrpaib e
 anéna. Do rab Dia rúptaéé duit a Dhua-
 aire, ol Caimine, 7 do beipar duit an tra-
 léctam do ronaip dia cabere ar e'anniam,

Irish Archaeological Society type, 1841.

Cén po baol an Ríograib na n-óreann
 ino Ailuch ruiréac Fhígneann,
 zan choiméad for neach oile
 acó for Dub n-dail n-daó doipe.
 Dubdoipe nochan feapp
 occlach oile buitheach;
 dia ip duine ara toig
 Dubdoipe ua Tígearnoig.
 Tuccha logh a leanna lain
 do Dhubdoipe oil, óreachnair,
 do chpeich Dal Araibe uair,

Another Irish Archaeological Society type, 1841.

Do éaréioraó rpar go cárimair, earéior
 gan áirio, gan airtear, go cpiáidte, ceap
 éac:

Fá bpión móir, a g keairiáó mo deóir!
 Gur deaircara láim lom bán-éneir, ban
 Wánlad, marreamuil, gpiáóimair, gearan
 Ró móóaimi, ba éairéioimac clóó!
 ba éabairac, cáblaé, páimgeac, padat
 U g keacac 'r a rpar go páil, airi baille-c
 U bláé-foite bacalac, r gáiméac, cpiar-r
 Táclac, rnamadéac, báir-éar, daite, li
 Airi cló 'n óir, gan r gaimal, gan ée

Christie's type, 1815.

**an cheao rann.
 an cheao cheacht:**

De Chruúgac, agus oé éric an ouine.
 CEIST. Cé crútuig, agus oo éuir air an
 raogal tu?

FREAGAR. Dia.

C. Cao fáé ar éuir Dia air an raogal tu?

F. Chum aité oo beir air, cum e oo gpa-
 úúgac, cum a feirbir oo éeanaó, agus cum
 an beata fioppuirde oo raortúgac tpió.

C. Créao ir éigean oo éeanaó éuirge rin?

F. Cheitpe neitde.

C. Cao iao ran?

F. An éeao níó, gac níó o'foillrig Dia,

The seminal Keating Society type, 1863.

folluigie ó éeann go cors le lubra an peacair, a dul
 rarrad na ngrása so air an Te a m-bidmurd cur feirge
 laetairil? Oó! cad eile, cia air a n-rarfamuid se n
 ein? Cia an carad, no an duine muntirda air a d-
 barfamuid agair ó rinneamar namair d' ar g-carad r
 munn-Criost? A tá, a éairde, air an Maigdean Muir

An attempt by Canon Burke to produce a hybrid Gaelic-Roman
 type, 1877. Note the ridiculous *éimhiú* over the lower case 't'.

Tá an scríbinn seo go díreac mar fuair mé i ó
 láim an údair acé amáin go bfuil an mórcuid
 págta ar lár de éascaib easba spáis agus fós de
 éascaib a raib innci de tráccas ar neitde naé bfuil
 oiriúnaé. Beid a deic oiread eile le páil go ré, mar
 sin péin, má's amlaid a bíonn aon glaoé ag an
 bpobal ar an leabrán so.

Tuigtear go soiléir gur i leit Chorca Dorca
 amáin aon ní acá luaite ann agus ná cuigtear go
 bfuiltear ag tráct go foirleatan ar na Gaeltaéai

A rather better attempt at hybrid type, Liam Miller's *Times*
New Roman was used in one edition of *An Béal Bocht*.

(d) An Páidir.

Ar n-éair atá ar neam, go naoimtar é'ainm; [go]
 dtige do ríogaé; mar ndéantar do éoil ar an talam
 mar nítear ar neam. Ar n-arpál (arpán) laetairil,
 tabair dúinn indiu; maré dúinn ar bpiac' le mar maré
 dúinn. Ná léig dúinn tuirim i gcaitúgite, ac raor
 rinn ó gac oic 'noir agus ar uair ar mbair. Amen.

A rather stylish Gaelic type cut about 1925, possibly in Germany.

τ.é. [Urnai an son a Soilse an éannion.

A TIARNA, ár n-éair neamáí, oll-ard uile-
 cumadac, Rí na ríte, TIARNA na oTIARNAí,
 donrialtóir na bplac, a éreánaíos ó do rí-
 éacáoir ar luéé áitriú an domain uile;
 iarraimio ort go lánuétraéac péacaint le
 do grásta ar a Soilse, ár n-ardbantiarna, an
 éannion Elizabeth; agus i a líonad de
 síor de grásta an Spioraid Naoim, i gcaoi go
 gclona sí i gcónaí éun do tola agus go síula

Standard twentieth century Gaelic type. Excerpt from the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Church
 of Ireland. Here Irish-speaking Protestants in Northern Ireland pray for their Queen. Note the
 foreign 'z' in her name.

20. Agus tuairc Dia: “Beireadh na h-uirgí go lionmhar an créatúir corpuíoch ‘na bfuil beatha, agus éanlaic eiteallar ór cionn na talmhan in iorraitc ‘gíl neimhe’”. Crúcuig Dia pfeirin míolta móra agus gac créatúir beó corpuíoch; rug na h-uirgí iad go lionmhar agus na h-éanlaic rgiatánaíoch do péin a gceimil. Agus ba léir do Dia goma maic é a ríochas. Beannuig Dia anghin iad: “Bíodó corrac”, deir sé, “agus foirlionaid, agus lionaid na h-uirgí atá rna foirrgí, agus foirlionaid na h-éanlaic ar an talamh”. Ior nóin agus maoin bí an cúigeasó lá irctig.

The truly artistic Colm Cille Gaelic type of Colm Ó Lochlainn.

Cúigeas Colm Cille

Réad n-aon do cuais Colm Cille i gceann Fínnéin Úroma Fínn agus o'iarra iasac leabair air, agus fuair sé sin ó Fínnian. Agus o'panasó sé i nois ó áic tar éis na tórad agus na nAipreann sa ceampall do bí sa baile sin péin agus do bí sé ag scríob an leabair ann gan ríos o'Fínnian. Agus an uair éigeas an oíche cuise, is iad ba coinnle do ag déanam na scríobneoireasó sin, .i. cúig meoir a láime veise do lasad amail cúig lócranna rólánaíoch ionas go gcuirís deatram agus solas rán ceampall uile.

Agus an oíche déanaí do Colm Cille ag scríob veirid an leabair sin, do cuir Fínnian tuine o'iarraíoch a leabair air. Agus ar noul go doras an ceampall a raib Colm Cille do, do b'iontaí leis méas na soilse do énaic sé isciú agus do gab eagla móir é, agus o'péasó sé go raiceas trí poll do bí ar comla doras an ceampall, agus ar bpeiscint Colm Cille do ar an inneall sin, amail a úramar romainn, níor lig an eagla do labairt ris ná an leabair o'iarraíoch air. Do foilsíod, iomorro, do Colm Cille an t-óglaic do beic 'gá rícheam amlaic sin, agus do gab fearg móir é rán ní sin, agus do labair sé re peata coirre do bí aige, agus is ea oúirt rí:

“Is ceas liomsa, más ceas le Dia, tusa do buain a súil as an óglaic úo do táinig dom péacaint gan ríos dom péin.”

O'airig an corra i gceasóir le bríachar Colm Cille, agus tug buille dá god trí poll na comla i súil an óglais gur bain a súil as a ceann,

gur rás ar a gura amuig í. O'imig an t-óglaic iar sin mar a raib Fínnian agus o'inis do mar a o'imig air ó ús go veireasó. Níor maic le Fínnian an ní sin, agus do beannaig agus do coisric sé súil an óglais, agus do cuir ina hionas péin arís í, gan oíobáil, gan uireasa do beic uirtí, amail do bí sí ó ús.

Agus mar do cuala Fínnian a leabair do scríob gan ceas do péin, do cuais sé o'gairc Colm Cille ann, agus oúirt nár óbir a leabair do scríob gan ceas do.

“Do béarsa breic Rí Éireann oinn,” ar Colm Cille, .i. breic O'iarraíoch mic Cearbaill.

“Gabrasa sin,” ar Fínnian.

Do cuasar re óile ina oiaic sin go ceamair na Rí, mar a raib O'iarraíoch mac Cearbaill, agus o'inis Fínnian a scéala ar oúis don rí agus is ea a oúirt:

“Do scríob Colm Cille mo leabair gan ríos dom péin,” ar sé, “agus veirim gur liom péin mac mo leabair.”

“Deirimse,” arsa Colm Cille, “nac misce leabair Fínnéin ar scríob mé as, agus nac coir na níce oiaic do bí sa leabair úo do míúasó nó a bacasó dom péin ná do tuine eile a scríob ná a léam ná a sílasó pá na oiníocháic; agus pós veirim, ina do bí cairbe do na poibleacáic, agus gan oíobáil o'Fínnéin nó a leabair do ceas as, gur ceasáic dom a scríob.”

Is ansin rug O'iarraíoch an breic oirre, .i. “le gac boin a boinín, agus le gac leabair a leabairín.”

Eleven point Cló Naithí, 1990. This typeface is still in the experimental stage, and will be improved. The sample is printed at 300dpi using an HP LaserJet III.

The least Irish and least attractive of all Gaelic typefaces was that of Vincent Figgins, the first typefounder of that name. His Irish type of 1825 was apparently used in only two books. This is the same Figgins who, in 1832, made the first major promotion of sans serif types and popularized the name by which they are known today. By the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a considerable demand for printed material in Irish, and the Irish fonts necessary for mass production were not available. It was the London firm of Figgins which satisfied the demand. The same firm, under the name of Stevens, was responsible for the 1922 monotype which became familiar to succeeding generations of Irish school children as the standard form of the Irish letter before it was gradually phased out in the 1960s by governmental decree.

Though, in the Irish language revival, there had always been a faction which wanted to adopt the roman letter forms, it is probable that the main reason for its eventual success was a purely practical one. The variety of sizes and weights in which Irish type was available was extremely limited; moreover, Irish typewriters were old-fashioned and clumsy. The written language was apparently being strangled by its dependence on materials which did not belong to the mainstream of European trade and culture. In any case the change was made, and a whole generation has now grown up for the most part ignorant of a very distinctive part of its history.

TeX may well prove to be one of the most important innovations in the history of typesetting. If that is true, then it is even more certain that the invention of METAFONT will come to be regarded as revolutionary for type design and casting. If METAFONT had been available thirty years ago, it might well have saved the Irish typeface. As it is, Irish fonts in a range of weights and sizes unimaginable a generation ago are now being made using SBMF, a particularly fast PC version of METAFONT perfected by Dr Wayne Sullivan in the Mathematics Department of University College, Dublin.

The new typeface, known as Cló Naithí after one of the local saints of the area of County Dublin in which I live, already comprises the most extensive set of Gaelic fonts ever produced. It is, moreover, the only truly Gaelic typeface to include in a single design all twenty six letters of the modern English alphabet. It is intended primarily for everyday typesetting, not for fancy work; simplicity and readability have been the main considerations in

its design. The point sizes of five, ten, eleven and seventeen are available in four types: unslanted and slanted, each at standard weight and in an extended bold form. There is yet a considerable amount of work to be done: parameters for other point sizes need to be worked out; the numerals and many special characters have to be designed; there are some questions about punctuation which must be settled; essential variant forms of letters and optional ligatures have to be created; sans-serif routines have to be finalised; large initial fancy letters, which were quite a common feature in Gaelic printing, should be included; work on kerning is yet to begin; moreover there are many imperfections in what has already been done, and these must be weeded out relentlessly. The Naithí project should also include mathematical fonts so that technical material can be typeset without difficulty; it ought also to include the production of a comprehensive hyphenation dictionary. How much of this can be achieved will probably depend on whether or not the workforce of one and the zero funding level can be increased.

There are more than sixty phonemes in the Irish language; it is thus phonetically one of the richest languages in Europe. To accommodate this splendid variety of sound, the Irish traditionally employ an alphabet of only seventeen letters; this number does not include aitch, which is used only to prevent hiatus; nor does it include the various letters which have crept in with some loan words in the past few years. The vowel sounds of the language are, for the most part, pure; they may be either short or long, the latter usually being indicated in the written language by a length mark, commonly called the *síneadh fada*; this is similar in appearance to the French acute accent.

Each of the twelve consonants is used to represent at least two distinct sounds, one broad and one slender; which of the two sounds is intended is usually indicated by adjacent vowels—if these are slender (e or i), then so is the consonant; otherwise the consonant is broad. Most of the consonantal sounds (of both varieties) are subject to a qualitative softening, indicated by the placing of a dot, called a *séimhiú*, over the appropriate letter. These sounds may also be subject to vocalization or nasalization, which is indicated by placing the appropriate consonant before the one to be inflected. There are, properly speaking, no written accents in Irish, and only the two diacritical marks noted here. The language is written more or less phonetically according to its own phonetic rules, which differ considerably from those of English.

The Irish language, in both spoken and written forms, is highly inflected. Approximately one in six vowels takes a length mark, and around one in five consonants a softening mark. Plain T_EX's English language conventions for accessing diacritical marks are therefore clearly unsuitable for typesetting in Irish. In Cló Naithí all diacritical marks are treated as ligatures: for example, 'ch' is printed as 'c̄' and '/a' as 'á'; the ligatures can of course be broken if that is desired. On the other hand, the situation for the user of Computer Modern with standard conventions is considerably eased by noting that the correspondence between letters and diacritical marks is one-to-one. By making, say, the forward slash active and writing the appropriate macro, each desired inflection can be got by typing the slash before the letter to be inflected. There are few Latin alphabet languages in which such a proliferation of inflections can be dealt with so simply by T_EX.

For many of us whose homes are Gaelic-speaking, there is little doubt that Gaelic fonts are more suitable for the printing of our language than are the Roman. One reason for this is the profusion of aitches with their ugly ascenders which take the place of the *séimhiú* in the roman fonts. Around twenty per cent of all other consonants are followed by the letter aitch; this percentage would have been even greater had not simplified spelling accompanied the change to roman fonts*. Historically, there is justification for the introduction of the aitch, at least in conjunction with the letters c, p and t, but that should hardly be used to support the widespread adoption of ugliness; the dot is less conspicuous than the ascending h, and it also helps to provide a sense of balance in a typeface with upper-case ascenders. Another reason for preferring the Gaelic typeface arises from the difficulty of placing diacritical marks over upper-case roman letters whose height already extends more or less to the extremities dictated by the typeface; this difficulty Irish has in common with many languages. In Gaelic typefaces it has never been a problem, since they have upper-case ascenders which determine that the natural height of fonts is sufficient to accommodate all such marks without any squeezing. The Gaelic typeface has tradition, beauty and practicality on its side, and it will give many of us great joy to see it being used more frequently in the future.

* Despite my interest in the re-emergence of Gaelic typefaces, I have no intention of promoting old spelling conventions.

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