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"Fiction, Amusement, Instruction": The Irish Fireside Club and the Educational Ideology of the Gaelic League*

"'Give me,' says Uncle Remus, 'the youth of a nation.'"[1]

Through the teachings of the Irish Fireside Club, the largest children's association in Ireland in the late 1880s, thousands of children gained a desire to educate themselves and each other for the benefit of Ireland's future. The Irish Fireside Club's teachings reflected the growing cultural nationalist current in Irish society, focusing on the academic study of the Irish language, history, and literature, along with social instruction concerning equality of the sexes, self-sufficiency, independence, and the need for unity to enable social progress. Although the nucleus of the Irish Fireside Club was a newspaper column (attached for most of its lifespan to the *Weekly Freeman* and spread over half a page at the height of its popularity), essentially self-governing branches of the club sprung up in rural and urban Ireland and abroad, creating a mass child-driven movement that would later supply the Gaelic League with several young language enthusiasts who would play crucial roles in the new Ireland of the twentieth century. These included, among others, Edward

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1. *The Weekly Freeman*, *National Press*, and *Irish Agriculturist*, 27 Oct. 1888. Hereafter, the *Weekly Freeman* will be cited as *WF*.

(Éamon) de Valera, founder of Fianna Fáil and the *Irish Press* and a long-serving Taoiseach; Agnes O'Farrelly, the first female Irish-language writer, a women's rights activist, and cofounder of Cumann na mBan (the female counterpart to the Irish Volunteers); and Thomas Concannon, a returned emigrant from America, translator, writer, and the Gaelic League's most noted *timire* (traveling teacher).[2] The purpose of this essay is to examine the educational ideology of the Irish Fireside Club and to determine its formative and enduring influence upon the Gaelic League activists already mentioned as well as other significant early twentieth-century figures associated with the League, such as William Rooney, Henry Morris, Edward (Éamon) O'Neill, George Moonan, Máire Ní Chillín, Stiofán Bairéad, and Michael Mullen.

The Irish Fireside Club (IFC) lasted for nearly four decades, from 1887 to 1924. While newspapers had an established country-wide channel of distribution to enable the dissemination of new ideas and trends throughout Ireland during the period, the key factor in the unparalleled success of the club was the inspiring instructor at its helm, who could communicate with, and thus influence, young people on a national scale.[3] The children came to know this instructor as the amiable "Uncle Remus," who, in characteristically militaristic language, appointed himself "Commander-in-Chief" of the IFC. However, this familial "Uncle" misled his "nephews" and "nieces" to some extent: his alter ego was initially Rose Kavanagh and later Hester Sigerson, both of whom made good use of their gender mask.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the IFC's influence had begun to wane; at that point, however, the Gaelic League had come of age. According to P.H. Pearse's assessment, membership had reached over fifty thousand by 1904, and the number of branches had nearly tripled in three years.[4] While scholars dispute the precise

2. See An tSr Finnín Ní Chonceanainn agus Ciarán Ó Coigligh, *Tomás Bán* (Baile Átha Cliath: Conradh na Gaeilge, 1996).

3. See L.M. Cullen, "Establishing a Communications System: News, Post and Transport," in *Communications and Community in Ireland*, ed. Brian Farrell (Dublin: Mercier Press/Radio Telefís Éireann, 1984), 26.

4. *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 5 Nov. 1904. Hereafter, *An Claidheamh Soluis* will be cited as *ACS*.

figures involved, it is apparent that the League had gained widespread appeal among a new generation of Irish-language enthusiasts who readily embraced its ethos of cultural nationalism.[5] Young men and women who had grown up alongside the League now joined its founding fathers, Douglas Hyde and Eoin Mac Néill amongst them, at the forefront of a national crusade. The initial aim of the Gaelic League, established in 1893, had been to preserve and promote the Irish language and its literature; however, according to Mac Néill, its founders soon realized "that this movement had bound up with it everything also that concerned the country."[6] Thus, by the turn of the twentieth century, the League's remit had expanded, and it was channeling much of its resources into a campaign for the reform of the Irish educational system, the transmission of Irish heritage to schoolchildren being viewed as the best way of securing its future.[7] The former "firesiders" who now participated in the Gaelic League brought with them the aspirations of youth blended with well-developed ideologies characteristic of the Irish-Ireland movement. With much of their lives before them, Ireland's future was their main concern; through a de-Anglicizing/re-Gaelicizing process inside and outside the educational system, they intended to recreate Ireland's precolonial past and adapt it by means of cultural innovation to suit the conditions of twentieth-century Ireland.

It is apparent that there was nothing entirely new about the Gaelic League's linguistic and literary aims. The Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language had been established by language enthusiasts as early as 1876 and led to the formation in 1880 of the Gaelic League's predecessor, the Gaelic Union.[8] From the 1880s onward, Dublin and London in particular were home to a burgeoning network of adult literary clubs, which fostered cultural nationalism and also had much in common with the later Gaelic

5. See Timothy G. McMahon, *Grand Opportunity: The Gaelic Revival and Irish Society, 1893–1910* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 88.

6. *Freeman's Journal*, 9 April 1902.

7. Eibhlín Ní Niocaill, *Nationality in Irish Education* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, n.d.), 4.

8. Máirtín Ó Murchú, *Cumann Buan-Choimeádta na Gaeilge: Tús an Athréimnithe* (Baile Átha Cliath: Cois Life, 2001), 8.

League.[9] W.P. Ryan's *The Irish Literary Revival*, published in 1894, gives details of some of these literary clubs and provides evidence that the Irish literary revival was then already underway, but it also reveals that until the establishment of the Gaelic League, "the momentum had been lacking."[10] The great strength of the Gaelic League in its early days, like the children's IFC, was its ability to unite the various factions within the cultural nationalist movement and create a common goal. This was achieved through Douglas Hyde's principal of using "the language movement as a neutral field upon which all Irishmen might meet."[11]

Irish-language scholars who have to date conducted research on the prerevivalist era have mostly addressed the precursory role of individual adults and adult organizations vis-à-vis the Irish language and cultural revival; only one article has considered the role of children's organizations.[12] Nonetheless, recent English-language scholarship in Irish children's history by Janette Condon and Marnie Hay focuses on aspects of nationalist propaganda aimed at children during the revivalist period and provides an insight into the motivations and means through which nationalists attempted to attract and indoctrinate children into their movement.[13] The subject of the present essay mostly predates the period to which Condon and Hay refer, yet it complements their findings and sheds new light on the ideology and cultural strategies of the Gaelic League.

In late June 1883, just over a year after the upheaval of the Land War, the first issue of the *Irish Fireside*, a weekly literary magazine

9. Amongst these clubs were the Phoenix Literary Club, the Sheridan Literary Society, the Edmund Burke Literary and Debating Society, the Pan-Celtic Society, and St. Kevin's Literary Union.

10. W.P. Ryan, *The Irish Literary Revival: Its History, Pioneers and Possibilities* (London: self-published, 1894), 34.

11. UCD Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore and the National Folklore Collection, Douglas Hyde Memoir 1918, 18–19.

12. Nollaig Mac Congáil, "*Weekly Freeman* ag Cothú an Náisiúnachais Bealach na hÓige?" in *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* 21, no. 2, and 22, no. 1 (2007–8): 278–318.

13. See Janette Condon, "The Patriotic Children's Treat: Irish Nationalism and Children's Culture at the Twilight of Empire," in *Irish Studies Review* 8, no. 2 (2000): 167–78; and Marnie Hay, "This Treasured Island: Irish Nationalist Propaganda Aimed at Children and Youth, 1910–16," in *Treasure Islands: Studies in Children's Literature*, ed. Celia Keenan and Mary Shine Thompson (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), 33–42.

that sought to "foster native talent," was circulated as a supplement to the *Weekly Freeman*, then the most widely circulated Irish weekly newspaper.[14] Caroline Dwyer Gray, wife of the proprietor of the *Freeman's Journal*, was its founder. She held high aspirations for her publication, hoping that its motto of "Fiction, Amusement, Instruction," promoted across diverse subject matter, would appeal to a cross section of Irish society, irrespective of class, sex, age, and geographical location.[15] From its inception, the *Irish Fireside* sought to promote "old Folk-lore stories," and by 1886, it had begun to espouse the rising revivalist current in Irish society with its "Great Irish Revival Number."[16] In response to this special edition, P.J. Keawell of the Southwark Irish Literary Club, London, suggested that the *Irish Fireside* should publish children's literature, Irish in theme, in the conviction that such literature "would do more to banish London trash from Ireland than a thousand eloquent newspaper appeals."[17] In this instance, "London trash" was synonymous with specific "penny dreadfuls" aimed at children, the growing popularity of which Keawell witnessed in England and Ireland. He alluded to *Boys of England* (1866) and *Boys Own Paper* (1879) as being "fascinating to Irish youths."[18] Keawell's suggestion regarding children's literature stemmed from his involvement with the Southwark Irish Literary Club; the club had grown out of the successful Southwark Junior Irish Literary Club, aimed at the children of Irish emigrants in London and established by Francis A. Fahy in 1881.[19] The objective of the Junior Irish Literary Club was to increase awareness of Irish history and culture, a process facilitated through lectures, concerts, and the allure of prizes.

14. See Cullen, "Establishing a Communications System: News, Post and Transport," 26.

15. *Irish Fireside*, 2 July 1883, 16.

16. Translations of Irish-language ballad poetry, as well as tales loosely based on folklore and Irish history, were regularly printed in the publication alongside stories of contemporary interest. See *Irish Fireside*, 2 July 1883, 4, 16; *Irish Fireside: Great Irish Revival Number*, 2 Jan. 1886.

17. *Irish Fireside*, 27 Feb. 1886.

18. Ibid.

19. See Ryan, *The Irish Literary Revival: Its History, Pioneers and Possibilities*, 11–15.

Keawell's idea was received favorably by the *Irish Fireside*, and the "Irish Fireside Club for boys and girls" first appeared on New Year's Day, 1887.[20] This children's column was established by the young poet Rose Kavanagh, who had recently been appointed as editor of the *Irish Fireside*.[21] She chose as her pseudonym, "Uncle Remus II," based on Joel Chandler Harris's fictitious African American narrator of the Brer Rabbit tales. The Brer Rabbit stories, first published in the *Atlanta Constitution* just eight years previously in 1879, had become an immediate success throughout the English-speaking world without arousing the controversy that would later surround them.[22] Along with her American sympathies, Kavanagh was a disciple of Charles Kickham and a committed nationalist.[23] Thus, the IFC was to be distinctly patriotic in outlook.

This Irish Uncle Remus's role was to facilitate the children's creativity and encourage their pursuits. He offered a weekly address to his "nieces" and "nephews" throughout the country and urged their active participation in the club. Competitions, which varied from Latin translations to homemade toys, were a regular feature, enabling children to pursue and excel according to their individual strengths and interests. Children as young as five were encouraged to write to Uncle Remus's office at 84 Middle Abbey Street, Dublin, and he would then publish their letters, together with a heartening reply.

The success of the Uncle Remus formula was unprecedented. While the *Irish Fireside* had run into financial difficulty by mid-1887, the IFC, being by then too popular to disband, was assimilated into the *Weekly Freeman*, increasing the column's circulation, readership,

20. *Irish Fireside*, 1 Jan. 1887.

21. Katharine Tynan, *Twenty-five Years: Reminiscences* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1913), 204–5.

22. Kavanagh may have identified with the African American folklore and depiction of slavery within these stories as a parallel to the Irish colonial situation. However, some later critics consider the Brer Rabbit tales to contain elements of racism. See Walter M. Brasch, *Brer Rabbit, Uncle Remus, and the "Cornfield Journalist"* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2000). A full examination of the similarities and differences between Harris's Uncle Remus and his Irish namesake are beyond the scope of this inquiry, which will use the name exclusively to refer to the character created by Kavanagh.

23. W.B. Yeats, *Letters to the New Island* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 121.

and popularity.[24] According to L.M. Cullen, weekly newspapers were more accessible to poor and rurally based people than the daily newspapers, and the *Weekly Freeman* was the most prevalent of the weeklies.[25] In October 1887, the IFC had ten thousand members; two years later, it had twenty-five thousand, and more than one hundred new recruits were signing up every week.[26] By January 1894, there were over fifty thousand club members, at which stage the pace of growth began to slow down.[27] While Kavanagh witnessed the club's initial popularity, her own tubercular condition forced her to relinquish the role of Uncle Remus by late 1889.[28] *The Irish Monthly* later reported that "hundreds" were willing to replace her.[29] It was Kavanagh's close friend, Hester Sigerson, daughter of the eminent surgeon and Irish literary scholar George Sigerson, who took over the popular role, and as the layout and tone of the column remained the same, the changeover was imperceptible to the young "firesiders."[30]

The IFC's fourfold aims for young readers were printed at the head of every column:

(1) To encourage the love of nature.
(2) To encourage the humane treatment of all dumb creatures.
(3) To help to make a happy fireside by kindness to others and by being good and useful ourselves.
(4) To diffuse our knowledge.

As the first two aims indicate, during Kavanagh's reign as Uncle Remus, the beauties and mysteries of the natural world were to the

24. *Irish Monthly*, August 1899, 423.

25. L.M. Cullen, *Eason & Son: A History* (Dublin: Eason & Son, 1989), 5–8. In 1898, the circulation of the *WF* was approximately 36,000 copies per week. See Lawrence W. McBride, "Visualizing '98: Irish Nationalist Cartoons Commemorate the Revolution," in *Eighteenth-Century Life* 22, no. 3 (1998): 105.

26. It is difficult to establish through analysis of the IFC column whether membership was predominantly one class over another; however, the "firesiders" mentioned in this article came both from working-class backgrounds (e.g., William Rooney) and upper-middle-class backgrounds (e.g., Agnes O'Farrelly).

27. *WF*, 6 Jan. 1894.

28. *Irish Monthly*, November 1891, 605.

29. *Irish Monthly*, July 1891, 366.

30. D.J. O'Donoghue, *The Poets of Ireland: A Biographical and Bibliographical Dictionary of Irish Writers of English Verse* (Dublin: Hoggis Figgis & Co., 1912), 427.

fore of the club's column. City children wrote to him about their pet swans and pigeons, while their country "cousins" boasted numerous pets. Some sought advice on how to care for their pets, which Uncle Remus duly provided. The Kilrush Branch of the IFC passed a motion to "do our best to stop the robbing of birds' nests, as this is the season of building," which led to a birds'-nest-robbers naming-and-shaming policy within the club's column.[31] Nature was also to receive academic treatment on a regular basis in the IFC, with essay competitions on topics from gardening to agriculture. An interest in nature and animal welfare was not unique to Uncle Remus: a Dublin branch of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was by then well established, and Uncle Remus encouraged young firesiders who were deeply concerned with animal welfare to correspond with its committee members.[32] The proliferation of animal-welfare organizations was characteristic of late-Victorian Britain, and their ideology filtered into the children's newspaper column: in 1876, the prolific "Dicky Bird Society" conducted by "Uncle Toby" first appeared in the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle,* and young members took a pledge to care for birds in particular.[33] While the IFC was undoubtedly influenced by this column, it soon refrained from following British trends and focused on issues particular to Ireland.

Within a few years, and most visibly under Hester Sigerson's direction, the firesiders' chief charitable interest had migrated from animals to Irish people in need. Thus when "cousin" John Rahilly, a young journalist from Kerry, drowned, the Ballingarry Branch of the IFC set up a "Rahilly Fund" for the impoverished mother of their deceased fireside "cousin," in spite of the fact that they themselves were not financially independent.[34] In March 1898, as the

31. *WF*, 24 March 1888. Muiris Ó Súilleabháin's well-known autobiography, *Fiche Blian ag Fás*, which outlines his youth spent on the Great Blasket Island in the early twentieth century, reveals that the robbing of eggs, from seagulls' eggs to starfish eggs, was a favorite pastime of boys in rural Ireland. See Muiris Ó Súilleabháin, *Fiche Blian ag Fás* (Má Nuad: An Sagart, 1981), 40.

32. *WF*, 25 Feb. 1888.

33. Fred Milton, (2006), *Taking the Pledge: A Study of Children's Nature Conservation Movements in Britain, 1870–1914*, www.eh-resources.org/dbs.html. Accessed 7 Dec. 2008.

34. *WF*, 16 Feb. 1895.

Weekly Freeman reported on the unfolding famine in Ireland, the Liverpool Fireside Club set up a distress fund for the "famine stricken people of the south and west of Ireland," which received contributions from branches and individuals in Ireland and America.[35] The Club was thus encouraging a generation of Irish children as they developed a social conscience and engaged in projects of social improvement, providing them with fund-raising and propagandist skills that they would continue to use after joining adult organizations.

According to Uncle Remus, the IFC's principal objective was "the education of the youth of Ireland."[36] While he chose to teach these youth through his weekly addresses, he also urged his young followers to "[t]hink for yourselves, act for yourselves, kind kinsfolk, and be assured that any aid Uncle Remus can give you in striving for such independence will be gladly given."[37] He held a broad definition of education that went far beyond the academic realm: it included the life skills of self-sufficiency, self-respect, and independence. As a lover of the great outdoors, Uncle Remus urged his "nieces" and "nephews" to embrace it by engaging in physical education, the benefits of which he exhorted in the club column. He promoted the Gaelic Athletic Association in its infancy, affording special attention to hurling and gaelic football (camogie for girls had not yet been conceived), and stressed the virtues of individual sports such as running and swimming in his weekly address.[38] It was essential that children be physically healthy if they were to survive into adulthood and play a central role in Ireland's future. Like many educators, Uncle Remus believed that physical education complemented intellectual development, and several of his followers carried this belief into their adult life, as they became involved in the promotion of Gaelic games alongside the Gaelic League.[39] Self-education in

35. *WF*, 19 March 1898.
36. *WF*, 9 Feb. 1895.
37. *WF*, 15 Sept. 1888.
38. *WF*, 25 Feb. 1888. The Keating Branch of the Gaelic League established the women's Gaelic game of camogie, similar to hurling, in 1904. See *Banba*, August 1904, 330–31.
39. For example, Agnes O'Farrelly would later become president and Mary E.L. Butler, vice-president of the camogie association of Ireland.

academic terms could be undertaken by children who were willing to participate in the club column and was an avenue open to all. However, it was within the IFC branches that the other aspects of Uncle Remus's educational creed were best developed. The branches, which will be examined later in this essay, fostered cooperation amongst children and taught them how to establish and administer educational and social projects.

In the early 1890s, Hester Sigerson promoted several new initiatives for the educational benefit of young firesiders. The Branch Library Scheme was foremost amongst them; interested branches received books in installments from the *Freeman's Journal,* and committee members were appointed as librarians. A number of branches expanded their libraries by collecting small subscriptions from members, and the Ballingarry Branch in County Limerick even boasted a permanent librarian.[40] Uncle Remus's "nephew," Patrick Morris, informed him that what the children learned from these books "will be useful to them as men and women and as Irishmen and Irishwomen the longest day they live."[41] In 1892, Uncle Remus introduced the "Fireside Debating Column," which sought opinion pieces on specific aspects of Irish history and culture, along with debates on historical foreign wars and armies.[42] This forum not only facilitated but also fostered nationalist views, as Uncle Remus raised topics such as "Was Moore or Davis the Greatest Poet?" and "Which is best—Ireland a Republic, or Ireland with a free parliament and constitution subordinate to Britain?" Overt political discussions had previously been purposely avoided in the IFC column, and this latter topic was terminated a month after its first appearance, as it was deemed to be "verging too much on politics of the day."[43] Nonetheless, discussions on cultural nationalism

40. *WF*, 16 June 1894; *WF*, 26 Jan. 1895.

41. *WF*, 5 March 1898.

42. A debate entitled "Was Wellington a Greater General than Napoleon?" greatly interested the young readers, most of whom believed Napoleon to be the greater, a view that may be partly attributable to anti-British fervor in Ireland at the time. See *WF*, 17 Nov. 1894, 11.

43. *WF*, 30 June 1894. The IFC's unwillingness to engage with "politics," although it unwittingly crept into the column on occasion, foreshadows the Gaelic League's later difficulties with the same brand of "politics," propelled by the Keat-

in all its forms were actively encouraged. Attitudes toward the Irish language and literature were debated and developed; so, too, was the question of an Irish national anthem.[44] It is apparent that the debating column particularly appealed to the older firesiders, those in their mid- to late teens, as more advanced literary skills were needed for participation in this column than that of the average letter written to Uncle Remus.[45] The debating column encouraged them to educate themselves by expanding their research and argumentative skills. By the time the debaters graduated from the IFC, their cultural nationalist views were already fully developed.

Uncle Remus, the self-appointed "Commander-in-Chief" of the IFC, consistently used military terminology in discussing the structures of his club, self-discipline and physical exercise being at the core of the values he promoted.[46] Since the inception of the IFC, he had encouraged young readers between the ages of five and nineteen to sign up for "Our Great Club Book," and a list of new fireside "recruits" was published in the club's column every week.[47] Those who recruited friends to the club were rewarded with a title on a scale of "corporal, sergeant, lieutenant, captain, major, colonel, general," along with Fireside Club medals. This military decoration was to be worn by firesiders of merit and would enable them to recognize one another in public.[48] Like any chief officer of a "Great Army," Uncle Remus was a strict disciplinarian when necessary, particularly when he discovered a plagiarist among his "little soldiers." Upon the receipt of a plagiarized poem, which he denounced

ing Branch. See Brian Murphy, "Father Peter Yorke's 'Turning of the Tide' (1899): The Strictly Cultural Nationalism of the Early Gaelic League," *Éire-Ireland* 23, no. 1 (1988): 35–44.

44. These debates were entitled "Will the Celtic Ever Be the Living Tongue or the Language of the Irish Race?" and "Have We a National Anthem?" See *WF,* 24 Feb. 1894; *WF*, 25 Aug. 1894.

45. A study of some prominent firesiders' correspondence with Uncle Remus over a period of years (e.g., Thomas Concannon, Henry Morris, Agnes O'Farrelly, and William Rooney) lends support to this statement.

46. In this respect, the IFC anticipated Robert Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys: A Handbook for Instruction in Good Citizenship* (1908), from which the scouting movement evolved.

47. The Great Club Book contained the name, number, and a record of each club member's correspondence with Uncle Remus.

48. *WF*, 14 April 1894.

as "an insult to Ireland," he impelled "all honorable members to help him to stamp it out."[49] However, Uncle Remus's main purpose was to unite the "little soldiers" of Ireland and to motivate and prepare them for their march toward the great future he believed to be ahead of them.[50] He considered unity to be a "priceless gift," and by offering his "nieces" and "nephews" roles in an imaginary army, he provided them with an incentive for self-advancement that would strengthen their army for its future battles.[51] In spite of the militaristic language he used in his addresses, Uncle Remus was essentially an educationalist who portrayed heroism in terms of patriotism and saw the necessity of relinquishing personal ambition for the benefit of national ambition. His little soldiers could thus aspire to heroism if all it entailed was being "honest, upright, true workers for Ireland's cause," unlike the bloody heroism of bygone days.[52] While Uncle Remus studied and invoked "Commanders-in-Chief" of other great armies, he felt his own tactics to be superior: "Bonaparte might have the mothers and not all their flock; whereas Uncle Remus keenly sees that if he only get hold of the young people, he will be sure of the mothers as well—ay, and of the fathers, too, and of the uncles and aunts besides."[53] A contributor to the *Irish Monthly* later suggested that there was some logic to Uncle Remus's ploy: "I think had Uncle Remus been announced to appear at any town or village, the children would have flocked from all the country-side. And not children alone, but the children's mothers and the children's friends too."[54] In the following decade, the Gaelic League would fluctuate between the Bonaparte and Uncle Remus means of recruiting and educating children.

In late-nineteenth-century Ireland, the IFC was the only "army" that recruited both males and females. Male recruits to the IFC

49. *WF*, 24 Feb. 1894.
50. *WF*, 3 March 1894.
51. *WF*, 9 Feb. 1895.
52. *WF*, 13 Oct. 1894. Uncle Remus was not alone in attempting to instil patriotism in young people, as this sentiment was also prioritized within the first Irish-language novel, *Cormac Ua Conaill*, by Fr. Pádraig Ó Duinnín, published in 1901. See An tAthair Pádruig Ua Duinnín, *Cormac Ua Conaill* (Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1952), x–xi.
53. *WF*, 27 Oct. 1888.
54. *Irish Monthly*, July 1891, 363.

consistently outnumbered female; nevertheless, girls were just as likely to write to Uncle Remus, and they entered Fireside Club competitions with as much enthusiasm and success as the boys.[55] Prizes for sock knitting and jam recipes were female oriented, but girls' names were also to be found amongst the winners of the apparently more male-focused arithmetic and astronomy competitions. Through the IFC column, young females were able to discuss their opinions in a public manner, an exercise from which their sex usually abstained. It appears that when one female participated in the male-dominated debating column, others would take courage and follow her example. Uncle Remus firmly believed in equality both within the club and in wider society and took pride in the successes of the first generation of girls permitted to sit the Royal University exams: "The girls are going ahead, and no one utters a heartier 'more power to them' than Uncle Remus," he stated in one column.[56] On another occasion, he informed his "nieces" and "nephews" that he "would give as free and as full franchise to women as to men. Indeed, he is convinced that it is only a question of time until the world will do the same, and feels heartily ashamed into the bargain, of its old, sad, bad, long stupidity on the matter."[57] Kavanagh, his then alter ego, was an independent and active public figure—a former member of the Ladies' Land League and clearly an avid supporter of equality for women.[58] Accordingly, the only occasion on which Uncle Remus directly challenged the administration of any individual club branch was when he denounced the Liverpool South Branch for attempting to curtail girls' voting rights at their meetings. In general, very few girls attended meetings in the Fireside Clubs, which were thus an almost exclusively male space; however, girls did correspond with the clubs from time to time.[59]

55. This is evident from the numbers of males and females who signed up to the Great Club Book in January 1888, 1894, and 1900, along with the male/female publications in the IFC column over the same periods.

56. *WF*, 11 Aug. 1888. The Intermediate Education Act of 1878, followed by the Royal University Act of 1879, allowed Irish women access to higher education.

57. *WF*, 13 Oct. 1888.

58. Yeats, *Letters to the New Island*, 121.

59. The January 1894 Branch reports reveal that the Ballingarry (Robert Emmet) Branch, Ballyfinnane, and Castlemain (Young O'Connell) Branch were exclusively male, while the Liverpool Branch and the Young Emmet's Ower and

When Hester Sigerson took over the role of Uncle Remus, she continued to promote equality within the club's column. For example, by holding an essay competition on "My Favourite Heroine," she encouraged girls to explore the lives of exemplary and powerful female public figures. Agnes Farrelly, who would later become the foremost female activist in the Gaelic League, submitted an essay on Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, the child queen whose life ended in execution by the Queen of England; it was highly commended by Uncle Remus.[60]

As Uncle Remus was portrayed as an old, paternal figure within the IFC column, he commanded much respect and authority amongst children, which enabled him to exert a strong influence over them.[61] The wise old female figures who appeared as hosts of several other Irish children's columns in the early twentieth century did not appeal to the children in the same manner. The female was too closely associated with the private domestic sphere to be envisaged as a public and authoritative figure. Katharine Tynan reminisced that Uncle Remus "became a real personality to many Irish children; and it was embarrassing when holiday-times came and the children called at the office to see Uncle Remus, expecting to find an old gentleman with a flowing beard, and found Rose instead."[62] This was true to the experience of two young Dublin firesiders, William Rooney and Henry Egan Kenny (later known by the pseudonym "Sean-Ghall"), who were keen to meet the "venerable old gentleman with the wallet of knowledge, the big heart and the kindly eyes."[63] After several unsuccessful trips to the *Freeman*'s *Journal* office in the hope of meeting Uncle Remus, they were greeted by Rose Kavanagh. Kenny reported that "Laughter danced in her eyes,

Carrigbeg Branch had a few female correspondents. This reflects a general pattern in the Irish Fireside Clubs. The Great American Branch was an exception; a female vice president was elected in September 1894. See *WF*, 29 Sept. 1894.

60. *WF*, 6 May 1893.

61. While there are interesting gender issues raised by the exploitation of the Uncle Remus mask by Kavanagh and Sigerson, a full analysis of these are beyond the scope of this inquiry.

62. Katharine Tynan, "A Wild Rose—Rose Kavanagh," in *Memoirs* (London: Eveleigh Nash & Grayson 1924), 171.

63. Padraic Colum, *Ourselves Alone! The Story of Arthur Griffith and the Origin of the Irish Free State* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1959), 17.

and without replying she plied us with questions about our school life and sports. . . . Then she impressed on us the need of establishing Fireside Clubs, where we were to gather all our school chums and write essays and have debates on Irish subjects."[64]

Along with other young enthusiasts, Rooney and Kenny obliged Kavanagh by establishing the City of Dublin Branch in late 1888.[65] Branches of the Fireside Club had been growing steadily throughout Ireland in 1888, with firesiders in Claremorris, Co. Mayo, Kilrush, Co. Clare, Tubbercurry, Co. Sligo, and Cookstown, Co. Tyrone, being to the forefront. Kenny later commented that many of these branches dispersed and then reorganized during their lifetimes due to "the fickleness of youth" and "the eternal need of pence," as the young firesiders had to rent their meeting rooms.[66] While this was true of the City of Dublin Branch, others were more stable, notably those based abroad.[67] The Great American Branch in Chicago and two Liverpool branches were among the most lively and well organized, affording both second-generation Irish children and young emigrants a social outlet similar to that of the Southwark Junior Irish Literary Club in London. Unlike the Southwark Club, which was organized by adults for children, these Fireside Clubs were run entirely by young firesiders. It appears that the *Weekly Freeman* was easily available to these emigrants, and Uncle Remus helped their clubs by publishing Fireside Club branch reports, which provided accounts of branch meetings and activities (dependent on the diligence of the young branch secretaries). From these reports, it would seem that Fireside Club meetings were generally held once a week, during which time young members read papers on Irish history and culture—the topics of which were mostly chosen from the IFC columns—and these papers were followed by lengthy discussions. Members also organized excursions such as picnics and day trips to scenic areas. It was in the context of the Fireside Clubs that the thirteen-year-old Éamon de Valera first emerged as secre-

64. Ibid.

65. *WF*, 15 Dec. 1888.

66. Colum, *Ourselves Alone! The Story of Arthur Griffith and the Origin of the Irish Free State*, 18.

67. A Dublin branch existed from 1888 to 1892; another was established in 1899.

tary of the Bruree, Co. Limerick, Branch; Henry Morris as member of the Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan, Branch; and George A. Moonan as president of the City of Dublin Branch.

Under "Sergeant" Moonan's directorship, the City of Dublin Branch resolved to promote "the cultivation of the Irish language," enlisting the services of R.J. O'Mulrenin, a member of the newly formed Pan-Celtic Society and Secretary of the Gaelic Union, as Irish teacher.[68] As the Irish class, which its secretary boasted to be "the only class of its kind in Dublin," grew in numbers, the club moved from Dame Street to new premises on Clarendon Street.[69] It was in this class that many young enthusiasts, including the future leading Gaelic League activist Stiofán Bairéad, were first introduced to the Irish language.[70] From the beginning, Uncle Remus had encouraged the Irish language by offering regular prizes for stories and letters written in Irish. However, in the early years of the IFC column, there were relatively few entrants, as children who were native speakers of Irish could rarely write the language and children whose first language was English had relatively little, if any, knowledge of the Irish language. This problem can be partially attributed to the fact that the Irish language was not taught during normal school hours in the national schools and was placed in an inferior position to other subjects in the secondary schools.[71] Thus, the initiatives of both Uncle Remus and the City of Dublin Branch attempted to offset the deficiencies of a British educational system that excluded the teaching of Irish.

During Hester Sigerson's reign, the growing influence of the Irish-language movement in Irish society was reflected in the club's column, with Uncle Remus avowing that "there is no movement which should be nearer to the hearts of the I.F. Club than this."[72] As Sigerson's father was a member of the first Council of the Gaelic

68. *Irish Monthly*, January 1953, 15–20.

69. *WF*, 27 July 1889.

70. Diarmuid Breathnach agus Máire Ní Mhurchú, *1882–1982: Beathaisnéis a hAon* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 1986), 16.

71. See Séamas Ó Buachalla, "Educational Policy and the Role of the Irish Language from 1831 to 1981," *European Journal of Education* 19, no. 1, Multicultural Education (1984): 75.

72. *WF*, 6 Jan. 1894.

League in 1893–94, she was well aware of the raison d'être of the League and of the means through which it wished to promote the Irish language.[73] In 1888, Norah O'Connell from Kerry informed Uncle Remus that "[w]e speak lots of Irish down here in Kerry, though I never saw an Irish book. Our servant Cauth calls the pigs and calves in Irish, and they understand her. While milking the cows she is always singing Irish songs."[74] The lack of reading material in Irish was one of the major obstacles with which Irish language enthusiasts were presented. To overcome this difficulty, the *Weekly Freeman* began to publish a series of lessons in the Irish language in 1894, a course of self-instruction, which included the serialization of Father Eugene O'Growney's *Easy Lessons in Irish*. These lessons made the Irish language more accessible to learners than previous attempts to popularize it, and although separate from the IFC, they were at times placed strategically alongside the Fireside column. Thus many children became acquainted with the language of their own accord, some pursuing it further than others.[75] The children reacted with glee upon finding out that Father O'Growney kept himself abreast of the Fireside column from Arizona and even corresponded with some of its young contributors.[76] "Lieutenant" Henry Morris was the most enthusiastic supporter of this initiative and exhorted his fellow firesiders to study the language: "Come, my cousins, 'be Irish still, stand for the dear old tongue'; commence these lessons and follow them perseveringly; and I say, if there is one spark of genuine patriotism in the youth of Ireland, hundreds—aye, thousands—will be found ready and eager to do this."[77] Until the Gaelic League began to actively promote the Irish language among children from around 1899 onward, the IFC was perhaps the only public forum in which native Irish-speaking children were encouraged to use their language.

Although entries to Irish-language competitions were initially few, they gradually increased over the next decade, mostly due to

73. See Donncha Ó Súilleabháin, *Athbheochan na Gaeilge: Cnuasach Aistí* (Baile Átha Cliath: Conradh na Gaeilge 1998), 6.

74. *WF*, 24 March 1888.

75. *Freeman's Journal*, 9 April 1902.

76. *WF*, 13 Feb. 1897.

77. *WF*, 6 Jan. 1894.

correspondence with several children from the Aran Islands, who provided their "cousins" with insight into one of the last fortresses of the old Gaelic way of life.[78] American and other international Fireside "cousins" wrote of their experience of living in the outside world and furnished them with critiques of foreign cultures. One young firesider who became a sailor with the American navy wrote letters to his "cousins" on his voyage to Japan, while others wrote from Australia, Buenos Aires, Egypt, Europe, and Mexico.[79] Emigration was mentioned from time to time in the IFC column, with several branches lamenting the loss of members to America and England, although some of these members would find a ready-made community amongst expatriate firesiders.[80] Patrick Dougherty, a young Irish emigrant in Philadelphia, wrote to his "cousins" at home in order to inform them of the poor quality of life of many Irish emigrants in "The Promised Land." His critique of slums and alcoholism amongst the Irish was a warning to his young "cousins," who expected to find a better life through emigration.[81] Within a few years, the Gaelic League, too, would adopt an anti-emigration stance.[82]

As Fireside Clubs grew in strength and number, members began to engage in literary pursuits independently of Uncle Remus, although he acknowledged their work through the IFC column.

78. Michael and James Mullen (Inis Meáin) and Mary O'Neill (Inis Mór) were the most diligent correspondents. Sixteen-year-old James Mullen told Uncle Remus that he received the *Weekly Freeman* every week and read the letters from all his "cousins." He claimed that "all the people here speak Irish, as for English they know no more about it than they do about Greek"; however, he failed to explain why he appeared to have an excellent command of English, as did some of his fellow Aran Island "cousins." *WF*, 22 May 1897. There is little information available regarding the access Aran Islanders had to print media during this period. Census reports from 1891 suggest that approximately 44 percent of the islanders were illiterate. See A.C. Haddon and C.R. Browne, "The Ethnography of the Aran Islands, County Galway," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 2, no. 3 (1893): 796.

79. See *WF*, 13 Jan. 1894; *WF*, 7 July 1895; *WF*, 22 May 1897.

80. *WF*, 16 June 1888.

81. *WF*, 22 Jan. 1898. See Úna Ní Bhroiméil, *Building Irish Identity in America, 1870–1915: The Gaelic Revival* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), for an account of Irish organizations operating in America during this period.

82. The discouragement of emigration amongst Gaels was one of the "generally recognised duties of a Gaelic Leaguer." See *ACS*, 21 Jan. 1908.

Various branches began to produce Fireside newspapers, which they knew to be the most effective way of disseminating information, and looked to their "cousins" as contributors and subscribers. The first such publication was the *Fireside Sun*, initiated by the Ballymacelligot Branch in Tralee in 1893.[83] The Great American Branch followed suit, with its *Young Irishman* newspaper. Many members of this branch had been avid firesiders as children in Ireland but had emigrated to America in their mid-teens. Thus the age profile of this branch was older than most other branches, and its working members could more readily finance their newspaper than the branches consisting of schoolchildren.[84] Irish firesiders were urged by their American "cousins" to send pictures and articles to be published in the *Young Irishman*.[85] Copies of the *Young Irishman* filtered through to the most rural Irish branches, which then lent their support to the work of the Great American Branch. The *Fireside Companion* (1895) and the *Fireside Star* (1899) were published by Liverpool firesiders and financed by the initiatives of young club members.[86] Through these newspapers, Aran Island "cousins" corresponded with Liverpool, Liverpool corresponded with Chicago, Chicago with Carrickmacross—thus establishing a transnational network of Fireside Clubs whilst facilitating friendships between Irish children and the Irish diaspora. [87] These firesiders perceived themselves as part of a deep and vast comradeship, and as they grew in independence, matching the achievements of several adult-run organizations, they also grew in confidence and ambition and began to desire direct

83. *WF*, 13 Jan. 1894.
84. *WF*, 10 Feb. 1894.
85. *WF*, 29 Sept. 1894.
86. *WF*, 13 Nov. 1897.
87. Michael Mullen (Mícheál Ó Maoláin) from Inis Meáin paid an official visit to Liverpool "cousins" in 1898. See *WF*, 11 June 1898. In the 1930s, Mullen would become secretary of *Coiste na bPáistí* (Children's Gaeltacht Committee). This committee provided a scholarship scheme to enable the children of Dublin's trade unionists to spend a month of their summer holidays learning Irish in the Connemara Gaeltacht. Indeed, a special "Liam [William] Rooney Memorial Prize Scheme," in honor of Mullen's fireside "cousin," was created to reward some of the children who had excelled during their time spent in the Connemara Gaeltacht. See *Irish Times*, 16 March 1940; Diarmuid Breathnach agus Máire Ní Mhurchú, *1882–1982: Beathaisnéis a Ceathair* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clochomhar, 1990), 139–41.

input into the shaping of Ireland's future. The Ballingarry (Robert Emmet) Branch in County Limerick aptly expressed this view, along with the frustration of young ambition afflicted by adults' attitudes toward it: "The firesiders throughout the world are treated as mere children. A great society of close on sixty thousand are not to be treated in this manner any longer."[88] In spite of this confidence, firesiders were only to be given the opportunity to exert direct influence over Ireland's future upon graduation to "honorary member" at the age of nineteen, when they then entered into adult nationalist organizations.

The IFC had offered an outlet and rewards for children of literary talent, such as Maurice Walsh, who would go on to write the short story "The Quiet Man," which was adapted into a film of the same title and released in 1952.[89] Several other former firesiders who were working in the higher echelons of nationalist organizations by the early 1900s chose to use their literary skills, as cultivated through the IFC, to propagate nationalist ideology. Before William Rooney's premature death in May 1901, he and Arthur Griffith had begun to channel their energies into their nationalist *United Irishman* newspaper. Since graduating to the rank of "honorary member" of the IFC in 1892, Rooney had founded the Celtic Literary Society, which also focused on the study of the Irish language, history, and literature.[90] However, the importance of the child, as expounded by the IFC, remained central to his nationalist beliefs. This was illustrated through the most significant child-oriented action initiated by the *United Irishman* and the Celtic Literary Society: the Patriotic Children's Treat, which catered for up to thirty thousand children in Clonturk Park, Dublin, on 1 July 1900. This treat, which Janette Condon has researched in detail, was organized as "a decidedly

88. *WF*, 13 Oct. 1894. Despite this young man's confidence, there is little evidence that the IFC was given serious consideration as either an ally or a threat by large social and cultural institutions such as the Catholic Church. It is worth noting that Rose Kavanagh was a Protestant, while the majority of young firesiders mentioned in this article were Catholic. This suggests that religious difference was not a major factor in IFC ideology.

89. Steve Matheson, *Maurice Walsh, Storyteller* (Dingle: Brandon Book Publishers, 1985), 28.

90. R.J. O'Duffy, *Historic Graves in Glasnevin Cemetery* (Dublin: James Duffy & Co., 1915), 200.

political and counter-hegemonic gesture" following Queen Victoria's visit to Dublin in April 1900, when breakfast treats were provided by a Unionist Ladies' Committee for up to twelve thousand children in Phoenix Park to celebrate the Queen's visit.[91]

While Rooney and Griffith took an entrepreneurial approach to nationalism by establishing their own literary society and newspaper, others—George Moonan, Edward O'Neill, Stiofán Bairéad, Mícheál Breathnach, and Mary Butler among them—espoused the most prominent nationalist organization of the time, the Gaelic League.[92] In order to assess the Irish Fireside Club's input into the Gaelic League, it is necessary to look at both the actions of individuals and the movement as a whole. Uncle Remus's "nephew," Aran Islander Thomas Concannon, for example, signed the Great Club Book in 1891; three years later, he was a member of the Great American Branch. He proceeded to become vice president then honorary president of the Liverpool Branch in 1898 while residing in Mexico. During his period as vice president, he first came to public attention by establishing the Kilronan (Aran Islands) Branch of the Gaelic League in August 1898.[93] While P.H. Pearse is often credited with setting up this branch, it appears from the account of Aran firesider Michael Mullen that Concannon, as a native speaker of Irish, played a more central role in its formation.[94] Concannon proceeded to

91. Janette Condon, "The Patriotic Children's Treat: Irish Nationalism and Children's Culture at the Twilight of Empire," in *Irish Studies Review* 8, no. 2 (2000): 173; *Irish Times*, 1 May 1900. The figure of twelve thousand children in attendance in Phoenix Park may be approximate, as both unionist and nationalists distorted numbers to suit their version of events. The *United Irishman* reported that "only 5,000 went to her Majesty's treat in the Phoenix Park." See *United Irishman*, 7 July 1900.

92. As Butler's name was a common one, she began to use "Mary E.L. Butler" to distinguish herself as a writer. Her first short story was published in the *WF* in 1895; however, it is quite possible that she was also the Mary Butler who corresponded with Uncle Remus until the age of nineteen. The name of James Joyce poses the same problem, as it appears in the Great Club Book, but as he was not a regular contributor, it is impossible to ascertain whether or not this James Joyce was in fact the later writer of repute.

93. See *Fáinne an Lae*, 20 Aug. 1898.

94. *WF*, 27 Aug. 1898. Tim Robinson, in his introduction to J.M. Synge's *The Aran Islands*, credits P.H. Pearse alone with having set up the Kilronan Branch of the Gaelic League. See J.M. Synge, *The Aran Islands*, ed. Tim Robinson (London: Penguin, 1992), xvi.

launch a national appeal for the "Aran Library" fund to enable the people of Aran to educate themselves, an idea that stemmed directly from the IFC.[95] Concannon then became the Gaelic League's first traveling teacher in Irish-speaking areas, establishing branches all over rural Ireland.[96] His "cousin," Agnes O'Farrelly, followed in his footsteps by setting up a women's branch of the Gaelic League on Inis Meáin, where Concannon had grown up.[97] In 1895, Henry Morris from Carrickmacross established the Farney Branch of the Gaelic League, the first such branch to be established outside of Dublin.[98] Later, Morris met Concannon through Gaelic League activities, yet Concannon was already familiar with his "cousin": "the Henry Morris of the 'Fireside Club.'"[99] These were not the only firesiders who made a seamless transition from the IFC to the Gaelic League; many followed a similar pattern.

Several firesiders, such as Patrick Morris and Thomas P. Keawell, became affiliated with the League at local branch level, while George Fagan, who had brightened the IFC column with his sketches, continued to display his work in the Gaelic League's publication, *An Claidheamh Soluis*.[100] Others, like Henry Egan Kenny, who had left Ireland for London, became involved in organizing Gaelic League activities in their new homes.[101] The ethos and structure of the Gaelic League was familiar to the former firesiders. Like their own childhood club, which promoted equality of the sexes, it was the first nationalist adult organization that welcomed women

95. *WF*, 12 Nov. 1898.

96. Breathnach agus Ní Mhurchú, *1882–1982: Beathaisnéis a Dó*, 85–86. Concannon's future wife, Senator Helena Concannon (née Walsh, sister of Louis Walsh), was also a keen fireside in her youth. See *WF*, 24 March 1888.

97. *ACS*, 12 Aug. 1899. Agnes Farrelly adopted the "O" in her name c. 1897, when she began to study Celtic in St. Mary's University College, Dublin, under the tutelage of Eoin Mac Néill. Similarly, the Blueshirt leader Owen Duffy, another young fireside, would later reappropriate his name as Eoin O'Duffy. See Fearghal McGarry, *Eoin O'Duffy: A Self-Made Hero* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

98. Breathnach agus Ní Mhurchú, *1882–1982: Beathaisnéis a hAon*, 88–89.

99. Thomas Concannon to Henry Morris, letter dated 23 Nov. 1898, University College Dublin, James Joyce Library, Special Collections, Henry Morris Correspondence.

100. *ACS*, 28 April 1903.

101. *Weekly Independent and Nation*, 28 Sept. 1901.

into its ranks on a par with men; it promoted self-sufficiency, encouraging and aiding people in their effort to educate themselves; it sought to avoid parliamentary politics yet endorsed patriotism and nationalism; and it was structured with a headquarters in Dublin, and its essentially autonomous branches in Ireland and abroad were united by a print medium.[102] Most importantly, it was a forward-looking, hope-imbued organization, which facilitated the firesiders' ease of passage into adult cultural nationalism.

While the cultural nationalism of the former firesiders in the Gaelic League had been fostered outside the school system during their youth, these young people realized that by integrating the Irish language and Irish history into the national and secondary school curricula, mass education along nationalist lines could be achieved. This was in keeping with Douglas Hyde's description of the Gaelic League's purpose: "to reform all education in Ireland, from the National School to the University, upon native and autochthonous lines."[103] By the turn of the twentieth century, the child had thus become the focus as principal receptacle and potential transmitter of the Gaelic League's cultural nationalist ideology, and the League began to invest much of its resources in the promotion of a child-centered nationalist education, to be administered by the Educational Boards and the Gaelic League itself in the public sphere and by the parent (generally the mother) in the private sphere. This need for public and private sphere Irish-language education formed the crux of the speech delivered by Thomas Concannon at the opening of the Aran Branch of the Gaelic League in 1898.[104] Concannon's ideas on child education were constantly reiterated by his colleagues; speaking about the children of Aran, Agnes O'Farrelly stated "*orra-san as mó bhéas leas na Gaedhilge ag seasamh 'san am atá le teacht*" (the well-being of Irish will depend mostly on them in the future).[105]

102. See Máiréad Ní Chinnéide, "Conradh na Gaeilge agus Fuascailt na mBan," in *Feasta*, Lúnasa 1993, 5.

103. Royal Commission on University Education in Ireland, *Irish in University Education: Evidence Given before The Royal Commission on University Education, 1902*, Gaelic League Pamphlets, no. 29 (Dublin: Gaelic League, 1902), 1.

104. *WF*, 27 Aug. 1898.

105. Úna Ní Fhaircheallaigh, *Smuainte Ar Árainn* (Baile Átha Cliath: Connradh na Gaedhilge, 1902), 46.

Similar to the IFC, in which both Uncle Remus and his "nieces" and "nephews" persistently spoke of the "great future before us" while instituting change in the present, the Gaelic League encouraged educational and social reform in the present while looking to future fruition, symbolized by the growing child. It was generally the female element within the executive of the League, most notably Butler but also O'Farrelly, who publicly encouraged the mothers of Ireland to aid the language movement by learning Irish (if they were not native speakers) and teaching it to their children.[106] Uncle Remus had recruited children in the belief that their mothers would follow, and Butler also adopted this approach: from 1901 to 1903 she edited an "Éire Óg" (Young Ireland) column in the *Weekly Independent*, based upon the IFC model, with "Seanmháthair" (Grandmother) at its helm.[107] However, Seanmháthair proved to be more of a dictator than an educational facilitator, emphasizing the faults of children's writing skills and urging members of Éire Óg to sign anti-emigration, anti-enlisting, and Irish manufacturing pledges.[108] Unlike Uncle Remus, who celebrated children of all nationalities, at times Seanmháthair sought to highlight ethnic differences amongst children by offering prizes for competitions such as the "Best description of the characteristics which should distinguish an Irish girl or boy from a British one."[109]

While the League was actively and publicly campaigning for an Irish-oriented educational system within the schools, the Irish language and history were being taught in its branches, independent of the Education Boards and the British Treasury in London. The League's financial resources, although limited, went far beyond those of the IFC; they enabled the League to propagate its educational philosophy and methods in branches throughout the country in a creative manner. *Tableaux vivants*, dramatic productions, and

106. See Mary E.L. Butler, "Irish Women and the Home Language," Gaelic League Pamphlets, no. 6 (Dublin: The Gaelic League, 1900).

107. The *Weekly Irish Times* also conducted a long-lived children's column, beginning in March 1900, entitled "Granny's Column for Little People." See *Weekly Irish Times*, 17 March 1900.

108. See Máiréad Ní Chinnéide, *Máire de Buitléir: Bean Athbheochana* (Baile Átha Cliath: Comhar Tta., 1993), 39–43.

109. *Weekly Independent and Nation*, 4 July 1903, 19.

the local Feis (festival) and Aeraíocht (open-air entertainment) were used in conjunction with Irish-language classes as means of promoting cultural nationalism amongst adults and children alike.[110] Although the Gaelic League branches generally catered to both children and adults, male and female, the need for exclusively child-centered branches was highlighted by P.H. Pearse in 1907 in *An Claidheamh Soluis*.[111] He believed that "'Éire Óg' Craobhacha [Branches] will perform a useful function in harnessing the young folk into work for Ireland as soon as they are of an age to understand what is required of them."[112] Pearse's choice of vocabulary is indicative of his designated role for children in Ireland's future, to be achieved through nationalist indoctrination.[113] In Pearse's description, the *Éire Óg* Branches of the Gaelic League would resemble those of the IFC both in structure and in content, although it appears that Pearse envisaged an adult presence directing these branches.[114]

Although Uncle Remus promoted intellectual curiosity amongst his "nephews" and "nieces," this curiosity never amounted to a critique of his own teaching; even the young firesiders who would develop into the intellectuals of the Gaelic League did not question his educational creed. As adults, they continued to foster the cooperation and unity he had encouraged. This was most visible in the Gaelic League's effort to secure the future of the Irish language within the educational system; indeed, it was a battle for which he prepared his followers. In 1912, Agnes O'Farrelly addressed a meeting in Kilskeery, Co. Tyrone, on the topic of the Irish language within education. Referring to the local children, she informed her audience that "the soldiers who follow a very brave, a fearless Gen-

110. See McMahon, *Grand Opportunity: The Gaelic Revival and Irish Society, 1893–1910*, 155–210.

111. Ibid., 98.

112. *ACS*, 21 Sept. 1907. The term "Éire Óg" was used for several different youth initiatives in the 1900s, e.g., *Young Ireland/Éire Óg* (1917–18), a newspaper aimed at Irish youth, edited by Aodh de Blacam.

113. It has not been established whether Pearse was a firesider; however, he was certainly familiar with the IFC; his closest school friend, Edward O'Neill, was a member.

114. *ACS*, 21 Sept. 1907. As an accompaniment, a bilingual "Éire Óg" column appeared in *ACS* in late February 1909.

eral, have always a hard time. These wee soldiers of the language battle look very merry and very happy notwithstanding. There must be some witchery in the cause . . . something that draws the heart of the little Irish child."[115] Her closing remarks reveal the extent to which she had assimilated the ideology of her childhood mentor, Uncle Remus:

> My message to you today is to go on in that good work as you have hitherto done—not to take your hand from the plough. Believe me, you are having your children educated on right and intelligent lines; you are drawing out the best that is in them, giving them chances of development they might not otherwise get, and all the time you are preparing them for the life of the better Ireland of the future.[116]

The IFC was at its height in the early 1890s, and although it continued until the *Weekly Freeman* merged with the *Irish Independent* in 1924, its energy and influence had slackened by the turn of the century, partially due to the emergence of similar children's columns in rival newspapers. Henry Morris reflected upon the early days of the IFC with great fondness:

> Looking back at this time I must say the Fireside Club was then to me a source of much happiness and pleasure—that exciting pleasure that is congenial to the period of boyhood. But it was more. It did a still greater service to me. Its competitions and discussions stimulated me to read, study, think, form opinions and write on very many subjects and things, none of which I might have done but for the inducement it afforded, the incentive it gave, and the juvenile ambitions it evoked.[117]

Morris, like so many of his "cousins," had been involved in and benefited from a great youth movement and saw the potential within such a movement to mold generations of children into Irish-speaking nationalists. It was little coincidence that when firesiders came of age and entered the Gaelic League, it soon embraced children's educational reform as one of its main objectives, establishing chil-

115. Úna Ní Fhaircheallaigh (Agnes O'Farrelly), *Secondary School Scholarships: Mr. Birrell's Anti-Irish Proposal* (Dublin: Devereux, Newth & Co., 1912), 10.

116. Ibid.

117. *WF*, 23 Sept. 1899.

dren's branches, promoting children's newspaper columns, and even producing children's literature. In this and other ventures, the former firesiders clearly drew inspiration from and projected the values and methods of self-instruction that characterized Uncle Remus's IFC. Even as children, the firesiders had been aware of the unique nature and strength of their club. As one young "nephew" foretold in a letter to Uncle Remus in 1898: "Those joined in the club form the nucleus of what will be the future Irish nation."[118] Indeed, in one of his early addresses, characteristically using the third person, Uncle Remus had delivered the clarion call: "'Give me' says Uncle Remus 'the youth of a nation.'"[119] The youth of the burgeoning Irish nation responded to that call.

118. *WF*, 5 March 1898.
119. *WF*, 27 Oct. 1888.