

## Chapter 17

### Aspects of language shift and the decline in Irish in County Cavan in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

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The issue of the decline of the Irish language is a complex and multi-layered one and the shift across the island from the use primarily of Irish to that of English is arguably the most profound social change to have taken place over the period from the beginning of the sixteenth century until the later part of the nineteenth century. Increased attention has been paid in more recent times to the complex array of factors which go some way to accounting for such transformation, but much remains to be done to document comprehensively the magnitude of the shift in linguistic behaviour that took place in Ireland over what was effectively a very short timescale.<sup>1</sup> One of the ways in which a more comprehensive national picture may eventually be drawn is through the lens of local assessments detailing how the linguistic shift occurred. Therefore, in this chapter it is intended to shed some light on the decline of the Irish language in County Cavan during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Brian Ó Cuív observed, in relation to the state of the Irish language in the sixteenth century that:

It is sufficient to note that all the evidence available goes to show that, with the exception of a small number in parts of Leinster and in certain urban areas, the people of Ireland were Irish-speaking and Irish-speaking only'.<sup>2</sup>

While the situation nationally may be deemed to have been reasonably healthy, the language was already facing significant challenges from various quarters. Conell Ma Geoghagan of Westmeath, who translated the Annals of Clonmacnoise into English, observed in 1627 that some native Irish families were already sending their children to learn English rather than Irish.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding that, a measure of the strength of the Irish language at that time may be illustrated by the attempts of various members of the Anglican clergy to evangelise the native Catholic population through Irish. This, of itself, suggests that knowledge of English among the lower social strata of the native population was still fairly limited.

Attempts at proselytisation through the medium of Irish were largely 'officially driven' as evidenced by Uilliam Ó Domhnuill's Irish translation of the New Testament in 1602 and the *Booke of Common Prayer* (1608).<sup>4</sup> William Bedell, bishop of Kilmore 1629-42, devoted significant energy to the translation and printing of an Irish version of the Old Testament and, indeed, learned the language itself as part of his efforts. He completed the text by 1640 but it was not published until 1685 owing to 'the weighty logistical difficulties that were encountered by those who sought to bridge the chasm that separated the Irish and English languages in the early seventeenth century'.<sup>5</sup> It also suggested that support for the venture, among both the ecclesiastical and secular powers, was lukewarm at best and that it continued to weaken into the next century.<sup>6</sup> One such strident opponent of the use of Irish to advance the Anglican and Protestant cause was Anthony Dopping, Anglican bishop of Meath, who believed that the sending of missionaries to preach in Irish 'would too much encourage the Irish to continue their own language'.<sup>7</sup> The Reverend Edward Nicholson, who ministered in County Sligo, was also strongly opposed to any attempt to use Irish as a means of conversion,

stating that the Irish language and Catholicism were closely intertwined and the promotion of:

... that barbarous language (so intimately fraught with cursing and swearing and all vile prophaneness) will but keep up the distinction of their people from ours to make us one people and one religion, which would have but one language.<sup>8</sup>

In 1710, the House of Commons sought to recruit 'a competent number of ministers duly qualified to instruct [the popish natives of this kingdom], and perform the offices of religion to them in their own language be provided and encouraged by a suitable maintenance', but the resolution to do so went largely unheeded.<sup>9</sup> Some in the Anglican Church perceived the use of the Irish language for proselytising the natives as a very obvious means to bring about the weakening of the Catholic faith and conversion of the popish natives to the established Church, but many could not see the merit of spending valuable resources effectively promoting a language that most wished to see extinguished. Dean Swift believed that the language might be abolished 'at a very trifling expense ... to accomplish so great a work'.<sup>10</sup> Others, such as the Reverend John Richardson, rector of Annagh, Belturbet from 1709 until his death in 1747, devoted much time and effort to the project. However, as Toby Barnard has noted, whatever enthusiasm for it existed in the latter part of the seventeenth century had evaporated by the end of the first quarter of the 1700s.<sup>11</sup> It should not be forgotten that Richardson's primary aim in promoting the use of Irish was the conversion of the Catholic natives to the Anglican faith and not the promotion or preservation of the language. In relation to the medium of instruction in schools, for example, his intention was that English only be used.<sup>12</sup>

The plantation of Ulster heralded the arrival of significant numbers of English and Scottish settlers. Over a period of time this resulted in the replacement of the Irish language with English, owing to the dispersal of the native population into the poorer regions.<sup>13</sup> This displacement is well documented and, for example, the practice was noted by Hugh MacMahon, Catholic bishop of Clogher, in a report to Rome in 1714 on the state of affairs in his diocese:

Although all Ireland is suffering, this province is worse off than the rest of the country, because of the fact that from the neighbouring country of Scotland Calvinists are coming here daily in large groups of families, occupying the towns and villages and seizing the farms in richer parts of the country and expelling the natives. They are in a position to do this because they enjoy the favour of the government and they have the support of the Protestant residents – men who, under title of confiscation, had in the time of Cromwell taken over the property and farms of the natives. The result is that the Catholic natives are forced to build their huts in mountainous or marsh country.<sup>14</sup>

The Irish language survived most strongly and for the longest time in those areas of the country which were more remote and less easy to access. Brian Ó Cuív, in commenting generally on the situation in the counties of Ulster in the nineteenth century observed that:

There, as a result of the Plantations, Irish was more localised, being in general confined to certain areas where there concentrations of Irish speakers. Thus in Antrim, Down, Derry and Fermanagh, Irish was spoken in the mountainous districts. In Tyrone, Irish

was general in Munterloney, and was spoken to some extent elsewhere. In Armagh, Cavan and Monaghan, the Irish-speaking communities were more widespread, but English was the more common language.<sup>15</sup>

In the course of time, the arrival in waves of English-speaking settlers brought about an increase in the pace of language shift from English to Irish for two key reasons: firstly, there was a dramatic increase in the number of people capable of speaking English and that language became increasingly essential for the purposes of trade, commerce and public as well as legal transactions;<sup>16</sup> secondly, there was a gradual dispersal of the Irish-speaking population away from more populated and urban areas to more mountainous and isolated regions. Along with the desire on the part of increasing numbers of the native population to acquire English as a means of social progress, these developments led to an increase in bilingualism and the slow but steady marginalisation of the Irish language. Gradually, however, even in the very isolated and most inaccessible areas, English began to make inroads among the people. The road network was being steadily developed across the country during the early part of the eighteenth century and by the 1750s, roads were being built in and around hitherto inaccessible areas.<sup>17</sup> The historian, Louis Cullen, has remarked that:

South Armagh, a region so inhospitable that it is one of the few districts where seventeenth-century settlement had receded, began finally to lose its isolation through the sheer scale of the traffic with Dublin crossing the county, and poor families of the region were also brought into contact with the market by the soaring demand for linen yarn. The smattering of English that occurs in the poetry of Peadar Ó Doirínín mirrors the infiltration of the language among the ordinary people of the region, and the mockery that an imperfect acquaintance with the language already occasioned.<sup>18</sup>

Ironically, the same type of progress was being cited as a cause of language erosion in a Gaeltacht area two centuries later. A pithy comment offered by an elderly native of the Donegal Gaeltacht in the 1950s, 'Leanann an Béarla an teárr', neatly sums up the consequences, in respect of language shift and language survival, of the displacement of Irish-speakers towards such areas and highlights the implications of the march of progress on a language already under siege.<sup>19</sup>

Séamus Ó Mórdha observed that all these factors were at play in the shift from the use of Irish to English:

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Irish language was deprived of the institutional support that languages need for survival. English became the language of administration, law and largely of commerce and from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards it became predominant in the spheres of religion, popular politics and education. Emigration to English-speaking countries had already commenced well before the Famine and after that disaster it became almost a mass exodus before settling down again to become a persistent population drain. The fact of emigration disposed people to abandon Irish and withhold a knowledge of it from their children. In the national schools, established in 1833, the language was ignored, a tendency which had already commenced in the hedge schools which preceded them. In Cavan, as in some other areas, from around

1825 onwards the proselytising societies that used Irish to further their campaigns hastened the abandonment of the language in an increasingly bilingual situation.<sup>20</sup>

For the purposes of this chapter, it is proposed to offer some assessment of the gradual decline of the Irish language in County Cavan through an analysis of a range of data from census figures. Though such data may not provide a complete picture of the shift from Irish to English, they do go some way in assisting an analysis of overall trends. A question on language capacity was included for the first time in an Irish census in 1851, due in large part to the promptings of Belfast Presbyterian and antiquarian, Robert Mac Adam.<sup>21</sup> The issue of language usage was not addressed in the censuses of Ireland in 1821, 1831 or 1841 and the prominent Ulster folklorist, G.B. Adams, observed that such an omission was infelicitous:

The later omission is greatly to be regretted as the Irish language was then still widely spoken, probably by about four million people, and a record of where it was spoken and in what strength at that date would have been invaluable. It was in fact the sharp decline in the number of Irish-speakers occasioned by the great Famine that led to the language enquiry being made in 1851.<sup>22</sup>

Using the barony as the basic unit of administration, the census form required that an indication be given as to whether the individual spoke only Irish or was a speaker of both Irish and English. One of the difficulties associated with using the barony as the smallest enumeration division for language statistics is that in many cases where the number of speakers was low, one could not with certainty 'say whether they represent an Irish-speaking community or were simply isolated individuals who had retained Irish speech in spite of their Anglicised surroundings'.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, when drawing on census and survey data about the Irish language some caution is required, as the data may not be comprehensive or complete. There is a variety of reasons for this. As Brian Ó Cuív observed in respect of the Royal Dublin Society's statistical surveys of a number of counties (published between 1814 and 1819):

The information obtained depended largely on the individual who had undertaken the county survey, and so it varied in quality. Some authors seem to have endeavoured to get accurate information, while others were vague or silent on the subject.<sup>24</sup>

According to the Census of 1851, the total number of persons returned as still using the Irish language was 1,524,286. The contemporary observer, Robert Mac Adam, observed that this figure was a significant underestimation. Writing in 1858, Mac Adam's reasoning for such an assertion was:

... even this large figure by no means indicates with accuracy the entire number of persons who understand [Irish], or who have learned it in their infancy. It is well known that in various districts where the two languages coexist, but where English now largely predominates, numbers of individuals returned themselves as ignorant of the Irish language, either from a sort of false shame, or from a secret dread that the Government, in making this inquiry (for the first time), had some concealed motive, which could not be for their good. Their native shrewdness, therefore, dictated to them that their safest policy was to appear ignorant of the unfashionable language. For this reason, we may add very considerably to the number given by the Census.<sup>25</sup>

In a series of essays about the census data, which appeared in *Ulster Folklife*, G.B. Adams questioned Mac Adam's accounting for the underestimation in the figures. In relation to the refusal of those questioned to reveal their ability to speak Irish owing to a suspicion of government, Adams asserted:

If this is true it was only likely to affect the returns in areas where Irish-speakers were a minority and were nearly all bilingual, so that they could pass themselves off as not speaking Irish. This would apply to many parts of Ulster and Leinster but would hardly affect the returns in Munster and Connacht and some parts of west Ulster where a high proportion were Irish-speakers and there would be no point in trying to conceal the fact.<sup>26</sup>

Another reason offered by commentators for the lower than expected numbers of Irish-speakers is the fact that the language question appeared in a footnote at the bottom of the census form and many enumerators may therefore have overlooked the question or deemed it unimportant. The practice of placing the language question in a footnote continued in the censuses of 1861 and 1871 but the figures returned in each of those years still showed a slow but steady decline. In 1881, when the language question was included in the main part of the census form, the number of recorded Irish-speakers increased despite a continuing decrease in the overall population. Adams suggests that this would support the hypothesis that the total figure of Irish-speakers recorded in the census, not only of 1851 but also 1861 and 1871, was an underestimation:

Various estimates of the strength of Irish around the beginning of the nineteenth century agree that it was then spoken by about half the population which was put at rather more than 4m for the whole of Ireland. During the first four decades of the nineteenth century the total population rose to around 8.5m as recorded in 1841, and must have been not far short of 9m five years later on the eve of the Great Famine. Allowing that the population of Munster and Connacht, which were mainly Irish-speaking, was rising faster than that of the other two provinces, which would more or less balance any fall-off in the number of Irish speakers in the latter, the total number of Irish-speakers in 1846 must have been nearly 4.25m. In the Famine there was a reduction of almost 2m to give a total recorded population of just over 7m in 1851. Roughly 1m died and a similar number emigrated. The mainly Irish-speaking provinces of Munster and Connacht were worst hit, and elsewhere also it was mainly Irish-speaking sections of society – the farm labourers, as opposed to the strong farmers who were more likely to have been English-speaking, especially in Leinster and Ulster – who were affected. We should therefore expect the Irish-speaking population to have been reduced to around 2.25m by 1851 but only slightly more than one and a half million Irish-speakers, monoglots and bilinguals together, were recorded at the first language census in that year. It would seem that the language census may have recorded only about two thirds of the number of Irish-speakers who actually existed.<sup>27</sup>

Although the data collected in the Statistical Accounts and Parochial Surveys have been criticised as less than perfect, reports such as those generated by Charles Coote (1802), Whitley Stokes (1806), Daniel Dewar (1812) and Edward Wakefield (1812), when taken

together, present a remarkably consistent picture of the state of the language and the rate of its decline. For that reason, Brian Ó Cuív was able to extrapolate from the data available to observe that unlike the situation in Connaught and Munster, 'Irish was definitely on the decline' in Leinster and Ulster in the early part of the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> Ó Cuív proffered a variety of reasons to account for such a significant fall-off in the language in Ulster and these tie in quite closely with the conclusions reached by G.B. Adams. As a result of the plantations, Ó Cuív asserted that Irish had become more localised, being in general confined to certain areas where there were concentrations of Irish speakers. In providing a general overview of the statistics emerging from the 1851 census, Ó Cuív noted that the percentage of Irish-speakers in the four provinces stood as follows: Connaught 51%, Munster 44%, Ulster 6.8% and Leinster 3.5%. While Counties Armagh, Monaghan, Tyrone and Cavan all had over 10,000 Irish-speakers each, in Cavan these were very much more geographically scattered. This was likely a significant contributing factor in the rapid decline of the language, as various communities may have lacked the necessary critical mass and social cohesion effectively to resist Anglicisation. G.B. Adams, in attempting to map language distribution in Ulster among persons who were under 30 in 1851 and who survived until 1911, provided some interesting data about the Irish language in that period:

[It] gives the general impression that English prevailed almost exclusively in a wide area of east Ulster, that Irish prevailed in a somewhat smaller area of west Ulster, and that there was a wide area of language mixture in central Ulster.<sup>29</sup>

In relation to the province of Ulster, Adams suggested his analysis showed that in the latter half of the nineteenth century there were five main areas of Irish language survival. One of them was:

... a fairly extensive though narrow area on the borders of south-east Ulster and north-east Leinster, which had been the main area of literary activity in Irish in the northern half of the country during the eighteenth century.<sup>30</sup>

This area would include south-east Cavan. Another area identified by Adams as showing good indications of Irish survival was 'on the borders of west Cavan and south Fermanagh, where south-western Ulster Irish was backed up by the strong survival of Irish in many parts of north Connacht'.<sup>31</sup> A closer examination of the situation in the baronies of Cavan will allow a fuller exploration of the patterns of language shift in the county from about 1770 until the end of the 1800s.

### **Analysis of Census Figures**

Looking at Ó Cuív's comparative analysis of the figures from the 1851 and the 1891 censuses in the baronies of County Cavan in that forty-year period, it becomes evident from table 17.1 how calamitous the decline was. While the figures supplied for the baronies of Loughtee Lower, Tullygarvey and Tullyhunco were particularly low in 1851, the fall-off in the numbers returned as Irish-speakers in 1891 was comparatively sharp. Noteworthy is the relatively small decline in figures relating to the barony of Tullyhaw, which might partly be explained by its more isolated location. The starkest figure in table 1 is undoubtedly the fall in the total number of Irish-speakers in County Cavan in the forty years between 1851 and 1891. A drop from 13,027 to 3,410 represents a reduction of approximately 75% within a forty-year period.

While the figures may not be entirely accurate, it is quite clear that few languages in a similar situation could sustain such a degree of contraction and at the same time successfully resist the encroachment of the language of the colonizer.

**Table 1: Census returns 1851 & 1891 – distribution of Irish-speakers in County Cavan<sup>32</sup>**

Barony	1851 Census			1891 Census		
	Irish Only	Total No. of Irish Speakers	% of population Irish-speaking	Irish Only	Total No. of Irish Speakers	% of population Irish-speaking
Castlerahan	38	2,991	10.6	2	867	4.8
Clankee	2	2,701	10.2	–	340	2.1
Clanmahon	1	2,035	10.2	–	340	2.6
Loughtee Lower	1	42	0.4	–	11	0.2
Loughtee Upper	5	1,447	5.2	–	152	0.9
Tullygarvey	5	939	3.6	–	96	0.6
Tullyhaw	2	2,746	13.5	–	1,554	10.1
Tullyhunco	–	126	0.9	–	50	0.5
<b>Co. Cavan (mean)</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>13,027</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3,410</b>	<b>3.0</b>

In 1984 Garrett FitzGerald published a paper in which he sought ‘to establish an approximate minimum level of Irish-speaking in respect of successive new generations of young people in different parts of Ireland (the geographical unit employed being the barony) from around 1770 to 1870’. [It is important to emphasise here that FitzGerald sought only to estimate *minimum* levels and that actual figures may well have been much higher.] He drew on the age-group tables in the 1881 census as the principal source of data but also used similar data from the 1851 and 1861 censuses, which were less satisfactory largely for the reasons outlined earlier in this essay. It must be pointed out that the figures supplied in table 17.2 are based loosely on the percentages per barony given on each of the maps in the appendices to FitzGerald’s essay and, therefore, the use of them here is not designed to be anything other than purely indicative of general trends.

**Table 17.2: Minimum level of Irish spoken per barony in County Cavan among decennial cohorts<sup>33</sup>**

Barony	Minimum Percentage of Population Speaking Irish									
	1771-'81	1781-'91	1791-1801	1801-'11	1811-'21	1821-'31	1831-'41	1841-'51	1851-'61	1861-'71
Castlerahan	60-69%	60-69%	60-69%	50-59%	40-49%	20-29%	10-19%	3-9%	0-2%	0-2%
Clankee	50-59%	50-59%	50-59%	40-49%	30-39%	10-19%	3-9%	3-9%	0-2%	0-2%
Clanmahon	40-49%	40-49%	30-39%	30-39%	20-29%	10-19%	3-9%	3-9%	0-2%	0-2%
Loughtee Lwr	3-9%	0-2%	0-2%	0-2%	0-2%	0-2%	0-2%	0-2%	0-2%	0-2%
Loughtee Upr	30-39%	30-39%	20-29%	20-29%	10-19%	3-9%	0-2%	0-2%	0-2%	0-2%
Tullygarvey	20-29%	20-29%	20-29%	10-19%	3-9%	3-9%	0-2%	0-2%	0-2%	0-2%
Tullyhaw	40-49%	40-49%	40-49%	40-49%	40-49%	30-39%	20-29%	10-19%	3-9%	0-2%
Tullyhunco	10-19%	10-19%	3-9%	3-9%	0-2%	0-2%	0-2%	0-2%	0-2%	0-2%
<b>Co. Cavan (mean)</b>	<b>36.25%</b>	<b>35.75%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>28.25%</b>	<b>21.5%</b>	<b>12.75%</b>	<b>6.75%</b>	<b>4.25%</b>	<b>1.5%</b>	<b>1%</b>

One of the more interesting observations concerning the data listed in table 17.2, even though they are minimum figures and largely based on estimates extrapolated from other census data, is how they track the gradual but consistent decline in the knowledge and use of Irish across the general population in County Cavan in the hundred-year period between 1771 and 1871. The baronies of Loughree Lower, Tullyhunco and Tullygarvey, respectively, show significantly lower figures than other parts of the county, even as far back as 1771 and generally correlate with the figures Ó Cuív produced in table 17.1. Similarly, Tullyhaw, which had the lowest decline in numbers in Ó Cuív's figures, also maintains higher percentages in the FitzGerald data until the middle of the nineteenth century. An examination of the situation in each of the baronies will assist the reader in establishing a more complete picture of the general pattern of language shift across the county as a whole.

### **Castlerahan**

The Irish language appears to have survived reasonably well – even into the early years of the nineteenth century – in Castlerahan.<sup>34</sup> By 1851, the barony could still boast a reasonable number of recorded monoglot speakers of Irish and a fair number of bilingual speakers. Nevertheless, the fall-off in numbers in both categories by 1891 was significant and this may be because many of the bilingual speakers recorded in 1851 were then in the older age cohorts and had died by 1891. The generally high returns for the barony may well be accounted for by its close proximity to districts of County Cavan and north County Meath where a strong literary tradition existed well into the nineteenth century. Various sources also suggest that native speakers persisted here until the early part of the twentieth century.<sup>35</sup> The baronies of Fore (Westmeath), Fore, Upper Kells and Lower Kells (Meath) all bordered Castlerahan to the south and east. FitzGerald's estimates for levels of Irish-speakers in those baronies were between 60-79% until the end of the 1790s and, while decreases are noted thereafter, were still above 30% until the early 1820s. In discussing overall levels of literacy in the south Ulster region, William J. Smyth noted that:

A frontier of resistance occurs in Oriel, where high levels of illiteracy characterized a core of Irish-speakers resident in north Meath, Louth and the southern baronies of Armagh, Monaghan and Cavan. This resilient Irish-speaking region benefited from a strong literate tradition in Irish amongst poets, such as Peadar Ó Doirnín and Aodh [*sic*] Mac Giolla Ghunna.<sup>36</sup>

The estimates produced by FitzGerald bear this out and, in general, numbers of Irish-speakers held up to between 40-50% until the early 1820s. However, in the 1830s, correspondence between Thomas Larcom, George Petrie and John O'Donovan of the Ordnance Survey, noted that many Irish-speakers, while knowledgeable about their local areas and literate in the culture and traditions of the language, were unable to read or write Irish and that this contributed to variations in the orthography of Irish place-names and their provenance.<sup>37</sup> Such evidence, from people who were moving around among local populations and seeking out those familiar with the language and its lore, would lead one to conclude that the process of language shift was well under way by that time. In fact, the associated risk of losing a whole cultural tradition alongside the erosion of the language had not gone unremarked in the press. It was observed in *The Dublin Evening Post* that the record of various traditions was being erased and that the Irish language was 'rapidly falling into disuse and becoming corrupted by an intermixture of English words'.<sup>38</sup> Séamus Ó Mórdha, writing about the



situation in the parish of Mullagh, also commented on the influence of the national schools, through the prohibition on the teaching of Irish, on the growth in bilingualism and the increase in the use of English among the people:

This hastened the decline in the speaking of Irish that had already begun in the parish. This system of elementary education ... provided at least two crucial generations of the youth of Mullagh with the means of acquiring an alternative to Irish and, ironically, an alternative which the emigrant was grateful for.<sup>39</sup>

One may assume that a similar situation applied in parishes across the county especially in areas where the retreat of Irish was even more advanced than in Mullagh.<sup>40</sup>

### **Tullyhaw**

One reason for the relatively slow rate of language decline recorded in Tullyhaw is the fact that it was the most remote of the baronies of Cavan. In describing the situation of the barony at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Philip O'Connell drew on Coote's *Statistical Survey of the county of Cavan*, published in 1802, where Tullyhaw was described as a:

... mountainous region comprising the western extremity of the county. The population of Tullyhaw was then a scattered one, suffering from the effects of recurrent famines, and existing with great difficulty on an inferior soil.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, the fact that it bordered the provincial boundary between north Connacht and south-west Ulster, where the strength of linguistic interaction with Connacht was a consideration, may have helped to slow decline. A review of the FitzGerald data for the two baronies immediately to the south and west of Tullyhaw supports this assertion. FitzGerald's estimates show that the baronies of Drumahaire and Rosclogher (Leitrim) had minimum levels of Irish-speakers at between 70-89% up until the 1820s. Clanawley and Knockninny (Fermanagh) to the north of Tullyhaw, while having lower overall levels of Irish-speakers, had estimated levels of between 20-39% to the early 1800s. Nonetheless, the striking pattern of decline which becomes much more pronounced from the 1820s in Tullyhaw, cannot be ignored. It may be assumed that by then, bilingualism was already becoming an established reality. In July 1823, as part of a survey conducted by the Irish Bible Society, correspondence was sought from Anglican clergy in various parishes about the extent of the use of Irish in their areas. The Reverend Mr H. reported that:

Irish is much spoken among the people, some understanding no other language – but the majority in the lowlands understanding, though not speaking, English – in the mountainous district Irish almost exclusively.<sup>42</sup>

These remarks might lead one to assume that English had not made as much progress as might be expected. However, writing to Thomas Larcom from County Cavan about fifteen years later in 1836, John O'Donovan referred to the pace of Anglicisation and expressed the fear that the loss of the language itself would have much wider ramifications than language shift alone. Referring to the Anglicisation of 'Teallach Eachach' as 'Tullyhaw', O'Donovan surmised that the loss of Irish among the local population would erode any sense of the origin

or etymology of their local place names and that the history and traditions behind them would also soon be lost.<sup>43</sup>

### **Loughtee Lower & Loughtee Upper**

The very low figures returned for the barony of Loughtee Lower may have something to do with the long history of plantation. The lands around Belturbet were granted to Stephen Butler in the early seventeenth century and a garrison was established there towards the end of the century, which likely had the effect of increasing the use of English. When the Reverend John Richardson arrived as Anglican rector of Annagh in 1709, he reported that ‘... the Irish language was being spoken everywhere, even in that stronghold of Anglicanism’.<sup>44</sup> If by the 1770s the minimum number of Irish-speakers was at around 10% of the population, as FitzGerald surmised (table 17.2), then one must assume that the collapse was dramatic and must have happened within a few generations. Furthermore, John O’Donovan remarked on extremely low levels of Irish-language usage in the area in the 1830s:

On Sunday last we travelled on foot from Belturbet to Bellaconnell, a distance of five Irish miles and stopped there for the night to get the names in the Parish of Tom Regan but to our great disappointment we found the ancient language and the traditions quite extinct in that part of the county. The language is spoken by the old people only, and even those do not understand the meanings of the topographical names (words).<sup>45</sup>

FitzGerald’s estimates for the use of Irish in Loughtee Upper, in which the county town of Cavan is situated, are higher than that of neighbouring Loughtee Lower. Initially, this strikes one as unusual, for since the town of Cavan was established by charter in 1610, one might therefore expect to find higher levels of Anglicisation there. The data produced by FitzGerald suggest that at least 30-39% of the population of the barony were Irish-speakers around 1770 and that this percentage remained fairly consistent until the end of the 1790s, when the decline became more pronounced. However, as Jonathan Cherry has shown:

... of the principal towns of Ireland, in terms of their origins, Cavan and Longford hold the distinction of being the only two classified as Gaelic market towns. Together, these towns provide unique examples of indigenous urbanization within a country dominated by towns of colonial origins.<sup>46</sup>

Cherry traces the establishment of the first corporation of the town and shows how it comprised a higher ratio of Gaelic natives to settler newcomers so that:

... members of the native Gaelic community rather than the colonizers exercised political authority and the traditional inequalities associated with colonizer governing the colonized in the political field did not materialize’.<sup>47</sup>

While a closer study of this seeming paradox is required in order to assess more fully to what extent it assisted the survival of Irish in an urban setting in Plantation Ulster, it must surely go some way to accounting for the higher than expected levels of Irish speaking as demonstrated by FitzGerald.

## Clankee

A situation similar to that of Loughtee Lower may have applied in the barony of Clankee, where the lands in Tandragee were granted in the early seventeenth century to William Bailie, who set about establishing a house and demesne there. Ó Mórdha also noted that the Bible Society began its campaign in 1819 in the town of Kingscourt, a campaign which did much to weaken further the Irish language, as the population were already significantly bilingual. The London Hibernian Society, which had its headquarters in Kingscourt, issued religious tracts in Irish 'which tended to bring the language into disfavour as a literary medium and thereby hastened its decay'.<sup>48</sup> John O'Donovan, while working in the area in 1836, observed that:

... the teachers of the Bible through the medium of the Irish language, have created in the minds of the peasantry, a hatred for everything written in that language and that the society who encourage them could not have adopted a more successful plan to induce them to learn English and hate their own language.<sup>49</sup>

It was alleged that in some parts of the county, Irish came to be referred to as *an teanga Phrotastúnach* ('the Protestant tongue'), owing to the fact that it became so closely associated with the attempt by the Bible Society to convert the Irish-speaking Catholic population.<sup>50</sup> In William Shaw Mason's account, it was observed of the parish of Bailieboro that 'The English tongue is in general use. There is no public library or collection of MSS of any kind in the parish'.<sup>51</sup> Séamus Ó Mórdha noted, however, that while such a sentiment was probably true of the town of Bailieboro, the hinterland around the town was one of the strongest bastions of Gaelic tradition in County Cavan at the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>52</sup>

## Tullygarvey

From the time of the 1641 rising and the Cromwellian wars, Tullygarvey was subject to the steady immigration of English settlers, although 'the native Irish Catholics clung tenaciously to their holdings'.<sup>53</sup> Thomas Coote, a brother of Charles Coote, who was a leading Cromwellian general, received a grant of land in the Drumgoon area sometime in the mid-seventeenth century and thus began a long association of the Coote family with the barony.<sup>54</sup> Charles Coote, referring in 1802 to the use of Irish there, stated that 'the English language is entirely spoken, indeed few of the lower orders understand the Irish tongue'.<sup>55</sup> Séamus Ó Mórdha took issue with that assertion observing that while it might be true of Cootehill, which was the core of the Coote estate and a significant Protestant planter population, five or six miles south of the town there was a 'breac-Ghaeltacht' area until about the 1870s.<sup>56</sup> He also pointed out that a manuscript that was to become known as Egerton 209 (containing a copy of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*) was preserved in a townland south of Cootehill, while to the east of the town, in the parish of Drung, other valuable manuscripts were known to have survived.<sup>57</sup>

## Tullyhunco

The census data for barony of Tullyhunco are, at first glance, among the more striking of those produced in tables 17.1 and 17.2. Even as far back as 1771, the statistics, while estimates, illustrate clearly the degree of language shift afoot in the area. Difficult though it may be to believe, the census data from 1851 reveal that there were no monoglot speakers of Irish and only 126 bilingual speakers in the barony at that time. These figures indicate,

therefore, that only 0.9% of the population of the barony were capable of speaking Irish. By the 1891 census, the number of people in the barony professing a knowledge of Irish had fallen to 50, a decrease of 0.4% within that forty-year period. FitzGerald's estimates, however, demonstrate that by the fourth quarter of the eighteenth century, the minimum level of Irish spoken in the barony ranged from approximately 10-19%. When one takes into account this information, then the shockingly low figures from the 1851 census begin to make some sense. A brief consideration of the history of the barony also provides a useful context for these particularly low statistics and the linguistic situation more generally. The barony of Tullyhunco was created during the plantation of Ulster and was granted to five Scottish Undertakers in 1610.<sup>58</sup> They, their families and followers began colonizing the area in the years that followed. For a period of time around the rebellion of 1641 and during the Cromwellian conquest, the process of settlement was disrupted but resumed when the political situation grew more stable. The result of this activity was that significant numbers of settlers and planters from Scotland and England settled throughout the barony. This settlement disrupted the language balance and effected quite a widespread language shift in the area, which goes quite some way to accounting for the much lower figures in respect of knowledge of Irish in the barony in later statistical surveys and censuses. It also provides powerful evidence of the impact of the plantation on the language balance in the barony, owing to the arrival in such large numbers of English and Scottish settlers.

### **Clanmahon**

Clanmahon borders the barony of Tullyhunco but, unlike the latter, the Irish language survived rather more strongly among the people there during the period with which this chapter is concerned. FitzGerald's estimates for minimum levels of Irish (table 17.2) suggest that 40%-50% of the population were capable of speaking Irish in the period from 1771 until the early 1790s. While the figures suggest a fairly healthy linguistic situation at that time, the capacity or willingness of the other 50% of the population to speak Irish must be questioned. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that levels of bilingualism in the barony were already well established by the turn of the nineteenth century. The data show a slight decrease in the levels of the use of Irish (30-40%) for the following two decades – 1790-1810. A steady decline then set in when during each of the next three decades until the early 1840s, an estimated average decrease of approximately 10% per decade occurred in the numbers estimated as possessing a capacity to speak Irish. In the statistics recorded during the 1851 census, around 10% of the people in Clanmahon (2,035 individuals) were returned as Irish-speakers. However, the trend towards language shift and decline, which had already begun to reveal itself in the barony in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, became much more marked during the years following the Famine and by the census of 1891, only 340 people were recorded as being Irish-speakers. This represents a reduction of about 8% (in numbers that were already very low) within the forty years between those two censuses. Similar rates of decline may be observed in the baronies neighbouring Clanmahon, although overall figures of levels of Irish-speaking are higher in some instances.

### **Conclusion**

While Ó Mórdha has observed that 'Irish was still the dominant language of the home in the greater part of rural County Cavan down until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century',<sup>59</sup> it is clear, from the data provided in tables 17.1 and 17.2 and from other evidence presented here, that even by the 1820s the situation had changed dramatically and that bilingualism was advancing

rapidly. Pádraig de Brún observed that ‘the language shift was passing its tipping point in the heart of Kingscourt by the 1830s’.<sup>60</sup> Along with this established trend, the Great Famine in the 1840s most likely had a significant impact on the numbers capable of speaking Irish. All the county’s baronies experienced reductions in their population where numbers generally fell by between a quarter and a third in the ten-year period between 1841 and 1851 as the following table illustrates.

**Table 17.3: Population decline in the baronies of County Cavan 1841-1851<sup>61</sup>**

Barony	Population 1841	Population 1851	Percentage Decline	Persons per Square Mile	
				1841	1851
Castlerahan	40,909	28,097	31.3%	368	250
Clankee	38,892	26,606	31.5%	387	264
Clanmahon	28,674	19,952	30.4%	337	235
Loughtee Lwr	15,851	11,245	29.0%	343	243
Loughtee Upr	36,440	27,660	24.1%	346	266
Tullygarvey	37,532	25,955	30.8%	400	277
Tullyhaw	24,992	20,207	19.2%	175	142
Tullyhunco	19,868	14,342	27.8%	307	224

After the Great Famine, examples of the creeping nature of bilingualism became even more evident. In west Cavan, where higher levels of Irish-speaking had formerly persisted, Ó Mórdha noted that from the 1850s onwards it was not unusual for schoolchildren to be encouraged to teach their prayers in English to their parents and grandparents. By the end of the nineteenth century, even in the baronies where Irish had remained relatively strong, the shift towards English was unstoppable. Ó Mórdha observed that by the end of the 1800s, Irish:

... was spoken only by middle-aged and old people in a few areas mostly in the baronies of Tullyhaw and Castlerahan, although there were a few districts where some elderly people could be found who still remembered the prayers they learned as children in Irish or some of the phrases they picked up from their parents or grandparents.<sup>62</sup>

The figures emerging from census data (tables 17.1 and 17.2) support the view that:

... the middle-aged people who knew the language ceased to speak it or transmit it to the rising generation. As emigration increased, parents encouraged their children to speak English, so that those who had to emigrate would have a good command of the English language.<sup>63</sup>

This generation may also have formed the view that literacy and education were concepts associated with a knowledge of English and that Irish was not, therefore, the language of the civilised.<sup>64</sup> Persistent references to Irish as a barbarous or dying tongue<sup>65</sup> and to the Irish natives as an uncivilised race, a ‘degraded people’, the ‘lower orders’ and such like over many years probably did little to disabuse them of such notions.<sup>66</sup>

The Irish language in Cavan during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was very much at the mercy of the times and subject to trends, such as those just mentioned, that were a feature of the evolving linguistic landscape nationally. The figures (tables 17.1 and

17.2) serve to illustrate the dramatic decline in the number of speakers of Irish across Cavan during the period from about 1770 until 1900. While the patterns in each barony may not always be easy to explain, the widespread decline in Irish and the concomitant increase in the use of English throughout the county over this period are remarkably consistent. Even if these figures represent a significant underestimation of the numbers of people capable of speaking Irish fluently, the underlying and widespread trend of language shift from Irish to English cannot be denied. Had the census returns revealed higher figures in respect of spoken Irish, it might be argued that the trend towards decline and shift would have been much slower but it is very difficult to contend that, considering the circumstances, the trend would have been any different.

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<sup>1</sup> See James Kelly & Ciarán Mac Murchaidh (eds), 'Introduction: establishing the context' in *Irish and English: essays on the Irish linguistic and cultural frontier, 1600-1900* (Dublin, 2012), pp 15-42. For other useful historical overviews and analysis, see William J. Smyth, *Map-making, landscapes and memory: a geography of colonial and early modern Ireland c.1530-1750* (Cork, 2006), pp 401-18; Tony Crowley, *Wars of words: the politics of language in Ireland 1537-2004* (Oxford, 2005); Brian Ó Cuív, 'Irish language and literature, 1691-1845' in T.W. Moody & W.E. Vaughan (eds), *A new history of Ireland iv: eighteenth-century Ireland 1691-1800* (Oxford, 1986), pp 374-423; idem, 'The Gaeltacht – past and present' in Brian Ó Cuív, *Irish dialects and Irish-speaking districts* (Dublin 1951; rpr., 1993), pp 7-32.

<sup>2</sup> Ó Cuív, *Irish dialects*, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Kelly & Mac Murchaidh, 'Introduction: establishing the context', p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26. See also Toby Barnard, 'Revd John Richardson (c.1669-1747): County Cavan rector and Irish-language enthusiast' at chapter 11 in this volume. For a comprehensive overview of Bedell's contribution to the Irish language, see Terence McCaughey, *Dr Bedell and Mr King: The making of the Irish bible* (Dublin, 2001). See also Marc Caball's chapter in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> Barnard, chapter 11 in this volume. See also J.G. Simms, 'Protestant ascendancy, 1691-1714' in Moody & Vaughan (eds), *A new history of Ireland iv*, p. 23 and Ó Cuív, 'Irish language and literature' in *A new history of Ireland iv*, pp 375-6.

<sup>7</sup> Simms, 'Protestant ascendancy', p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Philip O'Connell, *The schools and scholars of Breiffne*, (Dublin, 1942), p. 242.

<sup>9</sup> Ó Cuív, *Irish dialects*, pp 18-9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Maureen Wall, *The Penal Laws, 1691-1760* (Dundalk, 1976), p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> O'Connell, *The schools and scholars of Breiffne*, pp 229-31.

<sup>13</sup> William Smyth drew on Petty's poll-tax evidence for 1660 to illustrate '... the depth of both the migration of settlers and new languages into all of Ulster ...' See Smyth, *Map-making, landscapes and memory*, p. 407.

<sup>14</sup> P.J. Flanagan, 'The diocese of Clogher in 1714' in *Clogher Record*, 1:2 (1954), pp 39-42 at p. 39. The diocese of Clogher borders the diocese of Kilmore.

<sup>15</sup> Ó Cuív, *Irish dialects*, pp 21-2.

<sup>16</sup> L.M. Cullen, *The emergence of modern Ireland, 1600-1900* (Dublin, 1981), pp 131-2.

<sup>17</sup> Idem, 'Merriman in a world of schoolmasters' in *Eighteenth-century Ireland: Iris an dá chultúr*, 26 (2011), pp 80-94 at p. 85.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* For a comprehensive treatment of the steady encroachment of English in the south Ulster area as reflected in the work of one of poets of that region, see Charles Dillon, 'An Ghaelig nua: English, Irish and the south Ulster poets and scribes in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' in Kelly & Mac Murchaidh (eds), *Irish and English*, pp 141-61. For similar explorations of this theme, see Seosamh Watson, 'Coimhlint an dá chultúr – Gaeil agus Gail i bhfilíocht chúige Uladh san ochtú haois déag' in *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 3 (1988), pp 85-104 and Tomás Ó Fiaich, 'Art MacCooey and his times' in *Seanchas Ard Mhacha*, 6:2, pp 217-50 at pp 242-3.

<sup>19</sup> 'English follows the tar' (i.e. the tarred roadway). G.B. Adams, 'Language in Ulster, 1820-1850' in *Ulster Folklife*, 19 (1973), pp 50-53 at p. 50, fn. 8.

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- <sup>20</sup> Séamas P. Ó Mórdha, 'Glangevlin's Irish College: Ardscoil Bhréifne I' in *Breifne*, 8:1 (1989-90), pp 80-117 at p. 86; Maureen Wall, 'The decline of the Irish language' in Brian Ó Cuív (ed.), *A view of the Irish language* (Dublin, 1969), pp 81-90 at p. 82; L.M. Cullen, *The emergence of modern Ireland, 1600-1900* (Dublin, 1981), pp 131-2; Pádraig Ó Baoighill, 'The Irish language in Tyrone' in Charles Dillon & Henry A. Jefferies (eds), *Tyrone history & society* (Dublin, 2000), pp 665-696 at p. 669.
- <sup>21</sup> Ciarán Devine, 'The Irish language in County Down' in Lindsay Proudfoot (ed.), *Down history & society: interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish county* (Dublin, 1997), pp 431-87 at p. 445.
- <sup>22</sup> Adams, 'Language in Ulster, 1820-1850', p. 50.
- <sup>23</sup> Ó Cuív, *Irish dialects*, p. 23.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- <sup>25</sup> Robert Mac Adam, 'Six hundred Gaelic proverbs collected in Ulster' in *The Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 6 (1858), pp 172-83 at p. 172.
- <sup>26</sup> Adams, 'Language in Ulster', p. 51.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 51-2
- <sup>28</sup> Ó Cuív, *Irish dialects*, p. 21.
- <sup>29</sup> Adams, 'Language in Ulster', pp 52-3.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53. See also Smyth, *Map-making, landscapes and memory*, pp 411-12.
- <sup>31</sup> Adams, 'Language in Ulster', pp 53-4.
- <sup>32</sup> This table appears in Ó Cuív, *Irish dialects*, p. 85.
- <sup>33</sup> The data in this table is extracted from Garrett FitzGerald, 'Estimates for baronies of minimum level of Irish-speaking amongst successive decennial cohorts: 1771-1781 to 1861-1871' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 84C, 1 (1984), pp 117-55.
- <sup>34</sup> The Irish catechism was still in use in the parish of Munterconnacht in 1826, when Bishop Farrell O'Reilly visited there. He conducted his examination through the medium of Irish. See O'Connell, *The schools and scholars of Breiffne*, p. 371.
- <sup>35</sup> Séamus P. Ó Mórdha, *Portrait of a parish: Mullagh, Co. Cavan* (Cavan, 1988), p. 171.
- <sup>36</sup> Smyth, *Map-making, landscapes and memory*, pp 411-12. Séamus Ó Mórdha's study of the parish of Mullagh supports this view. He has noted that the south Cavan area 'was a centre of scribal activity, and it was from hearing Irish poems read aloud from manuscripts by one of her father's labourers that Charlotte Brooke was first inspired to take an interest in Irish verse'. See Ó Mórdha, *Portrait of a parish*, p. 151.
- <sup>37</sup> Gillian M. Doherty, *The Irish Ordnance Survey: History, culture and memory* (Dublin, 2004; 2nd ed., 2006), pp 20, 83, 107-8.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 79-80.
- <sup>39</sup> Ó Mórdha, *Portrait of a parish*, pp 163, 175.
- <sup>40</sup> Úna McGorry, 'Education in the parish of Drumgoon' in *The heart of Breifne*, 3:1 (1986), pp 28-56 at pp 47, 50.
- <sup>41</sup> O'Connell, *The schools and scholars of Breiffne*, p. 361.
- <sup>42</sup> Seamus Ó Mórdha, 'An Ghaeilge i gcontae an Chabháin, i gcontae Longphuirt agus i gcontae na hIarmhí san bhliain 1823' in *Breifne*, 2:5 (1962), pp 80-83 at p. 82, fn. 11. (Mr H. was minister in the parish of Templeport in the barony of Tullyhaw.) For a comprehensive treatment of the work and influence of the Irish Society for Promoting the Education of the Native Irish through the Medium of their own Language see Pádraig de Brún, *Scriptural instruction in the vernacular* (Dublin, 2009), esp. pp 1-127.
- <sup>43</sup> Doherty, *The Irish Ordnance Survey*, pp 151-2.
- <sup>44</sup> O'Connell, *The schools and scholars of Breiffne*, p. 234.
- <sup>45</sup> M. O'Flanagan, Typescript summaries of original manuscripts in the Ordnance Survey containing information relative to the antiquities of the counties of Cavan and Leitrim (Breifny) collected during the progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1836 (Bray, 1929), p. 7.
- <sup>46</sup> Jonathan Cherry, 'The indigenous and colonial urbanization of Cavan town, c.1300-c.1641' in Brendan Scott (ed.), *Culture and society in early modern Breifne/Cavan* (Dublin, 2009), pp 85-105 at p. 85.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- <sup>48</sup> O'Connell, *The schools and scholars of Breiffne*, p. 381.
- <sup>49</sup> O'Flanagan, Letters containing information relative to the antiquities of the counties of Cavan and Leitrim, p. 27.
- <sup>50</sup> Ó Mórdha, 'An Ghaeilge i gcontae an Chabháin, i gcontae Longphuirt agus i gcontae na hIarmhí san bhliain 1823', p. 82, fn. 9.
- <sup>51</sup> William Shaw Mason, *A statistical account or parochial survey of Ireland* (Dublin, 1812), i, p. 144.
- <sup>52</sup> Ó Mórdha, 'An Ghaeilge i gcontae an Chabháin, i gcontae Longphuirt agus i gcontae na hIarmhí san bhliain 1823', pp 81-2.

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<sup>53</sup> McGorry, 'Education in the parish of Drumgoon', p. 35.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Ó Mórdha, 'An Ghaeilge i gcontae an Chabháin, i gcontae Longphuirt agus i gcontae na hIarmhí san bhliain 1823', p. 80, citing Coote, *A statistical survey of county Cavan* (1802), p. 254.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>58</sup> For a detailed account of the history of Tullyhunco, see Tomás Ó Raghallaigh, *Turbulence in Tullyhunco* (Killeshandra, 2010).

<sup>59</sup> *Idem*, 'Glangevlin's Irish College I', pp 86-7.

<sup>60</sup> de Brún, *Scriptural instruction in the vernacular*, p. 124.

<sup>61</sup> Table by Margaret Crawford, 'Poverty and the famine in County Cavan' in Raymond Gillespie (ed.), *Cavan: essays on the history of an Irish county* (Dublin, 1995; 2nd ed., 2004), pp 139-58 at p. 140, 220-22.

<sup>62</sup> Ó Mórdha, 'Glangevlin's Irish College I', p. 86, fn. 22.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 86-7.

<sup>64</sup> *Idem*, *Portrait of a parish*, p. 175. Wall, 'The decline of the Irish language', p. 87.

<sup>65</sup> Richard B. Walsh, 'The death of the Irish language' in Liam de Paor (ed.), *Milestones in Irish history* (Dublin, 1986; rpr. 1998), pp 84-94 at p. 89.

<sup>66</sup> See fn. 8 above, and Breandán Ó Madagáin, *An Ghaeilge i Luimneach 1700-1900* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1974; rpr. 1980), p. 17; Tony Crowley, *The politics of language in Ireland 1366-1922: a sourcebook* (London, 2000), pp 13, 20 *et passim*; Ó Madagáin, *An Ghaeilge i Luimneach*, p. 17; de Brún, *Scriptural instruction in the vernacular*, p. 66.