

The Role of *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* Néill Uí Dhónaill in Irish Language Lexicography in the Twentieth Century

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This paper sets out to chronicle the compilation and usage of the Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla—or Irish-English Dictionary—by Niall Ó Dónaill, Tomás de Bhaldraithe and the lexicography team in An Gúm working on behalf of the Department of Education in the Republic of Ireland. As the primary modern dictionary of its time, its effect on the teaching and usage of the Irish language in the last quarter of the twentieth century is profound. This is especially the case in light of the fact that no update or amendment to it has ever been seen fit to be produced. Unlike the forthcoming English-Irish dictionary in motion under the auspices of Foras na Gaeilge—the government body responsible under Irish law for the promotion of the Irish language and Irish language organizations—and Lexicography MasterClass, there is no likelihood of any new Irish-English dictionary being produced in the near future. The evolution of the dictionary began as a development from the publication of the English-Irish Dictionary of Tomás de Bhaldraithe in 1959 when an equivalent resource for language users was desired from the opposite perspective—that of the Irish language user looking for the appropriate and most up-to-date English idiom for the words sought. The paper analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the dictionary together with the reasons that necessitated the production of the dictionary as it was. The paper represents a flavour of the ongoing research in the area of Irish language lexicography of the twentieth century, utilising, among other sources, the papers of Tomás de Bhaldraithe situated in University College Dublin’s Cártilann na gCanúintí-Irish language dialect archive, the papers of Muiris Ó Droighneáin, one of Ireland’s foremost grammatical consultants and the papers and archive of An Gúm, the Irish language publishing wing of the Department of Education.

The Irish Department of Education (“The Department”) published Tomás de Bhaldraithe’s *English-Irish Dictionary* (EID) in 1959¹. In the same year, with a little encouragement from the then Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland, Éamon de Valera, the Department began its third bilingual dictionary project, an Irish-English Dictionary or *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (FGB) on this occasion under the editorship of Niall Ó Dónaill, at the time a civil servant and Irish language writer. The aim of this dictionary was to explain in English a great part of the store of Modern Irish words and to give examples of their use. It is a mixture of the language of the native speaking regions, the Gaeltachtaí, a collection of words from literary sources of the language and newer terminological words. There are 1,309 pages and up to 50,000 headwords in the larger dictionary² with English explanations and examples of usage added when needed; and another 20,000 words inserted as cross-references, as either a headword or as a variant.

The FGB project started on the 19th June 1959 and finished 19 years later on 6th July 1978³ and grew out of the EID and the standardised grammar rules⁴ and the need to provide a modern

¹ It was originally envisaged in 1943 as an appendix to Lambert McKenna’s *English-Irish Dictionary* of 1935, the first large bilingual dictionary compiled for the Department since the foundation of the independent state in 1922.

² The cross-references are not contained in the shorter version of the dictionary, which totals 815 pages, but all the standard headwords are included with English explanations and some examples of usage.

³ The FGB was published on the same day as the small booklet *English-Irish Dictionary: Additions and Corrections*, amending and correcting the EID after nearly 20 years.

reference dictionary for use of civil servant, educator, translator and student alike. In post-war lexicography in Ireland, the effort, the ability and the support that went in to the creation of the FGB has not since been matched. As this paper will describe, the project involved a number of capable lexicographers working in unison and was financially supported in less favourable economic climate that of the Ireland of the 21st century.

The principal lexicographers—Niall Ó Dónaill and Tomás de Bhaldraithe

Niall Ó Dónaill, native speaker, linguist and Irish language writer was born in Barr an Ailt, in Loch an Iúir, in County Donegal in Ireland in 1908. He died in Clontarf in Dublin on the 10th February 1995. He attended Coláiste Adhamhnáin (St. Eunan's College) in Letterkenny from 1921 to 1925 agus won a scholarship to University College Dublin from 1925 to 1928. He left university without a degree and spent a year teaching in a secondary school in County Tipperary in the Midwest of the country. He married in 1929 and moved to Dublin and spent two years translating books for An Gúm, the Irish language publishing wing of the Department and three years as an assistant to Fr. McKenna in the compilation of his English-Irish dictionary.

He was a civil servant from 1934 until he retired. His previous post before joining An Gúm was with the Department of Social Welfare, managing an employment exchange. He published widely in the Irish language in local and literary history and he discussed the state of the Irish language in his well known publication *Forbairt na Gaeilge* (1951). Trinity College Dublin later awarded him an honorary doctorate for his work. He continued working in An Gúm on an extension of his contract from 1973 onwards (the age he was due to retire) until the age of 75.⁵

Tomás de Bhaldraithe was born in Limerick in Ireland in 1916. His family moved to Dublin (de Bhaldraithe-Garrett 1997: 13) and he studied Irish and French in University College Dublin in the mid 1930's and when he received his MA in French in 1939, he went to Paris on a travelling scholarship from the National University of Ireland. The war disrupted his studies and he returned to Ireland to spend the last two years of his scholarship studying the Irish language dialect of the Cois Fharraige region in Galway.⁶ He received his Ph.D. in 1942. Having spent a year as a scholar in the Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, he was appointed a university assistant in University College Dublin in 1943. After the EID had been published, he was appointed as the Professor of Modern Irish in 1960, a position he held for 18 years.⁷ He died on 24th April 1996, two years after his retirement, while launching a book appropriately entitled *The Words We Use*⁸ in the Arts Club in Dublin.

More than any other scholar, de Bhaldraithe's work left a greater impact on Irish language lexicography and on the Irish language in print in the 20th century; perhaps even more so than Fr. Pádraig Ua Duinnín, compiler of what certainly must be the foremost lexicographical work in that period, *Foclóir Gaeidhlge – Béarla*. De Bhaldraithe's 49 year involvement in dictionary-making included 33 years working part-time on projects for the State; initially the EID of 1959, which he edited himself, and then FGB as consulting editor.

⁴ The standardised forms of words used are based on the rules of *Gramadach na Gaeilge agus Litriú na Gaeilge: An Caighdeán Oifigiúil*, published in 1957 by the Government as the most authoritative record of standardised spelling amongst the dialects of the language and also of standard grammatical rules.

⁵ He worked on a number of dictionary-related projects from 1978; work that helped to create the series of dictionaries designed for children and *An Foclóir Beag: Foclóir Gaeilge-Gaeilge*, a pocket monolingual Irish language dictionary.

⁶ The results of his research in Galway were made available a number of times over a period of 40 years; from *The Irish of Cois Fharraige, Co. Galway: a phonetic study* (1945) and *Gaeilge Chois Fharraige: an deilbhíocht* (1953) to *Foirisiún Focal as Gaillimh* (1985) in addition to many sets of notes on words and points of grammar in learned journals.

⁷ After a further 8 years working in dialect studies, he retired from UCD in 1986. He spent another 8 years after that working on dictionary matters in the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin.

⁸ By Dr. Diarmuid Ó Muirithe.

Background to the FGB

In October 1958, Niall Ó Dónaill was offered a position in An Gúm as editor of the FGB (An Gúm 1958). He was told that the dictionary was to be made to suit students and the general public in place of Ua Duinnín's Irish-English dictionary, which was already out of date in terms of spelling, typeface and terminology. It was mentioned to Ó Dónaill that the Department intended that de Bhaldraithe would act as advisor to Ó Dónaill to lay out the scheme of the FGB and that they would place Ó Dónaill in charge of the general editorial work of An Gúm when the then principal editor retired.

When Ó Dónaill was transferred from the Department of Social Welfare to work on the dictionary, there was already a certain amount of preparatory work completed the Department by de Bhaldraithe, who was aware at this point of the Department's plans and his own potential involvement with the FGB. At this stage, it was not intended to be a complete Irish-English dictionary but a shorter production with 20,000 headwords, including the most common words from the 18th century onwards and their principal meanings with some more modern technical terms. The sense was that this was a work which would take three or four years to complete.

Working methods

Ó Dónaill and de Bhaldraithe created the scheme of the new dictionary together. Its scope was widened until it covered the following, 'Words which were in general use in the vernacular, their common meaning, and the usage attached to them; the most common words of prose or poetry; common technical terms or those needed for the teaching of subjects at school; official terms relating to legal matters'⁹ (An Gúm 1959). In the course of the years, the dictionary expanded beyond those terms of reference. The team included as many words in modern Irish as their use and meaning could be proven; words from older literature, the meaning of which would be needed by the readers of such literature generally albeit that they would no longer be in common use; and a variety of technical terms which had been created by various terminological committees (Ó Dónaill 1977: vii). In addition to the words that were accepted as standard, with their meanings attached, cross-references were inserted for variant forms of many words in the vernacular; literary forms that might not be understandable by those who had not learned the older spelling; and variant forms that would not be easy for those who had little Irish to attach to the basic words (Ní Bhrádaigh 1997: 75). Of course, the explanation of the words was the most important aspect of the work on the dictionary. There was no editing methodology on any previous Irish-English dictionary that could be used or imitated. Ó Dónaill did not use the system based on *Harrap's English-French dictionary* on which the EID was based. He decided to use the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* and the *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* (and *Webster* in difficult cases) with a suitable system of his own from which he could derive the words.

The most common words and the developments in their meaning through constant use caused the most work; and the prepositions such as *ag* (at), *ar* (on), *as* (from) etc and main verbs such as *bain* (remove), *cuir* (put) *déan* (do) were the most difficult. In case of the prepositions, the concept of prepositional pronouns in the Irish language always makes them difficult to use and translate; in the case of the verbs, their multiple meanings rendered them awkward (An Gúm 1961). One basic principal was agreed upon from the outset: that the main meaning of the word would have pride of place (if it could be found and it wasn't too antiquated) and that all other meanings would be listed in order of relevance to the main meaning (An Gúm 1960). This work fell to Ó Dónaill himself as editor. But as the assistant editors became familiar with the system, they covered more of the work in the same way. De Bhaldraithe read everything that Ó Dónaill completed and he advised him on any point about which he was in doubt.

⁹ A translation from the Irish: "Focail a bhí i ngnáthúsáid i gcaint na ndaoine, an chiall choitianta a bhí leo, cora cainte a bhí ag gabháil leo; focail a bhí coitianta i scríbhinní próis nó filíochta; téarmaí teicniúla a bhí coitianta nó a theastaigh le hábhair scoile a mhúineadh; téarmaí oifigiúla a bhain le cúrsaí dlí".

Directing the work

At the start of the work in 1959, two university graduates were to be appointed as assistant editors—an expert in Connaught (Western) Irish and another, an expert in Munster (Southern) Irish. This did not happen.¹⁰ In 1960, Éamonn Ó hÓgáin joined the team as the assistant editor of Munster Irish, but for a long time there was no one well versed in Connaught Irish (Ní Bhrádaigh 1997: 76). Most of the first year was spent putting the cards of the EID in alphabetical order and producing new cards.¹¹ For three years after that, Ó Dónaill and Ó hÓgáin worked side by side on the editing work; Ó hÓgáin then going on to collect information from some sources, edit it and write it down as per the scheme, producing a draft of each headword (An Gúm 1963). Initially, Ó Dónaill had failed to recruit further staff through the Civil Service Commission.¹²

Then in 1964, he was allowed to seek suitable people on loan from various departments in the Civil Service¹³ (Ní Bhrádaigh 1997: 78). He assembled an impressive team, which certainly represented the highpoint of manpower in terms of number, experience and capacity of any of the government lexicographical projects of the 20th century in Ireland. Ó Dónaill then released Éamonn Ó hÓgáin to take on the other editorial work in An Gúm, so as to allow him to focus completely on heading up the dictionary team (Ní Bhrádaigh 1997: 79). Even though Ó Dónaill was over the retirement age in 1973, he was allowed to continue working with a contract extension sought for him every six months up until the end of the project (An Gúm 1977).¹⁴

Printing the dictionary

The FGB is especially noteworthy in that it was the first government publication to be mass-printed by means of a computer. Smurfit (the Richview Press) tendered for the printing work in an open competition organised by the Stationary Office. Their tender was the favoured one as it would conduct the work by means of a computer. There were great advantages to this process in that any further edition of the dictionary could be edited and amended which was very useful as An Gúm wished to extract a smaller dictionary from the larger one without having to retype all the material¹⁵ (An Gúm, 1972). However, it took 6 years for the company to solve their own production problems to enable the computerised printing process to work properly. There was a great deal of frustration on the part of the dictionary team and the Department that the company were unable to fulfil every printing deadline they were set and put the eventual production of the final printed version back by a number of years (An Gúm, 1975).

¹⁰ There were two members of the EID staff whose service continued on to the FGB—Eilís Ní Bhrádaigh as a clerical officer and Séamus Ó Grianna who prepared word lists of Ulster Irish with explanations.

¹¹ There were twelve female assistants employed at one point doing this task alone.

¹² He managed to recruit Seosamh Ó Dálaigh temporarily for a year (1963-64) but then returned to school teaching.

¹³ Annraoi Ó Liatháin, Seán Ó hUallacháin, Séamas Ó Dúgáin and Séamas Ó Scolaí were all sourced through this method. Pádraig Ua Maoileoin came in 1965 (from the police service, An Garda Síochána) and as a result of exams, Máire Ní Ící arrived in 1965 agus then Seán Ó Curraoin. Breandán Breathnach came from the Department of Agriculture at the same time.

¹⁴ Máire Nic Mhaoláin joined the team as editor in 1974 and she took on many of the cross-checking and proof reading duties, directing much of scheme through to its conclusion. Séamas de Barra (1975) and Liam Mac Cóil (1976) were appointed assistant editors after that. Cross-checking and manuscript correction were Eilís Ní Bhrádaigh's duties.

¹⁵ It would be possible to invert the print output so that the English words marked in the text would stand as headwords in alphabetical order with the Irish language headwords printed immediately after them.

De Bhaldraithe's relationship with Ó Dónaill

The Department of Finance never permitted de Bhaldraithe's advisory role to be maintained on anything other than a yearly basis. It was Ó Dónaill himself who made the case each year to retain his services for another year. Ó Dónaill always felt that the project was improved by a review of its ongoing work by the only internationally recognised Irish language academic lexicographer, now a Professor in UCD (An Gúm 1963). It was also essential in the first 3 or 4 years that he have access to an expert in Connaught Irish. There were a number of problems at the end of the project with the names of the respective editorial figures appearing on the dust jacket of the dictionary. Ó Dónaill had noted¹⁶ that he felt that the name of the Department on the cover of the dictionary would be sufficient and that the names of the editorial team should be listed inside the dictionary (An Gúm 1978).

However, the Department decided to put Ó Dónaill's name only on the cover of the dictionary. When he realised this, de Bhaldraithe wrote on the 3rd July 1978 to Doimínic Ó Laoghaire, the then Secretary of the Department, complaining that his name was left off the cover. He noted that he was appointed as consulting editor on the 10th October 1959 to direct the team's work, to set out a scheme for the work, to investigate and to supervise the work, to advise as required and to compile a monthly report. He mentioned that the basis of the material was collected and his dictionary inverted for this project with great effort before Niall Ó Dónaill was appointed. He felt that the dictionary was by no means the work of one person and suggestion of such would "not only (would it) be a clear injustice to me but it would be a public scandal".¹⁷ Niall Ó Dónaill was in his view "a person I trained and brought to a particular level of efficiency as editor".¹⁸ Two days later, Ó Laoghaire wrote to de Bhaldraithe stating that things would be put right. All the original covers were pulped and de Bhaldraithe's name appeared in small type under a larger entry for Ó Dónaill's name on a new cover.

Assessment and evaluation

Sales of the dictionary were high in the short term and 20,909 copies were sold in the first two years (An Gúm 1980). The project cost five times more than was originally planned by the Department of Education; more than £400,000 instead of £77,000 and Irish language lexicography suffered thereafter due to a sense of an uncontrolled overspend on the FGB (Public Accounts Committee 1980). Máirtín Ó Murchú praised the dictionary as a step forward in the Irish Times, "It is (in addition) a much more professional achievement than Dinneen's great thesaurus" (Ó Murchú 1978). Donncha Ó Corráin judged the FGB to be better than the EID but "There are basic deficiencies in the book that sully it as a scholarly work"¹⁹ (Ó Corráin 1987: 13). Malachy McKenna was somewhere in between when he said "Some niggling criticisms of this new dictionary can be, and have been, made but they in no way will detract from the book's overall excellence" (McKenna 1980: 197).

The principal lexicographers working on the dictionary were superb and complemented each other very well; Ó Dónaill, the native speaker of Ulster Irish, vastly rounded in the richness of that dialect and in writing and editing skills with a deep appreciation of the language's literary past; de Bhaldraithe, the university professor, compiler of the previous dictionary, internationally-recognised dictionary-maker, an erudite man, knowledgeable of Connaught Irish, who championed newer contemporary forms of Irish words. As certainly the largest project of Irish language lexicography undertaken by the Irish government heretofore, the FGB is a great reference work. Publishing a bilingual dictionary that explained Irish language words

¹⁶ In a memorandum on 12th April 1978 to Liam Dáibhís, Principal Officer in the Department.

¹⁷ Translated from the Irish: "Ní hamháin go mba éagóir fhollasach orm féin é agus ba scannal poiblí é".

¹⁸ Translated from the Irish: "duine a 'd'oíl mé agus a thug mé chun céim áirithe éifeachta mar eagarthóir".

¹⁹ Translated from the Irish: "Tá lochtaí bunúsacha ar an leabhar a loiteann é mar shaothar scolártha".

to the learner with English was the next natural step after the EID in the government's lexicographical policy. At that time, and even today, there was no bettering Ua Duinnín's dictionary when it came to a store of information on the dialectical words in the Irish language. However, a more modern direction was needed and the FGB certainly provided it. Even though the dictionary is beginning to date, it stands the test of time better than the EID. Above all else, Niall Ó Dónaill and Tomás de Bhaldraithe especially can be accredited with moving Irish language dictionary-making into the modern age. The FGB, together with the EID, has served the needs of the generation raised with an education of the Irish language in the new State since independence.

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