

## Review

**IDIR LÚIBÍNÍ – Aistí ar an Léitheoireacht agus ar an Litearthacht (Between Brackets – Essays on Reading and Literacy) ed. Róisín Ní Mhianáin. Baile Átha Cliath (Dublin): Cois Life 2003, p 208, ISBN 1-901176-38-X.**

The problems of minority languages have a certain familiarity for readers of LPLP. Irish<sup>1</sup>, though not strictly speaking a minority language<sup>2</sup>, shares many of their problems. Despite prolonged State efforts to promote its use<sup>3</sup>, the market for books in Irish remains small. The nine Irish language publishers rarely publish more than 500-600 copies of a title, although books on well-known *Gaeltacht*<sup>4</sup> personalities have been known to sell 1,000 copies in a few months. Shops are reluctant to stock books in Irish, as their profits for books in English are 10% higher (p 13 of this publication). Indeed, unless a book in Irish is included on a school syllabus, it is rare to find it selling more than 200-300 copies.

The present volume focuses on this problem, presenting the proceedings of a conference on literacy and reading which took place in An Spidéal, in the largest *Gaeltacht* in Ireland on 8-9 March 2002. The symposium was organized by Róisín Ní Mhianáin, senior editor with the Irish language publishers *Cló Iar-Chonnachta*, in the framework of a book fair and reading festival, which also included a number of workshops on reading for teenagers. The aims of the festival were (p 193):

- a) To organize a symposium on reading and to publish its proceedings, with a view to filling some of the lacunae in research on reading and literacy in Ireland;
- b) To celebrate the wide range of reading material now available in Irish (some 130 titles are published annually, apart from school texts);
- c) To present this material to the public through a festival bookshop;
- d) To draw attention to reading as a pleasurable pastime.

The book is divided into two parts: I. Reading; II. Literacy. In an informative introduction Ní Mhianáin cites the paucity of published research on reading in Irish, and a desire to stimulate debate with a view to improving this, as her principal motivation for organizing the festival. She is the author of a thesis on marketing research to promote the habit of reading at Dublin City University.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Gaelic”, sometimes used to refer to the language, is inadequate for two reasons: 1. It is ambiguous in that it can also refer to Scottish Gaelic, a different language. 2. According to Ó Murchú (1985: 4), “the word “Gaelic” ... has a distinctly pejorative connotation when used of the language, its use being intended to imply that the language is of peripheral status in present day Ireland.” The term “Irish”, and its equivalents in other languages, *irlandais*, *irisch*, *irlanda*, etc. is to be preferred.

<sup>2</sup> Its constitutional position is that of “national and first official language” (*teanga náisiúnta agus príomhtheanga oifigiúil*), and, although spoken daily only by a minority, it is recognized by a large majority of Irish people as Ireland’s distinctive ancestral language (Ó Tuathail 2002: 24).

<sup>3</sup> For instance, all children at primary and secondary level have been required to study it since the establishment of the Irish state in 1922.

<sup>4</sup> Traditional Irish-speaking areas, mainly in the west, north-west and south-west of Ireland.

Part I comprises six contributions: Young Readers of Irish (Hickey & Ó Cainín) discusses the importance of an adequate provision of suitable reading matter for young children, and looks at strategies for fostering an interest in reading in this age group. “By the Oath of the Book” (Joe Steve Ó Neachtain) gives the author’s view of why Irish is little read in Gaeltacht regions. Reading and the *Gaeltacht* (Dónall P. Ó Baoill) supplies the historical and social reasons for the low level of reading in Irish in the Gaeltacht. Popularising Reading in Irish – a Challenge for the Publishers (Colmán Ó Raghallaigh) looks at the potential readership for books in Irish, indicates that books in English are frequently no more popular, and examines the more professional arrangements in this area in Wales. The final two contributions in this section look at teenage reading in Irish from different perspectives: Reading among Teenagers (Seosamh Ó Murchú) gives a publisher’s view, whereas Reading and *Gaeltacht* Teenagers (Máire Denvir) looks at the problems of native Irish speakers faced with a surfeit of material prepared for learners.

Part II contains four lectures: “*Cén fáth nach?* (Why not? – Anglicism in Irish) – from Dialect to Creole (Caoilfhionn Nic Pháidín) analyzes literacy among Irish speakers since the beginning of the last century, and discusses the implications for publishing of the growing gap between the spoken and written language. Profiling Early Literacy – An Assessment Tool for Teachers in All-Irish Primary Schools (Gabrielle Nig Uidhir) describes a tool currently under development to pinpoint early reading difficulties. Reading Ability and Practice among Adults in the *Gaeltacht* (Tadhg Ó hIfearnáin) analyzes the most comprehensive research yet carried out on this topic in a Gaeltacht community – that of the West Cork Gaeltacht, *Múscraí*, in 2000-2002. The final contribution, Adult Education and Literacy in the *Gaeltacht* (Nóirín Ní Ghrádaigh), describes the work of *Breacadh*, the state agency set up to deal with problems of adult literacy in Irish in these regions. Two annexes complete the book: I. Report on Book Fair and Reading Festival; and II. Report on Reading Workshops for Teenagers.

There are many noteworthy points in all of the above contributions. The following are necessarily selective. Caoilfhionn Nic Pháidín (p 127) points out that state publishing was traditionally directed towards the promotion of writing rather than the fostering of reading (“*scribhneoireacht a spreagadh seachas léitheoireacht a chothú*”). It was erroneously believed that more writing would of itself produce more reading. The present reviewer’s research (Ó Riain 1994: 92-93) indicates that this erroneous belief mirrors a more general and equally erroneous view that beset Irish language policy since the foundation of an independent Irish state: the conviction that increased usage of Irish would automatically flow from increased learning of the language. Eighty years of State policy on the Irish language have proven the falsity of this belief conclusively. Increased usage of a less widespread language must be specifically planned, and it is heartening to note a recognition of this fact by the Official Languages Act 2003, signed into law on 14 July 2003<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> For the text of this law, see the website of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs at [www.pobail.ie](http://www.pobail.ie), which also contains useful information in speeches by the relevant government minister, Éamon Ó Cuív, T.D., who piloted this legislation through parliament.

Róisín Ní Mhianáin rightly stresses the need for more market research, to cater more accurately for consumer taste. The workshops on teenage reading underlined the desire for lighter, more amusing literature for entertainment. Some further miscellaneous points are of interest: Hickey & Ó Cainín point out the more effective readers among primary school children read at a speed of 110-120 words per minute whereas their weaker comrades may read as slowly as 40 words per minute. Caoilfhionn Nic Pháidín, though she rightly stresses (p 126) the threat to Irish of the wholesale adoption of English syntax, is not convincing in her assertion (p 123) of a loss of status for traditional Gaeltacht speech, due to the acceptance on the Irish language electronic media of “new creoles”. It is hard to see prestige ever attaching to the examples of these creoles she provides (p 124-125), which are very heavily influenced by English syntax and vocabulary. Sub-standard varieties have always existed, but they are seen by many as far from the elegance of traditional *Gaeltacht* speech, and it is revealing to contrast this with the view of the teenagers (p 208) “*a raibh an-ómós acu do Ghaeilge na seandaoine áitiúla*” (who highly honored the speech of older local people). Tadhg Ó hIfearnáin (p 160) is interested in “measuring the value of reading as an instrument of language transmission”, and his pioneering contribution is of high interest, particularly when he draws attention to the practice of both semi-state and private companies of imposing English on their *Gaeltacht* clientele. This is one of the key problem areas which the Official Languages Act 2003 is designed to address.

Róisín Ní Mhianáin is to be congratulated for taking this laudable initiative, and producing a book which is as readable as it is topical.

Mar bhuille scoir, focal mínithe faoi mo chinneadh an léirmheas seo a scríobh as Béarla: mheasas gur chúí aird idirnáisiúnta a tharraingt ar an sárobair atá ar siúl ag leithéidí Róisín Ní Mhianáin agus na comhleacaithe uile a chabhraigh léi sa tionscnamh an-úsáideach seo. Gura fada buan iad!

*Reviewer's address*

Ambasáid na hÉireann/Embassy of Ireland  
Friedrichstrasse 200  
D-10117 Berlin.  
[sean.oriain@iveagh.irlgov.ie](mailto:sean.oriain@iveagh.irlgov.ie)

*About the reviewer*

Seán Ó Riain (Ph.D., Trinity College, Dublin) has published research on language planning in Ireland and Québec (Ó Riain 1994). His diplomatic career has included Poland, Australia, Austria and now Germany. The Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ireland, Mr Brian Cowen, TD, launched his booklet on EU language policy on 11 July 2001. The present review expresses the personal views of the author.

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