

# ‘Sure why would they need Irish?’: Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch, Ballymun, and working-class decolonisation, c.1970-73

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## Abstract

This article examines the struggle carried out by working-class Irish-language activists in Ballymun to found a gaelscoil (Irish-medium school) in the early 1970s. The article is based on archival research and interviews with two key participants involved in the campaign for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch, Éilís Uí Langáin and Colm Ó Torna. The campaign to establish the school is viewed through the lenses of class and decolonisation. Firstly, the long-term socio-economic and political contexts to the campaign are outlined. Secondly, the social base and the pre-existing networks and ideology which allowed the campaign to develop are explored. Following this, the emergence of the campaign and its politics are examined. Finally, the lasting impact of the struggle for the school both locally and nationally is discussed. The conclusion reached is one that is of the utmost importance for Irish language, gaelscoil and decolonial activists, namely that it will be difficult to replicate the success of Ballymun again today in the neoliberal context because the material basis in terms of secure housing and a tight-knit urban community does not exist. At a time when there has been much talk in Irish revivalist circles about promoting Irish in Dublin with the launch of the Baile Átha Cliath le Gaeilge (Dublin For Irish) scheme, the history of Ballymun and Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch demonstrates how a secure home is the lynchpin on which real communal progress with regard the Irish language must be based. It is therefore necessary for those who wish to see the Irish language flourish in the city to learn the lessons of history and improve, first and foremost, the day-to-day lives of ordinary Dubliners by becoming active on the burning question of housing.

## Keywords

Class, ideology, Irish language, gaelscoil, decolonisation, Irish republicanism, cultural nationalism, Ballymun

Although a small community had existed in Ballymun prior to the 1960s, the towers which came to represent the area and feature in so much government, press, and literary output, were built during the years 1965-69. Dublin’s inner-city housing had become unsafe and what housing that did exist was scarce. This prompted the state to construct homes on a mass scale and in a short time frame. The National Building Authority (NBA) was established to build and oversee the construction of the Ballymun Flats and by 1969 nineteen towers of various heights had been built, housing some 20,000 residents (Boyle 2005:183). As Mark Boyle has commented ‘as a grandiose public spectacle that embraced the Keynesian economic management philosophy of the day, and that displayed the latest Fordist technologies of housing construction, Ballymun served as a showpiece of Ireland’s new ambition. Ballymun was Ireland’s beacon of modernity, a statement of its intentions to serve as a basing point for

international capital, and a benchmark of its drive for modernization' (2005: 183). However, the notion that the Ballymun Flats could be held up as a showpiece for state housing was soon cast aside. Despite spending £10,000,000 on the construction of the flats in Ballymun through the NBA, the state discharged responsibility to Dublin Corporation. The state's economic programme in the 1970s, based as it was on foreign direct investment, failed to deliver a budgetary surplus. Consequently, underfunded from the outset, Dublin Corporation washed its hands of providing decent services and amenities to the newly constructed housing in Ballymun (Boyle 2005: 183).

In similar fashion, from the mid-1960s, the state had also begun to wash its hands of the Irish language. No longer would there even be the pretence of delivering the serious funding needed for the language in the social and educational spheres if it were to survive in an Anglophone dominated world. In 1964 the publication of the government report *Athbheochan na Gaeilge: the Restoration of the Irish Language* signalled the state stepping back from offering serious support to the language (1964). Then, in 1965, under OECD influence, the *Investment in Education* report was published. The report further emphasised the Irish language as a hindrance to economic development, this time in the educational sphere (Daly 2016: 220-21). These two reports foreshadowed the abandonment of the cultural revival project which had been ongoing since the 1920s. That project, however, was never allowed to fully develop. Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin has highlighted the failure of the state to redistribute its resources in a way that would have saved the strongest Irish-speaking districts during the twentieth century (2007:207-8). Conchúr Ó Giollagáin and Tamás Péterváry, meanwhile, have emphasised the neo-colonial nature of the state and its various departments. Postcolonial states, they argue, often find it difficult to cast off the damage done by colonisation. According to David Llyod, whom the authors draw on, 'the consequence has been an effort, common to imperialism and the national state, to marginalise inassimilable and recalcitrant social groups, cultural forms and political projects' (Ó Giollagáin, Péterváry 2016; 36). This manifested in the culture of government departments, such as the Department of Education, where the demand for Irish-medium schooling was often met with apathy or hostility. If we view the obstinacy of such government departments through this prism, then, logically, the work of countering this mentality and democratising and Gaelicizing a section of the educational system can be viewed as decolonial.

By the 1960s, both Ballymun and the Irish language at a state-wide level were being abandoned due to an austere monetary philosophy that had been sinking its roots deeper since T.K. Whittaker *First Programme For Economic Expansion* 1958 further embedded the Twenty-Six County State's economy into the globalizing capitalist system. Paradoxically, by the late 1960s, there was a rise in the proportion of GNP devoted to social expenditure, on education, health and welfare (Daly 2016: 252). Whittaker's programme created an economic boon at a state-wide by the early 1970s. Thus, as the welfarist state was becoming more prosperous and spending more for the benefit of its citizens, it was retreating from its support for the Irish language. When Fianna Fáil under the leadership of Jack Lynch won the election of 1969 Patrick Hillery was appointed as Minister for Foreign Affairs. The move augured a campaign to join the European Economic Community (EEC) to further reap the rewards of newfound prosperity. Yet, despite some arguing that membership of the EEC would herald a move to break from English influence, as Robbie McVeigh and Bill Rollston have recently written, the move, in fact, belied a 'continued dependency' since there existed 'no viable project to join the [EEC] independent of the UK' (McVeigh, Rollston 2021:172-3). Although there was a multiplicity of opinion among Irish speakers, a strong campaign by some sections of Conradh na Gaeilge (The Gaelic League), highlighted the loss of sovereignty (Nic Oireachtaigh; *Inniu*

March 1970). The state's position of only paying lip service to the Irish language was underscored in the negotiations with the EEC. In the summer of 1971 Hillery informed the bloc that the Dublin government would only be seeking the much diminished 'Treaty status' – instead of that of a full working language – for Irish (Ráiteas: 1971).

But, to return to the local. Resistance manifested in Ballymun to the twin problems of underinvestment in the community and in Irish-medium schooling in the area from around 1970. In writing the history of Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch, the first gaelscoil<sup>1</sup> (Irish-medium school) established in Ballymun in the early 1970s, P. Ó Ceallaigh noted how the school was born 'in the teeth of fierce opposition from the Irish educational establishment; opposition which stemmed from the somewhat patronising belief that children from a working class Dublin background would not have the intellectual capacity to cope with being educated entirely through the medium of Irish' (Ó Ceallaigh 1960: 11). Not only had the founders of the school to contend with macro-economic forces such as capitalism, and a state that for neo-colonial reasons was either apathetic or hostile towards Irish, but, because they were working class, the added dynamic of classism compounded matters for those seeking a gaelscoil. This article traces the story of these founders and the issues of class and classism they encountered.

Most of the state- and national-level histories of the 1970s period either ignore completely or gloss over the emergence of the gaelscoil movement (Ferriter 2013; Foster 2007; Lee 1990). Thomas Walsh, in his book *Primary Education in Ireland, 1897-1990: Curriculum and Context* argues that 'department policy was supportive of extending the network of gaelscoileanna, owing to the positive results they were achieving in the Irish language' (Walsh 2012: 229). Meanwhile, in terms of Ballymun, Boyle has asserted that 'community activism in Ballymun dates from the mid 1970s' and that 'it was not until the rapid decline of the estate in the early 1980s that real community politics took off' (Boyle; 185). As the following pages will go to show, the Department of Education was certainly not supportive of Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch. Furthermore, the activism which led to the foundation of the school in spite of deep-seated opposition dated from the early 1970s. First, the socio-economic and political contexts to the campaign are examined. Second, the social base, pre-existing networks and ideology on which the campaign drew is interrogated, followed by detail on the emergence of the campaign and its politics. Lastly, the legacy of the struggle for the school in both Ballymun and further afield is discussed.

### **Class Composition, Networks and Ideology**

Who were the gaelscoil activists who waged this campaign for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch? Importantly, these activists did not function in a vacuum but instead were part of a burgeoning movement. In other parts of Dublin, such as Raheny, and in Galway and Belfast, parents and educators were mobilising to counter the erosion, or invisibility, of the Irish language within the school system locally. In Dublin, as sociolinguists Pádraig Ó Riagáin and Mícheál Ó Gliasáin contended in 1979, the growth of the gaelscoil movement from 1969 onwards was 'related to the suburban expansion of the last twenty years' (1979: 23). In the newly built estates, whether middle class like those in Raheny or working class such as the flats in Ballymun, the lack of amenities, especially community centres, created an opening for the gaelscoil. Irish-medium schools could function at once as centres for linguistic rights and

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<sup>1</sup> At the time the schools were called variously 'Scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge' or 'Scoileanna lán-Ghaelacha' (All-Irish Schools), but later came to be popularly known as gaelscoileanna, so I will deploy this latter term for simplicity.

education, but could also act as public hubs in places that were lacking an essential communal glue (Ó Riagáin, Ó Gliasáin: 146).

Nevertheless, the bulk of support for the gaelscoil movement in Dublin in its early years came from middle-class areas: Scoil Neasáin, Raheny (1969); Scoil Mobhí, Glasnevin (1972); Scoil Naithí, Dundrum (1973) and Scoil Chrónáin, Rathcoole (1975) were mostly located in such localities (POBAL 2006; Bunliosta, 2021). Indeed, by comparison with Dublin City more widely, the occupational status of fathers whose children attended the gaelscoileanna was relatively high. Most the fathers (65%) were employed as professionals or in state or semi-state companies at managerial level. Of the fathers 33% had third level education and the figure for mothers stood at 17%, in contrast to 7% of people in Dublin at large (Ó Riagáin, Ó Gliasáin: 33). The gaelscoil founding committee for Scoil Neasáin in Raheny was strongly middle class as shown in one list of its founders. The list included a ‘business executive’, ‘teacher’, ‘sub-editor’, ‘journalist’, ‘civil servant’, all males, and five ‘housewives’, while another woman was listed as a ‘civil servant’ (List: c.1969). The same class composition was discernible among the gaelscoil movement that was coming together on a supra-local level in Dublin and Galway from 1970 onwards and which eventually coalesced into Comhchoiste Náisiúnta na Scoileanna Lán-Ghaeilge in 1973/74 (Ní Fhearghusa: 17-18). The predominance of the middle class was a trend in keeping with the turn of the twentieth century Gaelic revivalists in Conradh na Gaeilge (McMahon: 139). Moreover, the emergence of the gaelscoil movement of the late twentieth century can be usefully theorised using Ronald Inglehart’s idea of ‘post-materialism’. This refers to the transformation of the objectives of social groups from primarily materialist – that is, seeking food and shelter – to agitating for broader concerns about autonomy, self-expression and culture (Inglehart 1977: *passim*).

This is not the full story, however. As Ó Riagáin agus Ó Gliasáin explain, ‘notwithstanding the pronounced leaning towards middle-class areas and families, the schools appear to draw support from a very wide range of social and occupational groups’ (1979: 38). Hence the importance of Ballymun and Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch as an exemplar of the working-class demand for a gaelscoil in the late twentieth century. The school’s founding group arose from the grassroots Ballymun Tenants Association and Ballymun Parents Committee (*Inniu* 8 October 1971). The group comprised mostly working-class men and working-class housewives (Ó Torna 2021, Uí Langáin 2021). Although material issues were still a concern for many of the gaelscoil activists in Ballymun, where lack of services and social issues were constant problems, the key activists held secure jobs, and, due to the housing policy of the time, secure tenure (*The Ballymun Experience*: 7-8). A recent study by Baumgartner et al. has highlighted ‘the foundational role of tenure security for ... multiple health outcomes’ (2022). It is my contention that this relative material security and its clear link to less negative social impacts, even in deprived areas such as Ballymun, created the context for gaelscoil activism.

One of the housewives involved in the campaign for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch was Éilís Uí Langáin. I conducted an interview with her by phone in early 2021. The interview could not be conducted in person due to the corona virus pandemic. Contact was established through pre-existing networks within the gaelscoil movement. As advised by Patricia Leavy in her chapter on research design for oral history projects, ‘a letter prior to a phone call is recommended, so that people are not put on the spot. A letter also allows you an opportunity to provide some introductory information about the study’ (Leavy 2015: 35). An email was sent to Uí Langáin outlining the project and then phone contact was established.

Originally from Cabra, Uí Langáin moved to Ballymun in 1968 where she got a flat with her

husband who worked for the *Irish Press* and their young child. Uí Langáin had only ‘school Irish’ and was not fully fluent when she first moved to Ballymun. She had been the only girl from her road in Cabra that went on to secondary school in the 1950s, the majority going straight into work. Her father, a Dublin man, instilled the importance of culture in her. By contrast, her mother, a Galway woman who had Irish, ‘had no interest in it, like a lot of people at the time’.<sup>2</sup> Her mother associated Irish with poverty and was not too pleased when Éilís sent her children to the gaelscoileanna. The first Uí Langáin heard of the proposed gaelscoil for the Ballymun area was on the programme *Seven Days* around 1968 (Uí Langáin 2021).

Colm Ó Torna was the second person interviewed regarding Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch. As with Uí Langáin, contact was made through pre-existing networks within the gaelscoil movement and an interview took place over the phone during the corona virus lockdown in 2021. Unlike most of the other gaelscoil activists agitating for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch Ó Torna did not reside in Ballymun. He lived outside the area in Artane and was employed as a civil servant. He was, nevertheless, central to the campaign there, particularly in terms of publicity and he took part in the Ballymun Parents Committee meetings. From early on in his involvement Ó Torna began delivering Irish classes four mornings a week in different flats and houses around Ballymun. He was keen to stress, however, that although he contributed to the campaign ‘this is the story of the people of Ballymun, not Colm Ó Torna’s story’. Ó Torna’s own experience of the Irish language within his family was positive. His father, from Drumcondra, published works in the language. Ó Torna received his primary schooling in Scoil Cholmcille on Marlborough Street, one of the few ‘all-Irish’ schools in the city, and then in Coláiste Mhuire, a secondary private school run by the Christian Brothers that used Irish as the medium of instruction. Following his schooling, Ó Torna emigrated to England and when he returned with his family secured a job as a civil servant with Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge, as a *timire* (a travelling teacher/activist) for the organisation Glór na nGael. He was not involved in politics, but was a member of a Catholic sodality while he also participated in educational campaigns in the Gaeltacht, such as those around schools in Dún Chaoin, Oileán Chléire and Ráth Chairn (Ó Torna 2021).

Other people both interviewees mentioned as being involved in the campaign or as being members of the Ballymun Parents Committee included Francis P. O’Toole/Proinsias Ó Tuathail and his wife Phyllis, Eithne Bean Uí Mhuireagáin and her husband John Morgan, Helen Nic Giolla Rua and her husband Antain Mac Giolla Rua, Cáit Mhic Chárthaigh, John and Eileen O’Connell, and Brendan Pringle (the latter the first Chairman of the Parents Committee) (Ó Torna Notes 2021) (Uí Langáin 2021). Ó Torna described both O’Toole and Pringle as ‘well educated’ and having great ability. According to Ó Torna, Pringle was an adept public speaker and highly effective at arguing his case (Ó Torna 2021). Both Pringle and O’Toole were members of the local Tenant’s Association, while they had also been active in the Credit Union movement and were trade union members where they worked in the postal sector. As noted in *The Ballymun Experience: a Case History of a Community Problem* pamphlet ‘neither had any previous connection with the Irish language movement and both had forgotten most of the Irish they had learned at school, but now came to the conclusion that without the Irish language, not only the Ballymun community, but the whole Irish nation, would suffer’ (*The Ballymun Experience*: 7-8).

Although the Ballymun Flats birthed a new community who demanded the right to have their

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<sup>2</sup> The interviews were conducted in Irish and any quotations used have been translated into English. Likewise, segments from newspapers or periodicals such as *Inniu* and *Comhar* have been translated from Irish to English in most cases.

children educated in Irish, there were pre-existing networks of Irish speakers in the area on which to build. When Riobard Mac Góráin of Gael Linn spoke on the television programme *7 Days* in 1976 and exclaimed that Irish-speaking communities had been cropping up in different areas for a number of years due to the founding of the gael scoileanna one Ballymun resident, Gus Cribben/Aibhistín Ó Cribín, was less than impressed. Cribben, who was active in the campaign for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch and a member of the Irish language youth group Ógras, wrote to the *Irish Press* to set the record straight:

Alas! As those of us who have laboured to establish All-Irish schools know to our very great cost, the opposite is the case. All-Irish schools are the product of existing communities who have had to fight tooth and nail for the right to have their children educated through the medium of Irish, and footing the bill all the way themselves.

Cribben further explained that there was ‘a solid Gaelic community in the Ballymun-Santry district when I first came into the neighbourhood in 1941, and the Irish school now established is but one of the extensions of that community’ (*Irish Press* 1976). Indeed, Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin have pointed to a correlation between higher than usual percentages of Irish speakers (between 13% and 20%) in the 1926 Census in places like Drumcondra, Glasnevin, Clontarf, and Blackrock, and the emergence of strong gael scoileanna in, or near, those areas in the 1970s (Ó Riagáin, Ó Gliasáin 1979). Elsewhere, as in Raheny in 1969 and later in Bray in 1977, the emergence of the gael scoileanna were preceded by the founding or revitalisation of local branches of Conradh na Gaeilge (Ní Fhlathartaigh 2021: *Irish Independent* 1975). In Belfast, meanwhile, Feargal Mac Ionnrachtaigh has demonstrated how the emergence of Bunscoil Phobal Feirste in the city in 1971 was built on the previous foundations of Cumann Chluain Árd (a social club founded by radical Irish speakers) and the urban Gaeltacht of Bóthar Seoigh (Mac Ionnrachtaigh 2013: 86-90). Therefore, the gael scoileanna clearly did not emerge in an organisational vacuum. One useful lens for understanding their emergence is through *Resource Mobilisation Theory*. The contention is rather straightforward; there will be a higher chance of a group being mobilised towards activism if there are pre-existing organisations and networks that share similar objectives already operating in the community in which the group exists (Connolly 2007: 14-15).

To turn now to the question of ideology. As mentioned above, state ideology was underpinned by both a neo-colonial and a capitalist rationale. The gael scoil activists were diametrically opposed to this logic – not least due to the cultural revivalist tradition on which they drew. From the time of the mid-nineteenth century, the Young Ireland movement promoted education as a key means of reversing the language shift that had occurred as a result of the expansion of British colonialism and capitalism into Ireland (Matthews 2003: 25-38, 136). The first real advance in this regard was the introduction, in the strongest Irish-speaking districts in the west, of a bilingual program for education in the national school system in 1904 following a campaign by Conradh na Gaeilge (O’Donoghue, O’Doherty, 44-52). Subsequently, Pádraig Pearse, the revolutionary and educationalist, laid the blueprint for the founding of autonomous Irish-medium schools when he established Scoil Éanna in Dublin in 1908 (Atkinson 1967: 70). P.J. Matthews has highlighted the progressive nature of turn of the twentieth century Gaelic revivalism. The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Féin, the Irish Agricultural Organisations Society, and Conradh na Gaeilge, although drawing on elements of custom, sought to create an ‘alternative modernity’ where tradition was a means ‘towards innovation and change rather than a barrier to it’. At the core of this activity was a philosophy of self-help and a desire to establish enduring physical institutions (Matthews 2003: 2-3, 23-28, 148).

Little wonder then that the gaelscoil activists who sought to found Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch drew on this tradition. There also existed a healthy suspicion of Anglophone cultural dominance and West-British/Unionist politics. As Ó Torna relates, on one occasion Breandán Pringle took on arch anti-nationalist and Labour TD Conor Cruise-O'Brien telling him sarcastically that 'we don't really need you lot, you've no time for Irish, why shouldn't we just have a better way off and have it all coming from London?' (Ó Torna 2021). Meanwhile, Francis P. O'Toole wrote to the *Irish Press* in March 1971 regarding Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch and remarked how the Irish were 'fast becoming a race of West-Britons-cum-Americans-cum-British Commonwealth nobodies' (*Irish Press* 1 March 1971).<sup>3</sup> For other gaelscoil activists entry into the EEC presented another worry in terms of potential cultural absorption (*Irish Press* 11 March 1972). But this was no insular nationalism. The school's name, Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch (The School of the Seven Heroes) refers to the seven signatories of the republican proclamation of 1916 – signatories whose names were also given to the seven tallest towers of the Ballymun Flats. Moreover, there was a strong influence from the radical socialist and Irish language activist, Máirtín Ó Cadhain, in the writing of Colm Ó Torna in an article about the school which appeared in *Inniu* in 1976:

caithfear obair na scoile a thuiscint i gcomhthéacs obair na Gaeilge ar bhonn náisiúnta, agus is i dtreo fíorú fise Mhic Phiarais agus Uí Chonghaile a bhí muintir Bhaile Munna ag saothrú, le go mbeadh Éire Saor agus Gaelach agus acmhainn éirime agus fisiciúil na tíre á saothrú ag muintir na hÉireann agus faoi smacht mhuintir na hÉireann (*Inniu* 1976).<sup>4</sup>

Much of this decolonising mentality can be usefully situated in a global framework laid down by key twentieth-century writers on decolonisation such as Franz Fanon, Albert Memmi and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Fanon, for example, attacks the 'national bourgeoisie' who cultivate neo-colonialism and turn their back on ordinary people following the formal withdrawal of the colonial power. In his view this 'caste' (consistent in the Twenty-Six Counties of Ireland with the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael parties who dominated twentieth century politics), did 'nothing more than take over unchanged the legacy of the economy, the thought and the institutions left by the colonialists' (Fanon 1961: 142). It is with such institutions – in particular, the Department of Education – which the gaelscoil activists had to contend. At a certain level, their goal was to break what Albert Memmi called the 'mythical and degrading portrait' that the coloniser had constructed of the Irish people and of the Irish language, in particular (1974: 131). The contours of such activism have been put forward by wa Thiong'o in whose writings can be delineated three cornerstones of decolonisation: self-respect, self-belief and self-reliance (1986: *passim*). The struggle for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch was infused with each of these three decolonial qualities. As indigenous education scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith contends, 'decolonization, once viewed as the formal process of handing over the instruments of government, is now recognized as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic, and psychological divesting of colonial power' (1999: 98). The building of gaelscoileanna, including in working-class areas like Ballymun, can be viewed as part of that long-term decolonial undertaking. This grassroots drive towards decolonisation which emerged through the gaelscoil movement in the state from the 1970s onwards is thus qualitatively different to the top-down bureaucratic revival efforts that Dublin governments oversaw between

<sup>3</sup> 'race' here is used in the twentieth century meaning of the word, that is interchangeably with 'people'

<sup>4</sup> 'We must understand the work of the school in the context of the work for the Irish language on a national level, and it is towards the realization of the vision of Pearse and Connolly that the people of Ballymun are working, so that Ireland would be Free and Gaelic and the intellectual and material resources of the country would be produced by the people of Ireland and under the control of the people of Ireland.'

the 1920s and 1950s.

In addition to this nationalist and republican decolonial agenda with global resonance there was a strong working-class identity among the Ballymun gaelscoil activists, especially evident in Uí Langáin's thinking. There was a refusal to be treated as second-class citizens. This necessitated a struggle to gain the same educational rights as middle-class Irish speakers. There was also a pride in this working-class identity. Unlike Scoil Neasáin in Raheny, Scoil Lorcáin in Monkstown and the privately run Coláiste Mhuire, Uí Langáin was keen to stress that Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch was 'the first [gaelscoil] in a working class area' (Uí Langáin 2021). For Ó Torna, who was, to a degree, looking in from the outside the Ballymun gaelscoil activists although not unemployed were seeking something that was amiss in their lives and striving for a broader cultural expression than was available to them at that time in Irish society (Ó Torna 2021). Also clear from *The Ballymun Experience* pamphlet, perhaps co-authored by Pringle and O'Toole, was a rejection of the homogenising forces of post-1960s social change, conveyed through new media such as television:

The problem of identity in Ballymun is not only one of community identity. It is also for many one of national identity and of personal identity. To some the results of these man-made problems are inhuman; they tend towards the depersonalisation, de-ethnicisation and alienation of those who live in large new urbanised areas planned without full awareness of human and social needs (*The Ballymun Experience*: 5-6).

Ultimately, the decolonial movement of the gaelscoileanna of which the campaign for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch formed an integral part – by demanding a central place for Irish language education within the Irish state *and* the necessary material resources to that end – challenged both the historic neo-colonial mentality and the capitalist and homogenising *zeitgeist*.

### **The Origins of Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch, c.1970-73**

Though Uí Langáin had heard mention of a gaelscoil being founded in Ballymun in the late 1960s, it was not until 1970 that concrete proposals were made. Ó Torna recalls how one woman, Peggy Walsh, suggested at a meeting of the Ballymun Tenants Association that a gaelscoil should be established (Ó Torna Notes 2021). Breandán Pringle and Francis O'Toole were selected to investigate the feasibility of the proposal in April 1970. In July that year the two men met with Captain Seán Ó Dunagáin, Secretary of Comdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge, who put them in touch with the already established Scoil Lorcáin. The meeting convinced them of the necessity of a fully immersive 'all-Irish' school (*The Ballymun Experience*: 6). *The Ballymun Experience* pamphlet, published by Pobal in late 1971, details the first year or so of the campaign between mid-1970 and mid-1971. Despite the Parents' Committee distributing 3,000 leaflets in the parish and receiving interest from the families of 30 children, the local clerics would not budge. They instead stated that there was 'no demand' for a fully immersive Irish-language school. The settlement arrived at by the autumn of 1971, and following negotiations between the Parent's Committee and the Department of Education, was for an 'all-Irish' stream in the Virgin Mary National School – a settlement the parents were unhappy about and believed to be only temporary. 'All-Irish' streams within English-medium schools did not satisfy those founding gaelscoileanna at this time, as they realised the dominant language, English, would prevail in the school yard among children, among teachers, and throughout the school in general. The parents of Ballymun had investigated the success of Scoil Lorcáin on Dublin's Southside (founded in 1952) and come to the conclusion that their school should also

‘be a separate school having its own special identity and environment’ (*The Ballymun Experience: 7-19*). The scene was thus set for the continuation of the campaign into 1972.

Around this time Ó Torna and his wife Eibhlín were attending an Irish language class organised by Cuallacht Mhuire gan Smál, a Catholic Sodality, on Gardiner St. in the city. One night Pringle and O’Toole burst into the class unannounced. ‘They were full of the vision and looking for support’, according to Ó Torna, who that evening set up a meeting with the determined pair in one of the rooms under the Ballymun Flats, thus commencing his involvement in the campaign (Ó Torna Notes 2021). The participation of Peggy Walsh, and her colleague Tomás Mac Gib/Tommy Gibson, is also worthy of note. Ó Torna describes them as ‘sort of left-wing agitators’ who were hugely supportive of the Irish language. Both sought to improve life for the people of Ballymun, and to do so from a left-wing perspective. They thus promoted the foundation of Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch as part of that improvement (Ó Torna 2021). Walsh and Mac Gib, along with several others including Peadar Kelly, were also involved in the Ballymun News – a newspaper/magazine focused on community news and general social and cultural commentary that called for a rent strike and honoured Official IRA volunteer Joe McCann following his killing by the British Army in Belfast in 1972. The same publication criticised some of the already established gaelscoileanna for what it deemed was the ‘snob value’ attached to them and called on parents in Ballymun to become involved with Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch so as to keep ‘anything elitist’ from becoming ‘attached to it’ (*Ballymun News* 1973).

Although the origins of the idea emanated from this left-republican grouping in Ballymun, and they fully supported the initiative along the way, it was a group of working-class Irish speakers without any real political affiliation who drove the campaign (Ó Torna 2021). In this way they can be viewed as part of a broader national movement for Irish-medium education and the preservation of the Gaeltacht that was gaining momentum in places as far apart as Belfast, Dún Chaoin, Donegal, Galway and Dublin around 1970. Gluaiseacht Cearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta (The Gaeltacht Civil Rights Movement) was also founded around this time. The movement highlighted the underdevelopment of Gaeltacht areas and held a number of key demands such as the establishment of a Gaeltacht authority and radio station. This also occurred within the context of the emergence of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association and the struggle which had broken out there in the late 1960s for equal rights for Catholics before it escalated into an anti-colonial war after the summer of 1969 (Ó Tuathaigh 1979: 111-23). Events in the North had an impact on the discourse, politics and mobilisation of people in the Twenty-Six Counties (Hanley 2019: *Passim*). According to Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh these movements must be placed alongside ‘the global dynamics of youth politics and civil rights movements of the late 1960s’ (Ó Tuathaigh 1979: 111-23).

In Dublin, in 1970, Irish language organisations such as Na Teaghlaigh Ghaelacha (a group of gaelscoil activists who were rearing their children through Irish) were highlighting the absence of a developmental plan for Irish-medium education in the newly constructed estates of Dublin’s periphery (*Kerryman* 1970). Therefore, Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch in Ballymun, along with the founding of Scoil Neasáin, Raheny, Scoil Mobhí, Glasnevin, Scoil Naithí, Dundrum and Scoil Chrónáin, Rathcoole, which all emerged in or around Dublin during this period, can be placed as part of a milieu of *New Social Movements*. According to Linda Connolly, these global movements, which emerged from the sixties onwards and focussed on issues such as the environment, gender, and language, could contain different class and status groups. The common denominator, however, was that modernisation impacted on them in some negative way (Connolly 2007: 23). In the case of the gaelscoileanna, the further globalisation of the

economy – which brought with it a more pervasive Anglophone dominance in media, commerce, politics and education, combined with the dislocation felt in newly built suburban estates – inspired a pushback from activists. Thus, paradoxically perhaps, although the activists found themselves adrift in the sprawling towers of Ballymun, the abovementioned security of tenure allowed them the ability to wage a campaign for a gaelscoil.

What little Fianna Fáil had done to maintain the vitality of the Irish language during their almost continuous hold on power from 1932 onwards was being curtailed around 1970, thus bringing into sharper relief the position of Irish speakers, and Irish speakers in Ballymun, as a marginalised minority language community. The aforementioned Francis P. O'Toole wrote to the *Irish Press* in January 1971 to raise what he viewed as the treachery of Fianna Fáil. He poured scorn on them for having been in power for thirty-five years and for failing to revive the language. He mentioned the Irish-medium schools in the Gaeltacht being closed and alleged that not a single gaelscoil had been founded outside the Gaeltacht by the Department of Education. O'Toole also alluded to the obstacles faced in founding a gaelscoil – a local committee needed to be founded, a declaration signed by parents indicating support for the school had to be produced, and a site had to be acquired from the Catholic Church, local business people or be secured independently. After that, the committee had to receive commitments from teachers that they would teach in the school. At that point, and only then, would the Department of Education offer assistance. 'What happens if you want your children taught in a foreign (English) language', he wrote. 'You walk 400 yards to the nearest school, put your child's name on the register and, "hey presto", no further problems' (*Irish Independent* 1971).

The central point about the years 1971-72, as Ó Torna recalls, was that 'something was happening in terms of the Irish language, without a doubt' (Ó Torna 2021). The mobilisation of sections of the population of the Gaeltacht, and of other gaelscoil activists throughout the country, including in Ballymun, began to form into a national movement, with various local campaigns impacting on, and influencing, one another in different ways. In terms of Ballymun specifically, it is difficult to trace the precise chronology of protest during the years 1971-72 which led to the establishment of Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch. Some of the large meetings and open letters of protest are recorded in the newspapers. But much of the smaller protests cannot be placed accurately on a timeline due to a lack of sources and the passage of time – the interviewees' memories could locate them only broadly and sometimes their accounts conflicted in terms of precise dates.

Following the April 1970 meeting of the Ballymun Tenants Association and the suggestion that a gaelscoil should be founded the Coiste Bunaithe na Scoile (School Founding Committee) submitted a formal application for a gaelscoil to the Department of Education and the local priest, an tAthair Dónal Ó Scanaill – himself an Irish speaker from the Baile Bhúirne Gaeltacht in Cork and his father in the upper echelons of Conradh na Gaeilge – rejected it. According to Ó Torna, he, as well as the Department, told them 'jobs, not Irish, is what they need!' (Notes). Uí Langáin relays how Ó Scanaill informed them that 'Irish language education is only for children of academics and people who can afford to educate their children. It's not for the working class' (Uí Langáin 2021).

There existed a long history of clashes between Gaelic revivalists and clergy, going back to that between Conradh na Gaeilge at Cath Cúl an tSúdaire (The Battle of Portarlinton) in 1906. The local branch of Conradh na Gaeilge challenged both the local priest and bishop on the issue of co-education. Two Conradh activists, both civil servants, needing to make up numbers for

an Irish-language class, sought to mix girls and boys – separate classes would not have functioned. A shop assistant lost his job as he would not sign a letter of apology to the priest. Ultimately, however, the Conradh won and the classes were held on a co-educational basis (Garvin 2005: 112).

The more immediate context to the decision by the local priest and the Department of Education not to allow Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch open is also of importance. As the correspondence of one Department official, Tomás Ó Floinn, with Archbishop John Charles McQuaid in 1970 on the topic of a ‘boys home’ in Finglas demonstrates, there existed a markedly deferential attitude among civil servants as it related to ecclesiastic power. Ó Floinn used the term ‘Your Grace’ no less than five times within the space of a short one page letter and he concluded with the words ‘perhaps Your Grace will be good enough to write to me on this point in due course’. Ó Floinn also failed to challenge McQuaid on his comments about those in the ‘boys home’ whom he termed ‘lost souls’ – comments evidently rooted in an upper-class Catholic and classist disregard for the working class (Ó Floinn 1970).

Despite the classism prevalent in the Department of Education and the Church, the Dublin Diocese had begun to make moves in the late 1960s to accommodate a democratic demand among parents for more involvement in local secondary schools. The Diocese began to assist parents in founding parents committees in the late 1960s (Martin 10 March 1969). This was done in response to the fear that ‘a national Parent Association as such could bring undesirable pressure to bear on schools as far as educational matters are concerned’ (Mother Jordana 1969). Although this relates to secondary schooling, it shows a shift in the thinking of some sections of the Dublin Church hierarchy. Significantly, the Church leadership realised there would be stumbling blocks with various local clerics. Father Liam Martin, the Diocese Secretary, wrote to Monsignor Fitzpatrick on the matter and claimed ‘that certainly at the moment the parish clergy are not ripe for such a development since they have not yet accustomed themselves or, to put it another way, have not been educated to the idea of the participation of parents in school matters’ (Martin 31 March 1969).

This proved to be the case in Ballymun when members of the local clergy made it known that they were hostile to the democratic involvement of parents in the running of schools. As Uí Langáin recalls, the same clerics were not averse to using red scare tactics to beat back this democratic demand; ‘I was labelled a subversive, a communist, everything’ (Uí Langáin 2021). Although those on the left involved in the campaign for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch had secular objectives in mind and sought to separate church and state in the running of the school, the majority of parents had no qualms with the Church itself. Rather, their issue was with one or two of the parish priests (Ó Torna 2021). Ó Scanail had made his feelings known early on. But in the summer of 1971 another cleric weighed in. An tAthair D. Baicéir announced at mass one Sunday in June that there would be no standalone gael scoil but instead that Irish would be taught in the pre-existing classes and schools. Breandán Pringle told *Inniu* that such a settlement would not suffice as they needed a school with ‘an Irish environment in which all subjects would be taught in the language’. Baicéir had already refused to allow the parents use the old school building of Scoil Naomh Pappin as he claimed ‘no demand had been demonstrated’ for such a move. Pringle believed the Church was attempting to split the Parents Committee with the unsatisfactory offer. He stated to *Inniu* that the parents were attempting to find out ‘if there was any truth to this talk [by those in power] about conserving our Irish heritage’. He finished by telling the reporter, ‘we’re of the working class here in Ballymun, but we demand our right to all-Irish education for our children’ (*Inniu* 18 June 1971).

In response to Baicéir's offer of having Irish taught in local English-speaking schools, Coiste Tacaíochta Bhaile Munna (Ballymun Support Committee), a group of Irish-language activists and educationalists mostly from around Dublin, organised a meeting in the Crofton Airport Hotel on 13 October 1971. A press statement was issued in advance declaring that the meeting was called to raise 'the question of primary education through Irish generally. And to specifically discuss the question of Ballymun' (*Inniu* 8 October 1971). Breandán Pringle slammed the prospect of small Irish-medium streams existing in large English-medium schools and he demanded a fully Irish-medium school like Scoil Lorcáin in Monkstown. Echoing early revivalist ideas about a link between cultural and material wealth, Pringle conveyed his belief that 'the public was drowning in the culture of England. It was evident from the poor result of the 'Buy Irish Products' campaign, for example, that this question of culture disproportionately impacts Irish industry, and us the workers'. The mood of the meeting was militant and Maolsheachlainn Ó Caollaí, President of Conradh na Gaeilge, told the crowd that the Conradh had 'learned a lesson' as it was now clear 'that for twenty years the Department of Education has been working against the Irish language'. Canon Coslett Ó Cuinn, who introduced himself as an 'unapologetic Protestant from the north', condemned the Southern government for their stance in offering only streams; 'they asked for fish and got a snake, the same trick that was played in Rann na Feirste and Dún Chaoin'. Ó Cuinn finished his speech by urging the crowd to create a stir as politicians would not do what is necessary so they ought not be allowed 'rest nor respite'. Riobard Mac Góráin, President of Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge, an umbrella body for the various Irish-language organisations, sought to shift blame away from the Department of Education and onto the local clergy. Likewise, Críostóir Ó Floinn, a journalist and activist who had been involved in founding Scoil Neasáin two years previously, stated that 'I am no communist ... but a Catholic, and it is my opinion that the Catholic Church is the main problem here'. When two local politicians, Jim Tunney of Fianna Fáil and Mark Clinton of Fine Gael, rose to speak both were heckled. Clinton had to abandon his speech altogether. The meeting closed with a motion, accepted unanimously, to remind the Department of Education of its own rules which stated that the responsibility for managing a school need not be left to the parish priest, as another person or committee could be put in his place (*Inniu* 22 October 1971).

The Crofton Airport Hotel meeting was perhaps the high watermark in terms of making a national Irish-language issue out of Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch. A national gaelscoil movement had been coalescing in the run-up to the meeting. Earlier that same year, 1971, also saw a large protest in Dublin which some of the Ballymun activists attended. The march called for Scoil Dhún Chaoin in the Kerry Gaeltacht to be kept open and for an improvement in socio-economic conditions there. At one point during the march, as it halted outside the GPO on O'Connell Street, several of the protestors were brutalised by Gardaí (Ó Snodaigh 2017: 139-155). Ó Torna is keen to emphasise that the Irish language movement, nationally, was 'fully behind' the Ballymun campaign. They received support from Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge, Conradh na Gaeilge, Gael-Linn, and from Gaeltacht activists such as Donncha Ó hÉallaithe (Ó Torna 2021). There were also strong ties to Bunscoil Phobal Feirste in Belfast and Uí Langáin recalls being highly impressed with the urban Gaeltacht there – 'they had things we didn't have' – as well as feeling an affinity for the grassroots nature of the movement in the Northern capital. Casting her mind further afield, Uí Langáin emphasises the international connections with other minority language groups that were fostered; 'there were people from Scotland and Wales and from Brittany ... Basques ... There were always people like that coming to Ballymun' (Uí Langáin 2021).

In early 1972, once it became clear that Scoil Mobhí would open in middle-class Glasnevin in

September 1972 it appears the Department and Church changed tack once more. Instead of forcing the children of the Ballymun parents who wanted Irish-medium education into local English-medium schools, they would now be sent to a gaelscoil, but one outside of the area (Ó Torna 2021). This created a further fissure in the campaign, according to Ó Torna (Notes). Uí Langáin balked at the idea of sending the children to Glasnevin. The Glasnevin people were not seeking a gaelscoil, she recalls, but the Ballymun people were. Moreover, ‘there was a massive difference between the people of Glasnevin and the people of Ballymun and we understood that’ (Uí Langáin 2021). Refusing to send their children to Glasnevin, the Parents Committee managed to secure an Irish-medium stream for the children which operated in a prefabricated building in the Virgin Mary National School in Ballymun, a Church-controlled school which functioned through English (Uí Langáin 2021). The settlement was less than satisfactory for parents, but even still it did not last long. Uí Langáin recounts how one priest informed the parents – perhaps in early 1972 – that the stream would cease to function for the 1972/1973 school year, leaving them with nowhere else to go (2021). At this point, some of the parents decided to send their children into the city to the gaelscoileanna there, Scoil Mhuire for girls and for boys Scoil Cholmcille, on Marlborough Street (Ó Torna 2021). Since these two gaelscoileanna were located on the grounds of the Department of Education, Uí Langáin recounts how the women of the campaign – herself, Eithne Uí Mhuireagáin, Helen Mhic Giolla Ruaidh and K. Mac Cárthaigh – seized the opportunity to exert pressure on the civil servants within the Department and demand a standalone gaelscoil for Ballymun. This they did on a daily basis as they waited to collect their children (Uí Langáin 2021). One day while demanding a gaelscoil in Ballymun, a civil servant in the Department inquired as to the names of their children. When the women provided the names – the names were modern English-language names rather than Irish-language names – the civil servant responded that they had ‘nothing to do with Irish’ (Ó Torna 2021). Uí Langáin frames one protest where she left a letter into the Department of Education in the context of the classism people from Ballymun experienced and the democratic rights they demanded. ‘I’ll never forget the response of [one man] – ‘you can’t speak English in Ballymun. Why are you looking for Irish?’ *Ghearr sin mo chroí* [that cut my heart]. As if we were second class citizens up in Ballymun’ (Uí Langáin 2021).

Another form of protest used was the *scoil scairte* (hedge school). On one occasion a *scoil scairte* was held outside the offices of Pádraig Faulkner, the Fianna Fáil Minister for Education. Uí Langáin recalls: ‘what we did was we went into the Department, we put the chairs in a circle, the women sat around, and this oul’ fella started teaching us Irish. Right under the window of Pádraig Faulkner!’ (Uí Langáin 2021). The protest gained a good deal of publicity. Ó Torna is keen to highlight the respectability of the protestors during the *scoil scairte* and other protests and how this may have influenced Faulkner (Ó Torna Notes). However, on another occasion Uí Langáin and a group of women, along with an old Jesuit priest from Rathfarnham, an tAthair de Hindenburg, pushed their way into the Department of Education unannounced. This, she says, led to them being granted the prefabricated buildings for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch and thus removed the question of the streams or being forced to Glasnevin. ‘We had a terrible fight’, says Uí Langáin, ‘everyone was against us – everyone who had power’ (Uí Langáin 2021).

Months of gruelling campaigning at the grassroots and national levels had laid the basis for victory. However, it appears that it was only rubberstamped at the highest political levels due to a looming election. Afraid of losing votes in the upcoming electoral contest of 1973 to Fine Gael, the incumbent Fianna Fáil government relented and granted full recognition to Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch, meaning that its teachers would be paid by the Department of Education and that its maintenance would be mostly funded. Fianna Fáil TD for Dublin North-West, Jim Tunney, delivered the news to the Ballymun Parents Committee. As it transpired, Fianna Fáil

lost the election and the task of opening the school officially in early 1973 fell to the new Minister for Education, Dick Burke, with Tunney watching on in the crowd (Ó Torna Notes). Not long after the official opening, the split that had been percolating within the Ballymun Parents Committee came to a head in July 1973. Breandán Pringle sent his children to Scoil Mobhí in middle-class Glasnevin rather than to the newly opened Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch in the heart of working-class Ballymun. Antain Mac Giolla Rua, another member of the Parents Committee, subsequently asked Pringle to relinquish his role as Chairman of. It remains unclear whether these tensions related to issues of class. In the event, the split meant the number of students enrolled dropped from around twenty-five to eighteen. Luckily for the Committee they were able to reach the threshold of twenty again by registering two children (both only three years old), one of whom was Ó Torna's son (Ó Torna Notes).

### Post-recognition

Following the official opening, Ó Torna contends that things got easier once they were 'inside the system' (Ó Torna 2021). However, Uí Langáin recalls more difficulties in subsequent years. The Department of Education refused to employ a fourth teacher during the mid-1970s despite the school by then having seventy pupils. There were also plumbing problems and problems with the buildings, which were often filled with rats. Uí Langáin believed the Fine Gael government and the Department hoped the school would fail. But she pointed towards the voluntary efforts of local trades people who carried out constant repairs and upgrades to the buildings. There was also great financial assistance from the wider Ballymun community during fundraising events and collections (Uí Langáin). However, not everyone in the community supported Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch and at least one West-British crank did rear his head. Patrick J. Murphy wrote to the *Irish Independent* in March 1974 to accuse the school supporters of sending him letters and making telephone calls calling him a 'traitor, jackeen (or seoinín), West Briton etc etc' (*Irish Independent*, 19 March 1974).

An important factor about Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch's development in the years after its founding, according to Ó Torna, was the work of Pádraig Ó hEarcáin as principal. Ó hEarcáin, a republican from Omagh, County Tyrone, drove the growth of the school from its inception and built a strong ethos based around the Irish language, Gaelic games and traditional music. It was Ó hEarcáin, along with Antain Mac Giolla Rua, who coined the Irish republican inspired name for the school, Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch. Though a staunch republican, Ó hEarcáin believed that explicit political ideologies ought to be left at the door of the school, at one point notifying the school's board of management he would leave when an attempt was made to introduce what Ó Torna described vaguely as 'left stuff' directly into the school (Ó Torna 2021).

The tension with the Catholic Church was resolved when Archbishop Dermot Ryan moved Ó Scanaill out of the parish. He was replaced with a more amenable priest, an tAthair Ó Coighligh, who was appointed to Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch's Bord of Management. However, Uí Langáin was appointed chairwoman of the Bord, essentially the School Manager – the first woman in the state to take that role in a school under Catholic patronage, although she was unaware of it at the time (Ó Torna Notes)(Uí Langáin 2021). In 1974, the Department of Education introduced a new structure for the boards of management of national schools as well as the gaelscoileanna. The Christian Brothers put forward a counter-proposal to maintain a clerical majority on local management boards. Unsurprisingly, the move jarred with gaelscoil activists who had been running the boards of the schools they had helped found on a more democratic basis. A delegation from several Dublin gaelscoileanna, including Éilís Uí Langáin and Eithne

Uí Mhuireagáin of Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch, managed to win a concession from Archbishop Ryan when they met him in the Dublin Diocese headquarters in Drumcondra. The boards of management of the gaelscoileanna would continue to operate with only one clerical representative and a majority of teachers, parents and ‘supporters’ of the Irish language (Report, Gaelscoileanna 1975). At the same meeting Ryan even apologised to Uí Langáin and Uí Mhuireagáin for Ó Scanail’s behaviour, stating that a parish priest ought to be there to assist the parishioners, not go against them (Uí Langáin 2021).

Fundraising endeavours continued into the late 1970s. In the summer of 1977 a group of teachers and parents walked between Cork and Dublin to raise money for the school. The walk was organised by Dónal Ó Loinsigh, a teacher and later a principal of the school. Ó Loinsigh himself, as well as S. De Singletúin, Seán Ó Muireagáin, Proinsias Ó Brioscáin, Peadar Ó Cealaigh, Seán Ó hÓgáin, Dónal Ó Loinsigh and Tomás Mac Gib also took part. *The Irish Examiner* labelled the men ‘the magnificent seven’. They aimed to raise £5,000 and they had sponsorship from the supermarket chain Superquinn. As the *Evening Echo* of Cork explained, they were sponsored at a rate of ‘£1 for each pound of weight lost on the walk, so the more grueling the walk the better. The men were weighed in today before they set off and will be weighed in again in Dublin by former international boxer Mick Dowling’ (*Evening Echo* 1977: *Irish Examiner* 1977).

It took ten years for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch to get a permanent school building. In 1983 there was a long piece about the new school building in the *Irish Press* entitled ‘Scoil faoi na hárasáin’ (School under the flats). The principal, Ó hEarcáin, was interviewed and he pointed to the growth of the school over the previous decade, from 43 pupils in 1973 to 300 by 1983. He also told the reporter how there was ‘not often positive stories regarding this area in the news and the people of Ballymun are proud of this development’. Ó hEarcáin also highlighted the area’s social problems and the fact that school dropouts rates were high. In terms of progression for the children from Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch he noted how ‘the secondary all-Irish schools are middle class and too focused on academic affairs’. To address this, he suggested an Irish-medium technical school for Ballymun and the gaelscoil in Blanchardstown, Scoil Oilibhéir (*Irish Press* 19 April 1983). At the time of writing, and despite the subsequent founding of a second Irish-medium primary school in the area, gaelscoil Bhaile Munna, Ballymun still awaits a secondary school that operates through the medium of Irish.

## Legacy

The efforts of the gaelscoil activists in Ballymun left a number of indelible marks on the community and the wider gaelscoil movement. They opened the way for working-class involvement in the gaelscoil movement – a movement which grew exponentially for over 20 years after the 1970s. A largely middle-class decolonial movement at the outset, though not hostile to working-class involvement, was compelled to accommodate the demand coming from working-class communities for gaelscoileanna in their areas (Comhchoiste Memo 1973). Indeed, having faced down opposition from church and state in Ballymun, some of those involved went on to found or administer schools in other working-class areas such as Cabra, Harmonstown and Finglas. Uí Langáin herself was instrumental in establishing Gaelscoil Bharra in Cabra and Gaelscoil Uí Earcáin (named after the abovementioned Pádraig Ó hEarcáin) in Finglas in the years after helping to found Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch (Uí Langáin 2021). Ó Torna argues that Ballymun broke the mould not just in terms of how the Department of Education or the Catholic Church, but wider society, viewed who Irish belonged to. In the early 1970s, he says, Irish society generally, barring those in the Gaeltachtaí, viewed the

language as only belonging to the middle class – to teachers and civil servants (Ó Torna 2021).

The campaign also energised working-class people in Dublin in other settings to become involved in the Irish language movement. *Comhar*, an Irish language literary publication aimed mainly at the professional classes, commented on a Irish-language protest meeting, primarily about RTÉ's lack of broadcasting in the language, in the Mansion House in 1975 on the 'hopeful prospect' witnessed by the diversity of those in attendance. There were 'not the usual speakers' in attendance only. A woman from Ballymun spoke with confidence in Irish about the state of the language, much to the delight of *Comhar*. There was also another person 'speaking on behalf of the working-class of Jacobs [Biscuit Factory]. He explained that he and his co-workers in the factory were learning Irish and that they would keep going until they were fluent [and] he offered the support of his co-workers' (*Comhar* 1975).

For both Ó Torna and Uí Langáin, the importance of their efforts was framed in decolonial terms around self-reliance and self-respect. Ó Torna, for example, refers to the necessity of an inner spiritual heritage which needed to be served for any local or wider community to sustain itself. If that is lost 'you're imitating others and looking outside your own country for the answers'. Ultimately, 'if a community doesn't have self-respect, it will not succeed into the future' (Ó Torna). Similarly, Uí Langáin argues that the Irish language makes a child more confident; 'it's us, the language, the culture ... it makes you feel whole'. Everyone, she says, should have that opportunity to access the language, regardless of money or where you live; 'you're Irish. It's your entitlement to have your culture'. What does the future hold? 'I may not be alive to see it', says Uí Langáin again speaking about material and psychological independence, 'but I'd like to see our country stand on its own two feet again' (Uí Langáin 2021). As mentioned above, these themes of decolonisation – of reclaiming political and psychological autonomy through linguistic and cultural self-respect – are recurrent in the works of the key twentieth-century decolonial advocates (Fanon; Wa Thiong'o; Memmi). Moreover, the construction of a *gaelscoil* (a material decolonial institution) to educate children through the medium of Irish, the democratic challenge to the Catholic Church (an institution exceptionally powerful in Ireland by European standards *due* to the colonial legacy), and the involvement of parents in Irish language classes (reclaiming a language denied them by the history of colonisation), indicate a rigorous, though implicit, decolonial process.

But could what happened in Ballymun – where an organic working-class movement grew from the grassroots up, founded a school, ran regular Irish language classes and empowered its participants – happen again? Uí Langáin thinks not and emphasises the specificity of the time; 'I didn't know what it was, but there was something there' (Uí Langáin 2021). One writer for *Comhar*, Éamonn Mac Murchú, felt in 1972 that among the working class of Dublin and the Gaeltacht there was 'a revolutionary spirit in the air'. Mac Murchú pointed to the 'respectability' of the mainstream language movement as a stumbling block to the language making serious headway. He argued, instead, that the working class ought to take the lead as 'there was an incalculable well of energy and commitment to be found by the Irish-language movement among the working class' (*Comhar* 1972). Despite these sentiments being validated by the more clearly working-class and radical revival that has subsequently unfolded in the Six Counties since the 1970s, and the potential outlined by Mac Murchú fifty years ago *vis-à-vis* Dublin and other towns and cities in the Twenty-Six Counties, the Irish language movement in the South, with a few exceptions, remains predominantly middle class in character and moderate in its politics. Moreover, as Ó Croidheáin pointed out with regard to the *gaelscoil* movement more widely in his 2006 book *Language From Below: the Irish Language, Ideology and Power in 20th century Ireland*, 'without developing wider political critique of society such

movements may lose their collective force and be assimilated back into the dominant ideology of the state' (2006; 278).

In Ballymun itself, the €2 billion regeneration project that began in 1997, saw the demolition of the towers from 2004-2015 and the construction of more than 2,000 social homes in the area to which the residents were moved (*Irish Times*, 22 September 2015). As a recent important article has pointed out, the neoliberal doctrine of 'regeneration' deployed by Ballymun Regeneration Limited during the 2000s saw the dispersion of the locality's tight-knit communities. The area's 'vast network of community organisations', which had been largely autonomous, was 'corralled and subsumed' into a state-controlled entity known as the Ballymun Neighbourhood Council. In almost Machiavellian fashion this council was then dissolved within a few years, 'taking several generations of advocates and activists with it' (Kelly 2021).

Ultimately, three critical factors – the overly middle-class nature of the Irish language movement generally, the breakdown of working-class communities by gentrification or dispersion, and the absence of newly constructed housing on a sufficient scale – mitigate against the likelihood of an Irish language revival worthy of the name. Future revival efforts in urban areas in the Twenty-Six Counties of Ireland must do two things: 1. Focus on gaining more working-class adherents and 2. Inject the politics of housing, community and environment into their program. As, without a coherent community on which to build – one that is secure in its housing at the very *least* – the likes of what was achieved in Ballymun during the 1970s will be difficult to replicate.

### **Author Bio**

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