

One Hundred Years of Irish Language Policy, 1922-2022

Dr John Walsh

Associate Professor of Irish, National University of Ireland, Galway

By the late 19th Century when the Irish cultural and literary revival was at its peak, the Irish language was in a marginal position in society and spoken by less than one in five people, mostly in impoverished mostly coastal districts known as the Gaeltacht. The revitalisation of Irish became a key part of the movement for greater independence from Britain and many nationalists learned Irish or championed its cause, often through the voluntary organisation the Gaelic League (Conradh na Gaeilge). Following a tumultuous decade of political change, the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty on December 6th 1921 led a year later to the establishment of the Irish Free State, a dominion within the British Commonwealth. The Free State declared in its constitution that Irish was both the national and an official language, alongside English. Inspired by the ideals of the Gaelic League, some of whose members held ministerial positions, the new state announced a raft of policy measures to support Irish in education, legal status, public administration and the Gaeltacht. Drawing on theories of language policy and governance, this paper assesses various government and community initiatives in favour of Irish over the past century and situates them in the broader European context of minority language revitalisation and social transformation.