

Our National Language

(By THOMAS DAVIS.)

Men are ever valued most for peculiar and original qualities. A man who can only talk common-place, and act according to routine, has little weight. To speak, look, and do what your own soul from its depths orders you, are credentials of greatness which all men understand and acknowledge. Such a man's dictum has more influence than the reasoning of an imitative or common-place man. He fills his circle with confidence. He is self-possessed, firm, accurate, and daring. Such men are the pioneers of civilisation, and the rulers of the human heart.

Why should not nations be judged thus? Is not a full indulgence of its natural tendencies essential to a people's greatness? Force the manners, dress, language, and constitution of Russia, or Italy, or Norway, or America, and you instantly stunt and distort the whole mind of either people.

The language, which grows up with a people, is conformed to their organs, descriptive of their climate, constitution, and manners, mingled inseparably with their history and their soil, fitted beyond any other language to express their prevalent thoughts in the most natural and efficient way.

To impose another language on such a people is to send their history adrift among the accidents of translation—'tis to tear their identity from all places—'tis to substitute arbitrary signs for picturesque and suggestive names—'tis to cut off the entail of feeling, and separate the people from their forefathers by a deep gulf—'tis to corrupt their very organs, and abridge their power of expression.

The language of a nation's youth is the only easy and full speech for its manhood and for its age. And when the language of its cradle goes, itself craves a tomb.

What business has a Russian for the rippling language of Italy or India? How could a Greek distort his organs and his soul to speak Dutch upon the sides of the Hymettus, or the beach of Salamis, or on the waste where once was Sparta? And is it befitting the fiery, delicately-organel Celt to abandon his beautiful tongue, docile and spirited as an Arab, "sweet as music, strong as the wave"—is it befitting in him to abandon this wild liquid speech for the mongrel of a hundred breeds called English, which, powerful though it be, creaks and bangs about the Celt who tries to use it?

We lately met a glorious thought in the "Triads of Mochmed," printed in one of the Welsh codes by the Record Commission. "There are three things without which there is no country—common language, common judicature, and co-tillage land—for without these a country cannot support itself in peace and social union."

A people without a language of its own is only half a nation. A nation should guard its language more than its territories—'tis a surer barrier, and more important frontier, than fortress or river.

And in good times it has ever been thought so. Who had dared to propose the adoption of Persian or Egyptian in Greece—how had Pericles thundered at the barbarian? How had Cato scourged from the forum him who would have given the Attic or Gallic speech to men of Rome? How proudly and how nobly Germany stopped "the incipient creeping" progress of French! And no sooner has she succeeded than her genius, which had tossed in a hot trance, sprung up fresh and triumphant.

Had Pyrrhus quelled Italy, or Xerxes subdued Greece for a time long enough to impose new languages, where had been the literature which gives a pedigree to human genius? Even liberty recovered had been sickly and insecure without the language with which it had hunted in the woods, worshipped at the fruit-strewn altar, debated on the council-hill, and shouted in the battle-charge.

There is a fine song of the Fusians, which describes—

"Language linked to liberty."

To lose your native tongue, and learn that of an alien, is the worst badge of conquest—it is the chain on the soul. To have lost entirely the national language is death; the fetter has worn through. So long as the Saxon held to his German speech, he could hope to resume his land from the Norman; now, if he is to be free and locally governed,

he must build himself a new home. There is hope for Scotland—strong hope for Wales—sure hope for Hungary. The speech of the alien is not universal in the one; is gallantly held at bay in the other; is nearly expelled from the third.

How unnatural—how corrupting 'tis for us, three-fourths of whom are of Celtic blood, to speak a medley of Teutonic dialects. If we add the Celtic Scots, who came back here from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries, and the Celtic Welsh, who colonised many parts of Wexford and other Leinster counties, to the Celts who never left Ireland, probably five-sixths, or more, of us are Celts. What business have we with the Norman-Sassenagh?

Nor let any doubt these proportions because of the number of English names in Ireland. With a politic cruelty, the English of the Pale passed an Act (3 Ed. IV., chap. 3), compelling every Irishman within English jurisdiction, "to go like to one Englishman in apparel, and shaving off his beard above the mouth," "and shall take to him an English surname of one town, as Sutton, Chester, Trym, Skyrne, Corke, Kinsale; or color, as White, Blacke, Browne; or art or science, as Smith, or Carpenter; or office, as Cook, Butler; and that he and his issue shall use this name, under pain of forfeiting his goods yearly."

And just as this parliament before the Reformation, so did another after the Reformation. By the 28th Henry VIII., c. 15, the dress and language of the Irish were insolently described as barbarous by the minions of that ruffian king, and were utterly forbidden and abolished under many penalties and incapacities. These laws are still in force; but whether the Archaeological Society, including Peel and O'Connell, will be prosecuted, seems doubtful.

There was also, 'tis to be feared, an adoption of English names, during some periods, from fashion, fear, or meanness. Some of our best Irish names, too, have been so mangled as to require some scholarship to identify them. For these and many more reasons, the members of the Celtic race here are immensely greater than at first appears.

But this is not all; for even the Saxon and Norman colonists, notwithstanding these laws, melted down into the Irish, and adopted all their ways and language. For centuries upon centuries Irish was spoken by men of all bloods in Ireland, and English was unknown, save to a few citizens and nobles of the Pale. 'Tis only within a very late period that the majority of the people learned English.

But, it will be asked, how can the language be restored now?

We shall answer this partly by saying that, through the labors of the Archaeological and many lesser societies, it is being revived rapidly.

We shall consider this question of the possibility of reviving it more at length some other day.

Nothing can make us believe that it is natural or honorable for the Irish to speak the speech of the alien, the invader, the Sassenagh tyrant, and to abandon the language of our kings and heroes. What! give up the tongue of Ollamh Fodhla and Brian Boru, the tongue of McCarty, and the O'Nials, the tongue of Sarsfield's, Curran's Mathew's, and O'Connell's boyhood, for that of Strafford and Poynings, Sussex, Kirk, and Cromwell!

No, oh! no! the "brighter days shall surely come," and the green flag shall wave on our towers, and the sweet old language be heard once more in college, mart, and senate.

But, even should the effort to save it as the national language fail, by the attempt we will rescue its old literature, and hand down to our descendants proofs that we had a language as fit for love, and war, and business, and pleasure, as the world ever knew, and that we had not the spirit and nationality to preserve it!

Had Swift known Irish, he would have sowed its seed by the side of that nationality which he planted, and the close of the last century would have seen the one as flourishing as the other. Had Ireland used Irish in 1782, would it not have impeded England's re-conquest of us? But 'tis not yet too late.

For you, if the mixed speech called English was laid with sweetmeats on your child's tongue, English is the best speech of manhood. And yet, rather, in that case you are unfortunate. The hills, and lakes, and rivers, the forts and castles, the churches, and parishes, the baronies and counties around you, have all Irish names—names which