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**An Cló Gaelach. The role of typography in  
the construction of Irishness.**

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The aim of this article is to investigate the ways in which typography has and continues to be used to construct and project notions of Irishness in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland. Central to this study is a historic type form derived from manuscript and known by its Irish Gaelic name, *An Cló Gaelach* (Gaelic Script). From the advent of printing until the 1960s, this was the principal vehicle for texts composed in the Irish language. Since then it has been replaced by standard Roman (Antiqua) characters when Irish appears in print but continues to be used for ceremonial and display purposes. I hope to show how the *Cló Gaelach* has been used as an ideological weapon that points to the conflict over the nature of Irishness in Ireland and how to project this national identity both within and beyond the shores of the island.

From the seventh century manuscript known as the *Cathach* of St. Columba to the plastic lettering over the door of the Border Diner chip shop in *Béal Cú* (Belcoo), County Fermanagh, the *cló gaelach* has spanned the centuries. It has graced a wide range of settings from the sacred confines of the monastery to the ultra-kitsch commerciality of the ersatz pub and the faux-heritage duty-free shop. This trajectory has been characterised by the entanglement of the Gaelic script with ideological questions surrounding the construction of Irish identity. To varying degrees, the use of one script over another represents a cultural choice, a preference that reflects wider social, cultural and religious concerns and associations. One such example is the use of Cyrillic by the predominantly Orthodox Serbs and Latin characters by their Roman Catholic Croat neighbours. Atatürk's alphabet reform of 1928 had a similar ideological basis and can be viewed as an instrument of his desire to move Turkey into the mainstream European orbit. In Ireland, the choice of script often appears to conform to this model in which the ideological connotations of the *Cló Gaelach* often demanded its use as a tool of identity construction. However, the story of Gaelic script in Ireland is a great deal more complex than this statement allows and will be unearthed as we proceed. As is the case with many assumptions about Irish history and identity, the story of the Irish language and its type forms has often been misrepresented as a result of an over reliance on binary models that show Catholic and Protestant interests as mutually opposed. The *Cló Gaelach* has been used by both groups, an historic fact that makes its contribution to the construction of Irishness in the twentieth century a fascinating area for investigation.

The Roman alphabet arrived in Ireland from continental Europe around the time of Saint Patrick's 5<sup>th</sup> century evangelising mission. The earlier Ogham script was replaced by half-Uncial from which two insular scripts, Irish majuscule and Irish minuscule developed.

Irish majuscule is best known from the 8<sup>th</sup> century Book of Kells and was used for sacred texts in Latin, whereas Irish minuscule tended to be used for Irish language commercial and legal documents. Its narrower, spikier letters were intended to cut down on the amount of space taken up by text written on expensive vellum pages. The ninth century Book of Armagh showcases Irish minuscule – the resemblance with the later *cló gaelach* fount used for printing purposes is clear.

The importance of the written word in early Irish society is made apparent by the legend of the seventh century, so-called *Cathach* of St.Columba, one of the earliest Irish books.

St.Columba (c.521-97) is said to have borrowed a manuscript from St.Finnian (c.495-579) and stayed on in the church at night copying it out while his fingers shone like candles and filled the church with light. Finnian contested that his manuscript should never have been used in this way...The feuding saints appealed to the local king who declared against Columba making him hand over his pirated copy ('to every cow her offspring and to every book its transcript').<sup>1</sup>

The dispute continued and resulted in Columba's defeat of Finnian in the Battle of Cul Dremhe in 561. The book itself was subsequently carried into battle as a talisman, the word '*Cathach*' meaning *Battler* in Old Irish.

Given the almost religious devotion of the Irish to such books, it is perhaps unsurprising that the manuscript tradition should be the first reference point for the creation of print founts for Irish language books. After Gutenberg's 1450 invention of movable type, the first book to be printed in Irish came from the unlikely source of Queen Elizabeth I of England, who was keen to use the printed word as a means of converting her Irish subjects to the reformed religion, that is, Protestantism. While they remained loyal to the Pope, they remained a threat to English power in that they were suspected allies of France and Spain. It was believed that one way to convert the Irish was to provide printed religious material in their own language. Elizabeth had already commissioned one Christopher Nugent to produce a manuscript *Englishe-Irishe-Latin Primer*, a sort of Tudor phrase book which would help the Queen to converse with Irish visitors to her court, such as the famous pirate queen Gráinne Ní Mháille. The primer had included a full Irish alphabet in manuscript and now the queen turned to the printer John Kearney to produce a Gaelic fount that could be used on the printing press. In 1571, the *Cló Eilís* emerged in London and was used in the production of 300 copies of the *Aibidil Gaoidheilge agus Caiticiosma*, intended for distribution across Ireland.

This year the Irish characters were first brought into this kingdom...and it was ordered that the prayers of the church should be printed in that language and a church set apart in the chief town of every diocese, where they were to be read, and a sermon preached to the common people, which was instrumental to convert many of the ignorant sort in those days.

However, as S.H. Steinberg comments in his 1955 *Five Hundred Years of Printing*, things did not quite work out as planned:

As has not infrequently happened with the English Government's activities in the affairs of Ireland, the result was very different from the intention. Far from converting the Irish to the English Church, the Gaelic characters became a powerful weapon against the English church and state.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst it was some time before a concerted nationalist identity construction project would take up self-conscious use of the *cló gaelach*, it was not so long before representatives of the Catholic Church would realise the power of the type form in countering Protestant propaganda in Irish. The proselytising *Cló Eilís* of 1571 sparked a sectarian typographic contest for the hearts and minds of the Irish population. Bonaventure Ó Hussey cut the first Gaelic type created by an Irishman at the Irish seminary in Leuven (Louvain, Belgium) in 1614 and whilst it has been criticised as lacking in elegance, it represents an important first step into printing in Irish by the Catholic authorities. This was followed in 1732 by Conchubhar Ó Beaglaoich's *Cló Phárais* which emerged from the Collège des Irlandais in Paris in 1732. After the 1801 Act of Union there was a renewed interest amongst Protestant Bible Societies in the possibility of using Irish as a tool in the conversion of the majority of the Irish population. To this end the Hibernian Bible Society commissioned the *Cló Watts* in 1818 and used it to print a New Testament. Interest in Gaelic type also came from artistic circles. In 1830 the artist and antiquary George Petrie created an eponymous type that he intended to be used to print a copy of the Annals of Ireland. It also found use at the Three Candles Press in Dublin where the typesetter Colm Ó Lochlainn used it in his *Clann Lir* series. The *Cló Newmann* of 1858 was commissioned by the Catholic University of Ireland and named after the Catholic cardinal John Henry Newman. They had been refused permission to use the *Cló Petrie* and the printing press of the then Protestant bastion of Trinity College Dublin and created their own more angular, less rounded typeface which subsequently became the standard for the printing of Irish language books. The last Gaelic typeface to be produced for movable type was the 1964 *Cló Nua-Rómhánach*, designed by Liam Miller and only ever used in the design of one book – man edition of Myles na gCopaleen's *An Béal Bocht*, itself a satire on the excesses of the Irish language movement. The typeface is a hybrid, a mixture of standard Roman letters with a few distinctive Gaelic forms thrown in. It stands as a metaphor for the demise of the script in the printing of literary texts and indeed appeared at a time when Gaelic script was being progressively abandoned for printing purposes and losing its place in the education system. It appeared that the tide was going out for the typeface.<sup>3</sup>

Despite reports of its death, the *Cló Gaelach* has continued to thrive as a display typeface and is readily available in a profusion of digital versions, some of which have lent themselves to a kitsch projection of Irishness in the towns and cities of Ireland and indeed on an international level. These include the digital version of the popular American Uncial, originally produced in the 1940s by the Viennese typographer Victor Hammer after his emigration to the United States. A wide range of *Cló Gaelach* inspired digital scripts have been developed by the Co. Mayo based typographer Michael Everson. These scripts display a much greater sense of having absorbed the tradition of Gaelic script than is evident in the approximations of American Uncial.

At this point it may be useful to consider some of the theories set out by the French semiologist Roland Barthes, in that they provide a useful framework to consider the way in which typography has been used in 20th century Ireland as a means of accentuating the Irish identity. Barthes outlined a system in which signs, such as printed words, were considered in terms of denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the straightforward semantics of a sign such as the way in which the word Post Office or *Oifig an Phoist* refers to the place a person might go in order to buy stamps. Connotation, however, deals with the aspect of the sign that produces wider meanings and cultural

associations and is important in our consideration of the power of typography to produce meanings in terms of identity. In this way *Oifig an Phoist* set out in *cló gaelach* script will produce a different range of associations and connotations than the same words displayed in a modernist sans serif such as Helvetica. The *cló gaelach* conjures up associations with an Irish past, specifically with the literary tradition stretching back to the *Cathach* of St.Columba. According to the reader's experience, we enter a sign system in which the land of scribes, saints and scholars, sacred books and a distinctively Irish tradition come to the fore. In effect, use of the *cló gaelach* is a shorthand semiotic method for the production of a sense of Irishness.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Irish language and Irish identity were facing a crisis. The language had been under attack periodically since the Anglo-Norman invasion of the twelfth century but had remained the majority vernacular until fairly recently. During and after the Great Famine of 1845 - 1849 however, language shift from Irish to English began to occur on a massively accelerated scale. While death and mass emigration had obvious effects in reducing the proportion of Irish speakers in the population, there also developed a damaging sense that the language was connected to poverty and failure and that it was of limited use to those wishing to leave Ireland to profit from the economic opportunities offered by a move to England or the United States. Irish speakers often felt little pride in the language and chose to educate their children in English, which was also the language of instruction in the National School system. In terms of Irish identity and the rising tide of nationalist sentiment that called for Home Rule in Ireland, the language issue provided serious cause for concern. In 1892, a leading Protestant political agitator and Irish language scholar, Dubhghlas de hÍde (Douglas Hyde) made a keynote speech entitled *The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland*. He called upon the Irish people not to jettison that which distinguished them culturally from the English. "I wish to show you", he declared, "that in anglicising ourselves wholesale we have thrown away with a light heart the best claim which we have upon the world's recognition of us as a separate nationality". Hyde had a particular fondness for the distinguishing features of Irish nationality, those features unique to Ireland that differentiated it as a country, chief of these being the Irish language. He beseeched his compatriots to "stop running to England for our books, literature, music, games, fashions and ideas".<sup>4</sup> Hyde's speech spawned a national Irish language revival movement known as *Conradh na Gaeilge* or the Gaelic League. It set out to use education as a means of encouraging a greater use of Irish throughout Ireland and its organisation was based on a revolutionary grass roots network of local branches that ran classes and cultural events and encouraged the publication of printed matter in Irish. The *Conradh's* views on the *Cló Gaelach* are not outlined here but made clear through the typesetting of its publications, *Fáinne an Lae* and *An Claidheamh Soluis*. The first of these appeared in 1898. The *London Athenaeum*, an English literary review, hailed the use of Gaelic type for the presentation of international news in Irish, discussing the "creditable" use in the *Fáinne* of the "native character...which means so much to every Irish eye. It was of course derived from an Italian writing which reached England through Ireland. The Irish character thus commemorates the historical fact that England learnt writing from the Irish – a just subject of national pride in Ireland".<sup>5</sup> The basis for this statement is only half-justified given that St.Augustine's mission to Kent competes with the Hiberno-Scottish introduction of manuscript in Northumbria for the prize of having introduced the Latin alphabet to England. At the same time, the comments of the *London Athenaeum* regarding the use of the *Cló Gaelach* are an interesting equating of Gaelic type with a self-confident sense of nationhood and identity.

*Fáinne an Lae* was later eclipsed by *An Claidheamh Soluis*, which, with its less calligraphic masthead, conformed to the more modernist, machine-age look of its Dublin contemporaries. However, the successor paper did retain the *Cló Gaelach*, at considerable expense, for its Irish language content. It is clear that an almost unbreakable connection between the Irish language and Gaelic type was enduring in the nationalistic atmosphere of *fin de siècle* Dublin, a connection which distinguished Irish language content from English and worked as a tool of national identity construction. Indeed, there was hostility within Conradh na Gaeilge for a changeover to Antiqua or Standard Roman type used for texts in English, with some members bemoaning its inability to convey the spirit of the Irish language and erroneously damning Roman type as English in origin, a good example of the typographic bigotry of the period.

In 1918, in the aftermath of the Easter Rising and the British decision to execute its Republican leaders, Sinn Féin won a massive victory in national elections. In 1922, Ireland's political status underwent a dramatic overhaul. Six counties in the North remained, controversially, within the United Kingdom whilst the remaining twenty-six counties formed *Saorstát Éireann*, the Irish Free State. An embryonic post-colonial state required signs and symbols and a full-scale national identity construction project got underway in the southern entity. One of the chief concerns was to differentiate the new state from the previous colonial administration and the Irish language and indeed, the *cló gaelach* were to become major weapons in this struggle for identity. In investigating the use of Gaelic type by the new state, it is useful to draw the comparison with branding theories that seek to establish a unique institutional identity for the companies and other entities that make use of them. The Irish state was no different from other organisations in its desire to use signs and symbols as a way of projecting key components of its institutional identity. The Danish theorist and graphic designer Per Mollerup states that a brand is "a product, or class of products, including its trademark, its brand name, its reputation and the atmosphere built up around it".<sup>6</sup> He considers this as the ideological function of brand identity, one of the features of which is to differentiate one brand from its competitors within the field of its operations. The *cló gaelach* performs this role by clearly placing Ireland within the Western European tradition whilst distinguishing it from its nearest neighbour and the former colonial power, Great Britain.

The post-1922 Free State's sign system made full use of Gaelic type in its range of signs and symbols, reflecting the intended Gaelic ethos of the new state. The words *Saorstát Éireann* in gaelic type was branded on coinage and stamps, the earliest of which featured the words *Rialtas Sealadac na hÉireann 1922* overprinted in *cló gaelach* upon British stamps featuring the head of King George V. The British red postbox was painted green and in new models the royal insignia was replaced by the letters p and t in *cló gaelach*. The 1937 Constitution was, "composed for political reasons (at de Valera's insistence) in Gaelic characters and with the antiquated spelling system".<sup>7</sup> It is clear that the visual branding of the state depended heavily upon the use of the Gaelic letters and the colour green, alongside such icons of Irishness as Brian Boru's harp, native animal species, the sword of light and the map of Ireland. The use of *cló gaelach* began to be reviewed in the 1960s when it fell out of use in printing and in the education system. From this point on, its use has been limited to ceremonial and display purposes but its continued use as a vector of Irishness betrays attitudes to both national identity and the position of the Irish language that will be discussed further below.

It was not only in Ireland that typographic considerations were being played out in terms of the construction of national identity and political ideology. Atatürk's alphabet reform of 1928 in which the Turkish language abandoned the Arabic script in favour of Roman type, was part of a concerted effort to place Turkey within the European sphere. In Germany, a similar, if more embittered battle over national scripts, had been dragging on since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was the famous *Schriftenstreit* or Antiqua-Fraktur dispute which developed after German unification in the early 1800s. The Antiqua typeform, derived from the humanist typographic tradition developed in Italy and France, began to infiltrate Germany and challenge the hegemony of the earlier Gothic Fraktur, a broken version of Blackletter which was operating as the national script. Antiqua was originally used for Latin books and Fraktur for German – soon the perceived encroachment by Antiqua was being viewed in ideological terms. Antiqua was seen as un-German, shallow, and frivolous while Fraktur, much darker and denser on the page was perceived as representing the true German character and virtues such as depth, sobriety and even virility.<sup>8</sup>

Goethe's mother warned him away from a flirtation with Antiqua while Otto Von Bismark refused to read German texts in anything but Fraktur. The dispute came before the Reichstag in 1911 with a proposal to make Antiqua Germany's official national script and to cease teaching Blackletter in schools but the motion was closely defeated by 85 votes to 82. After World War I, a polarising debate developed between proponents of Modernism and Völkism, a teutonic tradition thought of as representing the spirit of the German people. Blackletter became the toast of the völkish aesthetic tendency in the Nazi party – it was seen as expressive of a great past and a useful means of engaging rural and working class voters. It found its way into Nazi propaganda and even a number of advertisements for Volkswagen in the form of the colourfully-named *Schaftstiefelgrotesk* or jackboot gothic – a sans serif version of Fraktur. While there were supporters of modernism within the Nazi party – Hitler himself was no fan of Fraktur – modernist experimentation and sans serif typography, like the flat-roofed architecture of the Bauhaus, was considered degenerate and un-German.

Ideological barriers were erected between the German völkism of Blackletter and the internationalism of sans serif Latin text. Indeed Jan Tschichold, propagandist of the new modernist typography, identified national scripts as a barrier to progress in an increasingly standardised world of more open frontiers in his 1928 work *Die Neue Typographie*.

The emphatically national, exclusivist character of Fraktur – but also of the equivalent national scripts of other peoples, for example, the Russians or the Chinese – contradicts present-day transnational bonds between people and forces their inevitable elimination.<sup>9</sup>

He also rejected the notion that type could have inherent spiritual qualities and would have presumably disapproved of the Free State's application of *An Cló Gaelach* to signage, as he did the German authorities' erection of railway signage in Fraktur. In 1942 the Nazis themselves fell into line with internationalist ideas, turning on Blackletter as part of some huge Jewish conspiracy, fancifully condemning the type as *Schwabacher Judenlettern*. Blackletter typefaces were banned for printing purposes in 1941 and swept out of the education system in 1942. Only *Normalschrift* was from this point permitted, a decision that represents a pragmatic triumph over ideology in that Blackletter was considered too difficult to be read by the populations of occupied countries.<sup>10</sup>

In both Germany and Ireland, while the fury of the battle of the scripts is now relegated to historic memory, both Fraktur and *An Cló Gaelach* have been able to maintain a presence in public spaces. In Germany Fraktur is mainly encountered in pub signage. There are rare occurrences of contemporary usage in public transport signage such as the Fraktur name plate at the new Potsdamer Platz S-Bahn station (2004). In Ireland, such signage is more common and raises interesting questions which highlight the position of Irish as a minority language which is often regarded through the prism of national heritage and used merely for ceremonial purposes to project a sense of national identity. German signs in Fraktur also do this but because German has such a high level of visibility in German public spaces, the language is allowed to function on many connotative levels and not as predominantly on the level of a repository of tradition, as is the case with Irish. In the Republic of Ireland there are a number of reasons for this tendency. Firstly the *cló gaelach* was abandoned for signage purposes only relatively recently. Therefore there is a back catalogue of examples of the typeface on the streets of the Irish Republic that cohabit public space with sans serif signs in standard Roman. Secondly, the heritage aspect of the typeface has been embraced on a number of levels. County councils control the right to erect street signs in towns and cities and are highly concerned with aesthetic surface styling that portrays their town as rich in heritage and distinctively Irish, thereby appealing to tourists. This tendency may explain the erection of bilingual street signs by Dundalk town council in which the English name appears in upper case serif standard Roman type and the Irish version in a lower-case Gaelic type that closely resembles manuscript. Such usage may appeal to a transitory tourist clientele but it poses a number of problems for contemporary Irish identity. There is a sense that Ireland is projecting itself as a kind of theme park whose heritage is just part of the spectacle, a kind of Disneyfication of culture and national identity. Secondly, the use of the Irish language as heritage rather than the living language that it is a marginalising factor that hampers efforts to normalise the use of Irish and efforts to encourage a more genuinely bilingual society. This is reinforced with the juxtaposition of the metal type English with its connotations of the machine age and the apparently handwritten manuscript Irish version of the streetname. Such a disparity does little to increase the prestige or the equality of the minority language. This approach reflects what was a growing perception of the value of the Irish language by the state authorities in the 1980s and 90s, as expressed by Tovey in 1993:

The result of trying to sustain the connection between the language and the identity of the nation, but also to accommodate growing pressures for pluralism, was that language policy-makers ended up with what could be called a mix-and-match, consumer-oriented version of national identity combined with a 'heritage' concept of the Irish language.<sup>11</sup>

This approach has recently been challenged by the recent Official Languages Act (2003)<sup>12</sup> but it is still not clear whether this will have an effect on banishing such a damaging use of the *cló gaelach* in street signage.

In Northern Ireland public use of Gaelic type in Irish is generally limited to areas where a nationalist majority predominates. However, English signs in Gaelic script are to be found across the North regardless of the sectarian make-up of the district. Any psychogeographical meanderings through Northern Ireland could in fact use typography as a rough means of identifying the political sensibilities of the local population. The Unionist-controlled post 1922 state and indeed the British direct rule that followed was for the most part hostile to public signage in Irish, indeed, it was forbidden by the

Stormont authorities. Despite this, there are a number of monuments that carry inscriptions in the *cló gaelach* including the statue of St.Patrick at *Sabhal* in Co.Down and a host of public murals on the Falls Road in Belfast. Some community signage has been erected in Gaelic script such as the bi-lingual signs at the black taxi depot at Castle Junction. Street signs in Irish have been permitted since the 1990s and these happily avoid the heritage trap resorted to by many local authorities in the Republic and display English and Irish in the same sans serif type. They generally appear in areas where there is a strong community involvement in the language, in other words, where it is a living vernacular. Where Irish is spoken as an everyday language, the extra layer of 'turbo-Irishness' provided by a traditional script is more or less redundant. Whilst the *cló gaelach* remains an important part of Ireland's distinctive identity and rich literary past, great care must be exercised in applying it to public spaces. It should not be used as a default typeface wherever the Irish language appears, which is often the case with pub signage. The Irish language should be allowed to escape this semiotic straightjacket that limits its connotations to the traditional and the historic. The presence of the language itself should serve to distinguish Ireland from other cultural spaces without the need to use Gaelic script too heavily as a means of projecting a sense of identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher De Hamel, *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts* (London: Phaidon, 1997), 22.

<sup>2</sup> S.H. Steinberg, *Five Hundred Years of Printing* (London: Penguin, 1955/1961), 121.

<sup>3</sup> "Four Centuries of Printing in the Irish Character," <http://services.spd.dcu.ie/library>, 2007-07-12.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Hyde, "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland" (1892), <http://www.gaeilge.org/deanglicising.html>

<sup>5</sup> John McCarthy, *Patrick Pearse and An Claidheamh Soluis: 1903-1909* (Cork: UCC, 2004), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Per Mollerup, *Marks of Excellence* (London: Phaidon, 1997), 55.

<sup>7</sup> Tony Crowley, *Wars of Words. The Politics of Language in Ireland 1534-2004* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 175.

<sup>8</sup> Hans Peter Willberg, in ed. Peter Bain and Paul Shaw, *Blackletter: Type and National Identity* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 40.

<sup>9</sup> Jan Tschichold, *The New Typography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 74.

<sup>10</sup> Hans Peter Willberg, op. cit., 47.

<sup>11</sup> Hilary Tovey, in Tony Crowley, *Wars of Words. The Politics of Language in Ireland 1534-2004* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 190.

<sup>12</sup> Tony Crowley, op. cit., 190.