



Tony Crowley. *Wars of Words: The Politics of Language in Ireland 1537-2004.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. x + 253 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-927343-0.

WARS OF WORDS
The Politics of Language in Ireland 1537-2004



TONY CROWLEY

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The Irish Language in Ireland

The role of language in Irish history, despite its cultural, literary, political, and symbolic importance, has attracted limited scholarly attention until recently. Such consideration as it had previously received tended either to be published in the Irish language, frequently with a cultural nationalist bias, or to be philological in focus and all but impenetrable to non-specialists. Tony Crowley's *Wars of Words: The Politics of Language in Ireland 1537-2004*, written in clear lucid English and spanning five centuries, is, therefore, a landmark publication. Not only does it offer an overarching narrative charting the various debates, controversies, and alternating policies, but it also provides a broad sweep across several centuries in a style accessible to students and academics alike. The history of the Irish language, as Crowley admits in his introduction, is often highly complex and has suffered from reductionism and oversimplification. All too frequently, critics and scholars ignore the role of language in history or, having made a vague reference to it, duly fail to incorporate it into their argument. So widespread is this practice that it is erroneously perceived as the norm, the exception being the study that engages with source material in Irish. The story of Irish is too often ignored or

simplified into an inconsequential tale of persistent decline. Any text that attempts to fill such a gap is to be commended. Such a study as Crowley undertakes here is long overdue and it is to his credit that he counteracts that convenient narrative and charts the language's fluctuating fortunes. Yet any welcome accorded to *Wars of Words* has to be a qualified welcome. Crowley challenges certain received versions of this history and argues that this approach is useful not just because the more complicated account is more accurate, but because the simplified versions are misleading and therefore dangerous. The author makes clear that this book "is not an attempt to render a precise history of the development of the Gaelic and English languages in Ireland, nor does it seek to sketch the history of the literatures in the two languages, nor is it in any sense a philological study of the languages. What this book does try to achieve is to work within the broad confines of the field of the politics of language in order to study the roles of language in history in a particular space over a given time; roles that are linked to issues such as identity, legitimacy, proprietorship, cultural struggle, and memory to mention but a few" (p. 8). For the novice, the text plots the history

of English and Irish on the island over the past five centuries; for the scholar, it offers a detailed sweep far better than that available elsewhere. Much of this book is devoted to the tensions and politics of proselytism and education Crowley is particularly strong on the Crown's cultural policy and the fluctuating policies advocated and applied by London. Prominent themes include proprietorship, sovereignty, cultural struggle, progress, purity, racial identity, proselytism, education, authenticity, and religion. In comparison to other recent publications that proclaim to be guides and overviews, it is vastly superior. Crowley is at his best when critiquing debates on the Irish language conducted in English-language sources. Following, and indeed relying extensively, on the work of Michael Cronin, Patricia Palmer, and Philip O'Leary, he lays the groundwork for future scholars who will find this text a useful guide and indispensable reference work for the role of Irish in their particular period. For the non-specialist Crowley avoids the various academic disputes that characterize certain periods. He alludes to the debates, directs the reader to the relevant texts and maintains his focus. That he leaves the reader anxious to delve deeper is a tribute to this writing and ability to simplify without dumbing down.

A recurring problem throughout the text is the names used to describe the indigenous language—"Irish" or "Gaelic." Alternating, as he does, between "Irish" and "Gaelic" leads to confusion, especially when discussing Scotland, and even more so when "Gaelic" and "Irish" are used in the same sentence. Despite its numerous merits, *Wars of Words* has serious flaws from the view of incorporating Irish-language criticism and writing. Only a handful of the secondary texts listed in the bibliography appear in the text and, while admittedly superior to rival publications, it is remiss in failing to note important studies. Notable omissions in-

clude its neglect of Irish-language sources, in particular the Cois Life series, *LÁob ar PhÁr*, and writings by Liam Ó Rinn, Niall Ó Dánaill, Seán Ó Riain, Muiris Ó Laoire, Maolmhaoldh Ó Ruairc, Alan Tittley, Mácheál Dubhshláine, Brighid Ní Mháirín, Tomás Mac Síomáin, and Caoimhe Máirtín. Important articles and books by Máirtín Ó Cadhain and Pádraig Ó Riagáin are conspicuously lacking as are the *Aimsir* pamphlets and surprisingly no use is made of the invaluable quarterly reports in *Áire-Ireland*. Columnist Kevin Meyers receives no mention.

Despite this, there is still no denying that Crowley's latest work on Ireland's linguistic history is the most comprehensive and detailed survey available. Yet one cannot help but feel that there is a more nuanced and detailed narrative to be told. Simply put, scholarship that aspires to be definitive and authoritative demands mastery of primary sources, which of course requires competency in the language in which they are written. Such criticism is emblematic of a wider trend pertaining not only to history but literary criticism, cultural studies, and beyond. Nevertheless the student approaching Irish studies for the first time will find no better guide to the socio-linguistic history of Ireland. Crowley's *Wars of Words* fills an enormous gap in Irish studies. It will be read, taught, and quoted at length, and it will dictate how future generations will read the history of the Irish language. Moreover, despite the noted reservation, it is the best book in print and a valuable contribution. Crowley is the first into the arena and has made an excellent start. It has to be hoped that his work will now stimulate the interest of researchers to build on the rich sources he has so expertly assembled and that his narrative will invite constructive criticism. For those who lament the weak use of Irish-language material, the gauntlet has been thrown down.

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