



Why am I making a monthly newsletter?

First, for myself, to help me see how I'm progressing and to act as a kind of broad-brush diary of my learning experience. Second, for you, so I can share the journey with a friend. Knowing that I will tell you each month how I've been doing also helps me to be accountable to myself for making progress. I'm grateful for you for that. Go raibh míle maith agat! The title of the newsletter might seem a little self important but it's actually designed to help keep me in a good humor. I'm all by myself. Although I'm in a bit of contact with a couple of people online, the title helps me feel not alone, that I share an aspiration with every gaeltacht out there, wherever it may be. I aim to make Irish a daily language for me, not a curiosity or academic study. It may happen I make mistakes in Irish I write here. I apologize in advance.

Bitesize Irish

The backbone of my Irish language journey is an online learning center called Bitesize Irish. Bitesize Irish was founded a bit over a decade ago by Eoin Ó Conchúir, a native Irish speaker. The depth of his sincerity and devotion is a constant inspiration to me. With his small band of helpers over the years, he has turned Bitesize Irish into an incredible learning resource. I particularly like the accent of Siobhán and am trying to mimic her pronunciation. The lessons are truly bite sized and my goal is to get through some every single day. On the days when I might not get through a lesson, I have set myself the goal of participating in the Pobal part of the site - which is the true community area - where I can relate to other members who are also on their Irish language journeys. The other aspect of Bitesize Irish - which I have fully adopted - they call Gaeilge Gach Lá, "Irish Every Day". To this end, I try to build an Irish language environment around me. The first time I saw a plate on the kitchen counter and "plata" popped into my head before anything else, well, I'll tell you, it gave me a special joy. I talk to myself in Irish all the time. "Tá madra agat?" "Níl, níl madra agam." "Cat? Is fearr leat cat?" and on and on. Lots of sentences on top of lots more sentences, some practical, some nonsensical. I turn on Raidió na Gaeltachta and let it play in the background while I do dishes and other chores. There's a nice website and app for the phone called Radio Garden. I can tune into Galway from there. Let me tell you, it was also a joy the first time I realized I was listening to the news and a weather report!

Gaeilge Gan Stró

Gaeilge Gan Stró is a series of two textbooks for beginning learners and low intermediate learners. Since I'm a beginning learner, I'm studying in the first book. There are fifteen units in

the book. I have the impression, perhaps in a classroom environment, that a learner should be knocking out a unit a week. As I am alone, I've decided not to be so hard on myself. I've set myself the goal of getting through no fewer than two units each month. This month, I have gotten thoroughly through the first two units: Meeting People and Your Background and Where You Live. Even though it's a bit ahead of my plan, I've already started on the third unit: the Family. The work in this book is made infinitely easier by Bitesize Irish. A problem with Gaeilge Gan Stró is it's localized for Ireland. This is wonderful for Ireland but I don't have the Irish equivalents for all the places in the United States. This means - at least at the moment - when I'm practicing my conversations with myself, I have to drop into English every now and then and I don't care for it. At any rate, I should get through the beginner's book in about six months.

Duolingo

I have used Duolingo a bit every day for the whole second half of September. It's good, I think, for helping me on several levels. I increase my vocabulary for one. Sometimes I have to type in Irish. I have to make sure of my spelling. "Buachaill" has two Ls "cailín" has only one! When I learn new words (from wherever), I'm very conscious of spelling. I don't want to miss any fadas! What I have noticed, though, is it's a great help to me spelling when I understand broad and slender consonants. I can't neglect that if I ever want to be good at Irish. In this regard, I've really been trying to work on pronouncing the slender "r". I must say, in every language I've learned to date, "r" has been an issue. Strange it seems.

Singing and Poetry

I started learning some songs in Irish. The first was "Óró, sé do bheatha abhaile". Learning the curfá for this was easy as pie because it's only four lines long and three of the four are "Óró, sé do bheatha abhaile"! I was watching an online video of the Dubliners singing this song with an audience. I noticed the camera would go to the audience for the chorus and back to the band for the verses. I got the distinct impression most of the audience only knew the chorus. Imagine my feeling when I realized that I just might know the song as well as many Irish people! I'll be working on the rest of the verses. A slightly more difficult song I've been learning is "An Bhfaca Tú Mó Shéamuisín?", a very catchy tune. And the third song I've been learning is "Trasna na dTonnta", the most difficult of all three because there's the most vocabulary to learn. A nice song, though. I decided, as well, I should learn some small poem. I settled on a fairly easy, yet powerful one, "Mise Éire" by Patrick Pearse. This poem has quite a few cultural references in it.

Reading

Cén sórt leabhair a léann thú? What kind of books do you read?

I have four books in Irish. All of them are translations from the English. In order of my perception of their difficulty, they are:

Asarlaí Iontach Oz by L. Frank Baum

Harry Potter agus an Órchloch by J.K. Rowling

Eachtraí Eilise i dTír na nIontas by Lewis Carroll

An Hobad by J.R.R. Tolkien

At the beginning of September, I would browse these books looking for any words I might recognize: "agus" for example. Before the month was up, there were whole sentences in *Asarlaí Iontach Oz* that I could read. In the other books, there are also words I recognize and the occasional sentence.

"An Hobad" is the most dense to me.

Besides these, I also have two dictionaries: *Foclóir Póca* from An Gúm and the Irish-English English-Irish New Edition Dictionary from the Educational Company of Ireland. Never underestimate the power of browsing through the dictionary and seeing words. Many of them will stick. When I was a boy, I would read the English dictionary this way. At this point, my passive vocabulary in Irish is comprised of about 700 words and expressions. Of these, I might be able to use a bit under a quarter of them in an active conversation. My favorite "fun" word I've learned is "ladybug" - *bóin Dé* - God's little cow. I also have books I dip into, like "Irish Grammar You Really Need To Know" by Éamonn Ó Dónaill. That one, in particular, I'll do shallow dives into in order to get a bit more about some bit of grammar I've learned somewhere else. I also putter around in Mícheál Ó Siadhail's "Learning Irish". I pick up some vocabulary and thoughts from it but the edition I have is near 40 years old and language changes.

I don't hold back from reading books in English, either. I've just about finished re-reading "How the Irish Saved Civilization" by Thomas Cahill. By my bedside is "The Story of the Irish Race" by Seumas MacManus. The particular copy I have was given me many decades ago by my father. I'm also in the middle of reading an old novel, "Shake Hands With The Devil" by Rearden Conner. I found an original edition from the 1930's, its pages brown with age.

Video Blogs

I watch and listen to Irish video blogs. I have enjoyed many videos by Ciara Ní É. She has a series called "What the Focal?" as well as others. Thanks to one of her poetry videos, I now know an Irish word for a woman's breasts I probably wouldn't be using in polite company. There are a number of other people who produce nice videos as well. I have been enjoying them all on the whole. It was also through a video I learned the story of "Na Tri Bhéar". And I've watched a few series like Manchán Magan's "No Béarla". At the moment, I've started watching "Ros na Rún" from the beginning.

Two Interesting Online Resources

I discovered a subreddit on Reddit for Gaeilge
<https://old.reddit.com/r/gaeilge>

I can't speak to the content. Reddit can be hit and miss. But it's

practice at reading the language.

Also, Nuacht Mhall, The week's main news stories, read slowly in Irish.

<https://anchor.fm/cnag-ldn/episodes/1-Lnasa-2020-ehhih>

Try Not To Overload

I have to be careful looking at too many Irish language resources. There are so many of them now! I can start to feel snowed under. Faced with what looks like an ocean of available knowledge, I can feel the weight of how far I have yet to go in my language journey. I think, for me, the trick is to stick with the few sources I'm using and only occasionally poke around at others. I need to look at where I'm putting my feet right now, not where I need to get to! Seeing how much there is and how much people have contributed can end up making me feel I have little to contribute at the moment except my experience of being a beginner in Irish. Maybe this is enough for now. There's a Chinese saying that applies: Don't be afraid to go slowly; just be afraid to stand still.

Virtually Walking in Ireland

As part of a kind of immersion in Ireland, I have embarked on a plan of taking virtual walks through Irish cities. Courtesy of online videos, I can put a "walk" on the screen and walk in place thereby getting both some exercise and an interesting experience. Every month I'll walk a different city. This month, I have been going through streets of Dublin: Grafton St., Suffolk St., Temple Bar, the city center, the Liberties, and more. I've (virtually) passed by a number of times the sculpture memorializing Mollie Malone on the corner. I wasn't aware - and it surely would have made my visit more poignant - that the sculptor, Jeanne Rynhart, on June 9 of this very year, had left our company for her joyous welcome in the concourse on high. Her companionship in this world is surely missed by many. I'm sure I will think of her again when I walk through Tralee.

In Closing for September

Is mise Jim Keenan. Tá mé i mo chónaí i Massachusetts i na Stáit Aontaithe. Tá mé 71 bliain d'aois. Tá an Ghaeilge á foghlaim agam. Is tosaitheoir mé. Rugadh mo sheanmháthair i mBaile Átha Cliath.

My mother's mother was a Dubliner. My father's line came from Fermanagh in Northern Ireland long before there was a Republic or a North. My grandmother came to the United States with her mother in the first decade of the 1900s. My father's forebears came to the United States around 1820. I am the first son of a line of first sons going back 200 years. My dream is to return to Ireland and say prayers in the places my people came from in a language they would recognize as theirs. I am a small crop from the harvest of seeds they sowed.

I hope God will bless my effort.

Slán!

I mo Saeilcacht bheas fhéin

No. 1—September 2020—Jim Keenan