

The founding of the Fáiinne Association in 1916 and its influence on the Irish language revival in Belfast

This lecture deals with the founding of the Fáiinne organization in February 1916 and its subsequent influence on the Irish language revival in Belfast in the aftermath of Partition.

Its history begins with the founding of its parent organization, the Gaelic League on 31 July 1893. Douglas Hyde was elected president of the League and Eoin Mac Néill became its secretary. Two years later Mac Néill attended the inaugural meeting of the first Gaelic League branch to be set up in Belfast in the home of PJ McGinley at 32 Beersbridge Road. Other branches soon appeared in other parts of the city.

The League was to be non-political and non-sectarian. Its aims were to preserve Irish as the national language of Ireland and extend its use as a spoken language; to study and publish existing literature in Irish and to cultivate a modern literature in the language. Hyde's membership of the Anglo-Irish elite attracted sympathetic Protestants but the most influential members in the early years were priests.

By the end of the 19th century, the language revival had spread to Maynooth College. The impact of the revival on students produced a new generation of patriotic revivalist priests several of whom were later to work in the north. Many clergy throughout the country were already sympathetic to the revival and offered support to Gaelic League organisers and travelling teachers as soon as they appeared. Their position as community leaders and school managers at the centre of parish-based rural society made them indispensable allies of the Gaelic League. In 1898 the League had 50 branches; by 1903 it had almost 600 and three years later it had 964.

The GAA, which also had clerical support, was another ally of the Gaelic League. Together they had a major impact on the social life of Ireland. Locally and regionally they helped fill the calendar with Irish-Ireland indoor and outdoor entertainments with evocative titles like *aeridheacht*, *sgoraidheacht*, *seanchas*, *seilg*, *pléaráca*, *céilidhe*, *ceolchuirn* and *feis*. Gaelic League branches also offered localities unique educational opportunities. They provided courses in Irish for learners at different levels, taught them Irish song and dance and held lectures on Irish history and folklore. They also encouraged local industrial enterprise and community solidarity based on a new Irish-Ireland identity.

The aim of the revivalist leaders was to graft on to the people the remnants of native Irish civilisation and thus create a new Gaelic Irish civilisation which would be the synthesis of tradition and modernity. They believed that what remained of native Irish civilisation was to be found preserved in the language, customs and values of contemporary rural Irish-speaking society and that from them a new nation could be built, spiritual, artistic, peace-loving, scholarly, communalist, and Christian – the antithesis, in their opinion, of its English counterpart. The creation of an Irish-speaking Ireland was therefore central to the whole endeavour.

The Gaelic League brought the revivalist message to the people of Ireland through a number of strategies. It established branches throughout the country where it provided Irish classes. It worked to revitalise community life in Irish-speaking (Gaeltacht) areas. It created resources and institutions for Irish speakers and campaigned for linguistic rights. The work was both

educational and political. Its object was to change people's attitudes, make them Irish speakers and reawaken in them what Patrick Pearse called the Gaelic mind.

Harnessing the support of the Catholic Church, the Irish Parliamentary Party and local authorities, the Gaelic League campaigned successfully on a range of issues. It used public meetings, petitions, pamphlets and the press. Thus by 1910 it had heightened awareness about the disadvantaged position of Irish in Irish society and created a public demand for change. The status of Irish had improved in higher education, in teacher training colleges, in the schools' curriculum and in Gaeltacht areas.

The Gaelic League had realized at an early stage that any effort to make the population Irish-speaking could only bear fruit if large numbers of qualified and highly motivated teachers were available – people who could teach adults in Gaelic League branch classes and the thousands of children in schools throughout the country. Despite intensive lobbying it was clear that neither the Board of National Education nor the Catholic teacher training colleges would step into the breach. The League found its own solution. It set up special Irish-language teacher training colleges which operated mostly during the summer months.

The first of these, Coláiste na Mumhan, was set up in Ballingearry in 1904. Another two were established in 1905 – Coláiste Chonnacht at Tourmakeady and Coláiste Chomhghaill in Belfast. Two more appeared the following year – Ardscoil Cholm Cille at Cloghaneely and Coláiste Laighean in Dublin. The prestige and financial position of the colleges improved from 1907 onwards when the National Board recognised their certificates as a teaching qualification and began paying them fees. The financial incentive and the popularity of the colleges with school teachers seeking qualifications in Irish created a demand for more colleges and their number grew. There were 20 by 1912, including a second one in Belfast, An Ard-Scoil Ultach, which had been set up the previous year.

The activities of the Gaelic League had both a positive and negative impact on Irish society. On the positive side some government agencies were persuaded to recognise that the Irish language should have improved status. The Post Office allowed mail to be addressed in Irish. The courts stopped prosecuting cart owners for writing their names on their vehicles in Irish. Public and street signs in Irish were tolerated. By early 1907 the National Board had appointed several inspectors of Irish. Later that year it appointed a further six organisers to support the teaching of the language. Some time afterwards the Intermediate Board followed suit and appointed its own inspectors of Irish. On the negative side, most Protestants and unionists became uneasy about the direction of the revival, fearful of its implications for them and suspicious of the Gaelic League.

The compatibility of the revival with Catholic values made the Gaelic League attractive to a broad section of the Catholic clergy. The notion that Irish was a Catholic language and that English was a moral pollutant associated with Protestantism and even paganism had been gathering momentum for some time. As more and more clergy became involved in the movement, revivalism and the advocacy of de-anglicisation began to take on a Catholic complexion.

A key figure in the transformation of the language revival campaign into a general Catholic Irish-Ireland movement in opposition to British Protestant hegemony in Ireland was DP Moran, the editor of the *Leader*. He paved the way for the creation of an explicitly Gaelic Catholic identity. He maintained that there were two civilisations at war in Ireland, one

Gaelic, wholly Catholic and anti-English, and the other, English, London-oriented and centred on the Protestant community. He argued that if Gaelic civilisation was to prevail nationalists would have to make an uncompromising return to core Gaelic values, rebuild Catholic social and religious life and infuse Irish values into every sector of society.

The combined crusades of the Gaelic League, the Catholic clergy, Moran's *Leader*, the GAA and others against the evils of anglicisation created an anti-British counter culture which had mass appeal. The values of Gaelic, Catholic, rural society were idealised and historic native Catholic antagonism towards the institutions and ethos of the British Protestant state was exploited. A broad constituency whose political consciousness was shaped by an ethnic Catholic communalist tradition was mobilised and they were offered a 'native' Irish-Ireland status system as an alternative to the alien British one.

This Catholic communalist Gaelic counter-culture created a climate of opinion which was sympathetic to separatism, hostile towards the Protestant unionist ascendancy and suspicious of nationalists who exploited British institutions. Derogatory terms such as 'West Briton' and 'Shoneen' were commonly used to label enemies of Irish Ireland. Irish-Irelanders were invariably called 'Gaels', an ambiguous term which can still generate confusion and debate.

The internal politics of the Gaelic League were affected. Members close to the IRB and Sinn Féin looked on the leadership of the organisation as Redmondites and were unhappy that they engaged in negotiations with the British authorities about concessions for Irish instead of confrontation. From 1907 onwards they promoted a growing antipathy within the League towards parliamentary nationalists which prepared the ground for the eventual takeover of the organization by the IRB.

Events in Ulster gave the IRB the perfect opportunity to pursue its revolutionary agenda. Determined Unionist opposition to the imposition of Home Rule crystallised in the formation of the UVF in January 1913. The nationalist response, with IRB involvement, was to set up the Irish Volunteers later that year. Civil war was averted by the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914. Simultaneously, the popularity of the Irish Parliamentary party continued to decline, particularly following Redmond's strong identification with British interests. He openly supported the recruitment of Irishmen to fight on behalf of the Empire in the ongoing European war. This triggered a split in the Irish Volunteers, bringing the small dissident anti-war element under the control of the IRB which intended to stage a rebellion before the war ended.

Strong anti-Redmondite feeling helped undermine the standing of the Gaelic League leadership a year later. They lost influence at the League's Ard-Fheis in August 1915 and the League's constitution was amended to include reference to a free Ireland. Its newly elected executive had a large republican majority and Hyde resigned as president to be replaced later by Mac Néill. By this stage the Gaelic League had entered a period of stagnation. The number of its branches had fallen from 964 in 1905-6 to 262 in 1914-15. Its decline had much to do with the realisation that political activism in the struggle for Home Rule might achieve more for the language in the long term than involvement in the Gaelic League. Thus by 1915 it was practically dead.

The Gaelic League's successes and failures could be summarized briefly. Its classes had produced a number of fluent speakers of Irish and had given a great many others a superficial knowledge of the language. The same was true of the Gaelic League's message. A minority

had come to believe that the survival and well-being of the Irish nation depended on the restoration of Irish as the language of everyday use in the community. The majority were sympathetic to the concept of an Irish-speaking Ireland but had interpreted the Gaelic League message in relation to its ability to fulfil their own needs. In this regard they were influenced by the way the language had been presented to them over the previous decades.

Catholic nationalists were not aware that their concept of Irishness was incomplete until they experienced the combined crusades of the Gaelic League, the Catholic Church and others against the evils of anglicisation. To be a proper 'Gael', according to the Gaelic League, it was necessary to speak Irish. However there already existed a halfway house to the Gaelic League position. It was the use of Irish as a token or symbol of 'Gaelic' ethnic distinctiveness rather than as a means of communication. This emblematic use of Irish, which had already featured in Irish nationalism at the turn of the century, flourished as the revival gathered momentum.

This use involved a number of strategies to indicate that a person or institution had a 'Gaelic' identity. For example an institution might adopt an Irish-language title, like Sinn Féin, or a person might begin a speech with a few words of Irish, use the Irish version of his name and address, or have signs erected in Irish. People might also feel that they should demonstrate their 'Gaelic' identity and that they need do nothing more than ensure that their children studied the language at school. Similarly politicians might back language issues publicly to show solidarity with their own 'Gaelic' community. In these circumstances it was possible to remain anglicised yet identify with 'Gaelicism' and support Gaelic League campaigns for linguistic rights. Some of these campaigns themselves were instrumental in strengthening the use of Irish as an ethnic symbol of the 'Gael' (eg. on postal addresses), without having much effect on the spread of Irish as a means of communication.

What the Gaelic League had succeeded in doing was to provide those who had become Irish-Irelanders rather than dedicated Irish speakers with a badge of ethnic distinctiveness. The language had become the totem of the 'Gael' which could be manipulated to test not only the commitment of government to the 'Gaelic' values of the community which it symbolised but also the commitment of individuals and groups within the community itself to these 'Gaelic' values.

Invariably, government reaction proved that it was anti-Irish. Yet even influential power blocs within nationalism were forced to pay homage to the totem of the 'Gael', as the campaign to make matriculation in Irish compulsory at the new National University illustrated. Nevertheless, as Pádraic Ó Conaire pointed out, the language in this context was like a suit or ornament. Beneath the veneer of Irish Ireland the core identity for most Irish people continued to be anglicised Catholicism.

Against this background a number of Irish speakers who were Gaelic League members came to the conclusion that revolutionary action was urgently needed to bring an Irish-speaking Ireland into existence. The most prominent of them was Piaras Béaslaí, a professional journalist, a member of the IRB and a Volunteer who had been born and raised in Liverpool. He could see that the language revival movement was failing and that the morale of many involved in the Irish language movement was low. He also noticed that many of the best Irish speakers he knew had switched to English as a result of their involvement in the Volunteers which was an English-language organisation.

Béaslaí drew attention to the crisis associated with the Irish-language revival movement in several newspaper articles. He urged Irish speakers to set up an association of people who would be oath-bound to speak nothing but Irish. He argued that, as a result of anglicisation, the oppressive ambient power of English was inescapable anywhere in Ireland, including the Gaeltacht. He said that the English language marked Irish minds and thoughts, and that even when all present were speaking Irish, the arrival of one English speaker would force the whole company to switch to English in deference to that person lest they would be accused of bad-manners. He thought that there was something wrong with Irish speakers, including members of the Gaelic League, many of whom, though they had good Irish, persisted in speaking English to one another.

In Béaslaí's opinion, it was high time for the most intensive effort ever to make the speaking of Irish habitually a common practice and to encourage other Irish speakers to do likewise. This would break the custom of switching to English and change public opinion so that English speakers could not expect to make Irish speakers speak English at any time simply at their whim. He wanted Irish speakers not to surrender to the power of English but to band together and combat it with the power of Irish.

Following pressure from his friends he held a meeting in Dublin at the Keating Branch of the Gaelic League on 10 February 1916. 26 other like-minded people attended. Among them was none other than PJ McGinley, otherwise known as 'Cú Uladh' (Hound of Ulster). He had helped establish the Gaelic League in Belfast where he had lived until 1913 and had strong connections with An Ard-Scoil Ultach. Béaslaí outlined his strategy and there was unanimous agreement that an association should be formed forthwith whose membership would be bound by a solemn declaration to speak nothing but Irish to fellow members. They called the new association 'An Fáinne' (The Ring). Before the meeting ended, all present stood and made the solemn declaration that they would speak nothing but Irish to any other member of the Fáinne unless special circumstances demanded otherwise.

A committee was formed, Béaslaí was elected president, and Cú Uladh vice-president. A badge in the shape of a plain yellow ring was adopted to indicate membership. From then on each new recruit would be obliged to appear before a gathering of local members, make the Fáinne declaration and sign a Fáinne declaration form witnessed by two members of the association who could vouch for his or her ability to speak Irish fluently. They would then receive their Fáinne badge. Initially membership was recruited from amongst native speakers and from those of near native speaker competence in Irish.

The Fáinne Association was independent of the Gaelic League but worked in close cooperation with it, using Gaelic League premises to hold its meetings and recruiting Fáinne members from its Irish Colleges and its numerous branches. The Fáinne Association developed along the following lines. The original committee, known as the 'Comhairle' or the 'Ard-Chomhairle' directed the association whose branches were known as 'Gasraí'. Each gasra was run by its own committee called a 'Comhaltas'. The comhaltas was led by the 'Aoire' and the 'Reachtairle'.

In the beginning members of the Ard-Chomhairle visited localities to help establish gasraí. Later any group of six members was allowed to set up a gasra in their locality and register with the Ard-Chomhairle. Later again it was agreed that young people between 10 and 18 years whose spoken Irish had reached Fáinne standard would be awarded the silver fáinne and that adults of the same standard would receive the gold fáinne.

The Fáiinne standard of spoken Irish was determined by examiners appointed by the Ard-Chomhairle or by the local gasra. They interviewed candidates for membership subjecting them to a rigorous oral test in Irish. These were commonly known as 'fáiinne examinations' and were arranged at intervals during the year.

Within days of the report of the founding of the Fáiinne in *An Claidheamh Soluis*, support for an unflagging determination to speak Irish whenever possible came from Belfast. Seán Mac Maoláin, a committee member of Ard-Scoil Ultach and a key member of the Gaelic League in the city, wrote to the paper. He said that every English word spoken in Ireland was a blow struck against the Irish language, particularly when those who could speak Irish declined to do so even though many of them had attended Gaelic League branch classes for years and had gone to Gaelic colleges.

Mac Maoláin blamed three main causes, indifference, indolence and shoneenism for this and warned members of the Gaelic League not to be found guilty of similar behaviour. He called for a means by which people who did their duty for the language could be identified. They could then protect the good name of the Gaelic League and demonstrate that they too were prepared to do what they expected poor Gaeltacht communities to do – to speak Irish.

The same edition carried a report that the Belfast District Committee of the Gaelic League had unanimously supported the action of Claud de Ceabhasa. He had refused to speak anything but Irish to the police in Ballingearry and, as a result, had been fined and jailed for two days. The incident boosted the fortunes of the Fáiinne as militant revolutionary action became attractive to some Irish speakers. These included Seán T Ó Ceallaigh, Cathal Brugha and Claud de Ceabhasa who joined the association soon afterwards.

As Easter approached it looked likely that the Fáiinne would soon establish itself in other locations, including Belfast. Plans were made to have a céilí on 6th May which, by the Irish-Ireland standards of the time, would have been revolutionary. It would be conducted entirely through the medium of Irish. It was upstaged, unfortunately, by another revolutionary event – the Easter Rising.

Fáiinne members, including those involved in the Rising, ensured that the association and its ideals would survive the turbulent period which followed. Irish classes became popular among republican prisoners in British jails and Béaslaí, who was held for a time in Lewes Prison, conducted Fáiinne examinations there. In the absence of fáiinne emblems, new recruits to the association among the prisoners were awarded coloured buttons to signify membership.

By the time republican prisoners had been released following a general amnesty in June 1917 the impact of the Rising was clearly evident throughout the country. There was an intense interest in the Irish language and in all things national, including the emerging Sinn Féin party. The Fáiinne Association grew steadily. It now had over 300 members. This figure increased significantly when the Gaelic League, in October 1917, instructed its language organisers who worked throughout the country to encourage Irish speakers to join the Fáiinne association.

Both organisations quickly recognised the mutual benefits of cooperation. The uncompromising commitment of Fáiinne members to the use of Irish in their everyday lives put them in an ideal position to lead Gaelic League branches and Irish classes were ideal

places for them to put their commitment into practice as teachers. By August 1918 Fáiinne membership had risen to 1,000. Later that year Seosamh Mac Ailín, a teacher in Ard-Scoil Ultach and a good friend of Mac Maoláin, founded a gasra in Belfast. By February 1919 the Fáiinne had 22 gasraí throughout the country and by August its membership had reached more than 2,000.

Although the leadership of the Fáiinne continued to focus on strategies to spread the speaking of Irish, urging members to increase their range of activities in the language and raise public awareness of it and, although some could foresee great possibilities for the creation of Irish-language clubs, schools, universities and other institutions, were Fáiinne membership to reach a critical mass, problems were already beginning to emerge within the association.

Increasing numbers of people, who belonged to the anglicised Catholic communalist tradition and who had become Irish Irelanders rather than dedicated Irish speakers, began to develop a fascination for the fáiinne as the ultimate status symbol of the 'true Gael'. The Irish language had never been central to their lives. They spoke English almost exclusively and reserved their enthusiasm for Gaelic games and Irish dancing. Now they slowly began to infiltrate the Fáiinne helped by some members who gave lip service to its revolutionary principles. It was a slow process which eventually undermined the association.

In March 1920 the first issue of the Association's journal, *Iris an Fháinne*, included a list of 41 branches, three of which were in Ulster, one in Cloghan (Co. Donegal), another in Belfast and a third in Derry city. The Aoirí of the last two gasraí were Fr Cathal Ó Néill and Fr Peadar Mag Loingsigh, two very zealous language revivalists. The Ulster representatives elected to the Ard-Chomhairle in August 1920 were Aindreas Ó Baoighill, Peadar Ó Dubhda and Ruaidhrí Mac Éinrí. Seán Mac Maoláin replaced Mac Éinrí a year later.

In September 1921 yet another gasra appeared in Ulster. It was set up by 15 Fáiinne members who were interned in Ballykinler Camp. They established a Gaelic college in the camp which ran a three-week intensive language course in August. Then, another 24 internees who had reached Fáiinne standard joined the gasra at its inaugural meeting. The Aoire was Fr Burbage, a priest who was also an internee. By early December the membership had risen to a total of 60. The gasra ceased to exist shortly afterwards. Following the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty all internees in the camp were released on 9 December.

By August 1922 the published list of gasraí had reached 169, six of which were in the new Northern Ireland state. Apart from the existing ones in Belfast and Derry, another four had been set up, one each in Newry, Dungannon, Armagh and Ballynascreen. An Fáiinne now had 6,000 members, more than a thousand of whom had been recruited during the previous 12 months. The secretary of the association, however, treated these dramatic developments with some caution. He was convinced that perhaps as many as 56 branches were inactive and that many of the new recruits were not fit to be members.

Political developments were already undermining the Fáiinne Association. On 28 June 1922 a bitter civil war erupted in the south between pro- and anti-treaty republicans killing the revolutionary spirit of previous years and creating enmities which would last for decades. The spirit of resistance amongst northern nationalists had also been crushed. By the end of June the northern government had complete control of its territory and within days the pro-Treaty IRA ended its campaign there.

On 19 August the Provisional Government adopted a new peace policy towards Northern Ireland which meant the abandonment of northern nationalists to their fate. Its implementation was facilitated by the death of Michael Collins three days later. As internment continued, despondency, dejection and disillusionment swept northern nationalists, intensifying with the death of Collins and the change in southern policy towards the north, leading to feelings of bitterness and betrayal.

Although the Gaelic League had ceased to function in Northern Ireland by the end of 1922 enthusiasm for the language had not died out. It survived in the hearts of Fáiinne members who remained active but isolated. It was also to be found in some schools under Catholic management where teachers loyal to the concept of an Irish-speaking Ireland continued to teach the language zealously. In many instances enthusiasm for Irish in particular schools was attributable to the efforts and encouragement of clerical school managers.

These priests, having become ardent Gaelic Leaguers and joined the Fáiinne, remained convinced that the language offered northern Catholics not only access to an undivided Gaelic Ireland but also protection against the evils of the modern world. These evils they associated with unionist values and the British Protestant ethos of the new Northern Ireland state. Some of these priests could be found working together with other veterans of the Fáiinne in Irish colleges, which were all that remained of the Gaelic League in the north. These included Ardscoil Ultach (Belfast) and Coláiste Bhríde (Omeath) which was soon to be transferred to Ranafast. It was in these colleges that the effort to revive the Irish language movement in the new Northern Ireland state began.

The Belfast gasra of the Fáiinne, like the Ard-Scoil, continued to function having survived the political unrest of the early 1920s. Both were housed in the same building and both owed their existence to the efforts of Seán Mac Maoláin who was later given credit for having saved the language movement in the city. He directed the gasra, was responsible for the running of the Ard-Scoil classes and was secretary of the Belfast district committee of the Gaelic League which began slowly to revive. Mac Maoláin was supported by local Fáiinne members including a number of influential priests who were totally committed to a renewed effort to revive the language.

Mac Maoláin's influence extended far beyond Belfast. He was a close associate of Fr Lorcán Ó Muireadhaigh, another Fáiinne member, whom he helped to transfer Coláiste Bhríde to Ranafast and to prepare the ground for the establishment of Comhaltas Uladh in November 1926. The Comhaltas was a new provincial committee of the Gaelic League which was supported by the GAA and influential members of the Catholic clergy. It went on to lay the framework for the revival of the Irish language movement throughout Ulster.

The beginnings of a fresh enthusiasm for Irish in Belfast were apparent by the autumn of 1927. The Ard-Scoil had to acquire extra premises to cater for the increasing numbers attending classes, including over fifty primary-school teachers. Large numbers were also attending various branch classes. At least three branches were in operation. The Fr. Toal Branch met at St. Paul's Hall, the Baile Mhic Airt Branch met at St. Matthew's Boys School, Seaforde Street, and the St. Patrick's Branch met in the Ard-Scoil premises in King Street and had classes in the Parnell Hall. The Ard-Scoil then moved to its own purpose-built premises on Divis Street in 1929.

The Belfast Gasra of the Fáinne was also thriving. It had over 100 members and met at 3.30pm in the Ard-Scoil on the first Sunday of every month. It differed from Gaelic League branches in one important respect. Its affairs were always conducted entirely through the medium of Irish. It organized debates, lectures and entertainments and gave its members a taste of what the life of ordinary Irish-speaking society in Belfast might be like.

Rivalry amongst branches boosted language learning in the city. The best way a branch could prove it was superior to others was by the number of fluent Irish speakers it produced. This was determined by the number of its members who joined the Fáinne Association each year. A branch's reputation was also enhanced by the number of prizes won by its members in the Belfast Feis. The Feis had been re-established in 1933 and soon became one of the biggest cultural events of the city.

The influence of Fáinne members was behind two major developments that followed. Since partition, the Belfast district committee of the Gaelic League had discussed its business in English. It switched to Irish in 1934. A year later Tír na nÓg, one of the biggest Gaelic League branches in Belfast, established An Cumann Gaelach, a new social club for the city where only Irish could be spoken.

There were nine Gaelic League branches in 1935. Numbers attending Irish classes had risen to such an extent that the Ard-Scoil building had become overcrowded, forcing Belfast Coiste Ceantair to rent extra accommodation in Marquis Street. By early 1936 the estimated number of learners attending Irish classes in the city had risen to 1,500, an increase of 50% since 1933. Accommodation was not the only problem. There were not enough teachers, and yet another three new Gaelic League branches had just been set up. The most notable of these was Craobh Pheadair Uí Néill Chruadhlaoidh, later known as Cumann Chluain Ard. The year ended on a high note as the Ardscoil celebrated its 25th anniversary.

Although Belfast had a vibrant social life during the 1930s which included céilithe, games, the Feis and many other activities in which the Gaelic League branches and GAA clubs took part, concern was growing among some Fáinne members. They realised that, despite the progress made by the revival, they were failing to persuade most of the English-speaking Gaelic Leaguers in the city to switch to Irish. The Belfast Gasra itself was in difficulties. As soon as many of its recruits gained their coveted fáinne they were never seen again.

The Belfast Gasra was experiencing the same problem that had bedeviled the Ard-Chomhairle since 1918. It had been heavily infiltrated by individuals who belonged to the anglicised Catholic communalist tradition and who became Irish Irelanders rather than dedicated Irish speakers. They coveted the fáinne as the ultimate status symbol of the 'true Gael'. They never had any real interest in making Belfast a Gaeltacht. They were quite content to speak English and reserved their enthusiasm for Gaelic games and Irish dancing.

These individuals represented the majority of the membership of the Gaelic League in the city and were identifiable by the way they understood certain terms. To them 'Gael' and 'Gaelicism' meant 'Irish Irelander' and 'Irish-Ireland mentality'. The minority, most of whom were Fáinne members, remained committed to the creation of an Irish-speaking Ireland, spoke Irish as much as possible, and some made it the language of their homes. To them 'Gael' and 'Gaelicism' meant 'Irish speaker' and 'Gaeltacht mentality'.

If the Belfast District Committee of the Gaelic League had to make a choice, it favoured the majority. At a meeting of the District Committee on 30 April 1936, the chairman, Aodh Ó Coirbhín, who was also head of the Belfast Gasra of the Fáiinne, Secretary of Comhaltas Uladh and Antrim County President of the GAA, attacked Breasal Mac Uilis, who was a member of both the District Committee and the Fáiinne. Mac Uilis, as *Irish News* columnist for the District Committee, had made several scathing attacks on the GAA's commitment to the language revival in his weekly column. Although Mac Uilis defended himself saying that he had written nothing but the truth, a motion of no confidence in him was passed. Seven voted in favour of the motion and two against. Responsibility for writing the column was given to Cathal Mac Criostail, another committee member who was also a member of the Fáiinne.

Eventually, over the next two decades, the Fáiinne succumbed to the influx of anglicized Irish-Ireland 'Gaels'. In the interval, nevertheless, what remained of the old guard managed to introduce yet another generation of Irish speakers to the challenges of creating an Irish language community. They, in turn, did sterling work. Some of them, like members of the newly established Cumann Chluain Ard, were already waiting in the wings.