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## "More than the Sum of its Articles"<sup>i</sup>: Publishing National Biography in Irish

Seán Dullea

### Abstract

This article concerns itself with the publication of national biography in the Irish language, focussing on *Beathaisnéis* (1986-2007), a nine-volume biographical series, and its companion online database which was launched in 2011. The essay begins by setting the printed work very briefly in the context of biographical writing in Ireland before going on to describe the origins and evolution of the project. In looking at the methodology employed and the selection criteria used for biographical subjects, it is clear that the editors wished to remain as inclusive as possible throughout. Given the patently nationalist agenda of projects such as the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, I consider in passing the conceptions of biography which inform *Beathaisnéis*. The article ends by focussing on the work's presence online, imaginatively linked to related projects, thereby giving the original printed volumes a new lease of life as well as furthering the creation of a civic discourse in Irish.

### Key Words

National biography; Irish-language publishing; minority languages; language revival; nation-building.

## Abbreviations

**AINM:** Online database comprising the nine-volume series *Beathaisnéis* ([www.ainm.ie](http://www.ainm.ie))

**B:** Used in parenthetical citations to refer to individual volumes of *Beathaisnéis* (1986-2007), always accompanied by the relevant volume number

**BEATHAISNÉIS:** Nine-volume series of biography in Irish by Diarmuid Breathnach and Máire Ní Mhurchú, published between 1986 and 2007

**DIB:** Dictionary of Irish Biography

**DNB:** Dictionary of National Biography

**ODNB:** Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

## Life-Writing in Ireland

Although something of a well-worn remark by now, Ernest Renan's observation that every nation needs its great men and its heroic past still holds true (Eley and Suny 1996, 52). In Ireland's case, however, the writing of national biography is complicated by the existence of two largely separate traditions, in English and Irish, frequently considered to enjoy an ambivalent, even antagonistic, relationship with each other. Linguistic diversity has characterised life-writing in Ireland from its very beginnings: the large extant body of biographical writing in Ireland dates back to the seventh century when an extensive hagiographical tradition was inaugurated, first taking the form of Latin *vitae* and, from the ninth century, also in the form of Irish *bethada* (Ó Cathasaigh 2006; Ní Mhaonaigh 2006). While these writings belong more properly to the tradition of exemplary biography, they nevertheless form a continuum of sorts to which the work under discussion, *Beathaisnéis*, might be added at its opposite fringe.

While now somewhat dated, C.J. Woods' inventory of biographical writings in Ireland, compiled in 1980, provides a wide-ranging survey of the tradition as well as offering a useful point of departure. Written mostly in English, or occasionally in Latin, by members of the ascendancy, many of the early surviving biographical works he lists were largely devoted to "the good and the great" of different professions. Not all of these writers overlooked Gaelic

culture, however, motivated as some were by a desire to learn more about the native Irish with whom they lived. Sir James Ware, author of *De Scriptoribus Hiberniae* (1639), is one such example. Over the course of the nineteenth century dictionaries of national biography became an indispensable component in the business of European state formation (Thomas 2005, Kindle Edition). Interestingly, the first recognisable example of national biography written in an Irish context, Richard Ryan's *Biographia Hibernica: A Biographical Dictionary of the Worthies of Ireland from the Earliest Periods to the Present Time*, dates to this period, the two volumes of which were published in 1819 and 1821 respectively (Woods 1980, 16-17). Ryan's dictionary set in train a line of biographical writing in Ireland which culminated in the publication, in 2009, of the Royal Irish Academy's DIB.

Across the Irish Sea, the Victorian DNB (predecessor of the ODNB) appeared between 1885 and 1901. In a telling contrast, its appearance occurred when the Irish language was only just beginning to be revived, having been steadily suppressed or abandoned in the three hundred years or so since Ireland's colonial encounter with England began. The DNB was very much a national venture, and like other large-scale cultural projects of its time, most notably the OED, it formed part of "the scaffolding of civic knowledge" of the nation (Raven 2007, 993; see, also, Deane 2010, 181). By contrast, the framework of civic knowledge in Irish could be said to be largely still in the making. Despite the state's determination to restore Irish as the vernacular of the country, their language policy in the period since Independence has met with countless challenges and disappointing results. One of the ways in which the government set about restoring the language was by sponsoring the publication of textbooks and other reading material, sought after in an educational system where Gaelic was now a compulsory subject. This state involvement continues down to the present day, with modest subventions being granted to other publications in Irish, in fields as diverse as modern literature, folklore and scholarly monographs.

The focus of this article, *Beathaisnéis*, is a nine-volume, Irish-language biographical series compiled by editors Diarmuid Breathnach and Máire Ní Mhurchú, and published between 1986 and 2007. An Clóchomhar Teoranta, a government-subsidised scholarly publisher of Irish-language academic monographs and companions, issued the series. It is no exaggeration to say that from its humble beginnings it has grown to become a standard reference work and, in its current online guise, forms nothing short of an Irish-language Dictionary of National Biography. The remainder of this article examines the background to, and evolution of, the printed series. Specifically, I shall attempt to identify the editors' precise motivations when including biographical subjects, while also investigating the conceptions of biography which inform the work and whether these changed as the project developed. Finally, the focus of this article will turn to the online database, in which is

aggregated the content of all nine printed volumes, while exploring briefly what consequences this may have for the future of national biography in Irish.

### ***Beathaisnéis*: Origins and Conceptions**

Prompted by the Royal Irish Academy's plan in the late 1970s to start work on its definitive English-language DIB (eventually published by Cambridge University Press in 2009), Breathnach and Ní Mhurchú set about gathering material in 1979 for their own far more humble undertaking. Work on *Beathaisnéis* was occasioned not only by the example of the Academy's biographical venture, but also by a desire to commemorate in some way the looming centenary of the start of the Gaelic Revival, conventionally dated to 1882 when the literary periodical, *Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge*, was founded. The first volume would be issued too late for the projected commemoration but, more importantly, its publication would mark the beginning of a biographical project which culminated in the launch of a government-sponsored online database, [www.ainm.ie](http://www.ainm.ie) (*Ainm* hereafter), over 30 years later in 2011.

The printed series (now completed) is a testament to the learning and prodigious energy of its editors and will stand as a monument to their labours. By contrast, the corresponding online database continues to grow and assume new dimensions: it comprises all of the entries from the nine published volumes along with additional material gathered in the period since publication as well as on-going critical revisions. In total, *Ainm* is made up of just over 1,700 pen portraits of men and women whose lives were linked centrally or tangentially to the revival of the Irish language. While seven of the nine printed volumes are devoted to the period post 1882, two specially commissioned supplementary volumes contain biographies of historical and literary figures associated with Gaelic language and culture as far back as 1560. These dividing dates - 1882 and 1560 - stand as important landmarks in the history of the language, with the first heralding renewal while the second coincides with the mounting Tudor conquest of Ireland and subsequent gradual language decline. The later Gaelic Revival would in its turn attempt to offset this decline, bringing the story full circle.

### **Methodology and Underlying Conceptions of Biography**

It is important to point out that *Beathaisnéis* differs from large-scale dictionaries of national biography not only in size but also in having received little institutional or state support from the outset. With modest means, its editors were prompted into action by the almost daily reminder of a lack ("*easpa laethúil*") of any proper reference work for those interested in deceased Irish-language figures (Breathnach and Ní Mhurchú B1, 11). In order to remedy

the situation, Breathnach and Ní Mhurchú examined census returns, obituaries, parish registers, biographies, autobiographies and the like, in order to build up detailed profiles of those involved in the Gaelic revival. One of the guiding principles adopted by the editors when selecting their biographical subjects was variety (*"éagsúlacht"*) allied to a strong wish to reacquaint Irish-language readers with figures long forgotten or written out of history (Breathnach and Ní Mhurchú B1, 11).

From the beginning, the editors' avowed aim was to be as inclusive as possible: in their oft-quoted words, they set themselves the task of building "a verdant graveyard where tenant, landlord, linguist, country man, jackeen,<sup>ii</sup> writer, scribe, revolutionary poet, maker of aislings,<sup>iii</sup> scholar, teacher, fascist, agnostic, catholic, protestant, dreamer, activist ... would lie side by side" (translation by Jenkinson 2004, 37). The variety of occupations cited in the list may give an indication of the relative obscurity of some of the figures included, a fact borne out by Breathnach and Ní Mhurchú in their admission that a goodly number of those included in the series would probably never make it into the national pantheon (Breathnach and Ní Mhurchú B1, 11), by which they meant the English-language DIB. This is to be expected given the local circles in which some of these revivalist figures moved.

Not all of those included are obscure figures, however. A number of the agents of the Gaelic Revival movement held sway in other spheres of life – Ireland's first president, Douglas Hyde, being, perhaps, the most obvious example. Far from being parochial, they were equally acquainted with contemporary European intellectual currents as their English-speaking compatriots in metropolitan centres such as Dublin. Moreover, the national cast of the dictionary is not exclusively Irish by birth, as evidenced by the large number of foreign scholars included in the series. These inclusions are, in large part, due to the interest shown in the Irish language and its literature, from the late nineteenth century through to the first half of the twentieth by comparative philologists from continental Europe and Britain, giving the Gaelic revival something of a fillip in the process. The contact these scholars had with the language was mutually enriching. As the project grew in size and scope, Breathnach and Ní Mhurchú sought to broaden their criteria for inclusion. At first, they had agreed on excluding persons who, although involved in the Revival, had little if any command of the language. Time and reflection brought them to the conclusion that such omissions were unwarranted. As well as attesting to the editors' resolve to remain as open as possible by including figures like John Sweetman and William Bulfin, inter alios, whose knowledge of the language was scant, such a methodology results in a fuller picture of the Gaelic movement and its agents, some of whom were motivated by their ignorance of Irish to involve themselves in its revival.

Dictionaries of national biography often veer between two extremes: namely, the positivistic recording of facts and details relating to subjects' lives, into which category works such as *Dictionnaire de Biographie Française* might fall, as well as more colourful or anecdotal descriptive entries, typified by the ODNB (Raven 2007, 996). In other words, these different approaches rest on a cline between biographical dictionaries *sensu stricto* at one end and biographical encyclopaedia at the other. In terms of style, *Beathaisnéis'* editors describe their work as a collection of biographical essays rather than bare-bones biographical entries, with frequent emphasis on the anecdotal and the encyclopaedic (Breathnach, Ní Mhurchú B5, 13). In their explanation for this, Breathnach and Ní Mhurchú claim that because so many of the featured lives were being properly researched and described for the first time, they felt the need to make their entries as complete as possible. Moreover, they reasoned that because they were dealing with periods that had long ago fallen into history, all detail was valuable detail, so to speak (*ibid.*). While this may give some entries a less systematic feel, or occasion a certain looseness, any inconsistency is always leavened by the editors' eye for a good anecdote and their "great gift of being able to fillet out the judicious and encapsulating quote from the appropriate source" (Titley 2003, 10). This less systematic approach may also be accounted for by the fact that *Beathaisnéis'* editors had intended the work, in its initial stages at any rate, to serve as a "*leabhar adhairte*" (Breathnach and Ní Mhurchú B1, 11) or *livre de chevet* (a book to keep by one's pillow). Be this as it may, the series has come to serve far more uses than that, not least as a research tool.

Collective biography is a venerable and well-established practice and, as Keith Thomas explains, typically it "took one of three forms: group biography, universal biography and national biography" (2005, Kindle Edition). While the first of these was a classical genre, the second was devised and codified much later by "scholarly polymaths of Early Modern Europe" (*ibid.*). The final category was closely linked to the wide-scale rise of nationalist feeling (*ibid.*) and ensuing development of what Seton-Watson describes as "official nationalisms" (Anderson 1983, 102). The nationalist agendas of projects such as the DNB or *Biographia Hibernica* are undeniable, arising as they did out of a desire to form "national unity out of disparate ingredients" (*ibid.*). What, then, of *Beathaisnéis'* editors' motivations? Taken together the series also constitutes much more than a mere collection of discrete biographical essays: in retrieving the lives of many overlooked or forgotten figures, the editors were in effect "rescuing from near oblivion a central component of the cultural history of Ireland" (Lee, 1997). At the risk of over-generalisation, there is a sense in which the better part of the lives described in the printed volumes are inextricably linked to questions of linguistic and national identity, in some cases *avant la lettre*. Although subjects' backgrounds may often be greatly divergent, as illustrated vividly in the earlier list of

subjects' occupations, their involvement with the language and native culture was predominantly a positive one. While state consolidation is clearly not an aim of the work, in the way that the DNB, for example, had obvious nationalist intentions, a nation is nevertheless being represented here, predominantly an Irish-speaking one. The chorus of subaltern voices which issues from the work transforms it into a national biography "from below".<sup>iv</sup>

### A Second Life

The original print volumes have been granted a second life with the launch of the state-sponsored *Ainm* website containing updated entries, critical revisions as well as entirely new life histories. Its other advantages are obvious: for instance, the metadata on the website enable users to search within entries in ways simply not possible in the printed volumes. As James Raven has noted (2007, 994), the future for biographical dictionaries such as the ODNB or the American National Biography is indisputably as an electronic online resource, widely available and imaginatively linked to other virtual projects and databases. Printed works of this kind have now become something of a redundancy, most particularly in the case of large-scale biographical projects. Despite obvious difference of scale between the ODNB and the project under discussion, *Ainm* has similarly benefited from imaginative online linkages in that it now forms part of a triptych of sites, which contains, in addition, *focal.ie* and *logainm.ie*. The former is a national terminology database, the function of which is the online publication of all government-approved technical terms in Irish, while the latter is a Gaelic place-name database, which serves as "a comprehensive management system for data, archival records and place name research conducted by the State" ([www.logainm.ie](http://www.logainm.ie)).

Each of the aforementioned domains is central to the development of the Irish language, all the more so given its minoritised status. It could be argued that the juxtaposition of lives, words and places online works to elevate *Beathaisnéis* to a more central role in the creation of a civic discourse in Irish, to which I alluded at the beginning of this essay.<sup>v</sup> It has been famously argued that print-capitalism helped to bring about the development of modern nations through the creation of "imagined communities", in Anderson's oft-cited formulation. Proliferation of digital media now offers new possibilities for expanding the "potential stretch" (Anderson 1983, 49) of such collective groups. In like manner, *Ainm's* website encourages the growth of an online community with its Facebook plugin, Twitter feed and newsletter, while differing from comparable digital projects in being entirely free to the public. Given that the business of creating biographical works of this kind has frequently had a commercial dimension, *Beathaisnéis'* entirely non-commercial nature is noteworthy.

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Finally, it may be relevant to consider briefly Robert Darnton's famous "Communications Circuit" (1982), through which publications move from author/publisher on to reader and around again. The second life offered to the printed volumes by their incorporation into an online database, in this case, points up some of the ways in which digital technology has enriched or complicated Darnton's original model. This is most evident in the way that linkages between readers and authors/publishers have been strengthened, for example by "crowdsourcing" which allows editors to more quickly amend entries, to identify omissions and mistakes, or for users to make their own contributions, etc. Ultimately, perhaps the greatest benefit of an online version is that it is better able to resist the fate of printed dictionaries which are doomed to suffer an "always outdated future" (Deane 2010, 180).

### **Afterword**

The ODNB unquestionably represents a high water mark of biographical enterprise; few projects can claim anything approaching its authority or scope. Yet dictionaries also contain insinuated biases, working under the "operative fiction" (Deane 2010, 184) that all necessary knowledge is contained therein. Whatever their shortcomings or biases, *Beathaisnéis*' and *Ainm*'s principal claim to importance and value for posterity rest surely on their retrieval of a vital part of Irish cultural, linguistic and literary history.

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<sup>i</sup> The phrase is borrowed from "Leslie Stephen and the New DNB", the 1995 Leslie Stephen Lecture given by H.C.G. Matthew.

<sup>ii</sup> The term is glossed in the OED as follows: "a contemptuous designation for a self-assertive worthless person" but is often used in Ireland as a slightly pejorative term to describe someone who hails from Dublin.

<sup>iii</sup> *Aislingí* are vision poems that flourished in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry.

<sup>iv</sup> In using this term, I am deliberately recalling the famous historiographical movement, 'History from below', promoted by both the French *Annales* school and the British Marxists, which takes as its focus ordinary people by concentrating on their experiences and perspectives of historical events.

<sup>v</sup> While subsidised by the state, these websites were all initiated by Fiontar, Dublin City University, which has spearheaded a number of pioneering projects aimed at developing Irish-language resources within a digital environment. The latest project to benefit from their support is [www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie), an initiative undertaken in collaboration with University College Dublin (UCD), the purpose of which is to digitise and make available to the public all 1.7 million manuscript pages of the National Folklore Collection, held at UCD.