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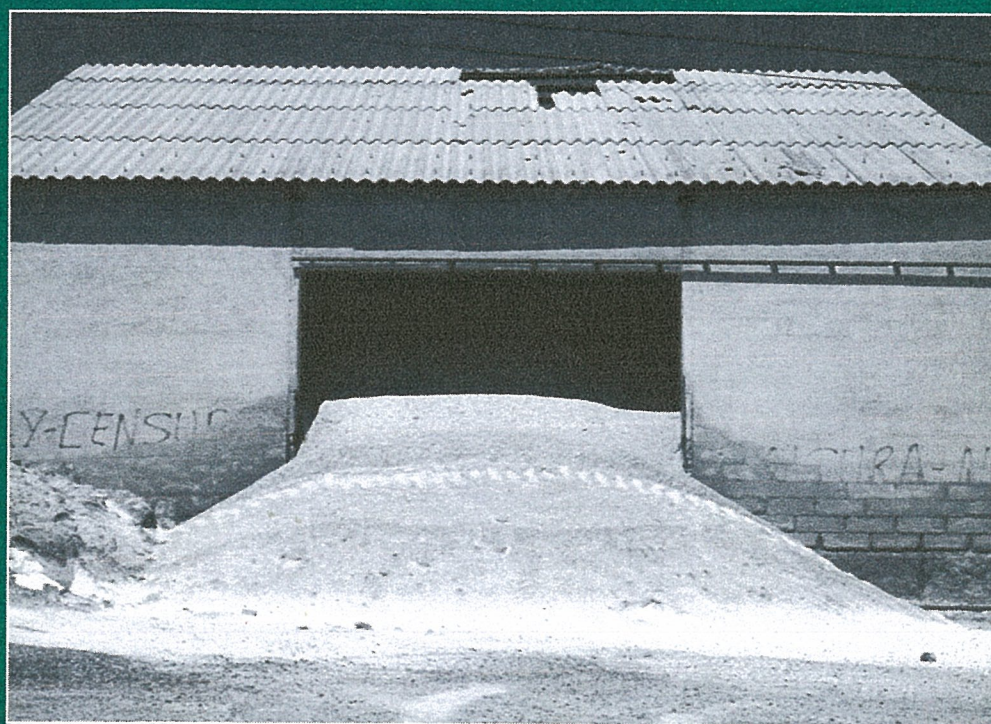
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THE IRISH HEDGE SCHOOLS:
REJECTION, RESISTANCE AND CREATIVITY (1695- 1831)

Anne-Marie O'Connell

The expression "hedge school" encapsulates the ideas of poverty (an open-air educational enterprise), clandestinity and local protection: surviving political repression over a long period of time is impossible outside a deep-rooted network of local acquaintances and complicity. That hedge schools were resilient enough to stand the test of time in Ireland is a testimony to the close association of the Irish peasantry and their schoolmasters. The latter were indeed the heirs of an ancient cultural tradition that had to find the ways and means to survive the collapse of Gaelic society after Ireland's military surrender to the English Crown. But that would not have been enough to explain the hedge school's extraordinary success were it not for the deep commitment of Irish parents to provide their children with a solid education based on teaching principles they had wholly embraced.

Yet hedge schooling is a concept that encompasses a great variety of educational ventures that varied from place to place and also with time. One basic fact remains: reputed schoolmasters never ceased to be in great demand and parents were ready to pay them fees, provide them with food and lodgings, and buy the books that their children would learn from. Considering that those parents belonged to the poorest section of the Irish population, their steadfastness to those principles is all the more surprising as the authorities regularly attempted to eradicate those schools. Besides, at times, institutions like the Catholic Church failed (or refused) to support them in word and in kind.

The present article aims to explore the reasons why hedge schools, which had neither the political support nor the financial clout to be granted any official status, were so cherished by the Irish poor.

Before delving into the particulars of such a complex social and cultural issue, some precisions concerning the mechanism by which the rejection of 'native' education has created a distinctive form of resistance and adaptation seem appropriate.

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Rejection by a victorious power may indeed take many shapes and forms. One of its most obvious senses is 'repression' and implies the enactment of laws outlawing previously acceptable practices: this was the case with Catholic education, which gave rise to clandestine schools operating in the face of coercion inaugurated by the Penal Laws. Such a repressive attitude gradually lost momentum and hedge schools subsided, while British officialdom turned a blind eye to them. However, equating hedge schools solely with Catholic education lost its sense with the Church's attempts at being given official status by the British authorities in Ireland. The role the Catholic Church played in education gained importance with time, along with growing pressure from the Second Protestant Reformation movement. Clandestinity for these schools had unexpected consequences: first, that it involved the setting-up of an ingenious and nationwide network of support for the banned schools, and an ambiguous relationship with the Catholic hierarchy, whose agenda was gradually changing. Hedge schoolmasters somehow distanced themselves from the Church and gained a relative independence, which will be examined in the first part of this study. That, along with the coinciding interests of the Irish population, gave hedge schools their strength and enduring capacity to survive. However, this did not come out of the blue, but was the result of a subtle adaptation of already existing structures of education that preceded the English domination of Ireland. These were the courts of poetry, whose prestige rested in the quasi-mythic figure of the poet in folk culture, emphasized by the huge number of unemployed court poets among schoolmasters (covered in the second part). Furthermore, those existing structures came to meet the demand for education from the Irish poor, whose wish it was to give a better social standing to their offspring, in spite of the limited prospects for Irish Catholics in Ireland. For such an alliance to work, hedge schools adapted their teaching. This is reflected in the popular subject-matters they taught, as well as their teaching methods, which were at odds with the ideology of the educational institutions of the day. Those elements follow a chronological and dialectical development that will be reflected on in the course of the analysis.

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I - The politics of institutional rejection and its consequences on education

A - *The enactment of the 'popery code'*

English involvement, both military and institutional, in Ireland was not a new phenomenon in the wake of the Treaty of Limerick (1691) that sealed the political fate of the island. The third decisive defeat for the Catholic cause in 17th century Ireland marked the end of political independence and the submission of the whole country to an entirely protestant Parliament in Dublin. As soon as the Irish leaders of the rebellion against the power of the English Crown had departed (an episode known as the 'Flight of the Earls'¹), the protestant ascendancy had to buttress their newly-acquired position in all walks of life. Their targets were the Catholic landed gentry, the Catholic Church as a prominent political institution and the social order that had managed to survive over a century of military turmoil and resistance. This fulfilled the aims of a colonial enterprise, but it should also be considered in the geopolitical context of the time.

1 - *The English Civil War and revolutions*

The accession of the Scottish Stuarts to the English throne in 1603 inaugurated a troubled period for England. To simplify things, the bone of contention that alienated the King from Parliament and the landed aristocracy revolved around political and religious issues. James I (previously James VI of Scotland) was a supporter of absolutism and clashed with Parliament over that particular point. After his death, his son Charles I's systematic opposition to parliamentarism led to tensions: he constantly rebuked parliamentary initiatives, and in return, Parliament refused to vote new taxes to finance his wars. The King overruled Parliament's decisions, which led to the Petition of Rights (1628),

¹ Among others, Patrick Sarsfield (1660-1693), first Earl of Lucan, who had been the military mastermind of the war against the English troops, negotiated the possibility for himself and 14,000 Irish soldiers to be given permission and transport to go to France. It is said that the terms of the agreement included the rebels' close families. It soon emerged that this was not the case, and the men who did not agree to the Treaty had to leave their wives and children behind. This event is the subject of a famous folksong in the Irish language, *Síúil, síúil, a Ghrá*. Sarsfield himself became a 'maréchal de camp' in the army of Louis 14th of France and was mortally wounded in Flanders, at the Battle of Landen on 19th August 1693.

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demanding that all taxes not voted by Parliament would be illegal, that the quartering of soldiers in private homes should be prohibited, as well as arbitrary imprisonment in time of peace. The stalemate remained unchanged for the following 11 years; in 1640 a civil war broke out, opposing the King's supporters (the Cavaliers) to the Roundheads (or Puritans) who entertained radical republican ideals. The situation came to a head when the King was deposed in 1648 and executed in January 1649. The monarchy was not restored until 1660, after the episode of the Commonwealth and the Protectorate under the rule of Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658). Parliament proclaimed Charles, the exiled son of the dead sovereign, king under the name of Charles II. On his death in 1685 (he died a Roman Catholic), his son James II upset both Parliament and the landed gentry with his militant Catholicism. He had a son with his second Catholic wife Marie of Modena, and promised to raise the heir to the throne as a catholic. This prompted the Parliament to appeal to James's daughter Mary and her husband William of Orange to raise an army and accept the throne of England and Scotland in 1689 by right of succession. James could count on some Irish supporters who believed that a Stuart king would fully promote the cause of Ireland's autonomy and religious freedom. But the troops suffered some serious setbacks, notably at the Battles of the Boyne (July 1690) and of Aughrim (1691), and the last hopes of the Irish Jacobites were dashed at the siege of Limerick, which ended in the Treaty that gave England full dominion over the island of Ireland.

But the religious issue was also an intrinsic part of the political situation in England, and had far-reaching consequences for the situation of Catholics in Ireland.

It is difficult to dissociate anti-catholicism and anti-absolutism sentiments in England. It is true that Henry VIII's Reformation had not been a quiet affair, and, at least in printed texts and pamphlets, any ill affecting the kingdom was immediately linked to a Catholic plot, whether real or imaginary. It is true that Mary Tudor's fierce anti-Protestant policy, the failed attempt of the Spanish Armada to invade England in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the failed Gunpowder Plot in 1605 against king and Parliament, the horrors of the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre in France, contributed to the creation of a major historical and political scarecrow in England's political life. Catholics were routinely blamed for every single problem, including the Great Fire of London in 1666. Although this hysteria was not completely reflected among the population except in times of crisis, penal laws had been enacted to bar Catholics from participating in the

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country's politics: no Catholic could be elected to Parliament, for instance. Anti-catholicism was deep-rooted in England, even though penal laws were not strictly enforced at local level. What was more worrying was the rise of France as an aggressive, Counter-Reformation power across continental Europe and the ambiguous ties entertained by the Stuart kings with French absolutism¹.

2 - *The Stuarts' French connection*

Charles I had married Louis XIV's daughter, Henrietta Marie, and he had tried to establish a more absolutist power, in spite of the more liberal parliamentary regime of the English tradition. Even in Restoration, Catholics were a strong party at the royal court. Charles II, although officially a Protestant, had married Catherine of Braganza, had Catholic mistresses, and was surrounded by Catholic courtiers (Thomas Clifford, the Lord Treasurer, and Lord Arlington, the Secretary of State, were suspected of Catholicism). On the Continent, France had taken advantage of the Thirty Year War to establish itself as the hegemonist power in Europe. It was no secret that Charles II could afford to disregard Parliament's remonstrances because he was getting financial support from the French king. The philosopher John Locke published his *Two Treatises of Government* in 1689. The first one was a refutation of the claim that royal power was mirroring God's absolute dominion. In the second, he laid the foundations of a liberal parliamentary regime founded on a social contract and the election of representatives. He also supported the idea of religious toleration, including the Dissenters, in so far as they were not hostile to the very idea of commonwealth. However, he clearly stated that those whose allegiance was to a foreign power were to be excluded from political toleration and liberalism. By which he had Catholics in mind, who were thought of as more loyal to the Pope and to other Catholic rulers than to the legitimate king and parliament of England.²

¹ For further details on the issue, see Moya K. MASON, MLIS, "Role of Anti-catholicism in England in the 1670s", at <http://www.moyak.com/papers/popish-plot-england.html>

² See also the *Letter on Toleration* (1685), in which he states: "What can be the meaning of their asserting that kings excommunicated forfeit their crowns and kingdoms? It is evident that they thereby arrogate unto themselves the power of deposing kings, because they challenge the power of excommunication as the peculiar right of their hierarchy. That dominion is founded in grace is also an assertion by which those that maintain it do plainly lay claim to the possession of all things (...) I say these have no right to be tolerated by the magistrate; as neither

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The War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714), where one of the likely successors to the Spanish throne was a Bourbon, exposed the threat of two crowns united in the hands of the same French dynasty. The political climate in England was dominated by the fear of such a hegemony. It subsided in 1714 with the Treaties of Rastatt and Baden, ending hostilities between France and Austria. In the same year, France agreed to stop supporting the Stuart Pretender. Anne Stuart, raised a Protestant, became the legitimate queen of Great Britain.

3 - *The politics of plantation and colonisation in Ireland*

a - Political measures

The English Parliament in Dublin, founded by English settlers in 1297, became exclusively Protestant after the Treaty of Limerick and quickly enacted a series of laws effectively barring Catholics from power and public life. Officially, the aim was to eradicate the Catholic religion, but in reality, few attempts were made to carry out such a plan. While religion was persecuted at times (priests were hounded down after the Banishment Act of 1697 was passed, forbidding a Catholic priest to set foot on Irish land on penalty of death¹), there was no systematic policy of forced conversion. The main concern of the Ascendancy was to help establish a long-lasting English rule all over the country, and that began with restoring the members of the Church of Ireland (the Irish Anglican Church) as first-class citizens, whereas Catholics and Non-Conformists were denied access to public offices and to universities. Access to the legal professions was denied to Catholics, who had to take a pledge renouncing their religion if they wished to be called to the Bar². In 1695, one of the first penal laws to be passed concerned the ban on any Catholic education; Catholic schoolmasters and educators were

those that will not own and teach the duty of tolerating all men in matters of mere religion"; in John LOCKE, *Political Writings*, David Wooton (ed.), London, Penguin Classics, 1993, p. 425.

¹ The living conditions of priests and their clandestine celebrations of masses in hidden places while members of the congregation watched for the coming of English troops are well described in the Irish song from Kerry called *An raibh Tú ar an gCarrraig?* (Were you at Carrick?) where a priest describes the Host and the Mass in covert terms.

² See Maureen WALL, "The age of the Penal Laws (1691-1778)" in T.W. MOODY & F.X. MARTIN (eds), *The Course of Irish History*, Cork, RTÉ/The Mercier Press, 1984, p. 220.

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forbidden to ply their trade and were forced into clandestinity¹. Moreover, Britain's control over Ireland was to be strengthened by legislation preventing Ireland from trading freely and thus competing with England, so much so that in 1699, Ireland's export trade in manufactured woollen goods was practically destroyed. Another important aspect of Ireland's subjection was the systematic policy of plantation in the province of Ulster. There, property had been forcibly transferred from Catholic to Protestant ownership: after Williamite confiscation, Catholics owned 14% of the land; this figure dropped to 5% by 1778: a series of Acts of Parliament in 1704 and 1709 forbade Catholics from buying land and leases were not to exceed 31 years.

In the aftermath of the Irish Jacobite defeat, many prominent aristocratic landowners left the country for continental Europe, leaving a mass of Irish peasants leaderless and powerless. The social impact of the Flight of the Earls also signalled the destruction of the pre-existing social order.

b - Social consequences

Until the destruction of the Gaelic Order, the social structure of the Irish ruling classes remained basically unchanged from its original Celtic, then medieval, pattern. Royal households in Celtic Ireland included the presence of filid (poets), members of the learned class, whose task it was to record the genealogy of the family and write poetry on big occasions or at banquets and other festivities. If Christianity gradually removed the religious aspect of the poet's mission, his presence was not challenged by the new spiritual order. The poet carried on performing the same tasks, even as the royal families gradually entered the era of medieval feudalism. Even the descendants of Old English settlers or Norman offspring adopted the custom of entertaining a court poet. The tradition survived the military vicissitudes of the 16th and 17th centuries, until the final surrender of the Irish troops at the Siege of Limerick. After their patrons had departed, many court poets were left to their own devices and had to find employment.

¹ "The title of the measure was 'An Act to restrain foreign education'. No doubt the purpose of this act was to limit contact between Irish Catholics and their continental allies. There was also a domestic provision added on, forbidding any 'person whatsoever of the popish religion to publicly teach school or instruct youth in learning'", in Antonia MCMANUS, *The Irish Hedge School and Its Books 1695-1831*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2004, p. 15.

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Some of them reluctantly accepted paid work from the new ruling class¹, most of them became itinerant schoolmasters, who eked out a living by giving instruction to the children of the poor peasants. The setting-up of a clandestine school, called a hedge school because children were taught in secluded open-air places, hidden by a hedge from indiscreet view, was an act of defiance that could be truly considered as "a kind of guerrilla war"². Thus the hedge school phenomenon was closely associated with Catholic resistance. Yet history shows that the situation was to change with time and political circumstances.

B - The Catholic Church's attitude to education

1 - The clandestine Church

The Catholic hierarchy was in a difficult situation after 1691. Politically, the Church was an enemy to the Crown, and even if the policy was a complete failure, there had been attempts in the past by successive English monarchs to use education as a means to force Protestantism and the English language upon Irish children. The Tudors had indeed set up a network of parish schools that were the responsibility of the Anglican Church, but figures show that those educational ventures had only a minor impact on the religious and cultural landscape of Ireland³. But the harshness of the Penal Laws meant that there was a risk for the Catholic bishops of losing influence over the population should the Catholic priests be continuously hunted down. So, in the course of history, Catholic bishops had tried to show enough loyalty to the English Crown to allow the strictest restriction to religious freedom to be lifted. The Penal Laws ceased to be implemented from around 1715, and by the middle of the 18th century, the hierarchy had been restored to its full strength, until the Church's position was finally legalised in 1782. During peace time, there were few risks of

¹ This was the case with Kerry poet Aogán Ó Ráithille, whose patron, Sir Nicholas Browne, died in 1720. His English-educated son, Sir Valentine, who did not treat him as would have been the custom, like giving him back some land he had received from his father as a reward for his loyalty. He expressed his bitterness at the outlandish attitude of Valentine who had rejected him in a poem called *Vailintín Brún*.

² Antonia MCMANUS, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

³ An investigation carried out in the 1780s shows that "there were only 361 operative parish schools teaching 11,000 children from a population of some four millions". Antonia MCMANUS, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

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molestation, and the laws on the statute books were more of a deterrent than a real threat. What concurred to such toleration of an otherwise banished faith was the effort made by the Catholic clergy to teach their flock that they should have respect for the temporal authority of the current rulers, since all authority came from God. Even if bishops and much of the regular clergy were officially outlawed, their presence was tolerated, because it was also in the interest of the ruling class to keep the educated elite as small as possible. The position of the Catholic Church was low key in terms of politics, but bishops knew they would not be allowed to run official schools for the Irish population. Most hedge schoolmasters were Catholics, and worked hand in hand with the parish priests to teach catechism to their pupils. The situation remained officially unchanged throughout the 18th century. However, the Catholic hierarchy had to wage a war on several fronts: first, their prudent attitude was, at times, at odds with the sentiments among the population. Such was the case with the 1798 Year of the French, whose troops had come to support the revolutionary uprising of the United Irishmen, inspired by the French ideals. The Church did not support the rebels' political views, while avoiding direct confrontation with the leaders of the movement. The bishops' attitude is coherent considering the effort made by the authorities with the official creation of a Catholic seminary in Maynooth in 1795, largely due to the British fears of a massive rebellion of the population based on French revolutionary ideals¹. Secondly, a rift was widening between the bishops and the clergy on the one hand, and between the Church and the hedge schoolmasters on the other. Indeed, even if there was no massive drive to conversion, there had been famous examples of parish priests converting to Protestantism, which unsettled the local social fabric; such events are well recorded in folk memory, mostly in songs². As for the schoolmasters, they taught the children of the peasantry, most of them being Catholics, but they also entertained a certain degree of independence from the Church. During the 1798 uprising, many of them had embraced the revolutionary ideals and contributed, either in acts or in propaganda for the United Irishmen, to the spreading of sedition. That was not a new phenomenon, since the schoolmasters' involvement in agrarian movements is also well-documented. The best-known secret organisation is

¹ Antonia MCMANUS, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

² See the sean nós (lit. 'old manner') song called '*Fill, fill a rún*' in Connemara, or its Donegal version about Fr. Dominick O'Donnell, who had turned Protestant. The song is a lament of a mother beseeching her son to come back to the real Church and cursing his conversion.

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that of the Whiteboys, who were very active in the second half of the 18th century¹; they levelled fences, opposed the collecting of rackrents and tithes, and even assassinated rent collectors. The Church saw that they needed to assert their control over the population if they were to gain official recognition by the authorities.

2 - *The Second Reformation and the Catholic struggle for emancipation*

a - The Catholic Church as a political actor

To avert the possible collusion between the Catholic hierarchy, whose flock represented some 85 % of the overall population, and revolutionary France, the Penal Laws were repealed in 1782 to diffuse seditious feelings, paving the way for official recognition of the Church. Eager to secure some prerogatives in the field of education, the bishops expressly demanded that their priests instill obedience to the Crown and vehemently condemn any act or movement that would threaten the Church's endeavour to play a political role in Ireland. That strategy could only be achieved when the bishops effectively controlled the education system, at least that part of the system devoted to the education of the Catholic poor.

Overall, any attempt at driving the population away from the Catholic hierarchy's control had proved a failure, from the parish schools under the reign of Henry VIII to the Elizabethan diocesan schools of 1570, followed by other Anglican-led schools chartered by Parliament². It was estimated that in 1731, there were 549 hedge schools in Ireland, 45 in Dublin alone, and 157 in Armagh, although the county had been systematically planted, and land given to Protestants soon after 1691. In the 1790s, due to a shortage of priests to teach catechism to their flock, the Church had worked hand in hand with the hedge schoolmasters, and parochial reports for the dioceses of Meath, Cloyne and Cashel for those years show that there was at least

¹ The oath-bound society was formed in Co. Tipperary in 1761. See Antonia MCMANUS, *op. cit.*, p. 25-27.

² In February 1733, a charter was granted to the "Incorporated Society in Dublin for promoting English schools in Ireland" (generally known as 'charter schools'). The aim was twofold: first, to teach the English language and manners, then to convert Catholics to the Protestant faith: "The society aimed to train the children in a Protestant environment to be thrifty and hard working by giving them a practical and religious education. By doing so they expected to 'rescue the souls of thousands of popish children from the dangers of superstition and idolatry and their bodies from the miseries of idleness and begging'", in Antonia MCMANUS, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

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one hedge school per parish¹. However, due to the concession made by the British authorities in their fight against the United Irishmen movement and other agrarian struggles, the Catholic Church started to part ways with their erstwhile allies, the hedge schoolmasters. It became clear from then on that, to gain the comfort of religious freedom and greater control, facilitated by the British authorities, over the Catholic population, the Church had to wage a war against what had been their best support among the Irish peasants.

What propelled the Irish bishop to the political forefront was the steady movement for Catholic Emancipation, which started in 1804 with a shrewd Catholic lawyer called Daniel O'Connell. The latter quickly realized that he needed the Church to support his attempts to wrench emancipation from Parliament. The issue was sensitive, since Catholic grievances ranged from denied access to elected posts, to land ownership and religious freedom, which encompassed access to education and official recognition of the involvement of the Church in schools. O'Connell, who had to fight on several fronts, decided to let the bishops lead the battle on the educational front.

The Catholic bishops moved their efforts in two directions: first, they tried to lobby political factions to counteract the influence of an educational movement called the Kildare Place Society, founded in 1814, whose aim was to provide non-denominational teaching to the poor; secondly, they reviled the teaching and morality of the hedge schoolmasters to promote their own legitimacy in controlling Catholic education, the more so as the political situation was rather explosive, due to the multiplication of agrarian unrest and sporadic violence in rural districts. The bishops wanted to show their capacities to arrain rebellion in exchange for recognition by the authorities.

b - The struggle against the Kildare Place Society

The Kildare Place Society was founded on charitable and utilitarian principles. For the most part, their teaching was based on the separation of lay and religious education. Protestant and Catholic children would be taught together, and all pupils would be read passages from the Testament in lieu of catechism, without notes or comments so as not to influence the children one way or the other. The Catholic hierarchy strongly objected to

¹ The hedge schools had achieved a considerable degree of literacy among their pupils, considering they were illegal and the education of Catholics more than frowned upon: in 1761, reports estimated that 54 % of Catholics could read, and 35 % could read and write. The figures were rising steadily.

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such teaching, for several reasons. One was that the Kildare Place schools received grants from the authorities and were headed by the Anglican Church, which was seen by the British as a prime recipient of government patronage. Moreover, many successive commissions set up between 1788 and 1824 to examine the state of education in Ireland were dominated by Anglican members. All those commissions showed that the influence of hedge schools was still predominant all over the land, but that there was no necessity to share decision-making with the Catholic bishops in educational matters; thus the Church was in no position to impose its views.

Moreover, the dispute over the Catholic bishops' objections to the commissions gained momentum because, since the Act of Union in 1800, there had been an evangelical revival among Protestant denominations striving to convert the masses of Irish Catholics. This was mainly caused by the trauma of 1798, which proved, for the Methodists, that Catholics could never be loyal to the Crown. By 1816, they adopted what was felt by the bishops as threatening methods of conversions by preaching to the crowds in Irish, in the hope that their message would come across as genuine and true. The Kildare Place Society served as a channel for those enterprises.

The question of the reading of the Bible in class turned sour with the promulgation of a papal bull banning such readings of the Testament to children, and giving the monopoly of religious education to the priests. Daniel O'Connell, himself a utilitarian, withdrew from the Kildare Place Society in 1820 and helped set up the Irish National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor the following year. This was the Catholic response to the Kildare Place Society. The same year, the bishops promoted a petition to Westminster asking for more power-sharing in the realm of education, to no avail. In 1823 O'Connell founded the Catholic Association to promote Catholic emancipation, and bishops were involved and some played a key role in the education issue¹. They voiced their grievances on education in another petition launched in 1824. The whole issue became entangled with political considerations, with bishops trying to promote their views in the highest political circles², and as members of Boards of commissions inquiring into the state of education. One such commission was set out to provide an accurate picture of the educational landscape between 1824 and 1827. It was dominated by the Kildare Place lobby, but nevertheless found

¹ The most vocal ones were Dr Kelly, Archbishop of Tuam, and Dr Doyle, Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin.

² For the complex political stakes and alliances, see Antonia MCMANUS, *op. cit.*, p. 41-68.

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that there were some 9,352 pay schools in Ireland, most of them hedge schools, and 1,727 connected with educational societies. With 32% of the 5-15 year-old age group attending school, the results showed that the Kildare Place Society only represented 3% of those children. The commission therefore proposed separate religious education, by a lay teacher for Catholics, as well as sweeping powers for the State, in terms of teacher training and general school supervision. These findings and proposals were adamantly rejected by the Catholic Church. However, one consequence was a recommendation to severely curtail the funding of the Kildare Place Society and to discourage the zeal of organisations like the Association for discountenancing vice by limiting their activities to book printing. Bishop Doyle of Kildare made a strong impression on the Committee by persuading them that the Catholic Church was quite happy to be loyal to a Protestant regime, while dismissing claims of idolatry, superstition and sedition.

c - Church propaganda against hedge schools

After a century-long association with the Church, for which they provided invaluable help by teaching catechism to the children, hedge schoolmasters on the whole rejected appeals to be loyal to the Crown. They began to look to other sources of possible emancipation, and their high level of education gave them access to many political pamphlets and foreign political publications¹. As they mingled with the poorest sections of the population, and shared their concerns, they got involved in many movements, most of them agrarian. Because of the strictness of the laws, they became members of oath-bound secret societies, such as the Whiteboys (1761), the Levellers, the Steelboys in Antrim (1770-72), the Rightboys (Cork 1785), and the United Irishmen (1798). They protested against land confiscation, enclosure and the disappearance of common grazing land, as well as the rents and tithes paid to the Established Church. They were notorious for their written threats and nocturnal raids against property. Some movements even challenged the Catholic Church's fees and priests' dues; they even managed to get the support of some of the Protestant gentry. What characterizes those movements is their limited level of violence (with the exception of the United Irishmen and the Defenders from

¹ Notably the works of Thomas Paine (1737-1809), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and William Godwin (1756-1836).

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Armagh¹) and their unsectarian ethos. The involvement of hedge schoolmasters was highly likely, as shown in high-profile cases and trials² of the 1790s. In 1795, a new secret, oath-bound society, the Ribbonmen, launched attacks on Protestants in Ulster and propagated a strange prophecy, written by a certain Pastorini, which claimed that in 1825 the Catholics would be restored to power and rule supreme once more. They were the Catholic equivalent of the Orange societies, which were to be known as the Orange Order.

One of the striking features of hedges schoolmasters' involvement was their stature: most were highly-respected scholars³. Beside using their scholarly skills to further political movements, hedge schoolmasters were, of necessity, beyond state and Church control, by the very essence of their professional activities. Another striking feature is that they taught children on a non-denominational basis; in other words, their teaching was not restricted to Catholic children, and in some areas, a number of Protestant parents sent their children to pay schools, headed by Catholic hedge schoolmasters⁴. Moreover, while the United Irishmen were defeated in 1798, they had managed to propagate their ideas through a network of printers and publishers, and thus win a propaganda war; this could not have been possible but for the degree of literacy among Catholics thanks to the hedge schools.

The Church's response to such challenge was quick and harsh. The hierarchy promptly instructed their priests to close their chapels to political

¹ The Defenders were set up to defend Ulster Catholics from militant Protestant groups between 1792 and 1764. They were also involved in murders, notably of 11 revenue commissioners in Leitrim, provoking counter-terror measures in 1794.

² Notably Lawrence O'Connor, executed in 1795 for his participation in a Defender attack, as well as other schoolmasters in Connaught and Ulster. See Antonia MCMANUS, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

³ "Without exception they were highly respected in the teaching profession. Richard MacElligott (1756-1818) was an eminent Celtic scholar from Limerick who was arrested in 1798. The Belmullet, Co. Mayo poet, linguist and hedge schoolmaster Ríocárd Báiréad (1739-1819), was imprisoned for his membership of the United Irishmen and James Baggott (1771-1806), called James O'Baggott as a mark of respect for his considerable ability as a mathematician, was a Limerick hedge schoolmaster who was actively involved in the United Irishmen at the highest level. Other masters who offered the benefits of their learning and organisational skills to the movement were happy to remain anonymous to avoid the risk of being hanged, excommunicated or banished from their parishes", *ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴ This was verified by the 1825 Commission: "In these schools the masters taught religion to all denominations separately", *ibid.*, p. 59

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meetings and ostensibly distanced itself from any seditious movement. With the Relief Act of 1793 and the setting-up of the Maynooth seminary, which effectively severed ties between the Irish Catholic Church and continental seminaries like Louvain and Saragossa, the bishops sought recognition and respectability from the British authorities. Their strategy concerning hedge schools was to deplore their low standards of teaching, and to denounce what they called their lack of morality and seditious nature.

The Church had, on the whole, nothing to complain about the competence of hedge schoolmasters, but its involvement in commissions that were controlled by Anglicans prompted bishops to launch a campaign of denigration against hedge schoolmasters, the aim of which was to prompt the State to give them their share in public education. In January 1831, Bishop Doyle wrote to Lord Edward Stanley, the Irish chief secretary (the official representative of the British government in Ireland), that "(they) have within these few years suppressed numberless hedge schools, and united, often within the place of worship the children theretofore dispersed"¹. He then made his point that, "as Catholics outnumbered Protestants eight to one, in his diocese alone, and as a large expenditure would be required to maintain 'Catholic' schools, it would be better to devise an educational system uniting the children of the different religious persuasions in the same schools"².

Of course, the Church's attacks on the hedge schools were not the most virulent ones; the Kildare Place Societies and many other organisations involved in education for the poor contributed to the existing prejudices against those illegal schools among the administration and the Ascendancy, because it served their proselytizing purposes. One of the members of the 1825 Commission on education, Antony Richard Blake, though a Catholic, spoke of the hedge schoolmasters as "particularly bad from what I could hear of them, they were described as very mischievous people, they were supposed to be persons engaged in writing inflammatory letters and notices"³.

As for the teaching standards, the prejudice was still very strong, and, again, the allegations were never supported by hard facts. Another member of the Commission, James Glassford, a Scottish advocate and a staunch

¹ Quoted by Antonia MCMANUS, *ibid.*, p. 66.

² *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³ The first Report of the Commission is quoted by Antonia MCMANUS, p.58.

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supporter of the London Hibernian Society¹, believed that "the hedge schools ... were schools in which the lowest possible state of morals was observed, in which the most immoral books were admitted, and in which intellectual education was at the lowest possible scale"².

However, considering the scale of the onslaught against them and their vicariousness, the survival of the hedge schools over such a long period of time, even after the National School system was founded in 1831, was something of a miracle. To assess their vitality, it is necessary to analyse the teaching and learning tradition in Ireland well before the English domination, then to outline the special relationship between schoolmasters and families in terms of curriculum and parents' expectations. There is no doubt that those once illegal pay schools met very serious needs and the Irish poor were ready to go to great lengths in order to pursue their educational aims.

II - Hedge schools, between cultural resistance and educational demands

A - The learned classes before colonisation

1 - A medieval tradition of independence

Celtic Ireland is known through the writings of Latin authors, and the bulk of the information they provide is mere hearsay. A more reliable source of information are the manuscripts, compilations of texts and poems ranging from the 7th to the 18th century. What is remarkable about this tradition is that the different linguistic layers are preserved; in other words, some Old Irish texts contain passages that are much more archaic, but were nonetheless incorporated to the corpus. It is also noteworthy that the Irish learned tradition was mainly oral; indeed, the written tradition became more widespread with the coming of Christianity. Until then the learned classes were connected to the administration of the sacred, and were represented by druids. They were ambassadors, historians, genealogists, court poets and priests. However, this order gradually dissolved under the influence of Christianity, but what was remarkable was that those poets, historians and genealogists became Christian monks and were the first

¹ This organisation, created in 1806, clearly aimed to convert Catholics to Protestantism under the cover of education and used the Irish language to improve their chances of success.

² Quoted by A. MCMANUS, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

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compilers of the bulk of Celtic lore¹. But the poets, or *filii* in Irish, retained their independence of mind, and some texts testify to the influence they wielded over kings and commoners; many a time did they have conflicts with monks and saints too, and they zealously sought to maintain their rights and prerogatives. Daniel Corkery offers the most detailed description of the importance of poets in the social fabric of the Gaelic order:

Those poets seized and maintained their pride of place not as individuals, but as a body. They were numerous in all centuries down to the seventeenth. Before the Danes came into Ireland they had become so powerful that 'they were three times banished by the kings of Ireland; but the province of Ulster defended them against the vengeance of the other Irish'. St Columcille... pleaded for them at Drumceat; and though at this crisis, and time and again in the following centuries, laws were framed to regulate them, what between their numbers, their wealth, their power of satire, their indispensability as chroniclers, and, it is hinted, their use of the hunger-strike, they seemed to have lived always a little of the thither side of the law².

Because of their connection with the sacred, even though their power had been superseded by the priests, they were both respected and feared by all, whether king or commoner, especially for their power of satire, which could bring misfortune and physical blemish to their victims³. Such fears subsided well into the 18th century, where a satirical poem could destroy someone's pride and reputation forever; besides, most Irish peasants believed that the *filii* could send or protect from the evil eye, and poets used

¹ See Françoise LE ROUX and Christain J. GUYONVARCH, *Les druides*, Rennes, Ouest France, 1986, for a thorough research on the learned classes and their relationship with the sacred. According to Proinsias Mac Cana: "Yet, despite all the evidence of revision and suppression there remains a great deal of material bearing upon native institutions and ideology – sacred kingship, the otherworld, cosmic division and the provinces, status and functions of druids and *filid*, and so on – which presupposes the earlier existence of a complex system of socio-religious doctrine and practice consciously maintained and applied during many centuries" in "Early Irish ideology and the concept of unity", in Richard KEARNEY (ed.), *The Irish Mind, Exploring Intellectual Traditions*, Dublin, Wolfhound Press, 1981, p. 62.

² Daniel CORKERY, *The Hidden Ireland*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, first published 1924; this edition 1967, p. 78.

³ See *Tochmarc Luaine*, 'La courtise de Luaine', ed. Whitley Stokes, in *Revue Celtique* 24, p. 278, or *Senchus Mor*, published in *Ancient Laws of Ireland* I, p. I-LI and II, p. V-IX, and III, p. XLI-LXXXVI.

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satire against any layman that dared deal with political or religious issues, not to mention learning¹.

Thus, the poet, the learned man, combined a strong sense of cultural and collective identity, as well as of his own worth. It is not surprising that such a group would be considered with suspicion or outright hostility by the authorities in the course of Irish history:

A millenium and a half later (after druidism²) the same suspicion and animosity coloured the attitude of the British government towards the Irish 'rhymers' who were the lineal descendants of the druids, and ultimately for the same reason: consciousness of cultural identity and commitment to its preservation is not overtly political, even among a professional elite, but they have profound political implications and a political potential which, given the right circumstances – the threat of foreign domination for example – can easily be transformed into an active and even decisive force. This is why the Romans and English distrusted druids and *filí* and acted more or less effectively to neutralise them³.

2 - *The Bardic schools: curriculum and teaching methods*

The originality of the Irish school system before the coming of the English and, later on, the disaster of Kinsale, was that it was frequented by poets. However, the term 'poet' is misleading, in that it immediately recalls a literary genre whose role was to entertain aristocratic households and deal with love or honour or glory. There is more to the Irish word *file* than a mere writer of poetry. As heirs to the druidic tradition, poets performed very specific functions: they were genealogists, chroniclers (historians to a certain degree) as well as judges in a legal system based on custom. Feudal families needed their services to establish their claims or rights over the

¹ “ Is de bharr olc a bheith curtha ag duine nó ag daoine éigin ar an bhfile a thagann staid fhiáin na feirge ar a aigne (...) San fhilíocht ón 17ú go dtí an 19ú céad, faighimid luachanna eile ag teacht i gceist sa chomhthéacs céanna, luachanna a bhí faoi bhéim de bharr an tsáraithe a bhí á dhéanamh orthu ag an am. Ina measc seo bhí an charthanacht le bochtáin, an chúirtéis, an dílseacht chreidimh, agus an scoláireacht “ (It is because someone or a group of people had caused him a wrong that the poet raving with wrath, proceeds to show it to them. (...) In the poetry from the 17th to the 19th centuries, other causes are brought about in the same context. Among other things, poverty, courtesy, religious beliefs and academic knowledge), in Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *An File, Staidéar ar Osnádúrthacht na Filíochta sa Traidisiún Gaelach*, Baile Átha Cliath (Dublin), Oifig an tSoláthair, 1982, pp. 308-309.

² Author's note.

³ Prionsias MAC CANA, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

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land and to maintain the legality of their lineage, as Irish society was not egalitarian; social ranking was crucial to establish legal responsibility and the scale of legal retribution for any offence committed¹. The curriculum in Bardic schools reflected those concerns as it was essentially professional: they dispensed teaching of law, history, language and literature (or poetry, and the art of verse-making), through the medium of the Irish language, even if classical languages like Latin or Greek were also thoroughly studied². The only subject-matter that was not taught in Bardic schools was religion, a domain wholly left to the monks and theologians³. Yet, even if bards were rarely monks, the constant travels of Irish missionaries to the Continent in the early centuries may explain why Latin and Greek were of crucial interest to the Bardic schools because learned men often met each other.

As regards the teaching methods, emphasis was put on memorising verses and word games; intricate rhyme-patterns were applied to the topics that the future *filii* were supposed to elaborate on. Each school was founded by a chief poet (or *ollamh* in Irish), and the academic spirit soon dominated the teaching. Indeed many verses followed the same immutable pattern, and most poems were panegyrics for the poets' patrons, as feudal families had started compiling verses in their honour in 'poem-books' known as *duanairí* "which brought together the formal verse of individual poets or groups of poets or verse composed for individual patron families"⁴. Generally the learning process was a long one, and it was not rare for an apprentice poet to spend as long as twenty years polishing his trade. If Bardic schools followed the tradition, they were not subject to any tutelar power; on the contrary, they remained staunchly independent, and one of their activities consisted in sending bright hopeful *filii* from place to place to challenge other schools. The strength of those schools was in the patronage they got from rich and powerful families. This was to change dramatically

¹ For the intricacies of the Irish legal system, see Fergus KELLY, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Dublin, DIAS, 1988.

² See Daniel CORKERY, *The Hidden Ireland*, *op. cit.*, p. 80-81.

³ "The bardic school... existed apart from the Church, unlike the Continental university (...) After some centuries when, at last, its abbeys were destroyed, and its learning flung out upon the roads, the Church found itself shiftless and dismayed. The bardic schools, with their deep-rooted feeling for Latin, if not also for Greek, then found themselves, shattered and changed though they were, gradually called on to fulfil a new purpose: in the penal days they became the unofficial seminaries of the Church", Daniel CORKERY, *The Hidden Ireland*, p. 97.

⁴ Prionsias MAC CANA, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

after the collapse of the old social order. Most poets lost their source of income and the status attached to their traditional function, but gatherings of poets, known as Courts of poetry, took place as late as the 18th century. Here is a description of the likely proceedings of such Court:

The meeting of the Court was generally made to fall in with some local event – a fair, a marriage, a 'pattern' or an important funeral - indeed, with any occasion that would bring the people together from their distant countryside... Presided over by the most famous poet of the district, who always took great pride in his authority, the poets read – recited, perhaps, is the better word – or sang such verses as they had composed since the previous meeting. (...) True to the tradition, the dearest study of those men was still the technique of verse; the question of technique is, however, among artists, largely one of precedents (...) They were workmen discussing their own craft, one of the greatest in the world, discussing it with energy, an energy all the heartier inasmuch as there was nothing else in their lives for their creative thoughts to settle upon. (...) Besides this reciting of verse and the discussions that followed, those gatherings enabled the poets to borrow manuscripts from one another as well as to examine such manuscripts as might have been discovered since the last Court was held. They had no publishers, it must be recollected, no law of copyright, no press, no printers: it was, therefore, in those Courts that many a famous poem was heard for the first time.¹

Such description does not only give us an insight into the culture of the penal age in Ireland, but it also gives a clear picture of the loose – and yet coherent - organisation of teacher training for hedge schoolmasters: not every teacher was a poet by trade; yet most poets, left penniless after the destruction of the aristocratic families that had provided for them, became hedge schoolmasters.

B - The hedge schools: a network of trained teachers

1 - Training and setting up a school

In an age when education by and for Catholics was at times severely repressed, prospective schoolmasters benefitted from the remaining network of the former Bardic schools. Whenever a promising young scholar was singled out by his schoolmaster, he would receive intensive classes in all the fields of learning that the schoolmaster was proficient in. He would

¹ Daniel CORKERY, *op. cit.*, p. 102-104.

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then send his scholar to other renowned hedge schoolmasters for more learning, and gave the young man a letter of recommendation (called a 'pass') to his illustrious colleague¹. Thus, the figure of the wandering scholar, known in Irish as '*An Scoláire bocht*' (the poor scholar) became a very familiar sight throughout the country. He did not get paid for his studies, but was given hospitality in cabins and barns. Schoolmasters did not get paid to teach these scholars, but having regular visits of students was considered very prestigious. Such was the respect bestowed on learned men that their lifestyle, however spartan, was considered a blessing, as the first verse of the following poem, called *An Scoláire*, shows:

Aoibhinn beatha an scoláire	(Pleasant the scholar's life
Bhíos ag déanamh léighinn;	When his books surround him;
Is follas díbh, a dhaoine,	Tis clear to ye, O people,
Gur dó is aoibhne i nÉirinn.	No better is in Ireland.) ²

Books were expensive and rare, and scholars as well as schoolmasters perpetuated the long tradition of copying manuscripts containing lessons, poems, and local lore collected here and there. Books were a sign of recognition for the wandering scholar and schoolmaster, and their loss was considered as more than a tragedy, as an excerpt from the poem (also a traditional song in Irish) called *Amhrán na Leabhar*, by Tomás Rua Ó Súilleabháin (1785-1848) shows³:

Bhí mórán Éireann leabhartha,
Nár áiríos díbh im labhartha,
Leabhar na Laighneach beannaithe
Ba bhréatha faoin spéir.

¹ "The reputation of the schools of Munster was not merely local. From nearly all over Ireland 'poor scholars' and others who had learned all that they could in their own neighbourhood, and who were not yet satisfied that their education was complete, journeyed thither. (...) 'The Munster masters', wrote Carleton in 1830, 'have long been, and still are, particularly celebrated for making excellent classical and mathematical scholars'", in P.J. DOWLING, *The Hedge Schools of Ireland*, Cork, The Mercier Press, 1968, p. 40. See also Antonia MCMANUS, *op. cit.*, p. 88-89.

² Aonghus Ó Dálaigh, quoted and translated by Daniel CORKERY, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

³ "Tomás Rua, schoolteacher and poet had been transferred from Derrynane to Portmagee. He placed his huge and valuable library of books – both printed and in manuscript form, all leather bound- and his clothes on a boat which was travelling from Derrynane to Valentia Harbour. He himself travelled by road. Unfortunately, the boat overturned ... just outside Derrynane Bay and his priceless library was lost", notes by Tim Dennehy, traditional singer, to the song in his album of traditional songs called "*Farewell to Milton Malbay*", ed. by Sceilig Records, 1997.

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An 'Feirmeoir' álainn, gasta, deas,
A chuireadh a shíol go blasta ceart,
Thug ruachnoic fraoigh is aitimn ghlais
Go gealbhánta féir.
Scoirim as mo leabhartha
Cé chrádar mé,
Is ná cuirfeadsa aon ní ar fharraige
Go brách lem ré...

When the scholar qualified as a schoolmaster, he sought to establish his own school, and had to prove his worth and his reputation, since he would get no other source of income, except by becoming a *spáilpín* (or 'farm labourer') when he found himself in financial difficulties. There were two ways to establish oneself. The first one, legendary in rural areas, involved challenging an established schoolteacher in a battle of words and verse about their academic knowledge. The winner of the contest, judged by the public, would remain in the place, and the loser had no choice but to pack his belongings and seek his fortunes somewhere else, or so the story goes.

In town, the prospective teacher resorted to the printed press to publish advertisements for his educational venture, or send a letter to the local parish priest. One such letter, written in verse in 1784, was sent to a priest called Fr Ned Fitzgerald by the wandering poet Eoghán Ruadh Ó Súilleabháin, asking him, in English and in Irish, to advertise for his school from the pulpit:

Reverend Sir-

Please to publish from the altar of your holy mass
That I will open a school at Knocknagree Cross,
Where the tender babes will be well off,
For it's there I'll teach them their Criss Cross;
Reverend Sir, you will by experience find
All my endeavours to please mankind,
For it's there I will teach them how to read and write;
The Catechism I will explain
To each young nymph and noble swain,
With all young ladies I'll engage
To forward them with speed and care,
With book-keeping and mensuration,
Euclid's Elements and Navigation,
With Trigonometry and sound gauging,
And English Grammar with rhyme and reason.

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With the grown-up youths I'll first agree
To instruct them well in the Rule of Three;
Such of them as are well able,
The cube root of me will learn,
Such as are of a tractable genius,
With compass and rule I will teach them,
Bills, bonds and informations,
Summons, warrants, supersedes,
Judgement tickets good,
Leases, receipts in full,
And releases, short accounts,
With rhyme and reason,
And sweet love letters for the ladies.¹

History has it that Eoghán Ruadh's school did not last very long, probably because of his wayfaring personality. Others made more durable ventures. Besides, with the relaxation of the penal laws, some education or Bible societies, all officially Protestant, managed to employ Catholic schoolmasters of the hedge school tradition. Local gazettes testify to the boom in the teaching trade, where the most diverse compendium of subject-matters was advertised for the benefit of demanding parents². The latter considered education as absolutely crucial for the future of their offspring, whatever their social standing, and it was in the schoolmasters' interests to live up to such expectations.

2 - Competition, and the survival of the fittest

Hedge schools were all fee-paying schools, and teachers had, of necessity, to bow to parental pressure and demands for certain subject-matters to be taught. For all the claims of the schoolmasters, and the huge demand, reputation was the prime condition by which to eke out a living, even among poverty-stricken communities in rural Ireland, which had always been noted for its state of dejection and poverty. All foreign visitors report on the abject state of the Irish peasants, which sharply contrasted with their humour and optimism. People were ready to provide schoolmasters of good repute with whatever facilities they had, be it accommodation in a mud cabin, food, turf or money. In the Penal Age,

¹ Quoted by Daniel CORKERY, *op. cit.*, p. 201-202.

² See in particular, Antonia MCMANUS, *op. cit.*, p. 90-91 for two fine examples of such advertisements.

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when the laws against Catholics were the most strictly enforced, whole communities managed to send their children to hedge schools, however deprived they were. They went to great lengths to offer protection to outlawed teachers:

In 1775 Twiss (an English traveller) 'observed a dozen bare-legged boys sitting by the side of the road scrawling on scraps of papers placed on their knees'. Arthur Younge (1741-1820) noticed many hedge schools also but he felt that this was a misnomer for them. He wrote 'they might as well be termed ditch ones, for I have seen many a ditch full of scholars', and the French tourist de Latocnaye who walked around Ireland between the years 1796 and 1797 and found 'numerous schools in the hedges'¹

P.J. Dowling comments that "the Hedge School, such as it was, certainly rendered possible, during the first half of the 18th century, the conduct of a kind of guerilla warfare in education"² by their facility to disband and reform somewhere else when found and threatened by local officials.

The national demand for instruction pushed villages and parishes to circumvent the law. Some communities managed to attract schoolmasters by advertising for the fees they were ready to pay, and an impoverished teacher had to take what he could get³. In some instances, renowned schoolmasters were kidnapped by local men who wanted to secure their services. The storyteller William Carson, an ex-schoolmaster turned Presbyterian, elaborated on such an incident in his short story called *The Hedge School*, and the preparation of such derring-do is the subject of the second part ('The abduction of Mat Kavanagh, the Hedge Schoolmaster'), so deprived and ill-reputed was the neighbourhood. There was therefore no shortage of demand and supply; however, if competition became too harsh, some masters did not hesitate to satirize their rivals.

Giving priority to good education was not the privilege of the ruling or the middle classes. One distinctive feature of the Irish countryside was the

¹ Antonia MCMANUS, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

² P.J. DOWLING, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

³ "Any shelter was better than none, and what he obtained was usually given freely to him. The people wanted education for their children and very often paid more for it than they could afford. Writing in 1808 of his Irish-speaking tenants in County Sligo, Lord Palmerston said: 'The thirst for education is so great that there are now three or four schools upon the estate. The people join in engaging some itinerant master; they run him up a miserable mud hut on the road side, and the boys pay him half-a-crown, or some five shillings a quarter. They are taught reading, writing and arithmetic, and what, from the appearance of the establishment, no one would imagine, Latin and even Greek'", *ibid.*, p. 37.

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high degree of educated people among the peasantry. Indeed, Irish peasants were very literate, considering the appalling living conditions they had to endure. What remains to be seen is the cause of such desire for academic education, including Latin, English, mathematics, gauging, letter-writing. Such craving for education also explains why and how the loose, haphazard system of the hedge school was maintained over such a long period of time. In fact, the close-knit relationship between parents and teachers helped generate an upsurge in pedagogical and organisational creativity against all political, economic and administrative odds.

C - The Hedge Schools: a unique and creative education system

1 - A demand for academic knowledge

Given the scarcity of money and buildings, school attendance was motivated by the range of subject matters taught. Far from accepting the utilitarian view that no one should be raised above their condition, as was the creed of the Kildare Place Society, Irish parents insisted on the necessity to teach mathematics, science, book-keeping, as well as land surveying and measuring. Some of those topics were motivated by necessity, especially in a rural society where land was the measure of wealth, and big houses providers of employment. Nevertheless, mathematics were not solely confined to arithmetics, and some scholars taught in hedge schools reached high levels of expertise. Some renowned teachers like Owen Reynolds of Mohill, Co. Leitrim was nicknamed 'the bright star in mathematical learning', while James Baggott "had not only a national but an international reputation as a mathematician, being a personal friend of the eminent physicist Laplace (1794-1827) who was tutor to Napoleon. Because of this distinction he was known as 'The Great O'Baggott'"¹. Another bright student and teacher, Michael Madden, "won acclaim for introducing the compact multiplication table. (...) A year after Madden entered Trinity College as a student in 1756, he died tragically, in a drowning accident. His death was recorded in a contemporary publication which acknowledged his mathematical genius"².

Other subjects taught in hedge schools included reading and writing, but also Latin, Greek, Hebrew, English and Irish grammar. This has to be viewed in relation to the parental wish to send their children abroad as

¹ Antonia MCMANUS, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

² *Ibid.*, p. 121.

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clerics in continental seminaries or in commerce with Europe. Irish and European history were also in great demand. Religion was very popular, and this was due to the shortage of trained priests from the continent, the more so as French seminaries were closed down during the Revolution. However, hedge schoolmasters did not limit religious teaching to Roman Catholics, as the presence of the Established Church's books proves. The parents' ambitions for their sons was for them to become either priests or clerks or schoolmasters, and the landed gentry regarded with disbelief the large number of their poor tenants who had enough Latin to their name to read the great classics like Horace, Virgil or Ovid.

2 - Teaching methods: necessity is the mother of invention

The reputation of a master was not only based on his academic achievements, but also on his personality, thus continuing a long tradition born in the old Bardic schools and the practice of fostering a student to a reputed master. Besides, hedge schools being fee-paying, it was necessary to ensure that the children were kept happy and in constant progress. Therefore, a master who was in charge of teaching children of different ages and levels had to resort to a great variety of classroom activities, and games were also allowed in order to keep the children alert. William Carleton expresses strong pedagogical opinions, reflecting on the mechanical approach of conventional schools, as opposed to the apparent chaos that reigned in hedge schools:

Children are not men, nor influenced by the same motives – they do not reflect, because their capacity for reflection is imperfect; so is their reason; whereas, on the contrary, their faculties for education (excepting judgement, which strengthens my argument) are in greater vigour in youth than in manhood. The general neglect of this distinction is, I am convinced, a stumbling block in the way of youthful instruction, though it characterises all our modern systems. We should never forget that they are children, nor should we bind them by a system, whose standard is taken from the maturity of human intellect. We may bend our reason to theirs, but we cannot elevate their capacity to our own.¹

Carleton insists on the necessity to let a child behave in class with as much freedom as he would in his natural surroundings, and such an attitude would not cause disrespect for the schoolmaster, as he added that "a master should be a monarch in his school, but by no means a tyrant".

¹ Quoted by P.J. DOWLING, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

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Teaching was tailored to individual needs, and each child went about his business, depending on the task given by the teacher. Certain activities were widespread and almost ritualized, like the spelling lessons. They consisted in writing line upon line, associating repetition to memorization. Some teachers had their pupils 'rehearse' their lessons, which meant they had to repeat out loud entire sentences. Some other masters encouraged word acquisition by organising contests among pupils to find synonyms for each word that was submitted to the class. The winner of the contest was given some token of his excellence, and emulation was a powerful element¹.

3 - Books and stationery²

Considering the destitute conditions of most Irish peasants and cottiers, it was remarkable that the schoolmasters managed to use so many books in their schools, because parents had to provide the books as well as pens and paper. In most cases they had to make do with what the parish could afford, and those lists of textbooks that have survived the vagaries of history may lack coherence.

Some masters insisted on using up-to-date primers for reading, spelling or science³. Some had compiled and published their own teaching methods in their areas of expertise, and manuscripts circulated, as well as subscriptions for newly-published books; subscribers were schoolmasters, for the most part. Lack of books was no impediment to teaching, since, as P.J. Dowling remarks,

Usually, the schoolmaster who undertook to teach these subjects had sufficient knowledge for the purpose; and even when he could not afford to buy the latest text-books, he had in manuscript form the most up-to-date information both as regards matter and method obtained by himself from a variety of sources⁴.

One solution to the shortage of affordable teaching material was found with 'chapbooks'. A chapbook is "a small book or pamphlet containing poems, ballads, stories or religious tracts" (*New Penguin Dictionary*).

¹ For more precisions about the daily routine of a hedge school, see Antonia MCMANUS, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

² A detailed study of the schoolbooks is provided by Antonia MCMANUS in her seminal study *The Irish Hedge School and its Books, 1695-1831*. Any attempts at exhaustivity would be beyond the scope of this article.

³ "There were a number of works on arithmetic in general use. Voster's Arithmetic was the oldest. This was superseded by Gough's and the latter, in the early part of the 19th century, by Thompson's ". P.J. DOWLING, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

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Chapbooks were small, cheaply-produced books, most often octavo or duodecimo printings of twenty-four pages, sold without a cover. They were so called because they were sold by peddlars known as chapmen. *Chap* comes from the Old English for 'trade', so a *chapman* was literally "a dealer who sold books". Chapmen would carry boxes containing the conveniently-sized editions, either in town on street corners, or travelling through the countryside. They typically sold their wares for twopence or threepence, and stocked a large variety of titles. Among the types of content contained in chapbooks were romantic tales of chivalry, religious and moral instruction, cookbooks, guides to fortune telling and magic, and bawdy stories full of innuendo¹. However, they were not known in Ireland as chapbooks until 1824; they were formerly referred to as 'Burton books'.

The school curriculum for reading was therefore much like a rattlebag of bizarre associations, mixing old tales and the lives of famous highwaymen and rebels. What made those chapbooks so popular was their price, which was originally set at a half-penny, and later raised to sixpence. This gave rise to a real industry in the major cities like Cork and Dublin: "It was estimated that the circulation of chapbooks grew to about 300,000 per annum. Irish chapbooks were mostly pirated versions of English originals. They owed their existence to a thriving reprint industry which had developed in this country between the years 1740 and 1800, due to an oversight in the Copyright Act of 1709, which excluded Ireland from its provisions"².

The constant resort to those cheap popular readings gave hedge schools a bad name, for some books were highly criticized by the official body of lay and church educators, especially when some of them described the lives of great rebels or criminals of the day.³ There are few records of schoolmasters' opinion on those cheap materials but they must have adopted a pragmatic approach to them, as there was really nothing else that the parents could afford.

¹ For more precisions, see <http://web.mit.edu/21h.418/www/nhausman/chap1.html>.

² Antonia MCMANUS, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

³ "The London Hibernian Society regarded the books they found as 'nonsensical' (...). The Hibernian Bible Society called them 'foolish legends which poisoned the minds of youth'. Other semi-religious bodies endeavoured to suppress these 'licentious books'". P.J. DOWLING, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

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III - Conclusion

All in all, hedge schools were the stronghold of Irish resistance to cultural domination by an outside power. The schoolmasters were able to resist rejection and repression because they represented Irish people's culture that would not be uprooted. Even after the National School system was established, the influence of hedge schools did not waver for some time. Indeed such a situation can be explained by the peculiar social fabric of the country: where there is cultural diversity, there is a need for centralised state-like structures, but "where there is cultural homogeneity these may be dispensed with"¹. Figures show that, in some counties like Roscommon in 1841, "the hedge schools were still educating the majority of school children"². These numbers were to freefall a couple of decades later, due to the ongoing rivalry between the Catholic Church and the old, independent schoolmasters, once the bishops' objective to share power with the other denominations in the field of education had been set out. Moreover, another tragic event signalled the end of the hedge schools, and this was the Great Potato Famine of 1845-50. The deep impact of the Famine will never be stressed enough, because the social group that paid the heaviest price were the Irish-speaking poor, those who provided a living for the schoolmasters and the hedge schools, those who were most steeped in the traditions of the past. Many of them died of starvation and related diseases, many of them emigrated to America, with no hope of returning to the 'old sod'. Meanwhile, an emerging Catholic middle class began to thrive, and its Victorian desire to conform to the social norms made them shed the traditional references and social practices of old, so as to gain more 'respectability'.

"In Roscommon in 1835 there were 189 hedge schools, by 1879, a year after the passing of the Intermediary Act, this number had fallen to 11, and a very small number continued into the latter years of the nineteenth century"³.

As the Irish language gradually disappeared from the Irish landscape, the poetic and pedagogical skills of the hedge schoolmaster were no longer in great demand. The growth of emigration meant that whole swathes of culture were to be abandoned. Soon the British administration would

¹ Prionsias MAC CANA, "Early Irish Ideology and the Concept of Unity", in Richard KEARNEY, ed, *The Irish Mind*, p. 73.

² Antonia MCMANUS, *op. cit*, p. 68.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

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undertake to map the whole island in detail, to update the old Ordnance Survey maps. By the same token, they also decided to translate or transliterate, anglicize, Irish placenames, an enterprise they would not have carried out without the assistance of schoolmasters. Such is the setting of Brian Friel's superb play *Translations*. The opening stage directions perfectly render the crepuscular atmosphere of decadence and death of the once flourishing hedge schools:

"The hedge-school is held in a disused barn or hay-shed or byre. Along the back wall are the remains of five or six stalls..."¹

Once the English regiment has carried out its duty by surveying the entire district, once the small group of pupils has been dispersed by the tragic death of the only idealist among the soldiers, murdered by a local man, one of the students, Máire Chatach (or 'Curly Mary'), who was in love with the English soldier and is waiting for him to return, asks Hugh the old schoolmaster:

Maire: I'm back again. I set out for somewhere but I couldn't remember where. So I came back here.

Hugh: Yes, I will teach you English, Maire Chatach.

Maire: Will you, Master? I must learn it. I need to learn it.

Hugh: Indeed you may well be my only pupil (...)

Maire: When can we start?

Hugh: Not today. Tomorrow perhaps. After the funeral. We'll begin tomorrow. But don't expect too much. I will provide you with the available words and the available grammar. But will that help you to interpret between privacies? I have no idea. But it's all we have. I have no idea at all.

Maire: Master, what does the English word 'always' mean?

Hugh: *Semper – per omnia saecula*. The Greeks called it 'aei'. It's not a word I'd start with. It's a silly word, girl.²

¹ Brian FRIEL, *Translations*, London, Faber & Faber, first published in 1981.

² Brian FRIEL, *op. cit.*, p. 90-91.

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