

## Irish

Christianity gained a secure foothold in Ireland during the fifth century, and Ogham (SECTION 26), inspired doubtless by contact with the Roman alphabet, is the earliest writing system known to have been used by the Irish. Experimentation with the Latin alphabet itself, as opposed to the Ogham script, may have been on-going during the early centuries of the Christian period, but our oldest surviving texts date from the seventh century, and Classical Old Irish (8th and 9th centuries) is the best starting point for a discussion of the adaptation of the Roman alphabet to Irish.

The Irish adopted 18 Roman characters: the vowel symbols *a, e, i, o, u*; the consonant symbols *b, c, d, f, g, l, m, n, p, r, s, t*; and *h*, which for them was for the most part a *nota aspirationis*—though it could also appear as a mute letter at the beginning of short words and loans (e.g. *hí* [i] ‘in’, *húar* [uəɾ] ‘hour’ < Latin *hora*). The vowel symbols may be said to have their Latin values, both long and short, in Old Irish; the long vowels are served by the use of the Latin *apex* (acute accent), i.e. *á, é, í, ó, ú*. The Irish consonants are more complicated, as each of these had a *broad* (velar) and *slender* (palatal) quality (for the most part contrastive), and in initial position each had *mutated* and *unmutated* (radical) forms. The most important developments in the evolution of Irish orthography focus on establishing an unambiguous system of representing this variety in the consonantal system. As the first stage in this evolution, Old Irish orthography is the least unambiguous and thus the most complicated.

TABLE 59.6: *Glides Indicating Consonant Quality*<sup>a</sup>

<i>Old</i>	<i>Modern</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	
Fintan	Fiontan	fʰɔntən	‘Fintan’
Déclán	Déaglán	dʰe:ɡla:n	‘Declan’
úa Cellig	Ó Ceallaigh	o: kʰalə(ɣʰ)	‘O’Kelly’
úa Cennétig	Ó Ceinneídigh	o: kʰe:nʰe:dʰəɣʰ	
	Ó Cinnéide	o: kʰi:nʰe:dʰə	‘O’Kennedy’
Éirenn	Éireann	e:ɾən	‘of Ireland’

a. A consonant marked with [ʰ] is slender, otherwise it is broad.

A system of writing on- and off-glides, which had begun early, was perfected in time to distinguish palatal and velar quality. The front vowels *i* and *e* were associated with the former; *a*, *o*, and *u* with the latter. By the Early Modern period (1200–1650), the rule *Caol le caol, leathan le leathan* ‘Slender with slender, broad with broad’ had been evolved whereby consonants had to be followed, preceded, and/or flanked by glides indicating their quality. Some examples illustrate this (TABLE 59.6).

Modern Irish spelling, then, is characterized by the use of digraphs such as *ea/éa/eá, iol/ío, ail/ái, oil/ói, uil/úi*, etc. One member of each set serves solely to mark the quality of a preceding or following consonant; the other serves primarily as the main vowel but also, by its nature, indicates the quality of an adjacent consonant. The first letter of the digraph represents the main vowel if it is long; otherwise the second usually predominates, thus *féar* [fʲeːr] ‘grass’ but *fear* [fʲar] ‘man’; *Séamus* [sʲeːməs] ‘James’ but *Seán* [sʲaːn] ‘John’.

In word-initial position, consonants in Irish may have their radical form; or they may be mutated by *lenition* (spirantization)\* or *nasalization* (nasalization and subsequent absorption of voiced stops, voicing of voiceless stops, and lengthening of voiced continuants etc.). A good example of lenition is furnished by the name *Séamus* [sʲeːməs], vocative *a Shéamuis* [ə hɛːməsʲ], whence Scottish *Hamish*. The final sound of a preceding closely connected word was the governing factor in Primitive Irish (pre-5th century): a vowel lenited a following consonant, a nasal nasalized it, any other consonant left it unmutated. But initial mutations are a feature of grammar in the period of recorded Irish, as the final syllables which caused them were lost in or around the fifth century. Thus the nominative, accusative, and genitive singular respectively of ‘man’ (Modern Irish *fear*, *fear*, *fir*) are *fer*, *fer*, and *fir* in Old Irish, but were *\*wiros*, *\*wiron*, and *\*wirī* at an earlier stage. Though they have the same auslaut in Old Irish, the nom. causes no mutation, the acc. nasalizes, and the gen. lenites the initial consonant of a following closely connected word. Similarly, the possessive adjectives *a* ‘his’, *a* ‘her’, and *a* ‘their’ are identical in shape in Old and Modern Irish but have different effects on a following initial, *a* ‘his’ leniting (< *\*esyō*), *a* ‘her’ causing no mutation to a consonant (< *\*esyās*), and *a* ‘their’ causing nasalization (< *\*esyōm*). Modern Irish *capall* [kapəl], then, becomes *chapall* [xapəl] ‘horse’ after *a* ‘his’, remains unchanged after *a* ‘her’, and becomes *gcapall* [gʲapəl] after *a* ‘their’. Representing these mutations unambiguously was a major challenge to Irish orthography, and TABLE 59.7 illustrates the Old and the Modern systems.

The most significant feature of the Old Irish system is its failure to mark the nasalization (voicing) of voiceless stops (i.e. its *t-* for Modern *dt-* etc.) and the lenition of their voiced counterparts and *m* (i.e. its *d-* for Modern *dh-* etc.). This, however, is more apparent than real, as the Old Irish system is based on traditional Latin spelling serving British (i.e. British Celtic) pronunciation. In British Latin the words *populus*,

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\*The unlenited forms of *l*, *n*, and *r* are represented in transcriptions by the small capital versions L, N, and R of those letters; for phonetic details see Thurneysen 1946 § 135.

TABLE 59.7: Orthographic Representation of Mutations

		Radical		Lenited		Nasalized	
t-	Old	[t]		th-	[θ]	t-	[d]
	Modern	[t]		th-	[h]	dt-	[d]
c-	Old	[k]		ch-	[x]	c-	[g]
	Modern	[k]		ch-	[x]	gc-	[g]
p-	Old	[p]		ph-	[ϕ]	p-	[b]
	Modern	[p]	↓	ph-	[f]	bp-	[b]
d-	Old	[d]		d-	[ð]	nd-	[N]
	Modern	[d]		dh-	[ɣ]	nd-	[N]
g-	Old	[g]		g-	[ɣ]	ng-	[ŋ]
	Modern	[g]		gh-	[ɣ]	ng-	[ŋ]
b-	Old	[b]		b-	[β]	mb-	[m]
	Modern	[b]		bh-	[v]	mb-	[m]
m-	Old	[m]		m-	[β̃]	m(m)-	[m]
	Modern	[m]		mh-	[v]	m-	[m]
l. <sup>a</sup>	Old	[l]		l-	[l]	l(l)-	[l]
	Modern	[l]		l-	[l]	l-	[l]
s-	Old	[s]		ś-	[h]	s-	[s]
	Modern	[s]		sh-	[h]	s-	[s]
f-	Old	[f]		ġ-	(no sound)	f-	[β]
	Modern	[f]		fh-	(no sound)	bhf-	[v]

a. *n* and *r* are treated similarly to *l*.

*pater*, and *locus* were pronounced (by British “lenition”) with intervocalic [b], [d], and [g], while *scribo*, *idolum*, *legendum*, and *dominicus* had intervocalic [β], [ð], [ɣ], and [β̃] respectively by the same process. In writing, the Irish simply adopted traditional Latin spelling with this pronunciation, so these words, which were borrowed into Irish, appear in Old Irish as *popul* [pobul] ‘people’, *paiteir* [padʲər] ‘the Lord’s prayer, a paternoster’, *loc* [log] ‘place’; and *scribaid* [skrʲi:β̃əðʲ] ‘writes’, *ídol* [i:ðə́l] ‘idol’, *léigend* [le:ɣʲə́nd] ‘reading’, *domnach* [doβ̃nəx] ‘Sunday’. The letters *p*, *t*, and *c*, on the one hand, and *b*, *d*, *g*, and *m*, on the other, had two sets of values in initial position in British, depending on whether they were “lenited” or not. This British “lenition” corresponded to Irish lenition in the case of the voiced stops (and *m*) and to Irish nasalization in the case of the voiceless ones; and Old Irish (like Early Welsh) simply applied the dual-value principle across word boundary (a boundary often ignored in writing). Thus, as the intervocalic *p* in *popul* [pobul] represented [b], the initial *p* could also represent [b] (its nasalized counterpart) in *a popul* [ə bobul] ‘their people’ (Modern *a bpobal*); and as intervocalic *d* represented [ð] in *ídol*, the initial *d* in *dán* ‘poem’ [da:n] could represent [ð] (its lenited counterpart) in *a dán* [ə ða:n] ‘his poem’ (Modern *a dhán* [ə ɣa:n]).

The same mutations were indicated unambiguously, however, in the case of other sounds. Thus the lenition of voiceless stops, unlike their voiced counterparts, was represented by Latin *ch*, *th*, and *ph*; that of *f* and *s*, which involved the complete loss of the sound in the case of the former, and reduction to [h] or no sound in some sequences in the case of the latter (e.g. Old Irish *mac int sacairt* [mak int agərdʲ] ‘son of the priest’ = ‘Mac Entaggart’), came to be marked during the Old Irish period by the Latin *punctum delens* (i.e. *f̄*, *s̄*), a scribal device for indicating an erroneously written letter. Similarly, the nasalization of the voiced stops *b*, *d*, and *g*, unlike their voiceless counterparts, was represented by Latin *mb*, *nd*, and *ng*.

By a process of cross-fertilization (operating in the direction indicated by the arrows in TABLE 59.7), the Old Irish devices just mentioned were gradually extended to the ambiguous notation discussed above so that lenited initial and internal *b* [β], *d* [ð], *g* [ɣ], and *m* [β] came to be written *b̄* or *bh*, *d̄* or *dh*, *ḡ* or *gh*, and *m̄* or *mh* (the latter in each case winning out completely in the Modern Irish standard, where even *f̄* and *s̄* have yielded to *fh*, *sh*). Similarly, as *mb*-, *nd*-, and *ng*- were pronounced [m], [n], and [ŋ], the principle that the first letter indicated the sound to be pronounced, the second the radical, was extended to nasalized (i.e. voiced) initial *p*-, *t*-, *c*-, and *f*-, giving *bp*-, *dt*-, *gc*-, and *bhf*- (after an intermediate experimentation with *pp*-, *tt*-, etc.). When not in word-initial position, *p* [b], *t* [d], and *c* [g] gave way to *b*, *d*, and *g*; e.g. Old Irish *Pátraic* [pa:drəgʲ] (< British Latin *Patricius* [padrigiʊs]) > Modern *Pádraig* [pa:drəgʲ], [pa:rəgʲ] in some dialects). These developments were on-going during the Early Modern period, 1200–1650, and manuscripts of the time often have both systems side by side. Some examples will illustrate the changes: Old *hi cocad* [i gogəð] > Modern *i gcogadh* [i gogə] ‘in a fight’, Old *a tech* [ə dʲex] > Modern *a dtéach* [ə dʲax] ‘their house’, Old *a gobae* [ə ɣoβe] > Modern *a ghabha* [ə ɣau] ‘his smith’.

The Official Modern Irish Standard (the *Caighdeán Oifigiúil*) established in the twentieth century fixed these developments; if it did not represent a new departure in orthographic convention, it did constitute a major break with tradition in taking the modern pronunciation as its basis. Scottish Gaelic orthography did not pass through this third stage.

#### SAMPLE OF IRISH WORDS AND NAMES

The following words and surnames (formerly patronymics) illustrate the conventions of the three periods in Irish orthography (Old and Middle, 8th–12th c.; Modern, 13th–20th c.; *Caighdeán Oifigiúil*, 1958–).

1. <i>Old and Middle Irish</i> :	buiden	[buðʲən]	slegán	[sʲlʲeɣa:n]
2. <i>Modern Irish</i> :	buidhean	[biɥʲən]	sleaghán	[sʲlʲaɣa:n]
3. <i>Caighdeán Oifigiúil</i> :	buíon	[bi:n]	sleán	[sʲlʲa:n]
4. <i>Gloss</i> :	host		slane, turf-spade	

1. celebrad [k'el'əβrəð]
2. ceileabhradh [k'el'əβrəð]
3. ceiliúradh [k'el'u:rə]
4. celebration
  
1. úa Domnail [uə doβnəlʲ]
2. Ó Domhnail [o: doβnəlʲ]
3. Ó Dónail [o: do:nəlʲ]
4. grandson/descendant of *Domnall*  
‘world leader’ > O’Donnell

- mac Mathgamno [mak maθγəβno]  
 Mac Mathghamhna [mak mahγəβnə]  
 Mac Mathúna [mak mahu:nə]  
 son of *Mathgamain* ‘bear’ > McMahan
- úa Ségdai [uə s'ɛ:γði]  
 Ó Séaghdha [o: s'ɛ:γðə]  
 Ó Sé [o: s'ɛ:]  
 grandson/descendant of *Ségdæ*  
 ‘the propitious one’ > O’Shea

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THE WORLD'S  
WRITING SYSTEMS

New York Oxford  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

1996

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
The World's Writing Systems / ed. by Peter T. Daniels and William Bright.

1. Writing. I. Daniels, Peter T., 1919– II. Bright, William, 1924–  
III. World's Writing Systems. I. Title. II. Title. III. Title.  
41–423—dc22  
95-4422