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Placenames as Politics: Thurles in 1920

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The period 1918-1922 witnessed the gradual establishment over Tipperary of Sinn Féin hegemony as Dáil Éireann battled for state authority with the British administration. Essential to the establishment of this hegemony was the rapid, often arbitrary, creation of a cultural symbolism which would complement Catholic nationalist politics while standing in opposition and in contrast to the British heritage then in course of rejection. As part of this process many Thurles placenames, some of them strongly redolent of lived history, were altered to accord with received notions of historical experience and current political correctness.

As well as sending a political message, it was intended that the new names would confer middle-class respectability on residents. Pudding Lane was instanced as "surely a name we could dispense with. . . . In towns a lane conveys a different picture to that of a flower-decked boren in the country, and most people prefer the word 'street', 'avenue', 'place' or 'terrace'. They naturally dislike having a lane as an address".¹

The principal reason given by the Thurles branch of the Gaelic League for the proposed changes was, however, that "it is obvious that at the present time there is, *buidhceas le Dia*, a national spirit in Ireland determined to win through to freedom. . . . The names of the worthy of our country's history are an inspiration, a source of strength and of encouragement".²

The new placenames were devised by the chairman of the Pierce McCan Branch of the Gaelic League, Rev. Dr. Michael O'Dwyer (1887-1975), then dean of St. Patrick's seminary, and by a committee formed under his chairmanship for purposes of the revision. The other prominent Gaelic League figure in the town, its teacher, Denis Morgan, had recently been jailed.³

O'Dwyer was a figure of considerable standing and had won an All-Ireland medal with Tipperary in 1908.⁴ The committee was chosen with an eye to popular acceptance, and cautiously described itself as "a committee of six Thurles people and two others who (born a mile or three outside and educated in the town) may also be classed as of Thurles."⁵

The changes suggested by the committee were adopted in full by the Urban District Council at a meeting held in February 1920. The names Cathedral St., West Gate, Friar Street, Derheen, St. Brigid's Terrace, Stradavoher and Bohernanave were to remain unchanged, presumably, for religious and linguistic reasons.

However, the following new forms were to be applied:

Kickham St. (Pike St.);
Mitchel St. (Quarry St.);
Parnell St. (New Road);
O'Donovan Rossa St. (Jail St.);
Smith O'Brien St. (Pudding Lane);
Slievenamon Rd. (Carrigan's — The Mall)
Fianna Rd. (Obbins Holding: by Urban Cottages);
Thomas Rd. (Delahunty's Mall)



Kavanagh Place (South Mall);
 Croke St. (Parts of Stradavoher and West Gate);
 Emmet St. (River Mall);
 Wolfe Tone Place (Carney's Lane);
 Mathew Place (Victualler's Lane or Post Office Lane);
 Wallace Place (Cook's Lane);
 Leyne Place (Back Lane);
 Suir Side Place (River Lane);
 Garryvicleheen (Mrs. Carew's Paddock);
 Abbey Rd. (from Garryvicleheen to boundary);
 Cuchulainn Rd. (Nicholas St.);
 Ikerrin Rd. (Limekiln Lane);
 St. Mary's Ave. (Church Lane);
 Eliogarty Rd. (College Lane).⁶

An Irish language version of each new name was provided and given priority.

With the exception of Garryvicleheen, the list consisted entirely of coinages, and the committee was of the view that the only opposition would come from those for whom "what was good enough for our fathers is good enough for us". It stated that those who might oppose the new names would also oppose innovations such as piped water and electricity — significant items of pride for the strengthening Catholic middle-class, whose aspiration to respectability would be furthered by the new, sanitised, place-names.

The Gaelic League committee offered Obbings Holdings as an example of the absurdity of the older forms. "Who can say what is the meaning of Obbings Holdings? Who was Obbings? Was he a person or a policeman, or was it a place or a thing?"⁸

The *Tipperary Star* of the week following the announcement of the changes carried a long article supplied by the Gaelic League, explaining the changes. The tone was indulgently nationalistic and sectarian. Thus the lane leading to St. Mary's Church of Ireland church, now to be known as St. Mary's Avenue, was to have its name changed by reference to the fact that "when Henry VIII developed the shop-keeping instinct for which his country was later to be detested, his covetous eyes saw the wealth of the church and monastery lands. To see was in this, as in other directions, to desire and to desire was to secure. In deciding to quench the lights of Heaven, St. Mary's Friary did not escape the extinguishing campaign . . . St. Mary's was grabbed. . . ."⁹

Thurles Transport Workers, the Mid Tipperary Board of the GAA and the Irish National Foresters all endorsed the changes immediately, while under its "Templemore Thrills" byline the *Tipperary Star* reported that Templemore would soon make similar changes, as indeed did Nenagh¹¹ and, later in the year, Slievardagh Rural District Council, when it changed the name New Birmingham to Gleann Guail.¹² The only open opponent of the changes was a Thomas O'Dwyer of Dublin, whose objections were discussed at a meeting of the Urban District Council held early in March.¹³

However, the defensiveness displayed by a number of councillors towards O'Dwyer's call for consultation with the residents concerned may have indicated a degree of insecurity on the issue. Only W. Butler could see merit in O'Dwyer's contention, saying that Main St. might be changed on paper to Liberty Square, "but I believe it will remain Main St." To this J. Houlihan replied: "Let them object to Liberty if they like and call it Main St."!

The principal years of Gaelic League activity in the county had been between 1901 and 1905. By the end of 1920 the League had gone from two classes in Thurles each week to one, and

by 1922 there were only twelve branches of the League in the entire county. At a convention held in the Confraternity Hall in Thurles in February 1922 the principal Gaelic League activist in North Tipperary, Michael Walsh of Roscrea, remarked that "after twenty years' work" Roscrea had only "ten Irish-speaking persons in a population of 2,300; he would like to ask any mathematician how many years would it take to make Roscrea an Irish-speaking town".¹⁴

Thus the alteration of Thurles's placenames was not brought about in the context of imminent language revival. Rather did it bear out the contention of the historian Eric Hobsbawm that "languages become more conscious exercises in social engineering in proportion as their symbolic significance prevails over their actual use."¹⁵

FOOTNOTES

1. *Tipperary Star* (hereafter *Star*) 14.2.1920.
2. *Star*, 28.2.1920.
3. *Star*, 7.2.1920.
4. Skehan Index of Clergy.
5. *Star*, 28.2.1920.
6. *Star*, 21.2.1920.
7. *Star*, 14.2.1920.
8. *Star*, 14.2.1920.
9. *Star*, 28.2.1920.
10. *Star*, 21.2.1920.
11. *Star*, 6.3.1920.
12. *Star*, 16.10.1920.
13. *Star*, 6.3.1920.
14. *Star*, 11.2.1922.
15. E. J. Hobsbawm: *Nations and Nationalism Since 1870* (Cambridge, 1990).