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What If Spenser Spoke Irish?

BY DIAN KILLIAN, PH.D. · THE GAELIC EFFECT: HOW THE IRISH LANGUAGE CAN SAVE THE WORLD · 3 OCTOBER 2026

Failte romhaibh anseo, a chairde (welcome here friends)! *Ar dtús* (first), I'm very excited: *The Gaelic Effect* is now 22 paying subscribers away from being a "Best Seller" on Substack! Whoopee! Can you help? If you've thought about paying-to-subscribe, now is a great time to do it. I'd so love to get that magic "best seller" badge! Thank you (in advance) for your help.

Speaking of appreciation, the next *Grá Mór* raffle is Sunday, Nov. 1st. A perfect way to celebrate *Samhain*, the prize is Effie Brush's art book *Paper Projects in Particular*. Similar to *The Gaelic Effect*, Effie's book is "about looking at things differently," and is *dáttheangach* (bi-lingual) with some of the collages made from Irish language graphics. The *Grá Mór* raffle is my way of showing my *grá* (love) for you. Thank you for being here—reading, sharing, commenting, and subscribing!



Irish growing. (Art by Effie Brush, from Paper Projects in Particular; used with permission.)

And now for this week's Gaelic Effect which (trigger warning) is a bit intense, thanks to the “great” poet Edmund Spenser...

“out of the heart the tongue speaketh”

Edmund Spenser lived in Ireland for most of his adult life. During that time (from 1580 to 1598), Irish was the majority language. Where Spenser lived in County Cork, it was the everyday tongue of life and business—on the farms, in the streets, at the markets, at home. Spenser was already a polyglot and published poet. He was fluent in Latin, Greek, French and Italian; by his early twenties, he was already a paid translator. Given his sensitive ear for languages (and that he lived in Ireland eighteen years), you'd think he'd learn at least cúpla focal (the basics) of Irish. Yet scholars agree: he spoke none. More, he made little effort to use Irish words cor-

rectly. Contrary to the detailed attention of a translator, his use of Irish is sloppy: nearly every word Anglicized or misspelled. For example, he uses “Sasson” to mean “Englishman;” the actual word in Irish (still today) is *Sassanach* [Cork]. Some words were already in English usage with errors; Spenser reinforced those. No copy of *A View of the Present State of Ireland* exists in Spenser’s own handwriting; copyists clearly added errors. Yet scholars agree: while scribal transcription made things worse, it was Spenser himself who made the bulk of the mistakes. [Cork] Spenser knew Irish speakers, including notable bards at the time [see Macmorris], so he could have checked the spelling of words.

“[Spenser] was one of a new breed of adventurer: an educated, non-landowning Englishman who saw the settling of overseas territories as an opportunity to establish oneself as landed gentry.”—*Famine as a Military Tactic in Plantation Ireland*



“from civility [they] are grown to be wild and more Irish.”

In Irish, there's a well known *seanfhocal* (proverb), *Tír gan teanga, tír gan anam* (“A country without a language, is a country without a soul”). Spenser agreed. In *A View*, through the character Irenius, he argues that “the speech being Irish, the heart must needs be Irish; for out of the heart the tongue speaketh.” This insight (the melding of language, culture and identity) becomes the underlying rationale of *A View*: the Irish, who are a “disruptive and degraded people,” must be suppressed and their language destroyed. The “Old English” (the earlier Anglo-Norman settlers) are guilty of over-integration—of that phenomenon referred to in Ireland as

being ‘more Irish than the Irish themselves:’ they married into Irish families and fostered and raised their children speaking Irish. According to Spenser, this “fostering, and marrying with the Irish” are two “dangerous infections.” A child who learns Irish is left with a permanent “smack” on their tongue for Irish manners and customs and behave “lewdly and Irish like.” [Ricorso] They are vulnerable to bards with their incendiary, anti-English texts and follow Brehon law (the ancient, indigenous legal system of Ireland). Brehon law is “wicked” and “unjust” for using restorative practices (such as restitution). English law, in contrast, is “civilized” as using capital punishment.

“unnatural that any people should love another’s language more than their own.”

Yet *A View* doesn’t stop with condemning Irish culture. Through the character of Irenius, Spenser recommends scorched earth tactics to make the Irish subservient. This is not theoretical. Spenser gives an actual, eye-witness account of these tactics during the Second Desmond Rebellion (1579–1583), when he was personal secretary to Arthur Grey, the Lord Deputy of Ireland. Gray’s army systematically burned crops, destroyed agricultural tools, and slaughtered native cattle. The result was:

“Out of every corner of the woods and small valleys, [the Irish] came out creeping on their hands because their legs could not support them. They looked like living skeletons of death. They spoke like ghosts crying out from their graves. They ate dead animal carcasses, feeling happy whenever they could find them, and soon after they even ate one another—so much so that they did not hesitate to dig corpses back out of their graves. If they found a patch of watercress or shamrocks, they flocked to it as if it were a grand feast, though it could not sustain them for long. In a short time, almost no one was left, and a heavily populated and fertile land was suddenly emptied of man and beast. —*A View* (in modern English)

In the end, “many did not die by the sword, but rather from the extreme famine that had been caused.” [*A View*] As a result of these tactics, it’s estimated that a third of the population in Munster perished.

Find this compelling? Please re-stack or share.

ad terrorem

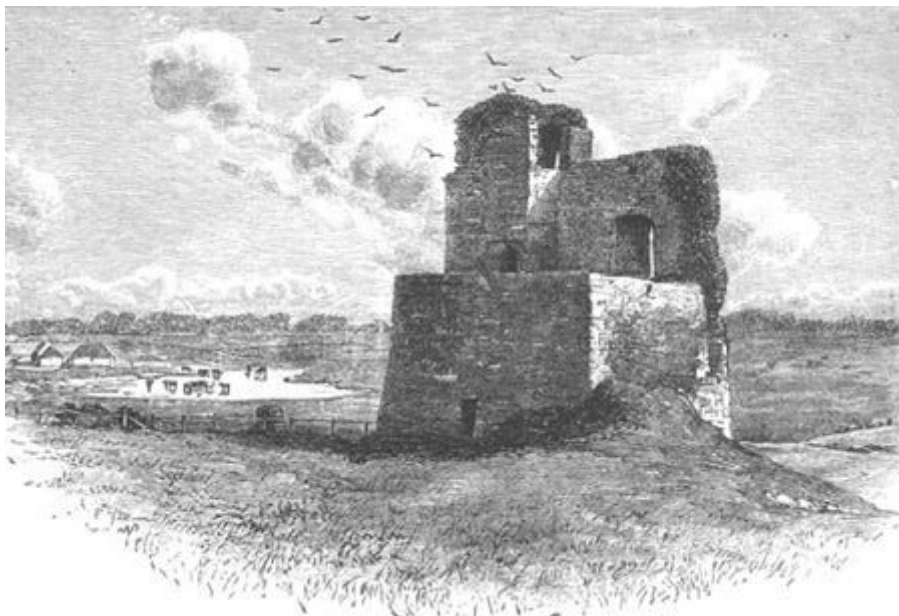
Spenser was not the first (or last) English official or writer to advocate such practices. Nearly three decades before *A View*, Sir Humphrey Gilbert used state terror in Munster, slaughtering every man, woman, and child and deliberately destroying crops to manufacture famine. He specifically justified killing non-combatant women on the grounds that destroying the agricultural support system was the fastest way to starve out Irish soldiers. He was also notorious for lining the pathway to his tent with the severed heads of the slain to inspire terror:

“His manner was that the heads of all those (of what sort soever they were) which were killed in the day, should be cut off from their bodies,

and brought to the place where he encamped at night, and should there be laid on the ground, by each side of the way leading to his own tent, so that none could come unto his tent for any cause, but commonly he must pass through a lane of heads, which he used *ad terrorem*, the dead feeling nothing the more pains thereby, and yet did it bring great terror to the people, when they saw the heads of their dead fathers, brothers, children, kinsfolk and friends, lie on the ground before their faces, as they came to speak with the said colonel.” — *A Generall Rehearsall of Warres*

Lord Justice Pelham also executed a scorched-earth campaign across Limerick, Cork, and Kerry in 1580; Irish peasants offered themselves up for swift execution rather than facing starvation. [Famine Tactic]

Spenser was also wanted to force the Irish to give up their pastoral lifestyle, which he considered “barbarous.” Practiced for thousands of years (since Neolithic times) and forming the socio-economic basis of Irish society, land was communally held by the *tuath* (the clan), allowing herds to graze fluidly across territories. Spenser (and other English administrators) disliked it because it made gorilla warfare easier and the Irish harder to regulate and control. Engineered famine was seen as key here as well: “This mass culling of the Irish will make re-population by English settlers easier, but it will also convince the survivors of the need to adopt tillage farming practices. [...] the vital step towards turning Ireland into a civilised country...” [Famine] Again, this was not new; early plantation schemes (in Laois and Offaly in the 1550s) explicitly mandated that settlers and subdued locals put suitable lands into “manurance and tillage of husbandry.” [Plantations] Yet the Tudors succeeded in replacing pastoralism with private property deeds and rigid land boundaries.



Stolen property: Kilcolman Castle, County Cork, where Spenser lived for ten years. (Library Ireland)

“[Spenser] was the instrument of a detestable policy in Ireland... the wickedness he had shared in begins to corrupt his imagination.” —C. S. Lewis [WIKI]

“...significant conflict and tension between the English and the Irish...” —Britannica

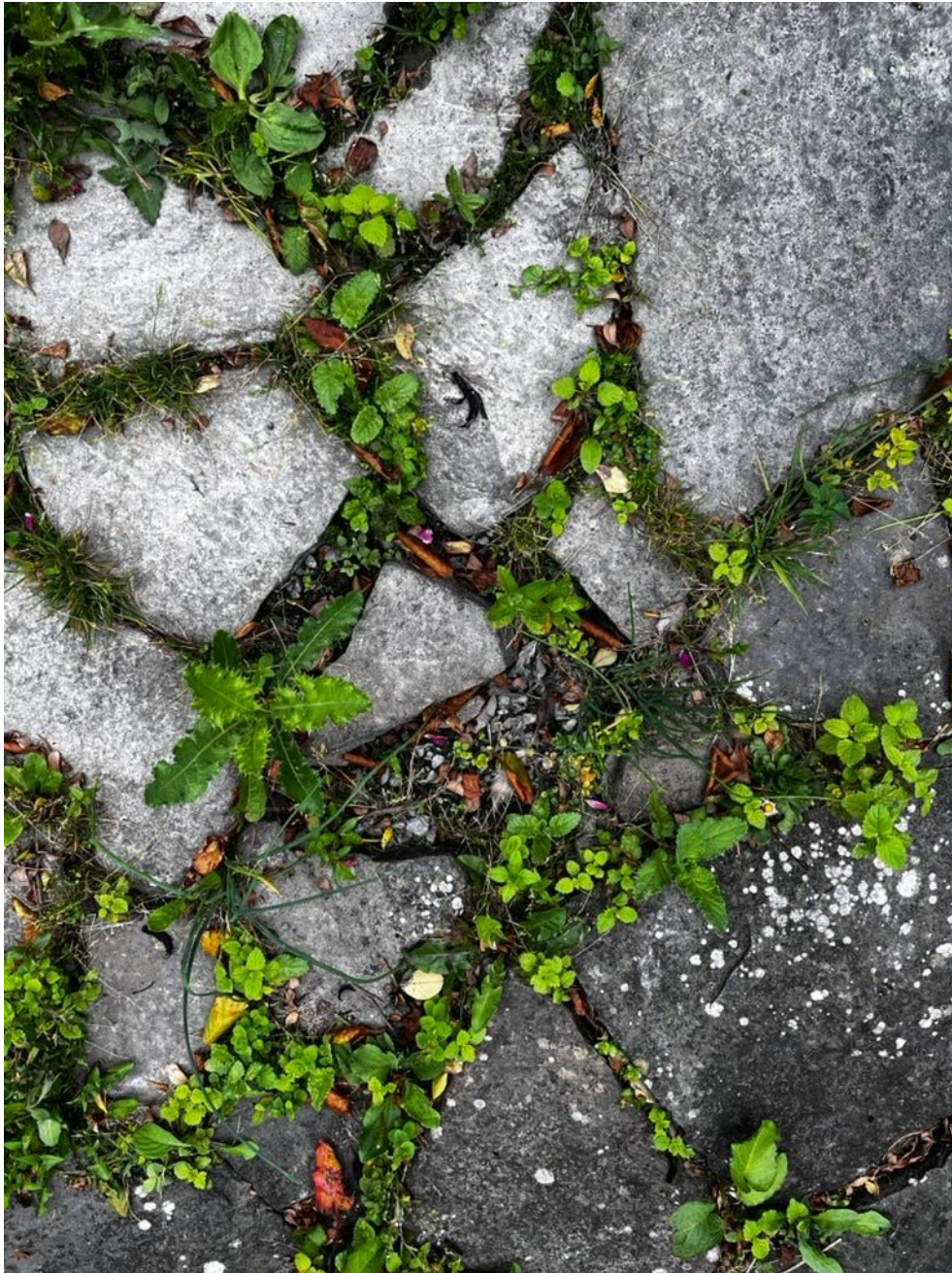
A View was not published during Spenser’s life time and, some posit, while circulated widely at court, it was held back because seen as too extreme. In 1598, when Sir James Ware finally does print it, he tones it down, omitting words such as “barbarous” and “savage” as well cutting some of Spenser’s harsher anti-Catholic rhetoric. He writes in the preface that he wishes “in some passages it had bin tempered with more moderation” [yet] “The troubles and miseries of the time when he wrote it, doe partly excuse him...” [Another Case]. Britannica takes the same tack today. The encyclopedia acknowledges that A View “advocates for harsh, ruthless measures to govern Ireland,” with leniency only “extended to those who completely submit to English authority,” yet conveniently leaves out the gory details. This “harshness” is justified as reflecting “a typical 16th-century colonial mindset [...] emphasizing the need for strong control over the territory and its people.”

A literary masterpiece

Highly consistent with Spenser’s own fears and interests, *The View* expresses widely held beliefs of “New English” Protestants in Ireland. After the Nine Years’ War led by Hugh O’Neill, they believed that half-measures had failed; only total subjugation, martial law, and engineered famine could secure English rule. Book V of *The Faerie Queene* advocates similar harsh political and colonial strategies. Rather than treating mass starvation as an unfortunate byproduct of war, A View calmly presents engineered famine as a rational administrative policy. The eye-witness account of famine is not shared with horror or sympathy—it’s used to further advocate the same practices again [Wiki]. Ultimately, while engineered, famine is blamed on the Irish themselves for their lack of submission. If they were only better subjects, they wouldn’t need such corrective interventions.

What makes Spenser stand out in all this is not his position but that he was so effective in advocating for it. Highly readable as a literary dialogue and with Irenius playing an innocent and naive role (that’s more sympathetic to the Irish), A View offers the perfect, seemingly balanced mouthpiece for Spenser’s extremism. It’s a political tract disguised as a literary piece; as such, it functions “to complicate the authorial responsibility for what is spoken.” [Voices] Spenser manages to (mostly) pull this off; he makes it as rational sounding as Swift’s *Modest Proposal* (where it’s argued the Irish should sell their babes as meat). The difference is that Swift’s *Proposal* is a parody.

Thanks for reading! This post is public so feel free to re-stack and share.



A lot of pieces... [Photo by author; all rights reserved.]

Thinking about Spenser raises a lot of questions for me—about literature and morality, who we consider “great” and canonical authors (and why), and about human complexity. Jorge Luis Borges said that we live by justification alone. I wonder if that’s how Spenser lived? His stated purpose in writing *The Faerie Queene* (considered his greatest work—written while he lived in Ireland) was to “fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline” [WIKI].

Seeking (self) understanding in the complexity of it all and grateful for your being here,

Dian (*i mBaile Átha Cliath*—in Dublin)

P.S. Friendly reminder: you can hear the pronunciation of Irish words in the dialect of your choice here.



In memory of Séamus, my familiar...

Not able to become a paying subscriber today? *Ná bí buartha.*
(Don't worry.) Support The Gaelic Effect by buying me a *cupán tae*
here.

