

Letters from Ankara

Scriptal Change in Turkey and Ireland in 1928

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We must not give anyone reason to doubt that we stand for national progress, or reason to suspect that we are out of sympathy with anything that is good in the spirit of the age, or even that we are unnecessarily hostile to things which, if not positively admirable, are harmless and characteristic of modern trends. Our object is not to turn back the hands of the clock or to restore social customs, institutions or preferences which have been generally abandoned by other nations and which properly belong to the past. [...] We do not want to make our people fundamentally different from other present-day Europeans, but only to make them as Irish as the people of France are French; the people of Italy Italian; the people of Denmark Danish; or the people of Sweden Swedish.¹

Ernest Blythe's 1949 presidential address to the Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge² was a passionate appeal for Irish speakers to embrace modernity. Convinced that "pedantic cranks", "irrational sticklers for the archaic", and "archaicising faddists"³ were hindering the Irish language movement and even embarrassing the Irish nation, he argued that the Irish people could enjoy their linguistic heritage without isolating themselves from their European neighbours. The countries he

¹ Ernest Blythe, *The State and the Language: an English Version of the Presidential Address of Ernest Blythe to Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge*, 3 December 1949, p. 16.

² The coordinating body of Irish language voluntary associations.

³ Ernest Blythe, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

mentions in the above extract have served as models at different periods of the 20th century for Irish governments keen to modernize agricultural methods and urban planning. But when Blythe began his crusade to modernize the Irish language in the 1920s it was the policies of a country on the periphery of Europe that attracted his attention: the newly established Republic of Turkey.

In 1928 Mustafa Kemal, founding father and first president of the Turkish Republic, introduced his famous alphabet reform. From that moment up until the 1960s, commentators of all sorts regularly urged the Irish government to follow his example and scrap the distinctive letterforms used in the printing of the Irish language. The Danish linguist Otto Jespersen⁴ and the Anglo-German printing historian S. H. Steinberg⁵ were the most well-known of these. They both saw the Gaelic script as anachronistic, exotic, medieval, and altogether artificial.

In his 1934 pamphlet *The Universal adoption of the Latin alphabet* Jespersen explains the benefits of using the same system of writing everywhere on the planet (facilitating intellectual cooperation, learning to read and write more quickly, reducing illiteracy) and takes a moment to wag his finger at Ireland and Germany. He regrets that both nations “have turned around and embraced forms of the Latin alphabet which date from the depths of the middle ages”.⁶ They have, in other words, cut themselves off from the civilized world. In the same article he heaps praise on the audacious actions of Mustapha Kemal in Turkey: by replacing the Arabo-Persian writing system with the more practical Latin alphabet he had reduced the number of illiterates and considerably improved general education.

By 1955 Germany had switched back from Gothic to the Roman script and for S. H. Steinberg this was very satisfying. His study of European printing and typography *Five Hundred Years of Printing* contains passages very reminiscent of Jespersen’s utopian manifesto:

It is rather one of the most wholesome consequences of the worldwide expansion of the printing press that the one Latin alphabet should have

⁴ Otto Jespersen (1860-1943) was a professor of English at Copenhagen University from 1893 to 1925. With Paul Passy and other linguists he founded the International Phonetic Association in 1886.

⁵ Siegfried Henry Steinberg (1899-1969) studied history, literature and history of art. He edited several encyclopedias and was a fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

⁶ Otto Jespersen (1934), *L'Adoption Universelle des Caractères Latins*, Paris, La Société des Nations, Librairie Stock. In the present article we use the translation of an article which appeared in the journal *Novialiste* (no. 4, Nov. 1934), in the language Novial. The translation from French into Novial was by N. Haislund and from Novial into English by James Chandler. The online text is at <http://www.geocities.com/athens/forum/5037/latin.html>

become the one medium in which every human thought can find adequate expression.⁷

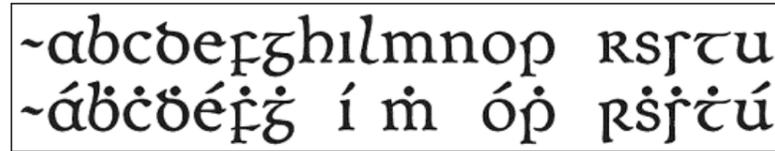


Fig. 1: The Gaelic alphabet⁸

Unfortunately, 1950s Ireland still represented a blot on this very harmonious typographic landscape:

The artificial Gaelic script is outside the mainstream of western letters. Irish literature (and Irish tourism) would probably be better off without the encumbrance of a script which, though most decorative on postage stamps, raises an additional bar to its understanding.⁹

Like the isolationist Soviets, Ireland had turned its back on Western Civilization. Steinberg, like Jespersen, advised the Irish government to take a leaf out of Turkey's book and move out into the European mainstream. Neither commentator seems to have been aware, however, that in 1928 the Irish Government attempted to do just that. Less than a month after news of the Turkish reform had reached the shores of Saorstát Éireann, plans were already afoot to Romanize the Irish language. Ernest Blythe was the chief architect of these plans.

In this essay we will explore developments in the scriptal environments¹⁰ of Ireland and Turkey in 1928 and attempt to answer several key questions: How exactly did the Irish Government react to the Turkish reform? Was there a similar typographic discourse inside each country? Could Turkey be in any way considered a model for

⁷ Siegfried Henry Steinberg (1969), *Five Hundred Years of Printing*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, p. 179.

⁸ This typeface was designed by the calligrapher and graphic designer Jean-Baptiste Taisne and is reproduced here with his permission.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁰ A scriptal environment, a concept borrowed from anthropology, is the totality of attitudes to writing systems in a given geographical space. These include the attitudes of nationalists promoting a national script where there is competition from the alphabet of the coloniser or another national group. Also included are the attitudes of political elites when their national script is placed in an international context. Will they defend their right to use their writing system? Will they be embarrassed and see their script as a burden or a sign of backwardness? Will they simply adopt the same script as everyone else?

Ireland? We will begin with an overview of the Turkish alphabet reform and then focus on reactions in Ireland.

The Turkish Letters Revolution

The alphabet reform in Turkey was part of a wider set of reforms undertaken by the new nationalist leadership of the country. After securing international recognition for Turkey's independence at the 1923 Lausanne peace treaty, Mustapha Kemal and his followers began to focus on domestic affairs and set about transforming Turkey's political and cultural landscape.¹¹ They quickly established a Republic (1923) and abolished the Caliphate (1924), thus paving the way for a whole series of secular reforms: koranic schools were closed and religious foundations were taken over by the state; islamic law (*şeriat*) was replaced by a version of the Swiss Civil Code and Islam was eventually removed from the constitution altogether. Yet the reforming zeal of early republican leaders reached far beyond the country's legal system. From the ban on traditional headgear such as turbans and fezzes to the more active role of – now unveiled – women in society, Turkey's visual identity as a whole was dramatically reshaped in the 1920s. Under kemalist rule, Turks – at least those living in big cities – were left no choice but to adapt.

The 'letters revolution' (*harf inkılâbı* or *yazı devrimi*) thus benefited from the social engineering skills and coercive methods developed in a decade of top-to-bottom nation building. As with many kemalist reforms, the letters revolution started with a bold announcement of intent, followed by quick and authoritative implementation. Although the set of Arabic characters used to write Ottoman Turkish had been criticized since the mid-nineteenth century, and Central-Asian Soviet Republics were already gradually shifting to the Roman characters, Turkey's literate elite were very much attached to the Arabo-Persian alphabet.¹² Nonetheless, in the late 1920s reform projects received the full support of the republican leadership and when a task force was set up in May 1928 to deal with the alphabet issue, its conclusions were enthusiastically endorsed by Mustafa Kemal himself. He officially launched the letters revolution at an Istanbul gala on 9 August 1928 and on 1 November, the Turkish Great National Assembly passed a law to replace the ancient characters. The elite had no choice but to fall into

¹¹ For a more comprehensive assessment of the kemalist reforms, see Erik J. Zürcher (2004), *Turkey: A modern History*, London, I.B. Tauris, pp. 166-205.

¹² François Georgeon (1995), "Des caractères arabes à l'alphabet latin : un pas vers l'Occident ?", in *Des Ottomans aux Turcs : Naissance d'une nation*, Istanbul, Isis, pp.199-221.

line and by 1930 the Arabo-Persian alphabet had virtually disappeared from public life, tolerated only in private correspondence.¹³ The scriptal environment had been quickly and efficiently reshaped.

The 1928 shift to an extended Latin alphabet was driven by various factors. Firstly, it was advocated on practical grounds. Reformers made the case that the new letters would both foster literacy and facilitate the development of the printing industry. Before the Karakhanids¹⁴ embraced Islam in the 10th century and adopted the Arabic alphabet, Turkic languages had used various Asiatic writing systems, the earliest being the runic alphabet of the 8th century inscriptions of the Orkhon Valley.¹⁵ Given the requirements of the Turkish language, the Arabo-Persian alphabet contained too many consonants and too few vowels, leading to frequent confusion. The same string of characters could read either “She became a mother” (*anne oldu*) or “Mum died” (*anne öldü*).¹⁶ Readers, were not the only ones to benefit from the new alphabet. With four different forms depending on whether they were inside or outside a given word, and their complex ligatures, Arabic letters proved a nightmare for typographic professionals too. Basic printing in Ottoman Turkish required more than 500 characters, compared to a mere 58 (29 uppercase, 29 lower case) with the new letters.

The Latin alphabet had other appealing qualities for the Turkish leadership. They were used by countries which the kemalists perceived as Europe’s leading nations. This was particularly true of France, the Ottoman reformers’ archmodel and still an inspiration in the early years of the Turkish Republic. As Benjamin Fortna recalls:

France had long served as the focal point of Western emulators in the Ottoman Empire. Whether in the fields of literature, social and political thought or fashion, Ottomans turned to Paris for models. As one Young Ottoman journal expressed this relationship: “Our position in comparison with France is that of an uneducated child besides an accomplished scholar.”¹⁷

An educated ruling class at the periphery of interwar Europe, the republican elite, like their Ottoman predecessors, suffered from what novelist Orhan Pamuk later identified as “a Chekovian sense of

¹³ Geoffrey Lewis (2002), *The Turkish Language Reform: A Catastrophic Success*, Oxford, OUP, pp. 27-39.

¹⁴ A Turkic dynasty which founded the Kara-Khanid Khanate and ruled Transoxania in Central Asia from 840 to 1211.

¹⁵ François Georgeon, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

¹⁷ Benjamin Fortna (2002), *Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire*, Oxford, OUP, pp. 14-15.

provinciality”¹⁸ This explains Mustafa Kemal’s constant emphasis on the vital necessity of keeping pace with civilization, which for him meant Europe’s intellectual and technical achievements: “We will become civilized... We will march forward... Civilization is a fearful fire which consumes those who ignore it”¹⁹.

The letters revolution was a westernizing reform aimed at anchoring Turkey in mainstream Europe and also a part of the Republic’s secular agenda. Religious conservatives had long opposed such a change. In a *fetva* (religious advice) issued when the Albanians abandoned the Arab script in 1910, the *Şeyh ül-islam* (the Ottoman Empire’s supreme religious authority) had stated that the reform was contrary to Islamic law (*şeriat*).²⁰ As late as 1923, General Kâzım [Karabekir], a prominent figure in the Turkish war of Independence, called the suggestion a “diabolical idea”.²¹ Because Arabic was the language of the Revelation and the Koran was written in Arabic, shifting to the Latin alphabet also meant turning one’s back on Islam. Four years after the abolition of the Caliphate, Turkey’s decision was still resented throughout the Muslim world as a further estrangement from the *Umma*, the community of the believers. Tellingly, in support of the reform, Mustapha Kemal blamed the old script for locking the Turkish mind in “an iron circle” – the very words France’s Ernest Renan used in a famous 1883 conference when he deemed Islam an obstacle to science.²² A committed secularist, Kemal is reported to have then raised his glass of *raki* to the crowd and said: “I drink in my nation’s honour”.²³

For sure, latinization was a secularizing and westernizing move. But it was also an expression of the young Republic’s fierce nationalism. Although French was the most widely known foreign language among educated Turks, and despite high hopes at the French embassy, the use of transliteration *à la française* was ruled out by the alphabet commission to the great satisfaction of British diplomats in Ankara.²⁴ There were practical reasons for this. For instance, it takes twice as many letters to spell the word “child” (*tchoudjouk*) with the French system as with the Turkish one (*çocuk*).²⁵ But the point was also to

¹⁸ Orhan Pamuk, “My Father’s suitcase” (Nobel Lecture), translated from Turkish by Maureen Freely (full English version available online at <http://nobelprize.org>).

¹⁹ Andrew Mango (2002), *Atatürk*, London, John Murray, p. 434.

²⁰ François Georgeon, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

²¹ Geoffrey Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

²² François Georgeon, *op. cit.*, pp. 218-9.

²³ Andrew Mango, *op. cit.*, p. 466.

²⁴ François Georgeon, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

²⁵ Geoffrey Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

dismiss the idea of a mere importation by devising a genuinely Turkish set of characters. Reformers thus called the new script: “Turkish alphabet of Latin origin” (*Latin Esasından Türk Alfabeti*).²⁶ The reform was not, however, merely a declaration of love for the West. Resentment against the Arab nationalists who had sided with *Entente* troops during World War I was still widespread in Turkey and the lost Arab provinces were believed to have been a burden to the Turkish people throughout Ottoman history. Kemalist reformers thus sought to free the Turkish language of what they perceived as alphabetic *impedimenta* – a move that was later extended to Arabic and Persian rooted grammar and vocabulary.

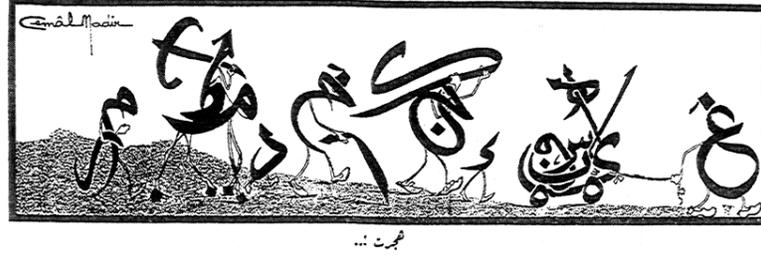


Fig. 2: Arabic letters leave Turkey in a caricature by Cemal Nadir [Güler] published in the newspaper *Akşam* in 1928

The letters revolution eventually proved a success. Literacy rates more than doubled between the 1927 and 1935 census (from 8.4 to 19.4%). The publishing industry, too, underwent steady development, with 556 publishers in 1938, compared to 284 in 1928.²⁷ Last but not least, the new letters gained peer recognition for Turkey in Europe. As the *Times* of London put it in its 31 August 1928 editorial: “By this step the Turks, who for centuries were regarded as a strange and isolated people by Europe, have drawn closer than ever to the West. It is a great reform, worthy of the remarkable chief to whom the Turkish people has entrusted its destinies”.²⁸ Doubtlessly, Mustafa Kemal’s personal commitment was instrumental in establishing the new alphabet. He toured Turkey, acting as the nation’s great schoolmaster, organizing public lessons in city halls and village squares. A charismatic leader with a firm grip on the country, he could accelerate the pace of reform.

²⁶ François Georgeon, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 214-9.

²⁸ Quoted by Lewis in *The Turkish Language Reform*, p. 38.

Yet, François Georgeon argues, it remains unclear whether it were the genuine qualities of the new letters or the unprecedented strive to bring education to the people that eventually ensured the revolution's enduring success.²⁹

Ireland

As the curtain went up on the Provisional Government of Ireland and then the Irish Free State in 1922, Gaelic typography was in its strongest position for 400 years. Script nationalism had developed hand in hand with the growth of the Gaelic League towards the end of the 19th century. The Irish language had played a fundamental role in nationalist claims for independence and Gaelic letterforms³⁰ constituted a powerful visual representation of these claims.³¹ Not surprisingly, then, we find Sinn Féiners and Gaelic Leaguers eagerly commissioning, using, promoting and even designing Gaelic fonts in the first two decades of the 20th century.³² When the letters revolution was launched in Turkey the Gaelic script was alive and well and being taught to schoolchildren all over the country.

Like their Turkish counterparts, Irish type founders were far less enthusiastic about the value of Gaelic characters. Applying the industrial logic that would eventually lead to the abandonment of a separate script for the Irish language, these canny businessmen refused to invest in the cutting of punches for potentially unsellable metal type. Ironically, it was a British company, the Figgins type foundry in London, which supplied the typeface that would be used for the printing of Irish language texts for most of the 20th century. It was this typeface that was

²⁹ François Georgeon, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

³⁰ These letterforms date back to the manuscript hands which developed in the Irish scriptoria of the 9th century. The slow, round semi-uncial was used for important books like the *Book of Kells* and the quicker, angular minuscule style became the popular hand because it used up less parchment. It is important to point out that both styles were nothing more radical than local variations of the Roman form of the Latin alphabet.

³¹ The British administration now had to deal with Irish letters popping up in unexpected, irritating and sometimes illegal places – on propaganda stamps issued by Sinn Féin, on the side of delivery vans, in the mastheads of newspapers, in advertisements for Irish-made products, in people's signatures. Script became a form of resistance to British rule.

³² The nationalist printer Bernard Doyle commissioned type from the Figgins type foundry in England and by distributing stereotyped columns of Gaelic to provincial journals was able to keep prices down. As editor of *An Claidheamh Soluis*, The O'Rahilly designed body and display typefaces, including badly needed italics, which were then manufactured by the American Monotype corporation, except, unfortunately, for the italics.

used to modify United Kingdom postage stamps when the Free State postal service opened for business. Proudly advertizing to the world that Irish institutions were now under new management, the Government commissioned the Dollard Printing House and Alex Thom & Co. Ltd³³ to cancel out the symbols of British rule and obliterate the king's head with recognizably Gaelic letterforms (see Fig. 3).

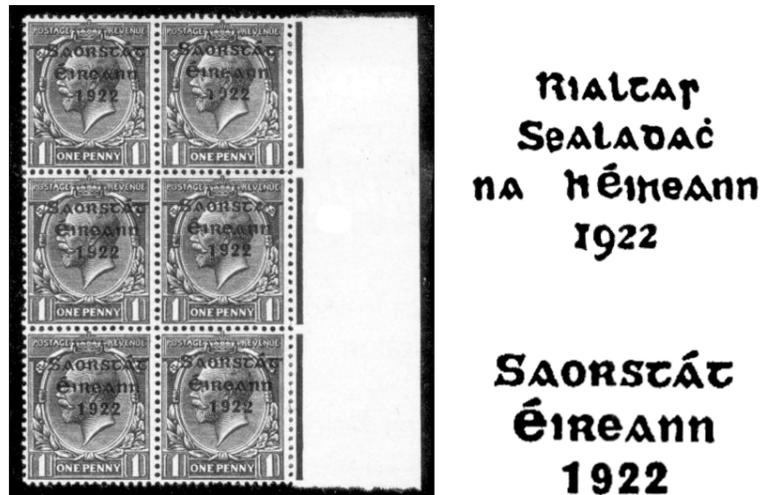


Fig.3: 1922 Overprinted U.K. Postage Stamps

This set of stamps represents the peak of the Gaelic letterform's symbolic power. Only two years later there were clear signs that this power was on the wane. In his 1924 book *The Irish Character in Print* the printing historian E. W. Lynam was already describing the distinctive Irish letter as "a strange survival from the past, which owed its preservation to Irish conservatism, and to political and religious conflict".³⁴ Like the type founders, Lynam did not believe it would

³³ Stanley Gibbons *Stamp Catalogue: Ireland*, London, Stanley Gibbons Limited, 2008, p. 1.

³⁴ E. W. Lynam (1924), *The Irish Character in Print 1571-1923*, Dublin, Irish University Press, p. 1. Lynam's religious conflict was the tit-for-tat print war between centres of Protestant and Catholic propaganda during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and the various religious texts printed up to the middle of the 18th

continue to survive. In post-independence Ireland there was no longer any need to demonstrate the existence of the national language typographically and the political imperative that had nurtured the use of Gaelic typefaces in composing rooms nationwide quickly evaporated. The Free State government had chosen not to establish an official script for the writing and printing of Irish and there was, therefore, no obligation to use Irish letterforms. As was the case in Turkey, ministers and senior civil servants now looked to their European neighbours for models, and in this new and larger web of relationships, Gaelic letterforms were soon perceived as an embarrassment. Lynam correctly predicted that the more Ireland entered into business relations with other countries, the worse this situation would become.

When it came to reforming the visual identity of the Irish language, the Free State equivalent of Mustapha Kemal was the Cumann na nGaedheal Minister for Finance Ernest Blythe. A former member of the IRB and the Irish Volunteers, he was a dedicated Gaelic Leaguer with impeccable nationalist credentials. Unlike many of his fellow nationalists, however, he was keen to import modern European values into the Irish cultural and political landscape, and kept a close eye on developments on the Continent, particularly in Germany and Italy. His involvement with the Army Comrades Association, a shirted movement emulating German and Italian fascists and arguably one of the most spectacular eruptions of European visual culture in 20th century Ireland, can be read as an ephemeral manifestation of this desire.³⁵ Evidence of a more significant and longer lasting contribution to the Europeanization of visual culture in Ireland can be found in his commitment to modernizing Irish language publishing. Blythe was convinced that Ireland needed a corpus of modern literature in its own language. He was equally convinced that it should be set in Roman type, just like the literature of Ireland's Continental neighbours.³⁶

The vehicle for this project was An Gúm, the publications branch of the Department of Education which was set up in 1925. Although

century. Like the Arabic script, Gaelic printing types had a strong religious connotation for much of their existence. From a typographical point of view the political conflict begins in the middle of the 19th century with the emergence of script nationalism for the first time. This begins with the very gentlemanly efforts of George Petrie, head of the topographical section of the Ordnance Survey.

³⁵ Better known as the Blueshirts this was a political organisation set up by Eoin O'Duffy in 1932. Originally its aims were to defend free speech and promote the interests of ex-Servicemen. Later it provided security at Cumann na nGaedheal meetings. In 1933 it was reorganised as the National Guard by O'Duffy and adopted many of the symbols of European fascism.

³⁶ For obvious reasons the UK was never a model for this project.

Blythe had no official connection with An Gúm, he was the driving force behind its establishment and his department provided all of the necessary funding.³⁷ Its mission was to supply Irish language textbooks to schools, provide contemporary fiction for recreational readers and, most importantly, to establish the much-needed corpus of Irish language literature. In terms of quantity, An Gúm was an unmitigated success, producing 1,465 publications between 1926 and 1964. When it came to quality, however, it proved a bitter disappointment to the more independent Irish writers at the time. Máirtín Ó Cadhain,³⁸ for example, complained that, in spite of Blythe's admirable aspirations, An Gúm publications reflected a very narrow vision of Irishness:

[contemporary novels] are as harmless as cement or tractor novels. Under this soviet organisation of literature two censorships operated, the ordinary state censorship and a special Gum censorship which presumed that everything that was to be written in Irish was for children or nuns.³⁹

If An Gúm failed to achieve its most important objective, it was nonetheless the epicentre for change in the visual content of Irish language publications. Some of this went against the grain of editorial conservatism. A recent exhibition at the John J. Burn library at Boston College has revealed that the graphic artists working for the state subversively incorporated elements of European and American style into their book cover art.⁴⁰ An Gúm was, however, also the locus for a deliberate and concerted effort to Europeanize the visual identity of the Irish language by eliminating the distinctive Gaelic type that Blythe saw as a handicap to its healthy development:

The old type is a great handicap to the language. It proved a great handicap to the language heretofore. I believe the script is even a greater handicap. I think one of the difficulties in teaching writing to children is that they have to be taught first in one script and then in another, and their writing is like

³⁷ He also granted £1,000 to the Abbey theatre making it the first state-subsidized theatre in the world and encouraged MacLiammóir-Edwards' An Taibhdhearc, Irish-language theatre in Galway.

³⁸ Máirtín Ó Cadhain (1906-1970), native Irish speaker, schoolteacher, and member of the IRA, was one of the most prominent Irish language writers of the twentieth century.

³⁹ Máirtín Ó Cadhain (1971), "Irish Prose in the Twentieth Century", in Caerwyn Williams (ed.), *Literature in Celtic Countries*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, p. 147. According to Brian O Conchubhair, "the Free State Irish-language novel was an innocuous and inoffensive object which re-enforced Catholic doctrine and offered no challenge free state". See note 40. The translation and publication of large numbers of American westerns and detective novels did not help matters, merely serving to boost figures without promoting creativity or even generating capital.

⁴⁰ Brian Ó Conchubhair, *Irish Times*, November 13, 2004, Weekender Supplement.

nothing on earth in either script. It imposes a burden and a handicap which I think can hardly be borne.⁴¹

With the agreement of the Minister of Education, Professor John M. O'Sullivan, An Gúm began to phase out this 'old type' in 1928. As the government was the main publisher of Irish language books this effectively meant the nationwide Romanization of printed Irish.

When it came to eliminating manuscript Gaelic letterforms things were more complicated. Blythe had no direct influence over Irish teachers and O'Sullivan, though sympathetic to Romanization, was unwilling to risk his career in a direct confrontation with the Irish National Teachers' Association (I.N.T.O.) and the Gaelic League. Unlike Mustapha Kemal, therefore, Blythe adopted a very subtle approach. He chose not to openly identify himself with Romanization, discreetly using his influence with the Civil Service Commission and the *Irish Independent* newspaper to achieve his aims. As a consequence, his role in the project remains to this day almost imperceptible.

Blythe's behind-the-scenes manoeuvring began with the publication of an anonymous account of the Turkish letters revolution in the *Irish Independent* on July 24, 1928. This was the first in a series of articles, some anonymous, some written by members of Cumann na nGaedhael or special correspondants, discussing the pros and cons of the Gaelic script. The *Independent* was overtly pro-Cumann na nGaedhael at the time and its editor, T. R. Harrington, was himself in favour of Romanization. The newspaper was, therefore, the ideal medium for a propaganda campaign to generate support for script reform in Ireland. The first article, entitled "The Changing Turk", established the key themes which would be repeated and reformulated by various hands during the second half of 1928.

In essence a call to jump on the bandwagon⁴² of international script reform, the purpose of this article was to convince *Independent* readers that the letters revolution was part of an irresistible global movement towards Romanization and Latinization and that it was in Ireland's best interest to join. After listing the various reforms carried out in Turkey (transferring the government to Ankara, abolishing the Sultanate and Caliphate, establishing the new constitution, abolishing polygamy, abandoning the fez and veil, suppressing of the title of 'Pasha'), the author focuses on the script issue:

⁴¹ Ernest Blythe, *Dáil Éireann debates*, volume 44, 28 October 1932.

⁴² The basic theme of the bandwagon appeal is that "everyone else is doing it, and so should you."

The other change is of more interest to Europeans generally. Latin characters are to replace the Arabic in Turkish script. For two years the Angora Government has been setting a headline by introducing this reform; it is now to become compulsory. Soon the Gael will stand alone in his refusal to accept the Latin letters, fondly imagining that he shows his fidelity to the Gaelic script when in historical fact the characters he employs have no claim to be so named or honoured.⁴³

This article is the template for all those that followed. Appeals to fear that Ireland would be isolated by its typographical conservatism, and relabeling Gaelic letterforms as Gothic, foreign or even British would become the stock in trade of the pro-Romanization lobby for the next 40 years. This was, after all, how the kemalists had attempted to convince the Turkish elite that Latinization would have a positive impact on Turkish culture, and both Jespersen and Steinberg employed the same tactics *vis-à-vis* the Irish government.⁴⁴

In this case, the author was using the Turkish precedent to pave the way for an official announcement the following week. Avoiding the bold declaration and swift implementation approach that had made the letters revolution a reality, the Irish reformers inserted a tiny announcement in the national newspapers on July 31. Significantly, this was not a Government announcement and no names were appended to the press release. Instead, the text simply stated that the Civil Service Commission, a cross-departmental body of three officials charged with determining the standards for entry to the Civil Service, had decided that from January 1, 1930 Civil Service examinations would be printed in Roman type and from 1933 all candidates would have to use the Roman script in their answers. Although Blythe appeared to have nothing to do with this decision, one of the three officials sitting on the commission was the Assistant Secretary of the Department of Finance, someone with whom he had a close working relationship. He could, therefore, influence their decisions.

The anonymous article had already provided an international context for script change without explicitly endorsing it. The commissioners' announcement now made Romanization inevitable without making it obligatory. Officially the Gaelic script was not even being abandoned. Consequently, there were no memos, directives or instructions for teachers, printers or publishers. It was nonetheless clear to all concerned that if Civil Service examinations were to be set in Roman type and

⁴³ Anonymous [T. R. Harrington, the editor?], *Irish Independent*, July 24, 1928, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Several years after this article was published the Nazis also used this strategy and declared that the Gothic script had never really been German at all and that what had been called German letters were in reality Jewish and were forbidden.

answered in the Roman script, teachers preparing candidates would have to use the Roman script in the classroom and publishers would have little choice but to supply students with books set in Roman type. By orchestrating this one ostensibly insignificant change, Blythe had effectively removed the *raison d'être* of the Gaelic script and guaranteed its disappearance in a matter of years.

Irish script reformers could not take advantage of the range of coercive methods available to their counterparts in Turkey. The various devices for damage limitation built into the commissioners' announcement reveal just how cautious they had to be in this volatile, transitional period in Irish politics. As we have already pointed out, this was not a ban on Gaelic script. As no member of the government could be held responsible for the findings of an independent commission, both Blythe and O'Sullivan could avoid any unwelcome questions in the Dáil. Even more telling is the timing of the announcement. With teachers and opposition TDs safely on holidays, Blythe and his allies had effectively given themselves a month's head start to promote Romanization without fear of interference from the two groups that would be most likely to oppose them. As it turned out, this tactic was particularly successful and the first serious opposition took almost two months to materialize.

In the meantime, there was more anonymous 'bandwagon' propaganda in the pro-Government *Independent*. The day after the commissioners' announcement the newspaper published further praise for Romanization similar in tone and content to the July 24 article. The novelty in the second article was the notion that Ireland was not only being overtaken by Turkey in the march of progress. Germany too was powering ahead and was abandoning the use of Gothic letters in its newspapers, having already given them up for a great deal of its book printing. The *Berliner Tageblatt*, a newspaper with "a world-wide appeal", is given as an example of this trend. The author goes on to suggest that a similar change would not be difficult in Ireland. The use of the Gaelic script in printing and publishing has been dwindling all by itself:

All official publications of the Government have been published in Roman type for some years, and all official communications in Irish from the Department of Education and other departments are written in Roman letters. [...] Many important books published have been in Roman type, particularly books requiring italics and varieties of type which are not obtainable in the Gaelic characters.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Anonymous, *Irish Independent*, August 1, 1928.

The reference to Government publications here is deliberately misleading. While it is true that, despite the availability of Gaelic typewriters manufactured by the American companies Underwood (c.1905) and Royal (c.1910),⁴⁶ the amount of Gaelic typescript produced by the Government and Civil Service in its internal communication was negligible, the same cannot be said for printed material (notices, circulars, public reports) or handwritten documents. The argument that Gaelic typefaces had no italics or any other type style stands on more solid ground, however. The first truly versatile Gaelic font family with italics, bold, small caps, a full set of accented letters and punctuation marks, and an associated Roman font was not produced until 1933⁴⁷ when it was arguably too late to do any good. Unfortunately, technical arguments such as this were unlikely to appeal to the layman and the pro-Romanization lobby soon resorted to an approach more accessible to an Irish audience: history.

On August 2, two days after the CSC's announcement, Pádraig de Burca, a Clare farmer who was already well on his way to becoming a Cumann na nGaedhail TD, published his own article in the *Independent*. Reformulating many of the arguments already in circulation, he combined his own brand of bandwagon propaganda with the sort of breathtaking historical negationism that would dominate the German scriptal environment throughout the 1930s. In his article he begins by identifying this "government decree" as a "death sentence" for the Gaelic script. He incorrectly assumes that it has been promulgated on the advice of experts. There is no evidence that experts of any kind were consulted before the decision was taken and de Burca is most likely attempting to dignify what was ultimately an arbitrary decision taken by a handful of politicians and civil servants. His principal tactic, however, is to deny that Gaelic letterforms are Irish and he brazenly cites Eugene O'Curry⁴⁸ as evidence:

What manner of script the early Irish had to supplement their Ogham system is not known, but O'Curry expressed the opinion that the now-lost *Saltair of Tara*, compiled more than a century before St. Patrick was born, was written in a modified form of the Latin characters introduced from the continent by

⁴⁶ See Michael Everson's "Gaelic Typefaces: History and Classification", <http://www.evertype.com/celtscript/fonthist.html>.

⁴⁷ This was the Colum Cille typeface designed by Colm Ó Lochlainn and Karl Uhlemann for the Three Candles Press.

⁴⁸ Eugene O'Curry (1794-1862) was a leading expert on Irish manuscripts. Having worked in the Topographical Section of the Ordnance Survey under George Petrie, he compiled the catalogue of Irish manuscripts in the British Museum and was appointed Professor of Irish History and Archaeology in the Catholic University of Ireland in 1854.

the druids. [...] All the early Irish scribes wrote in Roman characters, as manuscript remains still prove. In fact the Gaelic or Gothic script came to us in comparatively modern times from the Continent, where it was almost universally used until discredited in the march of progress.⁴⁹

De Burca had obviously done some research and his namedropping gives a ring of authority to his pseudohistorical fantasy. His argument is confusing but he appears to be making a distinction between the rounded, majuscule half-uncial letters of the *Book of Kells*, which he considers Roman, and the more angular minuscule style used in more profane writings, which he sees as Gothic. In reality, both styles were insular versions of the Roman form of the Latin alphabet, used contemporaneously in Irish scriptoria. 19th and 20th century Gaelic typefaces were based on one or other of these styles or on a combination of both. To label the contemporary Gaelic script 'Gothic' (see Fig. 4 for examples of Gothic typefaces) when in reality it diverged from its Roman counterpart in only a few details was misleading in the extreme. Returning to the 20th century he cites both Germany and Turkey as examples of typographic progress, reminding his readers of the *Berliner Tageblatt* and pointing out that German scientists have already adopted the Roman letters in preference to their own Gothic ones. Again, Turkey is singled out as a model for Ireland:

Schriftbeispiel Frühling

Schriftbeispiel Maximilian

Schriftbeispiel Deutsche Fierschrift

Schriftbeispiel Deutsche Anzeigerschrift

Schriftbeispiel Wilhelm-Klingspor-Schrift

Schriftbeispiel Wallau

Schriftbeispiel Claudius

Fig 4: Examples of 'Gothic' (blackletter) typefaces

⁴⁹ Pádraig de Burca [Patrick Burke], "An Irish Language Revolution: Government Decree", *Irish Independent*, August 2, 1928, p. 7.

Two years ago the Turkish Government voluntarily introduced the Roman letters to replace their more ornate Arabic ones; now it is proposed to make the change obligatory throughout the Turkish Republic. The question has long been debated here, is made more vexatious by the error of calling the Roman type "English" and by assuming that the so-called Gaelic type is Irish. The Roman should be more correctly called Latin, while the Gaelic is really Gothic. All the early scribes wrote in Roman characters and the Gaelic or Gothic was imported into Ireland in relatively recent times from the continent where it had since been discarded⁵⁰.

The logic is faulty but attractively simple: the Germans are phasing out their Gothic script. The Turks have abandoned their ornate Arabic alphabet. The Gaelic script is both Gothic and ornate. Irish people are, therefore, wrong to cling to such an archaic, foreign, impractical writing system when all around are abandoning theirs.

As the possibility of criticism from teachers and Gaelic Leaguers increased daily, the *Irish Independent*, in a show of support for Romanization, suddenly made its own announcement:

The Government has now decided that in the course of a few years only the Roman script will be recognised in Civil Service examinations. This decision has the general approval of Irish scholars and teachers and no doubt the schools will speedily fall into line. The *Irish Independent*, in order to facilitate Irish readers, has accordingly decided gradually to displace the Gaelic type from its columns⁵¹.

Neither the scholars nor the teachers had made any declaration of approval. The I.N.T.O. had not even discussed the subject yet and though there were Students Representative Councils in Irish universities, none of these had made a statement. Once again, T. R. Harrington was giving the script reformers a helping hand. The support of such a leading figure in the Irish newspaper industry was extremely valuable and the Romanization of a national newspaper, coming as it did only a few weeks after the *Berliner Tageblatt's* announcement, gave a considerable boost to their campaign.

Autumn of Discontent?

As expected, September brought the first criticism of the commissioners' announcement. Both the Gaelic League and the teachers released statements expressing dissatisfaction with the switch to Roman type and script, and with the way the commissioners were going about it. Printers and publishers, arguably the second group most affected by

⁵⁰ Padraig de Burca, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁵¹ Anonymous, *Irish Independent*, August 21, 1928, p. 5.

the change after the teachers, did not react. Opposition TDs who could have taken advantage of the situation to attack the Government held their tongues and let the opportunity pass. Script reform was clearly not as decisive an issue as Blythe and his fellow reformers anticipated.

The first group to react was the Gaelic League. A strictly democratic national organisation, the League waited until its annual congress to discuss the script change and refrained from making any statements until delegates from all over the country had had the chance to debate the issue. On September 4, the League's outgoing president, Cormac Breathnach, chaired a tense afternoon discussion of the reform during which a resolution was moved by Irish language militant P. T. McGinley⁵² disapproving of the commissioners' decision. Introducing his resolution he encouraged the delegates to agree that

They were opposed to the change. They practised and preferred the Irish type, and they knew that if English and Irish were printed in the same characters it would interfere with Irish pronunciation. It would lead to disunion amongst the Gaels.⁵³

In the ensuing debate it emerged that many delegates were, like McGinley himself, angry that the Government had consulted neither the Gaelic League nor the teachers before announcing such an important change. Opinions about the switch to Roman type and script were, however, divided. Eleven delegates, representative of a minority faction supporting Blythe's move and including Muiris Ó Catháin, Lord Ashbourne, Father Michael of Cork and Micheál Ó Loinsigh of Dublin, strongly opposed McGinley's resolution. They argued that the use of Roman characters would have a positive impact on the language and make it, as the commissioners claimed, an everyday language. Blythe was an influential member of the Gaelic League and, although he does not seem to have been present during the debate, everyone was aware that he was behind the reform.⁵⁴ After the pros and cons had been examined in detail and the resolution redrafted several times, a text that satisfied the vast majority of the delegates was produced:

We notify from this congress of the Gaelic League:

(a) That it is better for Irish that no great change should be made in the type or in the spelling of Irish until the language is out of danger of death or destruction

⁵² Better known as Cú Uladh in Irish Ireland circles, Peter Toner McGinley (1856-1942) was the author of *Eilis an Bhean Déirce*, the earliest Irish language play to be staged. It was performed by the Irish Literary Theatre in 1900.

⁵³ P. T. McGinley, *Irish Times*, September 5, 1928, p. 8.

⁵⁴ Regina Uí Chollatáin (2004), *An Claidheamh Soluis agus Fáinne an Lae 1899-1932*, Baile Átha Cliath, Cois Life Teoranta, p. 212.

(b) That the Gaelic League is not opposed to the use of Roman type when there is a special need for it

Therefore we desire to ask the Government of the Saorstát to put a stop to the new regulation for the present, and set up a commission to (1) obtain authoritative judgement from the Gaels on the question of type and alphabets, and (2) to inquire if it is possible to get a suitable type for Irish made inside Ireland.⁵⁵

Despite the opinions of several dissenting individuals, the delegates collectively rejected the reform. They recognized that existing Gaelic types were far from satisfactory and were aware of the reluctance of Irish type founders to produce new ones. They were, therefore, prepared to accept Roman letters in contexts where there was no real alternative. Their call for a commission to collect data on public opinion implies a criticism of the lack of transparency and the arbitrary nature of the commissioners' decision. The *Irish Times*, which maintained an impartial stance on this issue, made this rejection public in a long report on the congress under the headline "Roman Characters or Gaelic? Criticism of Civil Service Commission". The *Irish Independent*, however, seized on the conditional acceptance of Roman type expressed in part (b) of the resolution and put a more favourable spin on things: "Roman Type: The Gaelic League not Against it". In subsequent reports the *Independent* consistently misrepresented the Gaelic League's position.

Just before the I.N.T.O. held its own meeting to discuss the issue, the *Independent* published another anonymous article⁵⁶ on the letters revolution. This time the subject was education. On the whole, the article is very similar to the first one in July and was probably written by the same person. The writer sets up a direct comparison between the reforms in Turkey and Ireland and adopts the deliberately confusing terminology employed by de Burca:

Gaelic writers have been shedding their ink in a battle to decide whether they will revert to the Latin script practised by their more ancient ancestors or persevere with the Gothic script adopted by their less ancient ancestors⁵⁷.

Evoking a non-existent national debate the author argues that, compared to the kemalist letters revolution, the switch to Roman type and script in Ireland is "but the shadow of a trifle".⁵⁸ Clearly anticipating criticism from the I.N.T.O. about the difficulties such a

⁵⁵ Anonymous, *Irish Independent*, September 29, 1928, p. 7.

⁵⁶ September 20.

⁵⁷ Anonymous, *Irish Independent*, September 20, 1928, p.6.

⁵⁸ Anonymous, *Irish Independent*, September 24, 1928, p.6.

change would pose in Ireland, he focuses on the ramifications of the reform in the Turkish education system. His conclusion is full of gushing optimism: thanks to the tireless work of Mustapha Kemal and his Civil Service, “Turkey is now busy learning its new alphabet” and the president has earned the undying gratitude of the Turkish schoolboy. The implicit message is obvious: with hard work and determination a similar transformation can be achieved in Ireland and everyone will be better off for it in the end.

The members of the Central Executive Committee (C.E.C.) of the I.N.T.O. were not fooled by this rosy picture of an entire nation coming together to learn a new script and three days later passed their own resolution. Protesting against the arbitrary nature of the Commission’s decision, they claimed that such a change would “tend to increase the difficulties of teachers, children, and learners generally and to lead to much confusion, and be detrimental to the study of the language”.⁵⁹ Apart from sporadic letters to the editors of national newspapers by individual and for the most part anonymous teachers in the years that followed, there was no further comment by the I.N.T.O. They may have been unhappy about the switch to Roman type and script but appear to have resigned themselves to it almost immediately.

Cormac Breathnach, a teacher himself, took this as his cue to set the record straight and wrote a short letter of protest to T. R. Harrington which was published on September 28. The pro-Romanization lobby had written articles about modernization, Europeanization and efficiency. What Breathnach needed to counter their propaganda was a convincing argument based on a similarly highly-valued concept. Armed with resolutions from two national organisations he could have positioned himself as a champion of democracy challenging the arbitrary decisions of faceless bureaucrats. Alternatively, writing as one of the leading figures of the language movement, he could have defended Irish cultural values. Instead, after denouncing the ban on Gaelic script and restating the I.N.T.O.’s position, he opted for a strange and altogether uninspiring observation:

There is no chance whatever that those engaged in the Six-County area will adopt the type decreed by our Civil Service Commissioners; hence if the edict prevailed we should, characteristically enough, have imposed upon us partition even of the national language. The ban must go.⁶⁰

There was little chance that Breathnach’s halfhearted effort could disturb the script reformers or cause them to change their plans in any

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ Cormac Breathnach, *Irish Independent*, September 28, 1928, p. 10.

way, and he succeeded merely in expressing his unhappiness with the situation. This was essentially what the Gaelic League and the I.N.T.O. had already done. Faced with the rational position of the Commissioners, emotional claims that there was something essentially right about the Gaelic script were not going to achieve much. Breathnach had even fallen into the trap of referring to the reform as a “ban”. This gave the *Independent* and the Civil Service Commission a wonderful opportunity to declare that no such ban existed while adding to the ever-growing list of the benefits of script reform. The very day that Breathnach’s letter was published they set about doing just that. A special correspondent was dispatched to interview one of the commissioners who, cautious as ever, chose to remain anonymous. In the resulting article he begins by categorically stating that “there [is] no ban whatever on the use of of Gaelic type in the primary or secondary schools”. He continues by attempting to show that the action of the commission was admirable, intended as it was to bring Irish into use as an everyday language. This apparently involved keeping the costs associated with printing and special typewriters down so as to encourage more people to use the language:

If we want Irish to be used by solicitors and merchants and Co. Councils and Government departments, we must be able to use the ordinary office equipment for the purpose. No private firm or State Department could afford to have special typewriters for Irish. [...] It would cost the taxpayer a tidy sum if a Gaelic typewriter had to be installed in every office in which Irish was used.⁶¹

Roman type was already being used in in the offices of the Government and the Oireachtas for this reason and so those who wished to enter the Civil Service would have to learn the Roman letters before they entered. There is alksó an implicit criticism of Blythe’s ‘faddists’. If they were allowed to have their way they would slow down the business of the Civil Service, hinder the development of the language and waste a considerable amount of taxpayers’ money.

The mystery commissioner goes on to completely and deliberately misread the Gaelic League’s resolution, transforming opposition into a ringing endorsement. In spite of the fact that the text of the resolution is reprinted in the article, he claims that “the commission [had] simply anticipated the Gaelic League by issuing the recent order.” In relation to the recent resolution of the I.N.T.O., he makes similarly misleading statements:

Why should the children and parents be put to the trouble and expense of two sets of copybooks for handwriting, one for Irish and one for any other

⁶¹ Anonymous, *Irish Independent*, September 29, 1928, p. 7.

language that the children must learn. They all must know the Roman letters for English. They can use these letters for French and Latin and other languages. Why not for Irish. Must Irish be hampered by a separate set of letters for itself?⁶²

Now it is the conservative teachers who are going to waste money. His most outlandish argument, however, is kept for his conclusion. In response to Breathnach's prediction that the reform would lead to typographical partition, the commissioner ripostes with an even stranger argument:

If the orangemen were falling over each other in their desire to learn Irish, there might be some ground for the objection to changing from the Queen Elizabeth type to the Roman type but in the absence of such a desire there was no reason why we should not use the type which would help to bring Irish into general use in the Saorstat.

This is yet another attempt to convince the public that the Gaelic script was foreign. In associating Orangemen and Queen Elizabeth with Gaelic type the commissioner is suggesting that there is something Protestant or British about it. Like de Burca he had clearly done some research and had probably consulted Lynam's book while preparing his article. The first Gaelic typeface was indeed introduced into Ireland by the Elizabethan administration in an effort to promote protestantism. The author, however, tars four hundred years of Gaelic fonts, including those used by the Irish Government, with the same brush in a deliberate attempt to muddy the waters. The tone of this statement is strikingly similar to that of the anonymous articles already published by the *Independent* and it is very possible that the same commissioner was responsible for all of them. It would make sense for him to prepare the ground for his own announcement by introducing the subject to the public and then to defend it from potential criticism in the run up to the Gaelic League and I.N.T.O. congresses.

In his response to this article Cormac Breathnach retaliated against the commissioner's "jibes" but achieved little else. He called the claim that maintaining the Gaelic script would cost parents more money "foolish", the passage about the Orangemen and Queen Elizabeth type "sublime", and pointed out the Gaelic League was indeed opposed to the use of Roman type. He failed, however, to produce solid arguments of his own. His was the last word on the issue in 1928. By the end of the year it was clear that the reformers had won what had been for the most part a very one-sided battle. Unfortunately for Blythe, however, the

⁶² *Id.*

1932 general election put Fianna Fáil in the driving seat. Taking on board the position of the teachers and the Gaelic League, the new Government reversed the Civil Service Commission ruling before it had really begun to take effect, reintroduced Gaelic type into An Gúm publications and set the Irish version of the new constitution in a Gaelic typeface. This briefly returned the Gaelic script to its pre-independence status as a visual representation of national identity but, ultimately, the Irish language was never brought into general use.

Conclusion

Blythe's project to reshape the scriptal environment in Ireland ended in failure. This had nothing to do with the relatively slight opposition shown by the teachers and the Gaelic League. Cumann na nGaedhael paid scant attention to such criticism. It had even less to do with Fianna Fáil's election victory. Blythe was simply too cautious. If he had emulated the methods of kemalist reformers and not just used Turkey as an example to embarrass an uninterested public into accepting the Roman script, he might have succeeded. Eoin MacNeill, co-founder of the Gaelic League and a former Minister for Education, certainly seems to have believed that it was Blythe's piecemeal approach that had foiled his plans. In a 1931 article he suggested that the reformers should have been more direct and quoting an "old Irish saying" he offered Blythe some coded advice: "a year ago tonight my grandmother took the stepping stones; if she had gone round by the bridge she would have got home before now."⁶³ Anticipating controversy, the reformers took the stepping stones but the debate never materialized and for the rest of the 20th century script reform was a nonissue. When the Gaelic script was eventually phased out in the 1960s by Fianna Fáil, commentators remained silent and both the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Times* found it difficult to generate even a small response from the public, despite considerable provocation.

Neither Mustapha Kemal nor Ernest Blythe were in harmony with their respective scriptal environments but pushed ahead with their rationalizing, modernizing, Europeanizing schemes nonetheless. Kemal was in a strong position with the support of the Government and army and could identify himself with the project. He changed the Turkish alphabet and left the Turkish people no choice but to follow. Blythe chose the more cautious approach of making a small change in the administration and waiting for the Gaelic script to disappear by itself. His grandmother never made it home.

⁶³ Eoin MacNeill, "Roman or Gaelic Type", *Irish Independent*, April 29, 1931, p. 6.