Irish Letters: Sacred and Secular Usage *

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Abstract: *The objective of this article is to discuss the lettering styles that can be found in signs around Dublin, and which are used to convey some kind of Irishness and tradition. The first section discusses the story of insular scripts that flourished in medieval Ireland, being the* Book of Kells *their most conspicuous representative. After that, the rise of Gaelic typefaces is examined and, finally, examples are used to show the multiplicity of lettering styles in Dublin which are based on insular scripts. It is demonstrated that such letters often fail in their intention to display tradition and nationalism.*

Keywords: *Medieval Ireland; Gaelic typefaces; lettering styles.*

The exhibition of the *Book of Kells* is wisely constructed, allowing visitors to familiarize themselves with the process of codex-making and giving key-information on every aspect of the book before actually leading them into the dim chamber where it resides alongside the more modest, yet also admirable *Book of Armagh* and the *Garland of Howth*. After that, the Long Room is an apotheosis of space and light and only a few steps then separate the visitors from a deluge of products that replicate the millenary script. Of course, the preservation of such magnificent works of art depends partially on these products, but the fact that objects so coveted in the Middle Ages, often treated as relics, coexist so closely with artefacts less historically valuable invites us to think about how the letters of *Kells* became so widespread. The purpose of this study is to investigate the history lying behind Insular medieval scripts, such as the ones found in *Kells* and *Armagh*, and Gaelic typefaces, which originated some of the lettering styles often seen in official and commercial establishments, in signs and objects, in Irish or English. In Dublin, one is never a long walk away from inscriptions that, consciously or not, pay tribute to the medieval letters.

The first section will talk about the Irish branch of Insular scripts, paying attention to their history and formal peculiarities and, after that, the development of some Gaelic typefaces will be addressed in the light of Dermot McGuinne's book on the subject. This will lead to the examples of inscriptions collected in Dublin. Rather than including all the numerous and often similar findings, preference was given to those best illustrating the category discussed. The first is a group showing the use of American typefaces to convey Irishness, and how it relates to the neutralization of the half-uncial *G*. The second category shows how uncial-based letters, which were not part of the scribal repertoire in Ireland, are to be found on the streets. The third group addresses the divergence of forms adopted in a same place, while the last group explains the occurrence of the Tironean 'et' and the roman ampersand. Some reflections are then woven to wrap up the exposition.

1. Insular scripts in Ireland

Christianity was not new to Ireland when, in the fifth century, missionaries started a systematic process of conversion in the island. In fact, the very existence of a Christian community in the country, maybe since the fourth century, might have prompted Pope Celestine to send, in 431, Bishop Palladius to foster 'the Irish believing in Christ' (Meehan 2012: 19). The missionaries probably brought with them a script that would have been uncomplicated and close to the Italian half-uncial script (Bischoff 1990: 83-84). It gradually became more rounded, culminating in the grandiose "Insular half-uncial", the majuscule that was later employed in the *Book of Kells*, possibly around the year 800.

A formal and very slow style of writing, the majuscule could not cater to everyday necessities, and this was one of the reasons why a minuscule variant developed during the 7th century (Bischoff 1990: 84). It was much used for secular writing, though not exclusively, as some religious texts survive that employed such script. One example is the *Book of Armagh*, neighbour of *Kells*, but the latter codex itself contains both religious and profane writing in Insular minuscule, notably on the exuberant folio 25v and the less impressive folio 7r, a late addition to the codex.

The term 'Insular' is an umbrella word first used by Ludwig Traube (Brown 1993: 99) to comprise the family of scripts that flourished not only in the Celtic world, but also in the Anglo-Saxon one and, later, in the continent. The Irish were responsible for taking their script to Great Britain (Bischoff 1990: 90), something done under the influence of St Colum Cille, or Columba, the Irish monk who tradition says founded the Scottish monastery of Iona in 563. It was from there that Aidan, another Irish monk, set out to Northumbria to found the monastery of Lindisfarne in the 7th century, according to Bischoff (ibid.: 90).

Aidan's missionary activity not only restored Christianity in the area but also bequeathed to the Anglo-Saxons the scriptural lore acquired in the Columban milieu, thus starting the blurry distinction between Irish and Anglo-Saxon scripts, a confusion better expressed by Julian Brown (1993: 183):

> Where the line should be drawn between "pure Irish script" and "Irish script as developed in Northumbria" is a difficult question: a book decorated in Northumbria in a definably Anglo-Saxon way may still be in script which is essentially Irish, even if the scribe himself was the Anglo-Saxon pupil of an Irish master.

The two styles would not be entirely distinguishable until the late 9th century (Rumble 2009: 42).

The majuscule used in *Kells* is situated at the zenith of Insular scripts, being the youngest sibling of the similarly accomplished *Book of Durrow* and the magnificent *Lindisfarne Gospels*. It is a very rounded, airy script, showing some peculiarities. Letter *A* displays a characteristic shape of *O* and *C* merged, hence its name "OC-a", which Morison perhaps more justly calls "cc" (1972: 81). *G* and *T* are also distinguishing, the former with a flat top and the latter with a curved shaft. Also, Insular half-uncial freely uses some letters, notably *D* and *N*, from the older uncial inventory without apparent reason, sometimes in the same word INGENERATIONE in folio 12r from *Kells*, shows the two different kinds of *N*, the "OC-a", and the characteristic *G* and *T*.

Figure 1 - reproduction
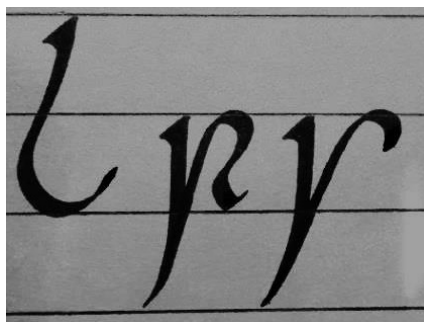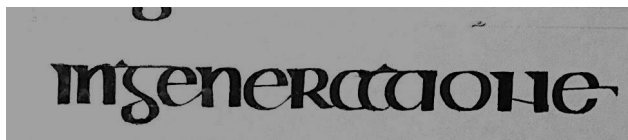of a word in Insular half-uncial.

Figure 2 - Quadrilinear *l*, *r* and *s*.

Most importantly, scholars dealing with Insular scripts widely mention the triangular-shaped serif in vertical strokes (Duncan 2016: 214; Bischoff 1990: 86 and Morison 1972: 153-159). Its presence is conspicuous enough to prompt Morison to write extensively about it, offering two explanations for the appearance of this odd serif. Given its heavily artificial nature, he suggests that it could have been a means to prevent the deterioration of the script into a scrawl, because 'a carefully wrought serif does correct slothfulness in writing' (1972: 154). Or, perhaps, the wedged shape was inspired by coins of Imperial provenance that display the same feature (ibid.: 157).

The less formal and more compressed Insular script, the minuscule, was confined within four lines, instead of two, as shown by the ascender of *l* and descenders of r and s in Figure 2. Brown (1993: 201) divided it in four subcategories in decreasing order of formality, starting from the *Hybrid*, which kept some of the majuscule roundness; the Set, accelerated, but still showing pen-lifts; and the *Cursive* and *Current* minuscule, very slanted and rapid, the latter abounding in ligatures and abbreviations, which contributed even more to the economy of the minuscule (Bischoff 1990: 86). The most important of these was the Tironian 'et', 7, which would later appear in Gaelic typefaces.

However informal, or rather because of its informality, the minuscule was destined to endure. For Morison (1972: 47), when two scripts of different speeds are practised side by side, they engage in a competition that either gives rise to a syncretic form or is won by the swiftest. Suffice to say that the minuscule survived well into the twentieth century (O'Neill 2014: 8), and was the one to inspire most Gaelic typefaces that came to light much later.
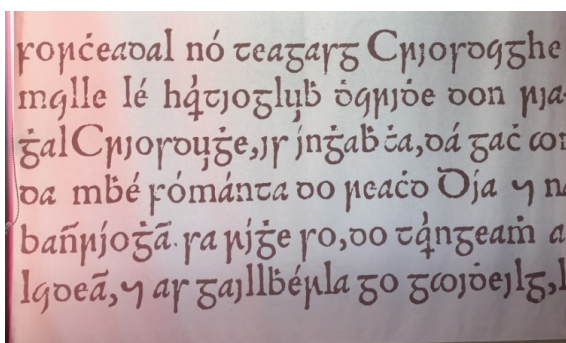

Figure 3 - Queen Elizabeth Type,
Trinity College Long Room

2. Gaelic typefaces

Unlike the Insular scripts, which appeared first in Ireland and were carried over the sea, the first Irish typeface came after its Anglo-Saxon counterpart. Indeed, Dermot McGuinne (2010: 8) points out that this earliest typeface was independently created, owing nothing to its English predecessor, despite their similarities. *The Queen Elizabeth Type*, named after its commissioner, was first used in 1571 in a doctrinal book called *Aibidil Gaoidheilge agus Caiticiosma* (McGuinne 2010: 9). A fragment of its title page now decorates the blinds on the staircase that leads to the Long Room at Trinity College Dublin (Fig.3). Being an amalgam, it is possible to see the coexistence of many roman letters, like *C* and *n*, and newly cut Irish ones, such as the flat-topped *g*, and *t*

with its curved shaft. Lowercase *r* and *s* are also quite similar to their scriptural forefathers, and the Tironean 'et' is visible in lines four and six.

Figure 4 - Royal Irish Academy, Dawson Street

While *a* was snatched from an italic typeface (McGuinne 2010: 8), it does resemble the one used in the *Book of Armagh*. This letter would suffer a dramatic change with the arrival of the second Irish type, the 1611 Louvain *Type*, named after the place of its creation. Based on the handwriting of a certain Franciscan called Bonaventure O'Hussey, McGuinne calls it the 'first truly Irish type' (2010: 23). It is probably not counted among the most beautiful, with a generally uneven appearance, an uppercase *A* resembling a debased form of Fraktur, and particularly unsightly *M* and *N*. These oddities were to remain in several subsequent typefaces which either retained them or attempted unsuccessful amendments. The sign on the door of the Royal Irish Academy (Fig.4), with its FNG – standing for *Foclóir na Nua-Ghaeilge* – could be inscribed in this tradition, although the staff were unable to confirm it.

However, the *Louvain Type* is curious inasmuch as its lowercase a initiates a trend that survived in most later Gaelic typefaces: it was modelled on a three, not two-stroke minuscule a (Fig.5). This is a late characteristic of Irish script that Timothy O'Neill (2014: 88) observes to initiate in the 11th century *Annals of Inisfallen*.
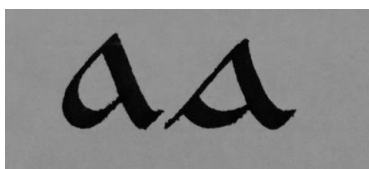

Figure 5 - Two and three-stroke minuscule a.

In 1835, more than two hundred years after the *Louvain Type*, the long line of Irish typefaces with progressively more bizarre *A*, *M* and *N* was at last broken by the Irish artist George Petrie. Staunton (2007: 9) sees his creation as a 'bold move': while all the preceding typefaces had been based on the Insular minuscule, his was modelled on the half-uncial majuscule. Subsequent alterations were made to the *Petrie Type* in 1850 and 1856, so that it became progressively more Kells-like. In the latest version, for instance, it is possible to notice the "OC-a" more clearly than in the first. It was Petrie again who, in 1857, designed the type that McGuinne (2010: 3) decided to call *Newman Type*, after its commissioner. It had successive variations and, according to the author (ibid.: 126) many typefaces that appeared in the late 19th and 20th centuries derived from it. Letters probably based on this type are ubiquitous, for example in street signs (Fig.6) and elsewhere (Fig.15).

Figure 6 - Letters possibly based on the *Newman Type*.

Also worthy of mention is the *Baoithín Type* (McGuinne 2010: 138-143). Created by Colm Ó Lochlainn in the 1930s, it derived from a 1921 type called *Hammerschrift* after its creator, Victor Hammer. In fact, what Ó Lochlainn did was add variants to Hammer's letters, notably *A, B, D, G* and *T*, all of them designed to recall the half-uncial. However, the triangular serifs, perceived as the most peculiar characteristic of Insular scripts, were absent in these additions, maybe to conform to Hammer's letters. *A*, *B* and *D* regained some of their original roundness, the flat-topped *G* was rediscovered, and the protruding shaft of T was reduced. Both typefaces will reappear in this discussion.

Ó Lochlainn would later get involved in the production of another type called *Colum Cille*, so named because St Colum Cille 'is, par excellence, the patron of Irish scribes' (cited in McGuinne 2010: 151). If this indicates an attempt to return to the origins, the actual result of the type upon completion does not live up to the name, showing a mixture of roman capital, uncial and half-uncial forms that was not present in the federation of scripts that prospered under Colum Cille's influence. The Irish typefaces had been devised to serve the purposes of the vernacular Gaelic language, but in the early 20th century nationalistic forces promoted the use of Gaelic typefaces as the *only* proper way of writing Irish, thus kindling a patriotic feeling (Staunton, 2012, "Gaelicizing the Scriptal Environment", para. 5 of 7). The discontinuation of Gaelic types in favour of roman letters, which occurred in the 1960s, is described by the Staunton (2007: 14) as a symptom of modernization, so that Ireland could engage in a world that had adopted the roman alphabet as its *littera franca*. But the Irish letters survived in their homeland and, in the next section, the contemporary embodiment of Gaelic lettering styles is addressed.

3. Irish letters in contemporary use

Not much effort is needed to reveal the pervasiveness of Gaelic lettering styles in the landscape of Dublin, but closer attention shows that although a common atmosphere surrounds these inscriptions they are varied in shape and function. Originally conceived as the visual incarnation of the Irish language, this purportedly symbiotic relationship is seen now mainly on inscriptions often commemorative or official. Most are based on the types that arose from the minuscule, but variation is constant, as evidenced by Figure 7.

Letters modelled after the half-uncial are also to be found. Collected in the Garden of Remembrance, the example in Figure 8 is careful enough to include the peculiar triangular serif.

The next paragraphs are dedicated to commenting on some remarkable aspects of Insular-modelled letters. They are a tiny fraction of the immense variety available even to inattentive eyes.

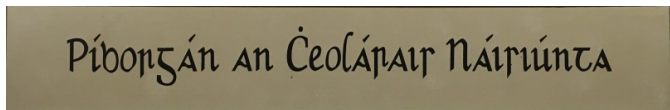Figure 7 - Minuscule National Concert Hall and General Post Office.

Figure 8 - Majuscule Garden of Remembrance.

3.1. Hammer's typefaces and the G-neutralization

Victor Hammer continued for many years designing typefaces based on his original *Hammerschrift*. Most important are the 1943 *American Uncial* and the 1953 *Neue Hammer Unziale*, available on the Linotype website. While the American Uncial makes no distinction between upper and lowercase, the *Neue Unziale* uses roman uppercase letters. Whether or not Hammer was inspired by the Baoithín Type is difficult to say, but some letters, particularly a, bear close similarity to Ó Lochlainn's. Their historical background as given on the website ends identically, stating that both are 'often seen in Ireland and elsewhere for things that should look "Irish" or "Celtic"' (Linotype [n.d.] 'Background Story' section, para. 4 of 4). These letters are thought to evidence a residual touch of the Irish half-uncial, something culturally constructed by the long-lasting association of traditional Ireland with roundish letters. Uncontrolled replication perpetrated this vague sensation, even when people are unaware of how it came to be. Thus, typefaces bearing a loose connection with Insular scripts, created in the USA by an Austrian designer, are deliberately adopted to convey Irishness mainly, but not exclusively, in souvenirs, pubs, restaurants and accommodations. They are also favoured by the residents of Glasnevin Cemetery, where they coexist with a third typeface of Hammer's uncials called simply *Uncial Regular* on the Linotype website, which affirms it to be derived from the *American Uncial*. Its most distinguishing letter is the rounded y, evidenced by comparison with the word "Memory" in both gravestones below (Fig.9). Curiously, the *Uncial Regular* was also chosen by the University of Uppsala, Sweden, for the explanatory notice at the entrance of the Gothic *Silver Bible* exhibition, most certainly not in celebration of Irish letters. A fragment of it is exceptionally included in Figure 9 below.

Only one example collected in Dublin bears the *Regular Uncial*, and three of them employ the *American Uncial* as a model: the Douglas Hyde Gallery, above, the Bridge Tavern (Fig.15) and the Irish Gifts & Luggage (Fig.19). All the others prefer the *Neue Unziale*, as evidenced by the uppercase roman letters and/or lowercase *b*, *d* and *l*.

Figure 9 - Hammer's uncial letters.
From left to right, Glasnevin Cemetery, Suffolk Strret, Townsend Street, Talbot Street, Trinity College Dublin and the Carolina Rediviva Library, Uppsala, Sweden.

Figure 10 - *G* neutralization. Church Street, Merion Row and Marine Road (Dún Laoghaire).

What is most intriguing about the three typefaces is that, while trying to give an idea of tradition, of plain Irish provenance, one typical letter is absent from their palette: the flat-topped *G*, which Ó Lochlainn had included in the *Baoithín Type*, but Hammer did not keep in later typefaces. Intentionally or not, the neutralization of this odd-looking *G* proved convenient for those who elected Hammer's letters as a tourist pheromone. It gives away the right amount of Irishness to attract the eye, and simultaneously sanitizes a letter that borders mere exoticism and obtrusive unintelligibility.

G-neutralization is not exclusive to the family of Hammer's uncials. In Figure 10, the first image shows the letter as it appears in the *Colum Cille Type*. In the second, the g in "Lounge" approaches the shape of a Merovingian half-uncial (Morison 1972: 148). As for the motto of Dún Laoghaire, the letter ends up matching the roundness of its peers.

3.2. Uncial letters

One issue that could be pointed out in Hammer's creations is that, despite their names, they are in fact more half-uncial than uncial and, in this sole respect, more Irish. Contrary to what its name suggests, the half-uncial was not an offspring of the uncial script, even if it appeared later. They both originated from the cursive roman capitals in the fourtth and fifth centuries (Brown 1993: 61), and, while the uncials reached England as far as Northumbria, they were not practised in Ireland (Bischoff 1990: 71). Uncial script ramifies into various

Figure 11 - Uncial (above) Half-uncial (below)

shapes which often overlap, at a first glance, with Insular half-uncials, particularly because, as mentioned previously, the latter does employ a few uncials as alternatives. The complexities of this script are many, but some differences, very simply put, can be seen in Figure 11. These dissimilarities notwithstanding, the general rounded aspect, reminiscent of the half-uncial, made popular some lettering styles that, though clearly uncial-based, are also employed to
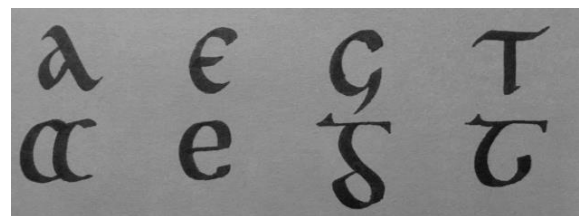
convey Irishness, even if strictly speaking they are more English. One of them, in 'The Brendan Behan' (Fig.12), is the *Omnia Roman*, created in 1990 by Karlgeorg Hoefer (Linotype [n.d.] 'Background Story' section, para. 3 of 3). 'Fitzgeralds' also displays an uncial style, distinguishable in *A*, *E*, *G* and *T*.

The variations in Figure 13 are very common as well. Again, one notes the characteristic *A*, *E* and *G* mixed with the half-uncial *T*.

Figure 12 - Uncial-style letters.
Abovre: Summerhill.
Below: Aston Quay.

Figure 13 - Uncial-style letters.
Above left: Temple Bar. Below left: van on Dorset Street.
Right: Great Denmark Street.

3.3. Competing forms

The existence of majuscule and minuscule-inspired forms of typefaces has already been mentioned, and some establishments chose both to signal their presence. The motivation is unknown: G-neutralization is a hypothesis, but a mere whim is also a possibility. The case of Claddagh Jewellers (Fig.14) might relate to the language shift, as the Irish version uses the more "authentic" *G* and *A*, based on minuscule models, while the English one appropriately betrays an uncial basis. As for the Bridge Tavern (Fig.15), it is noteworthy that two different majuscule styles were chosen, including Hammer's *American Uncial*, not to mention the minuscule, probably of *Newman Type* lineage.

Figure 14 - Claddagh Jewellers. Nassau Street.

Figure 15 - Bridge Tavern, Summerhill.

Figure 16 - The Long Stone, Townsend Street.

The Long Stone Pub chose four different styles. One of them (Fig.16, below), based on the minuscule, displays an uncharacteristic *S* and the flat topped *g*. The painting on the brick wall shows uncial features in *G*, while we are faced with two styles in Figure 19 (next section), including Hammer's uncial. The g with a single storey is possibly derived from the widespread normalized version of Carolingian ancestry.

3.4. The Tironean 'et' and the ampersand

It was mentioned earlier that a large inventory of abbreviations was used to enhance the speed of the minuscule. The only one that survived in Gaelic typefaces was the Tironean 'et', 7, in opposition to the roman ampersand, &. The Tironean sign is discreet but common in post boxes and manholes displaying the Irish logo of the abolished Department of Posts and Telegraphs, where it appears alongside the rounded P and T (Fig.17). Less usual – indeed this is the only example found – is the English version using the roman type and ampersand (Fig.18). Staunton (2007: 12) affirms that the modernization process that affected the use of roman typefaces in the 1960s created a typographic instability in the Post Office, demonstrated by the commemorative stamps of the period. Further research could elucidate whether both styles are related to this instability.

Figure 17 - P 7 T Gardiner Street Lower.

Figure 18 - P.& T. Dalkey Avenue.

The other example (Fig.19) belongs to a common sign in parking spaces. The remarkable aspect is that the Tironean 'et' is being used not because of an Irish typeface, but because of Irish language, as a means to counterbalance the ampersand in "PAY & DISPLAY". Being a translation calque, it failed to reproduce the rhyme. On the right, the person responsible for the painting chose neither character, preferring the ligature 'et' as it appears in the Hammer's uncial typefaces, something that we do not see in the red sign. Predominantly *American Uncial*, the ampersand cannot be defined as such.

Figure 19 - Above, left: Princess Street South. Above, right: Townsend Street. Below: Earl Street North.

4. Remaining issues

Staunton shares with the readers his critical view on the fact that, in the twentieth century, Gaelic typefaces fuelled nationalist movements, serving as a sort of bridge to the Irish civilization that had created the *Book of Kells* (2012, "Gaelicizing the Scriptal Environment", para. 7 of 7). If we accept that as true, we might say that the nationalists could well have chosen a less problematic source for their typographic ideology. Being such a beautiful artefact, and having such a border-crossing story, it comes as no surprise that scholars have engaged in a palaeographic tug-of-war in their attempt to pinpoint the book's provenance.

Julian Brown, an expert in Insular scripts, dedicated a whole article to explain the 'Northumbrian symptoms' in *Kells* (1993: 107). More than that, the implied message is that the book was written in Lindisfarne *after* the Irish and their influence had departed, allowing the Anglo-Saxons to develop their own style. On the other hand, the calligrapher Timothy O'Neill (2014: 22) and the scholar Bernhard Meehan (2012: 21) do not even mention the possibility of a Northumbrian origin, preferring, as most do, Iona as a likelier candidate. A Scottish monastery, indeed, but at least Celtic enough and closer to Columban influence. Wherever it is that the book was written, it has been in Ireland for so long, and is so often associated to the country that opposing voices are easily muffled. Thus, the rounded letters can continue playing their ancillary role in nationalistic feelings, which are not a past trend.

A Facebook page called "Irish Voice" (Fig.20) is one example of contemporary attempt to dress up ideology with letters, though falling short of the mark in selecting a typeface somewhat uncial. Directing unkind comments against Muslims and Brazilians, the managers of the page curiously tried to reach a higher level of Irishness by adding to the logo the most globalized element of the country, the shamrock. It would be dismaying to discover that English schools in Brazil store great amounts of green paper so that kids can cut their own shamrocks every March while listening to a very corrupted version of St Patrick's story.

Figure 20 - "Irish Voice" logo on Facebook.

While some use Celtic-resembling lettering to shun foreigners from Ireland, others try to attract them with a similar strategy, imparting to their letters a vestigial sense of tradition, as previously shown. See Figure 21 as a further example: the Irishness of the pub is enhanced by combining the name, the lettering style, the hanging flowers and the very feeble attempt of interlace in the uppercase roman letters.

Of course, one brilliant aspect of Insular letters is that they are an inexhaustible source of inspiration to which a creative mind can always turn. The logo of the National Trust for Ireland (Fig.22), a cultural organization, shows the characteristic T in a rustic way, suggesting an ancient carving, maybe. Also, many artists make good use of Irish half-uncials by reviving them in a contemporary context and removing the layers of varnish deposited through years of abuse, for want of a better word.

Figure 21 - Talbot Street

Figure 22 - An Taisce, Morehampton Road Wildlife Sanctuary.

This paper has elucidated important aspects of Irish letters, from their most sacred function to their wide use in daily, secular life. Jacqueline Svaren once affirmed that it is 'a mistake to believe that any one letter form or style can possibly do all the work required of letters' (1980: 33). But the Insular scripts and their descendants have been constantly required to play multiple roles, in churches and pubs, in gravestones and souvenirs, in millenary codices and adult colouring books. Pushed to the limit, a day might come when they will cease to be fully perceived as a source of Irishness. But despite any diminishing or distortion imposed on their former dignity, when we realize the amount of history behind the simplest Gaelic letter, it is still possible to catch a glimpse of their ancient majesty.

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