

September 21, 2016

Members of Cumann na Gaeilge i mBoston  
P.O. Box 51604  
Boston, MA 02205-1604

Dia daoibh,

In early January this year, Lesley Davison and I first learned about Cumann na Gaeilge and the courses it offers in Irish language; with no prior knowledge, we signed up for the beginner's class. Eight months later, I'm thrilled to be sending you the following report from our time studying Irish in the Connemara Gaeltacht. I also offer my deepest thanks to you for a scholarship that supported those studies. Particularly warm thanks go out to Karen Conneely, for reasons you'll understand soon.

For our immersion course we chose a program from Coláiste Naoimh Éanna, run by Máire Uí Chongháile, a native speaker from Inis Meáin (Aran Islands).

Máire had no English before the age of 14. After working for many years as a primary-school teacher and principal, she retired from those posts to devote her full time to helping aspiring teachers prepare for their Irish-language exams—exams that combine written, oral, and aural components. For our dozen or so classmates, this exam, scheduled for next April, will be a make-or-break moment between their education and their prospective careers.

Lesley and I had different goals from our classmates. Whereas they had already had several years of Irish-language instruction in their own school lives and a lifetime of exposure to the sounds and syntax, for us it was the first time we'd even been exposed to a community of native speakers. Their future livelihood depended on squeezing test answers into their brains. We were enjoying an exploratory swim in the language and culture of Ireland.

Our class was held in the out-of-session Coláiste Sheoisaimh, a primary school in Cill Chiarán, which lies about 40 miles west of Galway. On the first morning of our class, Máire quickly established that we would do best with private tutoring. That afternoon she placed us in our own classroom with Michelle, a friendly and competent young teacher, who patiently had us answering questions and reviewing material. The next three days we enjoyed a different teacher, Deirdre Feeney, who currently teaches primary school near Cork. A primary teacher was perfect for us; she was patient and cheerful. We worked with the text *Beatha Teanga*, which worked both as review and introduction of new material for us. The two-person class was tremendously productive, and Deirdre was able to steer our pronunciation and grammar skills in a directed way that would have been difficult to match in a less intimate classroom situation. Midday we would have a tea break where we

mingled with the other students. There under a certain amount of duress, they may have found our esoteric interest in the Irish language quirky and amusing, but they were pleasantly tolerant. On our final day we were joined by a student from the larger class who needed some review, and were taught by Anthony Grealish, a more formidable teacher. He had worked at Foras na Gaeilge, where his claim to fame was that he had invented the Irish word for "selfie": *feinín*.

In Boston we had been studying with Karen Conneely, and she had prepared us linguistically during our weekly classes at Cumann na Gaeilge. Karen's enthusiasm for the language is contagious, and she is no less zealous about the Irish culture. We had a lovely day with her in June, and she generously shared abundant notes about places to go in Dublin and on the West Coast. She gave us detailed directions through her favorite enchanted nooks of the Burren, she led us to places to eat and drink and read and absorb the delights of Galway. Karen continued to enhance our visit from afar.

The intensity of our tiny classes in Connemara meant that we were fully saturated by the early afternoon. Máire was very flexible with the schedule, which afforded us the ability to explore the culture and countryside on our own time after class. We squeaked by our fellow travelers on the narrow roads. We heard all manner of pub music. We saw more lush greenery and sheep and stone walls than we had imagined possible. We breathed in the mist, the sunshine, the salty air of profound tides. We soaked up the sounds and the sights. We tried our best to get aboard a Galway Hooker, and although unable to make it happen, we did enjoy trying: we tracked down Fergis and his brother Aengus at our local pub, who were willing to take us out, but the weather was less cooperative. We were able to see some Hookers sailing off without us as we left town, laden with celebrants for Saint Mac Dara's mass on the local island.

We truly exhilarated in our brief taste of Ireland, and are abundantly grateful to Cumann na Gaeilge for having helped make it such a thorough experience.

Go raibh maith agaibh,  
Tim Murphy and Lesley Davison  
September 2016









