San Antonio Review • San Antonio Review (Volume VI | 2022)

FIORSCRIOBH

Julie O'Donnell

Published on: Dec 19, 2021

License: [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License \(CC-BY-NC 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Carrickbrack Road, Sutton, Dublin, Ireland

Photo taken 1 June 2021

Photographer Julie O'Donnell (FiorScriobh)

What is Fíor Scríobh?

Fíor Schríobh is a virtual exhibition on Instagram documenting the fascinating bilingual street signs of Dublin city and shining a light on the beautiful ancient Irish script seen on these signs. The word is pronounced *feer-SHCREE-uv* in the Irish language (Gaeilge) and means True (*Fíor*) Script (*Scríobh*). As the curator of this documentary, I was struck by the fact that for the majority of people in Dublin, these street signs are the only exposure they will have to the Irish language in its original true script.

The origin of the bilingual street signs

Bilingual street signs in both English and Irish first appeared in Dublin in the early 1900s. The innovation was driven by the strong Gaelic revival movement which had

been underway in Irish society since the 1890s, during a time when the country was under British rule and English was imposed as the national language.

Although the Irish language had no legal status in the land, Gaelic revivalists networked through town Councils to bring about the installation of new bilingual street signs that displayed the names of streets with the Irish language placed above the English language. Technically this was against the law of the time but it appears that no action was taken by the British authorities against the relevant local authorities, before the achievement of independence by the Irish Free State in 1922.

One of the great legacies of this initiative started in the early 1900s, is the enduring presence of the beautiful street signs in Dublin and other towns in Ireland, many of which display great examples of the ancient Cló Gaelach script. It is this aesthetic and cultural legacy that we celebrate through the virtual exhibition FíorScríobh.

The script of the Irish Language

The Irish language script used on the city street signs is known as Cló Gaelach. There are 18 letters in the Cló Gaelach alphabet. There are also some superscript features including a dot over certain letters known as a “séimhiú” and an accent over vowels known as a “fada.” It is similar to the script of the Scottish Gaelic language, which is closely related to the Irish language. This script has been in use since the Irish language was first written first in the 5th century. Its alphabet is derived from Latin, which was the written language of the early Christian church. Most early writing in Ireland was done by priests and monks using both Irish/Gaeilge and Latin.

The Cló Gaelach alphabet retained the old typescript used from earliest times — known today as uncial typeface — which is calligraphic in its style. But during the 1950s the Cló Gaelach was phased out — possibly as part of a general societal movement towards ‘modernisation’ and replaced by the standard Roman/English alphabet. This also ended the use of the ‘séimhiú’ dot feature, which in turn required the letter ‘H’ to be added to words instead to signify this linguistic accent. This standardised script has been used since then by the Dublin City Council on our city street signs but, interestingly, the old Cló Gaelach, complete with its calligraphic and superscript features, made a reappearance on some city street signs for a period in the late 1970s to early 1980s. There is little known about the background that led to this brief resurgence to the former style, but it was not sustained and our street signs reverted to standardised script ever since. An objective of the FíorSchríobh

documentary is to uncover information that may be available in public sources or privately, that could help to resolve puzzling features of our Dublin city street signs.

Translation conundrums

Many fascinating observations arise from the translations between the English and Irish names on these street signs. Questions have arisen over the accuracy or appropriateness of some of the translations into the Irish language of the pre-existing street name in English. This is particularly so where the English form uses words that have multiple possible meanings or were intended to describe physical or local features that have vanished over time. I have encountered numerous examples of puzzling translations in the course of the project. Some of these have been resolved by Instagram followers versed in local history and by Irish language experts but some linguistic puzzles remain. See Bow Street and Orchard Road below and the discussions on these translations:

Bow Street - Dublin 7

Orchard Road - Dublin 3

Another interesting part of this journey is an appreciation of the style developments on the streets signs. There were different eras for the bilingual signs. The earliest were simple green and white signs with a typeface true to the original Cló Gaelach uncial style. A later style included a white border. More recently the signs included a postcode and introduced a modified script that became more linear and less calligraphic. A good example of the different style signage appearing on the same street is shown in the post below for Grace Park Avenue:

Sign I Gracepark Avenue - Dublin 3

Sign II Gracepark Avenue - Dublin 3

Further afield

Of course, Ireland is one of many countries where more than one language is of common use. Over the years my interest in travel and linguistics led me to record the use of multilingual script and a variety of typographic styles, in public street signs in many countries. Some of these discoveries appear FíorScríobh with the #SpecialSignSunday posts which is a weekly post that is a break from Dublin street signs. Some of these posts are from different countries with distinctive national street signage. Others are from different towns in Ireland which sometimes have their own variations on the Irish - English bilingual signs. The greatest signage to see are the bilingual and sometimes trilingual signs from other countries which reflect the sometimes complex linguistics cultures such as, Basque, Israeli and Cuban. Next, I am researching bilingual signs in the USA especially English/Spanish signs in bilingual areas. A particularly fascinating #SpecialSignSunday is Calle O'Reilly in Havana, Cuba. The street is named after an Irishman and what is remarkable is that the three languages on the plaque include Irish/Gaeilge!¹

Calle O'Reilly, Havana, Cuba

Conclusion

The original intention behind my FíorSchríobh documentary project was to highlight the treasury of the old Cló Gaelach script on public view on the street signs in Dublin City. This alone is worth documenting visually and celebrating! By creating greater public awareness around the rich heritage embedded in these signs, I am starting a conversation through social media to discuss the value and merits of using the original script as opposed to a modernised and homogenised script. With the followers of FíorSchríobh we ask questions like: Is the original Sean Cló script more appropriate? Does it make more sense linguistically? Do Irish speakers and writers prefer it? Could this script have widespread use in PC type the same way other non-Roman alphabet languages do such as Arabic/العربية, Greek/ελληνικά and Cantonese/日本語? So far the answer to these questions seems to be 'yes' and so the FíorSchríobh project could be a driving force behind this linguistic renaissance. If there is enough public appetite to lobby the authorities in Dublin, could we see a return to the practice of using the Cló Gaelach script on all such signs in the future?

Julie O'Donnell curates "[FíorSchríobh](#)" on Instagram. Tag, follow and message her to join the conversation on street signs of linguistic note across the world.

Footnotes

1. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CReJBHOnutd/> ↵