

Column: Yola and Fingalian – the forgotten ancient English dialects of Ireland

Yola was a fascinating mediaeval English dialect only spoken in Wexford which, along with Fingallian in Co Dublin, demonstrates the rich, multicultural society that was ancient Ireland, writes Damian Shiels.



Damian Shiels

IN 1836 the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, The Earl of Mulgrave, visited Ballytrent in Co Wexford. A member of the English aristocracy, he was a man used to listening to formal speeches everywhere he went, and this trip would prove no different. Mulgrave would have sat through many in the south-east that year, but the one at Ballytrent was unlike anything he had ever heard.

There he received ‘The humble address of the inhabitants of the Barony of Forth, Wexford’ or, as they put it, ‘Ye soumissive Spakeen o’ouz Dwelleres o’ Baronie Forthe, Weisforthe.’ The address, read by Edmund Hore, was neither Modern English nor Irish; the Lord Lieutenant was listening to one of the last speakers of an almost forgotten dialect – Yola.

Yola: the forgotten language of Co Wexford

Yola is most strongly associated with the baronies of **Forth and Bargy** in Wexford. It is thought that its origins lie with the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland in the 12th century. As the newcomers established a foothold in Wexford and the south-east they brought their medieval Middle English language with them.

The passage of centuries had little effect on the dialect; although it subsumed some Irish and French words it retained its distinctive character, and remained markedly different from the more modern English that developed elsewhere.

Even in 1836 Yola was dying out, and the address to the Lord Lieutenant remains one of the most important accounts of its final days. Fortunately this unique and compelling vocabulary survived long enough to have a glossary of some words recorded in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Here is how the language differed from what we are familiar with today, with the Yola examples written phonetically:

Modern English	Yola
Barley	Barlich
Beans	Baan-es
Horse	Caule
Cow Byre	Coo-pen
Shoemaker	Shoon-maakere

A little bird	Hempeen
Limpet	Bring-awn
Named	Y,cleped

So, how was Yola spoken?

How was Yola spoken? The answer seems to have been slowly. Edmund Hore, who read the address to the Lord Lieutenant in 1836, provided a few tips on correct Yola pronunciation. The ‘a’ in Yola was always spoken the same way, like the ‘a’ in ‘Father’. Where there was a double ‘ee’ it was pronounced like the ‘e’ in ‘me’. Another important feature of Yola was that the stress was always placed on the second syllable, so the word for ‘wedding’ becomes ‘weddeen’ and ‘hatchet’ become ‘hatcheat.’

Apart from the glossary a number of Yola songs were also written just in time to save them. Here is one called the ‘Song of Two Market Women’ with the Modern English translation beside it:

ZONG OF TWI MAARKEET MOANS (Yola)

*A moan vrim a Bearlough an anoor vrim a Baak,
Thaye zhoulth upan oother at high Thurns o Cullpaak,
Themost wi egges an heimost wi thick,
Fan a truckle ee zhoulthered too nigh upa ditch.
Thick besom fighed a spagh wi kick an a blaake,
An awi gome her egges wi a wheel an car taape,
Shu ztaared an shu ztudied hi near parsagh moan,
Shu ztaared, clappu her baashes an up wi punaan,
Zien, “a blaak vall, a blaak vall, Ich meigh vella knew,
Van a vierd durst a bargher an a haar galshied too,
In durk Ich red virst mee left-vooted shoe.”
“Swingale,” co the utmost, “thou liest well a rent,
A big daal a masled, slavaal an a kernt.
Thou liest valse co secun that thou an ye thick
Maa bee haghed i more caar an angish than Ich.”<*

SONG OF TWO MARKET WOMEN (Modern English)

*A woman from the Bearlough and another from the Beak,
They met one another at the high towers of Colepeak,
One had eggs and another had a kid,*

*When the car it moved too near to the ditch.
 The kid angry gave a struggle, with a kick and a bleat,
 And away went her eggs, with the car overset,
 She stared and she studied by the other passive woman,
 She stared, clapped her palms, and up with lament,
 Saying “a black fall, a black fall- I might well have known,
 When a weasel crossed the road, and a hare gazed at me too,
 In the dark I happened first on my left-footed shoe.”
 “Swindle”, said the other, “you know quite well,
 A big lot were rotten, dirty and half-hatched.
 You lie false, said the second, that you and your kid,
 May be upset in more care and hardship than I.”*

Yola was not the only medieval English dialect in Ireland...

Apart from preserving an impression of this remarkable dialect, the ‘Zong of Twi Maarkeet Moans’ also provides an insight into the culture and beliefs of the local area. Apparently if you lived in Forth and Bargy it was deemed ill luck to see a weasel crossing the road, a hare looking over a ditch, or to first put on your left shoe instead of your right.

Incredibly, Wexford was not the only county that preserved a relic form of medieval English into the 19th century. Co.Dublin had its own version, Fingallian, which as the name suggests was spoken in parts of Fingal, in the north of the county. These dialects are part of a rich tapestry of Irish culture which go beyond what we commonly view as ‘traditional’ Ireland.

A rich tapestry of multicultural mediaeval Irish society

The last bastion of the Yola dialect was Lady’s Island in Wexford, but there have been attempts to keep its memory alive into modern times. In the late 1970s Diarmuid Ó Muirthe travelled to south Wexford to see if he could find traces of Yola in the English being spoken there. At Kilmore Church he was able to record Yola carols being sung, part of a tradition stretching back centuries.

Yola and Fingallian deserve to be wider known across the country. These remarkable survivals provide us not only with unique windows into the past but also show us just how multi-cultural medieval Ireland was.

Listen to an example of ancient Christmas carols being sung in the Yola language in the **RTÉ Archives**:

Video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch=RFl9ptuxd8s&t=>)

Uploaded by **snadhghus**

*This article is based on research carried out by Know Thy Place, who produce historic and archaeological charts telling the stories of different counties, towns and events in Ireland. To find out more about them visit **www.knowthyplace.com***

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