

Ó Domhnalláin, Tomás (Donlon, Tom)

by James Quinn

Ó Domhnalláin, Tomás (Donlon, Tom) (1913–2005), teacher and linguist, was born 30 March 1913 in Delvin, Co. Westmeath, the youngest of five sons of John Donlon of Ballyhealy, near Delvin, a shepherd and land agent, and his wife Mary (née Kelly), a post office worker and native of Navan, Co. Meath. When Tomás was just a year old his father returned home from London, Ontario, where he had worked as a fireman, and the family moved to a farm at Kilskyre, Co. Meath. John Donlon had little Irish but his wife was a fluent speaker and enthusiastic Irish-Irelander who taught Irish to her children; while working as a post office assistant in Claremorris she had been secretary of the local branch of Conradh na Gaeilge and a member of one of the first camogie teams in Ireland. After attending the local national school in Kilskyre, Tomás won first place in 1926 in the Meath County Council examination for a secondary school scholarship, and became a boarder at St Finian's College, Mullingar (1926–31). He began training as a primary teacher in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, in 1934, was awarded the advanced certificate in Irish from the Department of Education in 1937, and graduated BA and H.Dip.Ed. from UCD in 1938.

After teaching for two-year periods in Tullamore, Co. Offaly, and Inchicore, Dublin, he became principal of Athboy national school (1937–44) in Co. Meath and then of the larger St Mary's national school, Drogheda (1944–8). He was a fine teacher whose work was praised by various school inspectors and in 1948 he was appointed a Department of Education inspector of national schools, serving mainly in counties Louth, Cavan, and Clare. From 1959 he worked as an inspector in the Dublin region and in 1963 was promoted to divisional inspector. As a national teacher in the 1930s and 1940s he was an active member of the INTO, and after he became an inspector he was secretary of the primary schools inspectors' branch of the union in the late 1950s. In this capacity he achieved some significant improvements in inspectors' working conditions, and as a result of his work the Department of Education agreed to establish an annual conference of inspectors and officials to discuss the school curriculum and educational policy.

Because of his long experience of language learning and teaching, he was asked in 1962 to assist in the updating of the department's *Notes for teachers – Irish*, originally published in 1934. Soon afterwards he was appointed in 1963 to assist Fr Colmán Ó Huallacháin (qv), OFM, with the first formal linguistic research project into the Irish language. This work culminated in the publication of the introductory report *Buntús Gaeilge* (1966), a scholarly account of the structure, morphology and vocabulary of the Irish language. Ó Domhnalláin sought to put this work to practical use in devising and developing basic teaching courses for use in primary schools. His research had identified the elements of Irish (vocabulary and structure)

that occurred most frequently in ordinary speech and he used this information in writing *Buntús cainte: a first step in spoken Irish* (1967–8), a beginners' course that consisted of three books and six audio recordings. It aimed to teach basic conversational Irish through the continual repetition and practice of the words and phrases that occurred most frequently in normal speech, without requiring the learning of any complicated grammar. The course included innovative features such as the use of static cartoons on a blackboard which increased its appeal to young children. It was a great success, selling over 200,000 copies within a year of publication, and was widely used in primary schools. Ó Domhnalláin also prepared the versions of the course that were broadcast on RTÉ television and radio and this brought his work to an even wider audience. *Buntús cainte* proved enduringly popular and four new editions were published by Foras na Gaeilge between 2002 and 2008.

In 1967 Ó Domhnalláin was among the experts asked by the minister for education to help set up the Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann (ITÉ) (Linguistics Institute of Ireland) to oversee research and publishing relating to the teaching of the Irish language. He was promoted to departmental inspector with responsibility for the use of audio-visual aids in Irish-language education in 1968, and that year was founding editor of the Department of Education's quarterly journal *Oideas*. He was a member of the council of the ITÉ (1967–80) and was seconded to the institute in 1973 (at which stage its staff consisted only of him and a secretary) with the grade of assistant chief inspector, working as a research professor and acting director, and becoming full director (1977–9). His ideas and research work had a major influence on the development of the ITÉ. In 1974 he founded and edited the institute's journal, *Teangeolas*, which continued to be published until its closure in 2004, and acted as linguistic consultant to the Department of Education in 1975. In the booklet *Projected development and future work of the institute* (1977), Ó Domhnalláin laid out the fields of research planned for the ITÉ: sociology and psychology of language, linguistics, and the provision of advisory services to language teachers. He took a deep interest in the development of the institute's library as an aid to researchers and students. Initiating lectures, seminars, and working groups to ensure that teachers would benefit from the institute's research, he insisted that all research projects and lectures should be made available in published form. By the time he left the ITÉ in 1979, it had grown to employ fifteen people.

In 1938 he married Margaret Mary 'Peggy' O'Brien (1913–2001), a native of Bandon Bridge, Co. Cork, who was working as an official in the Post Office Savings Bank, Dublin. The couple made a commitment to bringing up their family through the medium of Irish, and had thirteen children, eight daughters and five sons, two of whom predeceased Tomás: Tomás jnr was killed in an accident in Ennis in 1958, and Colm, former press officer of the IDA, died in 2004. Their son Seán Donlon (b. 1941) was Irish ambassador to the USA (1978–81) and secretary-general of the Department of Foreign Affairs (1981–7), and their son Liam Donlon (1948–2011) was managing director of KBCI bank; six of their daughters held significant positions

in Irish education, notably Áine Hyland, who was vice-president of UCC. The family lived mostly at Lavarna Road, Terenure, Dublin. A member of the Castle Golf Club in south Dublin, Tomás was a keen golfer for much of his retirement. He died in Dublin aged 92 on 19 November 2005 and was buried in Kilskyre alongside his wife and two sons.

Conn R. Ó Cléirigh, 'Cathaoirleach Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann', *Teangeolas*, x (spring 1980), p 3; Tomás Ó Domhnalláin, 'Buntús Gaeilge – cúlra, cur le chéile, cur i bhfeidhm', *Teangeolas*, xiii (winter 1981), 24–31; id., *Mo chlann féin: the story of a family* (1987); id., 'Buntús Gaeilge agus bunú ITÉ' in Anders Ahlqvist agus Vera Capkova (ed.), *Dán do oide: essays in memory of Conn R. Ó Cléirigh* (1997), 477–501; *A history of the parish of Kilskyre and Ballinlough* (2004), 309–16; B. Ó C. [Breandán Ó Cróinín], 'Appreciation', *Ir. Times*, 27 Feb. 2006; *Beathaisnéisí Gaeilge*, www.ainm.ie (accessed May 2012)