

Out of the Ivory Tower: concept and reality of SKSK

i.e. Studienhaus für Keltische Sprachen und Kulturen (Königswinter/Rhine)
(School of Celtic Studies and Cultures)

1 General outlines: SKSK and Celtic Studies

The SKSK is an institution which was set up nearly ten years ago to bring one of the smallest existing academic subjects, Celtic Studies, to the attention of the general public, i.e. to make its resources available for people interested in various facets of that field of learning, but with no ready access to it in their environment, academic or otherwise, in any part of Germany.

It is legitimate to ask whether a highly specialized field of research such as this could ever create the kind of demand to make an enterprise of this nature viable. Indeed, Celtic Studies has by and large been an historical subject, being largely concerned with medieval literature and history, with more visible links to Indo-European linguistics, archaeology, mythology, and of course the arcane skills of palaeography.

The areas just mentioned may be a valid summary of activities of most researchers in Celtic Studies, both in the „Celtic“ countries and abroad, with the implication that work on the living languages is lagging behind to a more or less serious extent – serious because the access to the wealth of information contained in any living language is becoming more restricted as they get out of use, adapt themselves to the dominant languages, or simply „die out“, as the process of language shift is usually called.

Aware of the fact that public interest in our field would be centred on the living languages rather than on the historical and philological topics of Celtic Studies, SKSK from the start took on the role of a modern language complement to the academic brand of Celtic Studies, – in uncontroversial partnership, allowing for a good deal of overlap and cooperation, and not as a rivalling alternative.

The major tasks of SKSK thus can be named as:

- offering linguistically and pedagogically sound instruction in any of the four contemporary languages of the Celtic group, viz. Irish and Scottish Gaelic, Welsh and Breton;
- developing a centre of information and documentation on these languages and their cultural, social and political contexts;
- stimulating and executing research in these areas.

2 Public response and demand

Language courses in SKSK have, from the beginning to this day, remained steady and sufficient to keep this main sector of activities viable. Groups consist of 3 to 12 persons, usually adults over 30, from a wide variety of professional branches,

but usually with a fairly sharp linguistic mind. Most students have a strong personal link to the country in question, having reached a level of awareness where the vanishing distinct language is sought as a key for deeper penetration into the culture of Ireland, Wales, Scotland or Brittany respectively.

An interesting minor fraction of our clientele are expatriates, especially from Ireland, who had learnt the language earlier in their lives, but forgot it. Another minority fraction are the 'language collectors' who drop in for some facts they cannot find elsewhere, and mostly drop out again after their curiosity has been satisfied, or when the effort of real and practical language learning appears too strenuous.

Students of related subjects such as linguistics, English, or French, are less frequent participants, apparently on account of their increasing workload in compulsory courses. Students of Celtic Studies, especially from the nearby University of Bonn, are similarly restricted in their freedom to take on extra studies.

The catchment area extends over the whole of Germany, with a plausible dominance of the Rhineland – especially for the evening classes which require permanent residence within a radius of ca. 100 km. A person determined on learning Irish, e.g., will normally find it very difficult to find a trustworthy offer in his or her vicinity. Occasionally *Volkshochschulen* are known to put Irish courses on the programme, or quite exceptionally groups like the DIGRM here in Frankfurt, but on the whole there is a blank; furthermore, the standard of teaching is not warranted even in the case of occasional offers here and there.

Among the four languages taught at SKSK, Irish was most popular during the first five years, followed closely by Scottish Gaelic, with Welsh and particularly Breton lagging far behind. In recent years however we found that interest in Irish decreased somewhat, with the demand for Scottish Gaelic and Welsh rising correspondingly. Breton is the permanent loser here – as it is at home.

Apart from the high degree of satisfaction among our students, media coverage has been very favourable, usually with an expression of surprise that such an endeavour should be feasible.

3 Structure and Organization

Following the strong advice of the Dept of Higher Education in Düsseldorf, which was in fact contingent upon a substantial founding grant, the SKSK was given the status of a constituent college of Bonn University. This had the advantage of a close formal link with one of the very few established centres of Celtic Studies in Germany, and a particularly renowned one at that, with strong traditional connections with Ireland in particular. Looking at it from the opposite perspective, the University was thus enlarged by a rather unique addition; and the Celtic section of its Linguistics Dept. was enriched by this outward looking modern language extension, only ten kms away.

However, it was out of the question to have new posts created and financed for the SKSK. The body responsible for running and financing the School is an independent organisation, registered as a charitable society, consisting of 80 members in Germany and abroad, and a governing board of seven elected members. Most of the work therefore is carried out on a voluntary basis, with the exception of a part-time clerical worker in our office, and the occasional activities of the mother institute's librarian to look after our own specialized library.

Membership in the Society (Förderverein SKSK e.V.) is open to anyone supporting the idea and recognizing the value of the work done by SKSK – at the cost of € 50 p.a.

Publicity and finances are the sole responsibility of the society, one of its aims being to raise funds from whatever sympathetic source – obviously a very difficult objective in a culturally marginal and economically insignificant area such as this.

4 Financial aspects

In the initial phase the SKSK was made viable through a grant from the relevant Government Dept in Dublin, contingent upon a similar grant from any of the other countries involved, and the required cofinancing was indeed secured from Scotland. This support enabled us to install the School in an ideally suited house with enough room for two separate class rooms, a library, an office, and a hall for lectures, concerts and conferences. In addition there was a guest apartment and a kitchen at our disposal. These premises were officially opened by Minister Éamon Ó Cuív in December 1999. All visitors enjoyed very much staying in that charming building and its adjacent garden. But when the Scottish contribution failed owing to a government reshuffle and the Irish grant was automatically suspended, we had to give up those premises and move to much more modest quarters. All attempts to replace the Scottish grant with a similar contribution from some other authority failed: Wales never spends on Welsh outside its own area, and the NI authorities were sent home just a week after a senior representative had agreed to support our efforts alongside the Dublin Government.

This fundamental crisis was eventually solved with the setting up of Ciste na Gaeilge, which is not dependent on cofinancing from other sources. It now helps us to survive and pursue most of our activities on reasonable scale, although not quite on the level originally intended and practiced.

5 Activities

5.1 Our core activities are language courses for all levels of proficiency. Standard formats are weekend courses comprising 10 hours of instruction, and weekly evening classes with two hours instruction per day over a period of ten weeks. Occasionally we have given weekly or fortnightly courses, but they proved difficult to realize. In fact, we now recommend participation in long-term intensive courses in the respective countries rather than offering our own. Thus it should be

clear that SKSK never intended to be in competition with Oideas Gael, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig etc., but rather a useful complement to the relevant institutions in the Celtic countries, and indeed a preparatory stage for their courses.

The required qualification of our teachers are (a) native or near-native command of the target language, (b) substantial teaching experience, (c) readiness to adapt to the specific needs and abilities of the students, especially to find the appropriate balance between communicative practice and grammatical instruction. Remuneration is derived from the course fees, which means that a minimum of three participants is necessary to break even.

Courses are usually given on our premises, but occasionally in other locations as well, especially when there are larger groups in distant places, such as a college in East Germany recently when a group of 30 students had a three-day introduction to Irish from one of our teachers.

5.2 In addition to these language courses we have been offering, though on a less regular basis, tuition in typical musical instruments such as harp, bodhrán, tin whistle and uilleann pipes, as well as sean-nós singing, given by acknowledged artists in these fields. To some extent these classes were linked to the language classes in that there was a certain overlap in participation. In spite of the earlier success of these programmes they had to be temporarily shelved owing to lack of suitable rooms, as well as organisational difficulties.

5.3 Single events consist of lectures, readings and concerts, or combinations of these. Whereas it is not easy to attract non-academic audience to guest lectures in universities, a more open cultural address such as the SKSK makes it easier to convey interesting topics in Celtic Studies to the educated general public. Thus public lectures by visiting scholars have been a permanent feature of our house, especially on topics which would hardly be touched by other institutions, although being of considerable interest. The range of themes cover stretches from mythology to politics, thus covering many areas concerning the culture of these countries well beyond the narrower confines of Celtic language matters.

Occasional readings of literature have been organised and successfully carried out; among the more recent events of this type I mention an evening with Tim Robinson on the historical and philosophical dimensions of place names, and a reading of original, German and Irish versions of some of W. B. Yeats' poetry, accompanied by renderings of rare musical compositions based on these.

In the purely musical area a variety of concerts are to be mentioned, usually well attended and well received. These range from events like the memorable open-air performance by Iarla Ó Lionaird, the excellent sean-nós singer from West Cork, to the ambitious series of three concerts featuring 'classical' music from 18th to 20th century Ireland, including a number of first performances in Germany. Again, the scope of SKSK here goes well beyond the linguistic core activities, covering other cultural areas of Ireland and her neighbours, particularly such that are not part of the widespread intercultural clichés.

Organising conferences would appear to be beyond the scope of a small group of voluntary workers, yet there have been two so far. In 2000 a dozen of specialists came together in Königswinter to discuss various aspects of literary translation from Celtic, both medieval and modern, to continental languages, covering questions of philological intricacies right down to marketing. The proceedings are published as vol. 1 of our own series of publications. Another conference was concerned with problems of teaching Celtic languages outside their countries, clearly a substantial matter for SKSK. This meeting served as a basis for designing carefully adapted study material for own needs, or rather that of our particular clientele. (The background of English, e.g. is usually taken for granted in most of the text books available, but it is quite inappropriate for students with other first languages.)

Further publications are envisaged, or indeed in print, namely our second volume, which presents previously unpublished folkloric material in a commented bilingual edition (Irish and German), including complete audio versions of these tales from Conamara, as recorded almost 50 years ago.

5.4 Our library now consists of ca. 1250 volumes, covering most relevant aspects of our four languages, especially Irish. Most of the books are permanent loans or donations, only a small part could be acquired by our own means. With a particular emphasis on the modern language, it is perhaps the richest collection in this field in Germany, if not on the European Continent. The catalogue is accessible through the University of Bonn's electronic portal. Use of the books, including copying, is possible on our premises; lending facilities are reserved for members of the Society. In addition to the books there is a growing collection of audio and video material, much of which is useful as an enrichment of the language courses.

5.5 Through our internet site we constantly receive requests for information on matters closely related to our activities, such as:

„Who can teach me Irish in Nuremberg ?“

„Is this bit Celtic, and what does it mean ?“

„I want to propose to a lady in Ireland, but in Irish. Please translate this for me: ...“

Or sometimes less closely related:

“I believe that these grave fields in our neighbourhood must be Celtic – what would you suggest to prove this ?”

Or quite recently:

„I have been living in working in Brittany now for some years, as a marine biologist, and I have acquired a good knowledge of Breton, both spoken and written. As I will return to Germany in the near future, I would like to know if you would consider taking me on as a teacher of Breton.“

6 Prospects

In spite of some critical warnings over the years, the SKSK can well be said to be a successful venture; certainly not in any economical sense, which doesn't apply in a non-profit organization anyway, but rather in the sense of having established itself, against considerable structural difficulties and through some critical phases, as the innovative institution which it was intended to be from the beginning, to the benefit of a scattered but significant clientele in Central Europe.

To improve performance and attain the full achievement of our aims, the following conditions should be fulfilled:

- Clarification of funding possibilities after the operation of Ciste na Gaeilge;
- Involvement of the non-independent countries (Scotland, Wales, Brittany);
- Growth of membership, especially abroad, and increased level of activity among members.

On that basis the two most urgent requirements might be realized:

- Creation of one or two permanent posts to serve as scientific viz. administrative directors of SKSK;
- Relocation in less confined and more attractive premises than presently affordable.

Concluding remark:

We are not Celtomaniacs. We are critical and sober enough to take the risk of doubting the existence of a „Celtic Nation“, in prehistoric times as well as to-day. We just represent one somehow coherent part of West Europe, linguistically, historically, and to some extent culturally, socially and politically.

Commitment to only one of the four languages would dangerously narrow down the potential of this venture. If asked to become a Cultural Institute of Ireland, Gaelic and otherwise, we would seriously consider the offer, but would want to teach Welsh etc. as well.

Dr. Arndt Wigger,

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