

Sengoidelc: Old Irish for Beginners, by

David Stifter.

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The audience for learning an ancient language like Old Irish (OI) is obviously different than the one trying to master a modern spoken language: unlike students learning languages like French, Spanish, or the modern Celtic languages, the student of OI doesn't expect to learn how to go into a bar and order a pint of beer. The student of OI typically comes from one of two specific subgroups. There are those who are students of linguistics and are interested in either studying a language with a complicated structure or are interested in learning an ancient language for comparative and historical purposes. And there are those—often students of Celtic Studies—who are interested in learning the language as a window into the history, laws and literature of the mediaeval Gael. Despite having these unique and specialized student bodies, when one is teaching OI one expects to be able to benefit from modern understandings of language teaching and language acquisition as they are appropriate to learning a dead tongue. Until recently, the materials for learning Old Irish have had a noticeable lack of modern sophistication. The most commonly used materials for learning Old Irish date from the 1970s (Lehmann and Lehmann 1975 and Quin 1975; usually paired with Strachan 1949, which itself requires a knowledge of Latin), and consist largely of translation exercises from OI into English accompanied by a few brief grammatical notes. The

most recent edition of the standard grammar of the language dates from the 1940s (Thurneysen 1946) and contains much information that is no longer considered accurate by scholars of the language. David Stifter's (henceforth DS) new textbook *Sengoidelc: Old Irish for Beginners* (henceforth S) goes a long way to filling this gap. It is the new standard for the teaching of OI. While the material continues to be largely thick grammatical detail and translation exercises, this book goes a long way to making it more accessible to an audience of modern students. Surprising in a textbook, it is also an excellent piece of scholarship and provides a very useful description of the grammar of the language.

This is a long book, at nearly 400 pages, so I cannot get into deep technical discussion of the details of the grammatical description. Instead, I'll provide an overall summary of the structure and methodologies used in the book and hit on a few points of excellence and a few points of weakness.

The book has a total of 58 lessons and a number of appendices. The first lesson gives a history of Irish relative to its near neighbors. Lessons 2 through 4 cover some of the basics of OI orthography, phonology, and mutations. Chapter 3, on phonology, is a daunting experience I think for a novice, particularly one without any experience in linguistics. Nevertheless it is an excellent reference. It's the kind of chapter that I might have students skim over and then return to when they have more facility with the language.

Thirteen chapters distributed throughout the book are devoted to the incredibly complex declensional system of OI nouns and articles. These chapters are not only remarkable for the clarity with which the patterns are articulated,

but for the depth of knowledge presented in each short lesson. All the lessons on noun declension and verbal inflection contain charts that have not only the synchronic OI forms, but also various forms (both attested and reconstructed) from earlier versions of the language (including variously Primitive Irish, Proto-Celtic, Pre-Celtic, and Proto-Indo-European, depending upon the table). For a linguist like myself, these are incredible resources not available anywhere else. I think they also add a deeper layer of explanation for the more sophisticated student, in that they show how the synchronic patterns of OI arose. For students who are only interested in OI itself and not in diachronic matters, this material is easily ignored.

Most of the rest of the book is devoted to the equally complex system of verbal morphology in the language. There is clear and accessible discussion of the conjunct/absolute distinction, the prototonic and deuterotonic distinction, the *ro-* augment, infixed pronouns and preverbs, and the various tenses, aspects and moods that make up the verbal inflectional system. While it is clear that DS has tried hard to make various grammatical terminological points accessible to the reader, the text sometimes assumes a depth of grammatical knowledge that North American students simply won't have. For example, it assumes that students know what a 'preterite' is, and what the difference between 'tense' and 'aspect' is. Similarly earlier in the book, the distinction between phonemes and allophones is explained, but I'm suspicious that the discussion will go right over the heads of students without a linguistics background. While we might blame the lack of such knowledge on deficiencies in the way

traditional grammar is taught in North America, it means that an instructor using this book will have to be careful to explain these things to his or her students, or they are likely to become frustrated in a sea of technical vocabulary.

The book also contains chapters on the inflection of prepositions, numbers, relative clauses, the copula and metrics. Every three or four chapters there is a review chapter that contains "test" exercises for the students to review their knowledge. These review lessons typically also contain a short list of minor grammatical points and perhaps a poem or short text in OI. At the end of the book there are a number of appendices, including a source list, a lexicon (OI to English only), and 10 pages of reference charts. These charts alone are worth the price of the book.

The treatment of the syntax of OI is relatively sparse. Apart from a brief description of VSO order early in the book and description of the copula and clefts in lesson 24, the discussion of the syntax is largely limited to Lesson 52, where there is discussion of left dislocation, heavy subject shift, small (verbless) clauses, tmesis and the verb final archaic forms. This is to be expected, given the great emphasis on morphology and diachronic phonology found in the grammatical literature on OI and the great complexity of its inflectional system, but I would have hoped for perhaps a little more discussion where appropriate.

Most, but not all, chapters contain exercises to accompany the text. These are mostly translation exercises, using vocabulary and forms taught in the lesson. There are a couple of important features of these exercises that are worth mentioning. One thing that might alarm purists is the fact

that DS has, where appropriate, simplified sentences taken from Old Irish texts, and in some cases made up entirely new ones. He's very careful to mark these forms so the student is aware what is attested and what is not. I think including such forms is a very wise move. On one hand it avoids unnecessarily exposing students to complex material that they'll learn about later in the book, and on the other hand it exposes them to a wide set of exemplars for pattern learning.

All the exercises have solutions at the end of the book. This is a mixed blessing. It means that students have immediate feedback on their work and it makes the book useful for individuals doing self-study. On the downside, it makes the book less useful for a North American university audience. In the European tradition, exercises are meant as practice for exams. In North America, of course, we are more used to the tradition of assigning grades to homework assignments. Since the answers are given at the end of the book, the exercises can't be used as graded homework assignments. Perhaps in future editions, the author and publishers will remove the answers and put them in a separate instructor's manual, or include only selected answers for the North American market.

The organization of the book and the order of presentation of the material is excellent. I never contains situations where students are expected to know material that is detailed later. I do have one minor complaint about presentation in the early part of the book: up to chapter 13 almost all the book is grammatical description or historical background. Apart from the exercises, there is almost no expo-

sure to the language in its natural milieu or form in the early part of the book. It isn't until chapter 13, on page 70, that we're exposed to our first real example of the language: a short poem. Although such poems and other real language texts become more frequent towards the end of the book, I really wish there was more of this early in the book as a reward to the student so they can feel like they are really achieving an understanding of the language and not just memorizing paradigms and translating sentences out of context. In this regard, I'd be tempted to continue using Lehmann and Lehmann (1975) along with S. In Lehmann and Lehmann the student is taken through a story written in OI right from the first chapter, and the reader feels like they are really "cracking the code" of the language right from the beginning. The two books, although inconsistent in phonological transcription and order of presentation are perhaps best used together for this reason.

I have one major complaint about the book, which is likely to be of concern only to linguists and not to language teachers. I'm not terribly happy with the phonological transcriptional system used in the book. The transcriptions used for the lenited series of sounds seem very confusing to me and deviate significantly from the International Phonetic Alphabet. The lenited (lenis) sonorants /n, r, l/ are transcribed using the Greek letters <ν, ρ, λ>, and the unlenited (fortis) sounds, more typically transcribed /N, R, L/ are transcribed <n, r, l>. This mismatch is very distracting and confusing. Two of these are not only confusing because they don't match the IPA values, but also by their resemblance to letters in English orthography: The similarity be-

tween Greek rho <p> (/r/) and English pee <p>, and between Greek nu <v> (/n/) and English vee <v> compounds the confusion arising from the deviance from IPA. Other non-IPA transcriptions, all in the lenited series, include <μ> for /ṽ/, <δ> for /ð/, <β> for /v/, <γ'> for /j/, <φ> for /f/ (although only for orthographic intervocalic and lenited <p>), and <χ'> for /g/. S is upfront about these variations and explains them in the book. I can certainly see the value in representing all lenited sounds with Greek letters for consistency, but I found this aspect of the book very difficult when I was working through the transcriptions of texts. On more than one occasion, I actually had to look at the notoriously unphonetic OI spelling to figure out what the transcription was supposed to be. I'm sure that those students who are already familiar with IPA will share my frustrations here and I suspect that students of history and literature are likely to ignore the transcriptions entirely. I laud DS in transcribing all of the texts in the book, but in the long run I think it might actually be more effective to have sound recordings of the texts read by the author or another OI expert. On my wish list for any future editions, then, is a CD/DVD or website with sound files for all the transcribed material. I suspect that most students, whether they are linguists or not, will find auditory input more helpful than the transcriptions as they are given in this text. It should be a relatively trivial and cheap matter to distribute this kind of media, so I hope the author and publisher will give it serious consideration.

A review of S would not be complete without a comment on the extremely cute and frequently cheeky sheep cartoons

that pepper the text. While not typical of dry scholarly works on OI, they remind me of the marginalia found in real OI manuscripts. They add a level of levity that breaks up the complicated and heavy material.

S is a fantastic addition to the resources available to Celtic language teachers and scholars. I only get to teach Old Irish every four or five years, but it will definitely be my text of choice the next time I teach it. In the meantime, I'm pleased to have it at hand as a first class reference work. The depth of detail in the grammatical descriptions in many ways makes it as valuable a reference tool as Thurneysen—at least for the major patterns in the language—and perhaps a more accessible one. It is definitely a book that any teacher of Old Irish or historical linguistics should invest in.

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Seachd: The Inaccessible Pinnacle **Film Review**

The buzz in the Scottish Gaelic world over the film *Seachd: The Inaccessible Pinnacle* started years before its actual release. Having a feature film in Gaelic seemed too good to be true. I visited the film's website regularly, hoping for news of a release date, new trailer, or soundtrack teaser. I suppose that it was inevitable that there would be a sense of disappointment when I actually saw the film after that much build-up.

The film has many strengths. The cinematography is very strong, and it's hard to beat the scenery of Skye. The music is wonderful, and Aonghas Pàdraig Caimbeul portrays the lead character ably. My friends Peggie MacKinnon from the Isle of Barra and Peggie Smith from the Isle of Skye both saw it and declared the spoken dialogue to be flawless, idiomatic Gaelic.

The main character, the grandfather (Aonghas Pàdraig Caimbeul) and grandmother (Dolina MacLeannan) have become the guardians of their three grandchildren after a climbing accident on Skye claims the lives of the children's parents. The kids, though native Gaelic speakers, appear to be unfamiliar with traditional culture, which creates conflict with the grandparents. The grandfather works to bridge the generation gap by telling fantastic stories all of which carry a message for the kids. There is an engaging sideline about who is responsible for the climbing accident and a cèilidh scene that presented homemade music unapologetically. I really enjoyed that part.

The stories the grandfather tells move through centuries