

A PROFILE OF FATHER O'GROWNEY.

By Walter Stock.

The last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth may well be described as the most critical period in the history of the Irish language. Throughout the nineteenth century, the language had been in a state of decline comparable to that which came upon Cornish during the sixteenth century. In 1840, there were around seven million native speakers of Irish; in 1891, around seven hundred and fifty thousand. This trend, if it were not halted would prove the end for Irish as it proved for Cornish so many years before, and as it is now proving for Manx.

We must remember also that many of those classed as native speakers in 1891 were no more than the minimum that this term implies. Many were people who could speak some form of Irish, often heavily infiltrated with English words and even English syntax, but who could read and write, if at all, only English. Such people were not acquainted with Irish spelling, or literary usage, or indeed any usage except that of the area in which they lived.

This situation has fortunately been changed. The number of people who can speak Irish today is estimated to be around one million. (Whether these people do speak Irish as much as they should is another question). Of course, the political independence of at least the major portion of Ireland contributed much to this regrowth. But this independence did not come until 1921. Many are inclined to believe that it was the work of dedicated language teachers and authors of literature in Irish which halted the decline in the language, and also, by emphasizing the linguistic heritage of their people and their cultural independence, helped to prepare them for political independence.

Father Eugene O'Growney was one of the leaders of this Irish language revival. His series of "Simple Lessons in Irish" provided the first popular textbook of the Irish language, and he contributed much besides

to the field of Irish literature.

Born in the Parish of Athboy, in County Meath, on August 25, 1863, he received his elementary education at the Diocesan Seminary in Navan. It was here, at the age of sixteen, that he first began the study of Irish. The fact that he was not exposed to his national language at an earlier date is an indication of its neglect in the educational system of the time. But even this was, in a way, an advantage to him when he wrote his "Simple Lessons", for, as he states in the preface to the first volume: "As I myself was obliged to study Irish as a foreign language,... I have at least a knowledge of the difficulties of those who, like myself, have no teacher."

In September, 1882, he went to Maynooth, where he studied for six years. In 1888, he returned to Navan, where he was ordained and made curate at Ballynacargy, in County Westmeath.

In 1882 the "Gaelic Journal" was founded. Even as a student at Maynooth, Father O'Growney made contributions to this publication. He published in it a series of modernized early Irish tales as well as translations of popular songs,