

# **In Search of ISL's Pre-History: The complex origins of Irish Sign Language(s?)**

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## **Abstract**

Irish Sign Language (ISL) became a recognised language in the State with the passing of the 2017 Irish Sign Language Act. It is a language that has been shown to not only be a fully-fledged language, but one that exhibits complexity and significant variation on the basis of gender and age. Research into the linguistics and sociolinguistics of ISL has been carried out over more than thirty years, and it is almost twenty years since the establishment of Trinity College's Centre for Deaf Studies, the source of much of this research. However, an examination of the historical records reveals an even greater complexity. Modern day ISL is descended, in the main, from the signed languages that were used in Cabra's Catholic Deaf schools from the 1840s, but little is written about other signed languages, and variations thereon, that have existed on this island over the last 200 years. This article attempts to show that the history of Irish signed language(s) used by Deaf people is neither the story of signing systems invented by hearing people, nor of a single genesis leading in a straight line to modern ISL - but a layered and diverse account of social, historical, educational and language change.

**Keywords:** *Deaf history; History of sign language; Irish Sign Language; Social history; Sign linguistics*

## **1. Introduction**

After many years of campaigning by the Irish Deaf Society and other stakeholders, Irish Sign Language (ISL) finally became a recognised language in Ireland with the passing of the 2017 Irish Sign Language Act (Conama, 2019, forthcoming). Within the Act, the “State recognises the right of Irish Sign Language users to use Irish Sign Language as their native language” and the “community of persons using Irish Sign Language shall have the right to use, develop and

preserve Irish Sign Language” (Irish Sign Language Act 2017, s.3(1)–(2)) – at a stroke, legally acknowledging the linguistic status of the language, and the existence of the community to whom it belongs.

Yet before ISL could be recognised as a language, it had to be shown to be one; to this end, research into the linguistics and sociolinguistics of ISL has been carried out over more than thirty years, at first under the auspices of the Centre for Language and Communication Studies (CLCS) at Trinity College Dublin, and, subsequent to its establishment, from 2001, at the Centre for Deaf Studies. The field of Deaf Studies research has shown ISL to be not just a fully-fledged language, but one that exhibits complexity and significant variation on the basis of gender and age (Grehan, 2008; Leeson and Grehan, 2004; LeMaster and Dwyer, 1991; Leonard 2005). An examination of the historical records reveals even greater complexity. Modern day ISL is descended, in the main, from the signed languages used in the Catholic Deaf schools in Cabra, Dublin. Researchers have emphasised its historical links with – or even descent from - French Sign Language (LSF) (Leeson & Saeed, 2012; Leeson, Saeed, & Grehan, 2015).

Yet little has been written about signed languages, and variations thereon, that have existed on this island before the Cabra schools opened their doors in the mid-nineteenth century. This article shows that the history of signed language(s) used by deaf people in Ireland is a complex, layered account of social, historical, educational, and language change. Much of the literature on Irish Sign Language’s origins has neglected the situation that existed for deaf people in Ireland prior to the opening of schools for the deaf, instead focusing on 1846 – when St Mary’s school for Catholic deaf girls opened in Cabra - as a ‘year zero’ for signed language in Ireland.<sup>1</sup> We believe this is misguided, and leads to an incomplete picture of all those who embraced and preserved signed languages in Ireland throughout the centuries.

There is some evidence that signed languages were in full flow in ancient times. For example, Plato and Socrates made references to the existence of deaf people and signed languages (Bauman, 2008). Such references can be found peppered through works on the history of deaf people and deaf education in the period prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Bragg, 1997; Carty, Macready & Sayers, 2009; Lang, 1996). A fascinating opportunity presents itself - to pinpoint where on the timeline signed languages were first used in this country. We focus on the period of the 18<sup>th</sup> century until deaf schools were established in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century; it is our belief that signed languages were used in Ireland during this period—but were not well-documented. We have

been hampered by a lack of solid evidence of its usage in Ireland, but we now present new documentary evidence, and re-analyse existing historical sources, to support our case. Use of digital repositories reveals contemporary books, reports, magazines, and newspaper articles that also assist us in reconstructing the linguistic landscape for deaf people at the time (Legg 2016, p. 43).

In going through the historical record, however, we are well advised not to make sweeping statements about signed languages in this period. These are visual languages, and we have no direct video evidence of signed languages in Ireland before the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> We do possess a number of written descriptions of signs used by deaf people in Ireland. Many of these sources, by their very nature, are incomplete and vague. Furthermore, nearly all sources from the period which mention Deaf people or signed language are written from a non-deaf perspective, by people unacquainted with the linguistic features of signed languages – indeed, with even the idea of them being languages, beyond their description as ‘natural signs’. Occasionally the sources are dismissive or hostile towards deaf people or signing; even the most awestruck and enthusiastic writers, however, describe the signs in a way that gives a modern sign linguist highly compromised access to how a sign looked or was used, making the sources somewhat unreliable. We certainly have little idea, from the records available to us so far, about how these signs were expanded and refined by pupils into a flowing, living language of the early Irish Deaf community.

We must also be aware that signed languages, in all their full linguistic complexity, differ vastly from what are termed ‘home sign’ systems. These less developed, *ad hoc* systems of manual gesture, are used by, for example, solitary deaf children within hearing families who do not know signed languages.. This said, the “properties of homesign ... hold a special place in the analysis of sign languages”, as “it is likely that many, if not all, current day sign languages have their roots in homesign” (Goldin-Meadow 2012, p. 620). When a critical mass of deaf people comes together, blending and extending these ‘home sign’ gesture systems and – crucially – passing them from older to younger signers to do the same, then an authentic signed language can be the result. The system is enriched further, with younger signers using it in newly-inflected and gradually more standardised ways. This process has been described as a form of creolisation, with a ‘pidgin’ of homesigns becoming the linguistic input for a new generation of deaf children, who acquire it naturally and become native signers of a new ‘creole’ (Fusellier-Souza 2006:36). This happens most recognisably in schools for deaf

children. Recent research has tracked this process happening in 'real time', and the creation of new signed languages in deaf schools within living memory - most notably in the case of Nicaraguan Sign Language (Polich 2001; Senghas & Coppola 2001). Further examples exist, notably Al-Sayyid Sign Language, located in the Negev area of Israel "where a locally evolved sign language is at the heart of a signing community shared by deaf and hearing members. Thus, they constitute a signing community but not a deaf community" (Kisch 2007, n.p.).

Irit Meir, et al. (2010) contrast fully-fledged 'deaf community sign languages' with 'village sign languages', where a number of deaf people in isolated towns or villages create their own signing system. In this latter setting, "from the beginning, people share a common culture and social environment at a very intimate level. Their shared context, expectations, and knowledge make it easier for them to communicate than it is for people with diverse backgrounds. This degree of familiarity may allow them to be less explicit verbally than people who do not have as much in common, yet at the same time to communicate effectively across a range of topics, provided the context is shared." (Meir et al. 2010, p. 268) This description would seem to fit the case of a family with a number of deaf siblings; the line between 'home sign' and 'village sign language' may be thin. It has even been found that homesign systems used within families with multiple deaf siblings can display nascent features of language, as shown in research into Zinacantec family homesign in Mexico (Le Guen 2019, p. 379; Haviland 2015). It may well be that in the past, large numbers of deaf children in rural, isolated settings may have led to multiple 'family sign languages'.

However, Bragg (1997) cautions against overly optimistic or anachronistic thinking. "In histories of the deaf ... we often find ... natural but unsubstantiated assumptions that deaf communities, natural signed languages, and the distinctive subculture that grows up within these language communities have existed in all times and places" (Bragg 1997, p. 4). Population density is also a factor, relevant to Ireland: "When the general population is resident in such small, isolated, static groups ... the modern historian must assume the burden of proof for the existence of a natural sign language in a deaf community" (Bragg 1997, p. 4). Ireland, while densely populated before the Great Famine, was nevertheless a rural country with very few large population centres, and "[w]ithout evidence of any genetic streak that would raise the deaf population to over its normal fraction of a percentage point ... the assumption must be that the general population density never reached the critical threshold for the formation of deaf communities until the eighteenth century." Bragg concludes that "[c]ommunication among the

deaf and between the deaf and the hearing would have been, of necessity, sublinguistic or protolinguistic, consisting, that is, of gesture, mime, and context-dependent protolanguage”; however, she does admit that Deaf siblings may have used “embryonic but real language” and that “linguistic or protolinguistic communication ...must have taken place among [Deaf] siblings” (Bragg 1997, pp. 4, 6). While we therefore must still show caution, there would seem to be no small amount of possibilities that even before the Irish Deaf community first assembled around deaf schools in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, that deaf use of language was potentially very rich indeed.

## **2. ‘Old ISL’ / ‘Indigenous ISL’**

Matthews’ (1996) pioneering work on the history of Deaf education and ISL explores the influences that have come to bear on the language since the early nineteenth century. He speculates on the existence of pre-1816 Irish signed languages, and ponders how a form of “indigenous” ISL may have spread through the country:

Although the grammar of Irish Sign Language was not written down prior to the establishment of educational institutions for the deaf, we know that deaf people travelled from region to region in search of work and to meet with other deaf friends. Sign language developed among the Irish deaf population and was handed down from one deaf person to another, much like spoken language is passed through generations of speaking people. It is plausible, therefore, to deduce that there was a natural, indigenous ISL which existed in the country prior to the education of children with the British two-handed manual alphabet brought to Ireland with the establishment of education for the deaf at the Protestant Claremont school (Matthews 1996, p. 71).

While, as elsewhere, Irish deaf schools became the primary vehicles of vertical transmission of signed languages from older deaf pupils (or teachers) to younger deaf people (Quinn 2010, p. 479), Matthews suggests here that prior to this, other arenas such as rural, town and city environments could have been sites of signed language use and transmission in Ireland. However, no evidence or examples are supplied.

Leeson and Saeed’s (2012) description of ISL also attempts to trace its genealogy. They describe a substrate of ‘Old ISL’, including a ‘BSL variant’ used at Claremont, Ireland’s first

Deaf school that opened in 1816. They state that “whatever variants that uneducated deaf people may have used at that time... we cannot assume that there was a *tabula rasa* context in existence in terms of language used by Irish Deaf people before the establishment of the Catholic schools, and therefore we assume that the form of ‘Modern ISL’ that arose ... built on and integrated with ‘Old ISL’” (Leeson & Saeed 2012, pp. 33–34). A *tabula rasa* definitely did not exist, as we shall see. In the remainder of the article we present evidence for this ‘Old ISL’, and the existence of signing Deaf people in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This evidence holds for both individuals and groups, such as private tutorship of deaf children, and large families of deaf siblings.

### **3. ‘Natural Signs’**

Rachel Pollard states that “[a]s far as could be known, there is no physical record of existence of sign language or any system of communication used by deaf people in Ireland before the end of the eighteenth century” (Pollard 2006, p. 129). However, fragmentary sources do exist from the eighteenth and very early nineteenth century that point to the existence of uneducated Deaf people using signs to communicate.

These include invaluable evidence from newspaper reports of court proceedings. In a Kilkenny King’s Bench poisoning trial in 1781, one witness spoke of “a woman deaf and dumb” who “made signs which the witness comprehended, signifying that she understood Mr. O’Flaherty was poisoned. She was asked how she could understand her signs? she said very well, for that she put her fingers to her mouth and to her ears, signifying that she had understood that he had died of something which he had eat of” (Anon, 1781). From this brief description of signs – and, importantly, the interpretation this witness put on them – we see only that signs were open to a very wide interpretation indeed. Another early example of an Irish trial, involving Deaf people and a signed language interpreter, occurred at an 1802 trial at the Court of Common Pleas in Dublin, where “the principal evidence... rests on the testimony of two persons deaf and dumb, to whom a man conversant in their signs and gestures, acted as interpreter” (Anon, 1802b). The case revolved around a will made by Nicholas French, who had three deaf siblings, and it appears that two of them may have been witnesses giving their testimony about how they were treated within the French family (Anon, 1802a). In late 1818, a young man named John Killins was brought up to the Dublin Recorder’s court on a charge of theft of 6 lbs. of sugar. It was found that he had lost his hearing and speech six years previously, through a severe fever, and “[s]igns were made to him by a person whom he knew, and he interpreted those he (the

prisoner) made, as denying the charge” (Anon, 1818). Given his age, and the fact he does not appear in Claremont admission records, it seems these signs he used were not those of the Claremont school.

Other published evidence is noteworthy, including a 1794 account of the religious conversion of a deaf man, William Heazley from Antrim. Heazley was “perfectly deaf and dumb from his infancy, yet at a proper age he learned to weave linen, and became expert at the business... He was employed as a barber... and particularly on the Lord's-day, was very officious in serving all who applied to him” (Mitchel 1794, p. 455). However, as time wore on, he became “extravagantly fond of horse-races, cock-fighting, and similar diversions... But instead of regarding the admonitions of his real friends, *conveyed to him by signs which he well understood*, he too frequently discovered the highest displeasure, and even rage, at their reproofs” (ibid.) [*authors' emphasis*]. A visit from a Methodist preacher to that part of Antrim, according to the article, affected him deeply (despite presumably not being able to hear the sermonising), and “from that hour he renounced all his foolish pursuits, and vain companions. When persons applied to him on the Lord's-day, as usual, *he made signs to them to come on a Saturday, or otherwise they would be unshaved by him*; and at the same time he endeavoured in this way, to convince them of the sinfulness of Sabbath-breaking, and of the dreadful consequences that would follow it” (Mitchel 1794:438-40) [*authors' emphasis*].

An 1829 article by a travelling writer in Clonmel describes a signing deaf man, apparently well able to get across his meaning to local hearing people acquainted with his signs:

I observed a man working very assiduously in driving holes through a sheet of lead... [I was told] that he was deaf and dumb, but that there was one of the millers who could converse with him in signs. The dragoman was called; and I put various questions, which were conveyed and answered with signs, and I received most satisfactorily replies. The deaf and dumb man, I was told, remembered with singular minuteness, all that he had ever seen... I desired the interpreter to ask him if he remembered the Rebellion? After some gesticulation by the former, the dummy started up, and began to writhe his face into grimaces, in which agony and horror were expressed, while he twisted his back, and quivered in every limb, as if he were enduring torture; and while with one hand he touched his shoulders, that mimicked convulsive suffering, with the other he imitated the gesture of a

man who was inflicting a flagellation. "That," said the interpreter, "represents Sir Thomas Judkin Fitzgerald." (Shiel, 1829)

This referred to 'Flogging Fitzgerald', notorious for his brutal repression of the 1798 Rebellion as high sheriff of Tipperary, especially around the Clonmel area (Long, 2019).

#### **4. How Widespread was Signing?**

##### *4.1. Applications and Admissions Books*

One invaluable source to use is the Application Book for the Claremont Institution. This source captures in great detail the information from application forms completed by those wanting to have deaf children admitted to Claremont, whether accepted or not into the school. Among the myriad columns recording details is a column marked 'Signs', into which was made many records of the reported ability of children to sign before they were considered for admission. (Claremont Institution n.d.; Pollard 2006, pp. 269–71 Appendix 2). The second documented Irish school for Deaf children was the Cork Day School, opened in 1822; this would suggest that during the period 1816 to 1822, deaf children in Ireland would not have been exposed to any other standardised form of signed language used in Deaf education, other than Claremont Sign. It is possible that some applicants had already been educated privately or abroad, but given the high cost of these options, and the fact that Claremont was primarily intended as a school for the poorer classes, this seems a highly unlikely possibility.

During this period, 148 pupil applications to Claremont were received. The 'Signs' column of the Applications Book shows 74 applicants, exactly 50%, listed as having some form of signing prior to arrival at Claremont. Signing ability was framed and described in the Application Book in a way that suggests that signs were taken as a mark of intelligence. Early descriptions were inserted in the column such as 'considerable shrewdness', 'great talent for conveying ideas by signs', 'minutely intelligible', 'perfectly intelligible', and 'very plain'. (After about 1826, descriptions placed in this column are replaced mostly by a simple 'yes' or leaving it blank.) Extending the timeframe further, of the first 722 applications recorded (from 1816 up to about April of 1842), 461 pupil applications (64%) reported the child being able to sign, at least to some degree. Thus almost two-thirds of children who applied to go to Claremont reportedly had some degree of signing already. Of course, these children would not have signed to themselves; the reporting of their signing indicates that they had been using signed language in some form or other with their family - and perhaps even other, signing deaf family members.



*4.2. Deaf Families*

The 1851 Census of Ireland shows a total of 4,398 'deaf and dumb' people. A very small proportion, 790 of them or 18%, had been educated or were currently at school. This left a total of 3,608 uneducated 'deaf and dumb' people (82%) – who, we can assume at this point in Irish Deaf educational history, had not been exposed to a signed language used in a Deaf school. At this point, the proportion of 'deaf and dumb' parents was rather low; only 98 were married, and most to hearing people, with only 6 married to other 'deaf and dumb' people (Census Commissioners 1854, pp. 13, 27). However families with large numbers of deaf siblings certainly existed. The 1851 Census reveals a total of 433 families with at least 2 'deaf and dumb' siblings around the country. A family was recorded in Sligo with a total of 7 Deaf siblings, and another in Donegal with 8 Deaf siblings. There were also a total of 7 sets of deaf twins (Census Commissioners 1854, p. 16).

Total Number of Children in Family.	Number of Children Deaf and Dumb.								
	One.	Two.	Three.	Four.	Five.	Six.	Seven.	Eight.	Total.
One, . . .	121	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	121
Two, . . .	146	8	.	.	.	.	.	.	154
Three, . . .	224	20	8	.	.	.	.	.	252
Four, . . .	308	35	12	2	.	.	.	.	357
Five, . . .	338	41	14	1	1	.	.	.	395
Six, . . .	364	44	12	7	.	.	.	.	427
Seven, . . .	377	43	17	8	2	1	1	.	449
Eight, . . .	320	58	22	4	3	1	.	1	409
Nine, . . .	233	27	20	5	1	1	.	.	287
Ten, . . .	152	28	9	5	.	.	.	.	194
Eleven, . . .	93	13	11	3	.	.	.	.	120
Twelve, . . .	63	5	4	1	1	.	.	.	74
Thirteen, . . .	29	1	1	.	1	.	.	.	32
Fourteen, . . .	14	2	1	2	.	.	.	.	19
Fifteen, . . .	5	2	3	.	.	.	.	.	10
Sixteen, . . .	7	1	1	.	.	.	.	.	9
Seventeen, . . .	2	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	2
Eighteen, . . .	1	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	1
Nineteen, . . .	1	.	1	.	.	.	.	.	2
Twenty, . . .	2	1	.	.	.	.	.	.	3
Twenty-nine, . . .	.	1	.	.	.	.	.	.	1
Unknown, . . .	92	4	1	.	.	.	.	.	97
<b>Total, . . .</b>	<b>2,892</b>	<b>334</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3,415</b>

*Table 1: 1851 Census of Ireland - Number of children born in each family, and the number of children 'deaf and dumb' (Census Commissioners 1854, p. 16)*

We can also see the presence of deaf siblings in the families of early Claremont applicants. It was recorded that 175 of the first 722 applicants (24%) had at least one deaf sibling in their families, and 119 (68%) of these were reported to use signs. This compares to 62% of 532 applicants without deaf siblings using signs. While not an overwhelmingly greater occurrence, it does illustrate that deaf children coming from families with deaf siblings were more likely to use signed language in their pre-school days. The Roper family from Ballyshannon, Donegal, comprised four deaf sisters and a deaf brother, and were all reported to have used signs (Claremont Institution n.d. admissions nos. 61–65, 96 & 97).

Charles Orpen, the founder of Claremont, was certainly aware of the frequency of multiple Deaf siblings from his involvement in the school. They presented “in general, as 'one of a family, or two of a house;' though sometimes five, six, seven, nine and even eleven have been met, in one domestic cluster”. However, he did not feel that this gave any sophistication to their signed language; “divided as they are from each other, both by time and space, they can never improve their own language of signs and gestures, so as to serve any but the commonest expression of animal wants, or physical observations” (Orpen 1827, p. 27). It may also have been the case that Orpen simply failed to recognise complexity in the signing that he had seen in such settings. Given the possibilities pointed to in the research of Haviland, the preponderance of children’s signing in applications to Claremont, and the existence of families of up to eight deaf siblings in mid-nineteenth century Ireland, it would seem highly unusual if a relatively sophisticated form of signing did *not* arise in such a situation.

A rare example of a shared ‘family sign language’ can be seen in 1834, when a deaf woman named Mary Curtis alleged that she had been sexually assaulted. At the Ennis Assizes, she gave evidence on oath at the trial. From her “gestures it was evident that an assault had been committed upon her by the prisoner, but the description she gave of what followed was intelligible only to those who were perfectly acquainted with her manner.” Her brother Martin was called to “interpret truly according to the signs she made”, a common enough occurrence in Ireland when an uneducated Deaf person was giving witness testimony. Interestingly, two other deaf relations of Mary’s were also examined during the trial; a sister of the deaf girl, “a deaf and dumb female like herself”, and her uncle, Denis Curtis, who was also deaf, were examined, “and made signals that they *knew* from the gestures of their relative that the prisoner had committed an assault upon her.” It also seems that the latter two deaf witnesses were interpreted for by another hearing member of the family, a hearing niece of theirs (Anon 1843a;

Anon 1843b).<sup>3</sup> None of the Curtis family seem to have attended Claremont according to their Application Book (Claremont Institution n.d.). It is most likely that none of the Deaf members of the family were formally educated. Evidence of Deaf siblings and extended family members is relatively plentiful, but rarely do we see any mention of such families *signing with each other*. It appears that the Curtis family members used a mutually intelligible variety of signed language. Denis may have served as an adult model of signed language usage to both the two deaf sisters. Furthermore, the signs used by the three deaf signers were also understood by Martin Curtis and the other niece well enough for them to interpret them.

#### *4.3. Pre-1816 Deaf Educators*

The coming of schools for Deaf children in the nineteenth century was the first proper chance for enough deaf children to be brought together to form a ‘critical mass’ for a signed language to develop. However, private tutors of deaf children may have offered the chance for smaller-scale gatherings of signing deaf children, as well as opportunities for signing teachers of the deaf to introduce signing systems to the linguistic repertoire of those children. We also have come across examples of deaf individuals who were literate, educated, and who used signed language.

Charles Dubois Angier was a private Deaf educator from Ashford in Kent, who worked in London treating speech impediments (Anon, 1785a; Anon, 1787; Anon, 2014). He had moved to Ireland by 1795 and was based in Harold’s Cross in Dublin, with his newspaper advertisements proclaiming “The deaf and dumb educated and taught to speak” (Anon, 1795). His experiments may not have been successful; after 1797 he no longer advertised this service and he died in 1803. (Anon 1803, p. 293). No indication is given that Angier used signed language. However, between August 1785 and May 1786, a Mr Macpherson, based at Mary’s Abbey, advertised that “having served a regular Apprenticeship with his Uncle, the celebrated Mr. Braidwood, formerly of Edinburgh, [he was] sufficiently qualified to instruct those, who have the Misfortune to be born Deaf and Dumb, to speak, read, and understand what they read, write, and cipher” (Anon, 1785b). Thomas Braidwood was one of the first teachers of deaf children in Britain, and ‘ciphering’ is possibly a reference to fingerspelling – part of Braidwood’s method of Deaf education, from which “natural signs and the manual alphabet were apparently not excluded as useful aids” (Farrar 1901, p. 69). Elements of signed language, possibly British Sign Language (BSL), may therefore have been used with, and between, Macpherson’s pupils at this very early stage. We are unsure how many deaf children in total

were taught, or how many would have had the chance to meet each other at the clinics of these educators in late Georgian Dublin.

#### *4.4. Educated Deaf individuals*

We also have some early examples of privately educated Irish deaf children. Mary O'Brien was born about 1721, one of two Deaf daughters of William O'Brien, the Earl of Inchiquin and an Irish politician and peer. Mary and her Deaf sister were sent to England to be tutored by Henry Baker, one of the most famous British educators of Deaf children before the Braidwoods (Chalmers 1812, pp. 336–37). She married her first cousin Murrough O'Brien in 1753, the ceremony performed in signed language, and lived with Murrough at his castle in Rostellan, Cork (Anon 1832, p. 79). "The countess had the most happy method of conveying her ideas through the medium of her fingers, and by looking at a person speaking, could immediately understand what they said" (Anon, 1790). In fact Baker interpreted for Mary at court in Westminster in 1753, in a land-related court case, and "being sworn, explained the Question to her by Signs, which she answered by Signs" (Barnes 1790, p. 168; Leahy, 2016). It is possible that her deaf, and indeed hearing, family members signed with her when she lived in Ireland.

John Burns was a 'deaf and dumb' orphan, born about 1740 (Breslin 2001, p. 32). He lived in Monaghan, and "discovering a strong natural capacity, was taught to read and write, and speedily acquired a considerable knowledge of arithmetic, geography, history and chronology" (Ryan 1821, p. 273). Although it is not yet known who originally educated Burns, we know he was taught about religion by a Church of Ireland minister, Philip Skelton, who helped him write a book, *An Historical and Chronological Remembrancer*, published in 1775. (Burdy 1824, pp. xxxvi–xxxvii; Burns, 1775) Burns kept a shop in Monaghan town, married a hearing woman, could "read, write, keep accounts, and preached when but a mere boy, several *very striking sermons in dumb show*" (Skelton 1824, p. 71) [*authors' emphasis*]. This raises the possibility that Skelton or others may have used signed language with Burns, in a way that he later utilised for communication with others.

Robert Long was born about 1713 and lived in Bandon, Co Cork; apparently "by his own industry, with very little assistance from any matter, acquire[d] a considerable knowledge of some branches of the mathematics. He had a perfect knowledge of the principles of geography, and could calculate eclipses. He made both globes, and drew the map and constellations himself" (Smith 1774, p. 435). His "Propositions for finding the Longitude at Sea" were "laid

before the Astronomer to the King; the Substance of the Principles being explained by his Brother and Interpreter”, and were published in contemporary magazines (Long 1759, p. 16; O’Shea, 2010).<sup>4</sup> Long, from the use of his brother as his interpreter, was clearly a signer, but whether his signing system was mere ‘home sign’ or something far more sophisticated – perhaps a family sign language – is open to debate; given his high level of intelligence it indicates the latter.

## **5. Conclusion**

We have seen, from the historical evidence presented, that deaf people did use forms of signing in Ireland in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. We have further raised the possibility of localised signed languages, or language-like forms of signing, developing within large Deaf families. Therefore the ‘indigenous ISL’ and ‘Old ISL’ mentioned by Leeson & Saeed (2012), and Matthews (1996), seems to be multifaceted – certainly at times resembling home sign, at other times hinting at linguistic complexity. We are still hampered by the nature of our sources, which are essentially imprecise written accounts of signs by those unaware of the nature and parameters of signed languages. More analysis of sources, especially looking at the social standing of deaf people and the communicative situations in which they found themselves, is recommended, to try to ascertain just how functional these ‘Old ISL’ or ‘indigenous ISL’ varieties really were. In the meantime, the examples we present offer an intriguing window into linguistic possibilities, and the lives of Irish deaf people.

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<sup>1</sup> This is not the case for all of the literature that looks at this period - see for example Leeson & Saeed (2012:28–32) - but several works by Barbara LeMaster, for example, who pioneered the investigation of ISL as a deeply gendered language that at one point had mutually unintelligible male / female variants, do not consider Claremont or other pre-Cabra schools at all in their accounts of how Irish Sign Language came to be (LeMaster 1993:124, 1997:68; LeMaster and Foran 1986:82).

<sup>2</sup> The Deaf Heritage Centre, based on the grounds of Deaf Village Ireland in Cabra, holds reels of film taken of young Deaf boys in St Joseph's Deaf school during the 1930s where they are seen signing, though to the authors' knowledge, no linguistic analysis has been made of these films.

<sup>3</sup> A number of newspapers around the country picked up on this case, and the exact details of how the three deaf Curtises were related – uncle and niece, brother or sister - varies according to which account is read; even the deaf girl's name is reported differently - Ellen is also named 'Mary Curtis' in other newspaper reports. Such variability in detail across different newspaper reports of the early nineteenth century is just one feature contributing to unreliability of the records discussed in this article.

<sup>4</sup> Many thanks to Graham O'Shea and Anne Leahy for much of this information on Robert Long.