

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Irish Classical Self: Poets and Poor Scholars in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries.* By LAURIE O'HIGGINS. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp.321. Hardcover, \$95.00. ISBN 978-0-19-876710-7.

**T***he Irish Classical Self* takes on the idea of national identity as tied to classical language and education in Ireland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It explores how national Irish identity was tied to classical language through literature and poetry, and through education as a pre-requisite of seeking higher education and status on the Continent. The author's stated focus is particularly on the how the poorer scholars educated at informal and potentially illegal 'hedge schools' might have gained some level of education in Classical languages and traditions, and on how Irish poets of the time reflect Classical influence alongside attempts to preserve and promote native Irish literature.

The books consist of an introduction, seven chapters, a conclusion, four appendices, a bibliography, and an index. The introduction introduces the concepts of the hedge school, ideas of national identity through language, and the basic political and literary situations in the time period of focus. Chapter 1, "The Stage is Set", discusses how languages including Irish, Latin, and English, played a role in Ireland's national identity, and how writers of the time used a narrative of "the 'language theme'" (15). Chapter 2, "Books in Their Hands", discusses the availability of Greek and Latin texts in Ireland. In Chapter 3, "Esteem, Seriousness, and Folly", attention shifts to Irish-language poetry and manuscripts, and how they reflect a synthesis of Irish and classical (mostly Latin) knowledge and literary technique. Chapter 4, "Eighteenth-Century Institutional Views", covers the views and political background of education in Ireland, official and otherwise. Chapter 5, "Narrative of Scholars and Schools", continues to examine education, from the more personal perspectives of travel writers, correspondence, and non-government publications. Chapter 6, "The Educational Tide Turns", follows the history and politics of the ideas of public education, and Chapter 7, "Genius in the Humbler Walks of Life", "spotlights socially underprivileged individuals who evinced a sense of responsibility for Irish culture" (173). The appendices provide examples of some of the primary materials including an excerpt from "Archbishop Butler's Visitation

Book”, a Latin poem by Newby, and two government reports from the early nineteenth century.

This book is a history of the politics behind language and education, and the connections to Greek and Latin traditions that Irish writers used in composing works in both Irish Gaelic and Latin, not a history of classical transmission, a concept more familiar to most classicists, and the author displays some sensitivity to this point. She acknowledges that two of her main sources of evidence may not be known to classicists, and she provides some detail explaining what they are. First she presents government reports and evaluations of the school system in Ireland in the early to mid-eighteenth century and first quarter of the nineteenth (12–13), and second, she presents poetry from Ireland in the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries, and the scholarship on it (13–14). Together, the poetry, the reports, and other evidence for informal schooling among the lower classes cover the foundations for her analyses.

The shakiest element of the book is that it does not fully connect its various threads. The author makes the following claims in the introduction: “I have found substance behind the legend” (6) of classical knowledge among the lower classes, “The book addresses the puzzle: *Why* did people outside an elite class pursue classical education” (8), and also that “a version of Irish identity in the seventeenth century” (9) has some bearing on the previous two statements. The conclusion of the introduction then claims, “The classical ‘strain’ that I am tracing, on the other hand, drifted upwards, to the attention of observers, from a place of less privilege.” (14) This final claim reflects Chapters 4–7, but is not a consistent emphasis in the first three which focus more on the Classics and identity point.

On a related note, given that the idea of the ‘poor classical scholar’ is a key point, a lack of concrete support makes it difficult to accept readily. The author admits that some of the primary sources for the ‘poor scholar’ thesis are conflicted (6–7), but when a scholar is labeled as poor or socially underprivileged, the evidence is at best a citation in another work of scholarship without any concrete detail. For example, upon the introduction of a group of intellectuals in 1820s Louth, the group is called “a coterie of poor men who celebrated Irish literature in the 1820s” (189). The accompanying footnote points to two sources, but offers no indication as to the actual contents of the evidence. In addition, one of the sources appears to be in Irish, which means that the average Classics scholar today might have difficulty consulting it for further information.

Overall, this book is an interesting and informative exploration of how classical languages helped Ireland begin to explore and re-discover a national identity in

the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It's also a good history of education and poetry in the same times and place. The chapters concentrating most directly on the influences and effects of the Classics are the first three. The remaining chapters, while interesting, are less focused on the Classics and more on the socio-political workings of Ireland concerning education and knowledge.

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