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O'Higgins, Laurie. *The Irish classical self: poets and poor scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries*. Classical presences. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. vi, 321 p. \$95.00. ISBN 9780198767107.

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<http://books.google.com?id=4lsjDgAAQBAJ>>Preview

This book is a fine study of a complex and elusive phenomenon. The author's description, 'a survey of the "classical strain" in Irish thought' (199) understates her achievement and the book's significance.

Laurie O'Higgins weaves a compelling story about the evolving status of classical culture and learning in Ireland during the eventful and sometimes turbulent eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Her writing style is precise and free of jargon. Many studies of this period of Ireland's history have privileged top-down perspectives and monoglot-monochrome English-language evidence. [[1]] O'Higgins balances 'official' government or ecclesiastical sources with the often fragmentary testimonies to ordinary people's lives and opinions, including those of women, poets, scribes and scholars, and 'socially underprivileged individuals who evinced a sense of responsibility for Irish culture.' (173) She digs deep into widely scattered and little-known material in three languages (Irish, Latin, and English), much of it in manuscript, from government reports on social and economic conditions through popular poetry to the manuscript testimony of itinerant hedge school teachers. The blend makes for a rich and coherent picture while also allowing conflicting interests, polarized views, and complementary viewpoints to emerge. O'Higgins is fair-minded in representing opposing positions, some of which would have elicited censorious rhetoric from more partisan scholars.

The fragmentariness of the evidence tells its own story of ephemeral institutions and publications, precarious patronage, haphazard learning, the lack of a print industry in Irish-language media, a lack of standardization across regions, and the diversity of viewpoints in play across class and confessional divides. In the background one can discern the misrule of distant lords, occasionally well intentioned, but more often oppressive and out of touch by turns. O'Higgins rightly makes no attempt to impose an artificial narrative on the material. She groups sources by theme, genre, or types of material (e.g., eighteenth-century autobiographical manuscripts), discussing each document in its turn with succinct and fine-grained attention to context, function, and tone.

Many narratives of classical reception in modern national cultures have focussed on the intimate link between elite learning and political power, often with reference to class, empire or postcolonialism. In view of these studies the uninitiated reader might expect classical learning in Ireland to have been the exclusive preserve of the Protestant Ascendancy or Catholic upper classes, instrumental to supremacy and advancement. Instead, O'Higgins documents widespread cultivation of Greek and Latin in the lower strata of society. The hedge schools that sprang up in response to King William's Penal Laws forbidding the instruction of Catholics have been suspected by some as exaggerated, and romanticized by

others. Writing of a trip taken in 1797, George Holmes ‘noted Kerry peasants of whom “many may be met who are good Latin scholars, yet do not speak a word of English. Greek is also taught in the mountainous parts by some itinerant teachers.” This glimpse of rural classicism was intriguing, but lacked detail.’ (123) But O’Higgins substantiates the legend in great and varied detail, even for times and circumstances when acquiring skills beyond the humanities would have better served the economic and agricultural interests of the Irish poor.

<q>In Ireland, as in England, writers urged training and the social and economic improvement of the underclasses. The new field of political economy inspired surveys, as thinkers began to envisage the masses as a potential asset to the economy, not just a threat to public peace. An early example was furnished by Dr. Charles Smith, whose survey of Kerry, published in 1774, noted that “classical reading extends itself, <i>even to a fault</i>, among the lower and poorer kind in this county.” The “fault,” in his estimation, was that it took their attention away from more useful | knowledge. He reports having witnessed “poor lads reading Homer” and taught by a “mendicant scholar” trained at an English grammar school at Tralee. Many of the “common people” he described as speaking Latin fluently, without knowing English. (133-134)</q>

The idealistic devotion ‘to a fault’ (133, 177) of these students and their families to classical learning attests to the power and persistence of a deep-rooted national identity that was widely (though not universally) held, which posited connections between Ireland, Irish, and the Greek and Latin classics.

O’Higgins shows how learning the Greek and Latin classics went hand-in-hand with the transmission of Irish poetic traditions already in the seventeenth century, when scholars such as Geoffrey Keating refuted the twelfth-century Giraldus Cambrensis’ castigation of the Irish as unlettered and barbarian.

<q>‘The seventeenth century marked the beginning of an influential Irish identity, articulated both on the European stage and in Ireland itself. This identity was crafted by learned Catholics, and it averred the value and authenticity of Irish annals, Irish saints, and traditional lore. At the same time, and drawing on this traditional material, the Irish language and people were implicated in an international past. Their story belonged with that of ancient Israel, the Scythians, the Greeks and Romans. It was part of a venerable and capacious human story.’ (29)</q>

Accordingly the book offers detailed coverage of the different elements of the hybrid ‘Irish classical self’, sometimes to the temporary occlusion of Greek and Latin.

At times O’Higgins zooms out and away from strictly classical material in order to situate it in a wider context, whether that be the training of priests or the patronage of Irish poets. Chapter 6 presents an analytic history of education in Ireland in the early nineteenth century, with much of interest on how denominational segregation came about. Here too she restores the context behind the official version of events. In 1824 the British Government commissioned a survey of education in Ireland and published a series of reports that only mention classical matters incidentally. One James Doyle, Catholic Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, retained duplicate copies of the returns on which the final report was based. Comparison of the two allows us to see that classical learning often fell through the cracks of the final report: the return mentions in addition that a certain John Carbery taught Latin, Greek and French, and that among his books were ‘Homer, Virgil, Cicero, Horace, [the]

Greek Testament etc.’ (153) A similar case: the government report records bland details on the earnings of teacher Simon Macken; an independent manuscript tells us of Macken’s Latin culture, his work as a scribe, and of his lively participation in the world of Irish poetry and scholarship, which is invisible in the English-language world of the report (154).

Throughout some two hundred pages (not including appendices and end-matter) O’Higgins brings to life a cast of characters many of whom would otherwise be consigned to oblivion. There are twenty-six index-columns of ancient and modern names, places, literary works, associations and other matters, with more gems than a reviewer can mention; here is a miscellany of my favourites, which should indicate the variety of the book’s contents.

A poem from c. 1650, *Tuireamh na hÉireann* (‘The lament for Ireland’) switches between Irish, ecclesiastical Latin, and English; it contains a catalogue of legal terms in English, ‘linguistic interlopers, conferring authority on their human counterparts.’ (33) A century later Art Mac Cumhaigh would write a macaronic poem in the form of an argument between a new Protestant church and a dilapidated Catholic one; the stanzas of the Protestant church are in English and those of the Catholic church are in Irish, and ‘this debate enacted Ulster’s dichotomy, linguistic and cultural. . . . MacCooley rendered Constantinople with a tmesis (“Constanti-Ghréagach[Greek]-nople”) and so literally enacted the linguistic heritage of his church, through the city whose name mixed Latin and Greek.’ (70) In contrast with religious divides, politicians who today make a political football of the Irish language would do well to remember the Ulster Gaelic Society, ‘nondenominational in design, although its members seem to have been mostly Presbyterian . . . founded in 1828 “for the purpose of promoting the diffusion of elementary education and useful knowledge through the | medium of the Irish language.”’ (179-180) We learn too of Constantia Grierson, a learned young woman (1705-32) who knew Swift, wrote poems and produced editions of classical authors (50-51). We encounter Maurice Newby and read his rambunctious Latin elegy to a friend, *Amicus amico*. ‘The poem teetered ludicrously between classical pomposity and beery bathos. It must have amused Newby’s friends, with in-jokes about their drinking haunts, scruffy acquaintances, and habits.’ (94) We read an extract from Catholic priest Cornelius MacCurtin’s sermon berating his parishioners for materialism and neglect of learning; O’Higgins gives the text in the original Irish and translates: “Isn’t it great barbarism for a father or for a young man to be complaining about spending six pence a month on his son’s schooling, and for that same man not to | take account or evince any distress over fourpence for a pot of cheap ale, or a half-sixpence for a quarter [stone?] of turnips in the week, to satisfy his animal appetites?” (107-108) Charles-Étienne Coquebert de Montbret, French Consul to Ireland 1789-91, made efforts to learn Irish, took an interest in the ordinary people, and noted that ‘the Irish were more eager for knowledge than the English.’ (122) Charles Henry Wilson reports a conversation between an unnamed visitor and a nonagenarian Cavan man who reminisces about local traditions, quoting Edmund Burke’s phrase ‘the swarthy daughters of Cadmus’ which refers to inscribed letters, Cadmus being of course a reputed inventor of writing. The conversation ‘created a mood of tender melancholy, with no hint of religious or political acrimony.’ (128) We read schoolmaster Richard Egan’s 1808 letter in elegant Ciceronian Latin, lamenting the lack of respect for learning, and quoting Juvenal on the contempt in which poverty is held; O’Higgins notes allusions to classical works, but never labours their interpretation. We learn of the nineteenth-century Griffin brothers’ unflattering portrayals of hedge school masters. ‘The Griffins clearly struggled to create a coherent and persuasive portrait of hedge school masters, in works intended for people predisposed to view Ireland through sentimental or condescending eyes.’ (139) We learn of Thomas Harney’s nineteenth-century translation of the *Iliad*, of which some 900 lines

survive in manuscript. Zeus became ‘Seathar’ (perhaps derived from Latin ‘Sator’), Apollo became ‘Grioth’ (an Irish word for the sun), and ‘Chryses became “Órgart,” an Irish calque on the “golden” Greek name of Apollo’s priest.’ (188) Harney’s allusions to Irish heroic saga create a dialogue between the ethics of Homeric society and those of the Fianna, Irish warriors who, unlike Achilles, were independent of their king.

This book deserves a wide readership. Students of classical reception will value its total familiarity with the receiving context, its combination of élite and non-élite views, and its understanding of how Greek and Latin classics interacted with native Irish traditions. Historians of Ireland too should recognize O’Higgins’ important contribution: beyond classical reception studies, she brings to light aspects of social and cultural history which historians who are not classically trained might have overlooked, or examined in less depth.

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[[1]] A premise of Vincent Morley, *The popular mind in eighteenth-century Ireland*, Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), is that many who write on Irish history do not speak Irish and so cannot read the vernacular sources.