
The importance of Latin to Irish culture up to the late modern period is almost incapable of overstatement. This may appear to be a truism, since the dominance of Latin all over Europe is clearly visible. The Latin of the classics, of medieval philosophy, history and poetry was also the language of Reformation theology, of diplomacy, propaganda and science. Latin culture thrived and developed, changing and discovering new possibilities as European society and culture grew and convulsed through two millennia. Everything new, much that was alarming or foreign, circulated through this medium, reaching remote places which reacted to innovation and preserved tradition. However the occlusion of Latin culture in the twentieth century, when so much of vital interest became invisible to otherwise educated readers, together with a colonialist perspective that saw the Irish as primitive, make it necessary to restate the obvious.

Jason Harris and Keith Sidwell’s collection, emanating from an interdisciplinary seminar at UCC, goes further than the obvious; it casts a necessarily selective but searching light on several areas of Neo-Latin activity in Ireland and by Irish writers abroad. The editors’ introduction admits the limitation of their enterprise, but suggests convincingly that the limitation is also in the fragmented and constricted nature of their subject. History, theology and controversy are the dominant genres—perhaps the interests of the Irish reading public have not changed as much as one might expect? There is however an essay by Keith Sidwell and David Edwards on Dermot O’Meara’s *Ormonius*, a propagandist epic poem written, they suggest, ‘to reach the widest possible audience’ and thus in Latin. Poetry on quite a different scale but to me of considerable interest, a late seventeenth-century ‘epigram on the insignia of Ireland’, visible in the Irish Franciscan house of St Isidore in Rome, and
(according to the editors’ introduction) apparently also in a collection of similar poems in a Vatican manuscript, is reproduced on the book’s cover, and translated on the front flap. Its significance might have been the subject of an essay to itself but it is not further discussed in this book—a pity.

Latinate culture had flourished in the late medieval period as is made clear in the fine essay by Diarmait Ó Catháin, ‘Some reflexes of Latin learning’. In the early modern period Ireland’s political situation and the campaign of Anglicisation, along with the international upheavals which followed the Reformation, are articulated and reflected through printing and the growing participation of the majority population in the Counter-Reformation Catholic church. As Irish writers bid to make an impression abroad, whether promoting Protestant or Catholic points of view, print and Latin become twin vehicles to display and disseminate their works. But Latin could also enter into commerce with other languages and media. John Barry explores a three-way relationship between one of the best-known products of print technology, John Derricke’s Image of Ireland, and two works of Richard Stanihurst, the English Histories of Ireland and his later De Rebus in Hibernia Gestis. Yet another article on Stanihurst from Colm Lennon is welcome as filling in a particularly interesting part of the polymath’s career, his friendship with Justus Lipsius as the great humanist’s career draws to its close with a return to the bosom of Rome. Friendly if remote correspondence is important throughout this period: Elizabethanne Boran’s essay, on the European ramifications of Archbishop Ussher’s manuscript collecting, shows the founding scholar of Irish Protestant classicism in touch with like-minded colleagues across national, geographical and religious boundaries.

Less edifying are the frequent disagreements of the Irish, especially the Irish in exile, which are amplified by the use of the international language. A testy succession of squabbles and splits makes for
dispiriting reading, though we need to recall that in the same century as Philip O’Sullivan Beare was abusing Stanihurst, and Father Robert O’Connell berating Ormond and his supporters, Milton and Salmasius were trading low insults across the narrow seas and many, many other scholarly specialists in invective were displaying their mudslinging skills. Hiram Morgan and David Caulfield succeed in clarifying what was at stake in the political and controversial writings of O’Sullivan Beare. There are a couple of brave attempts to analyse Latin style, as in Gráinne McLaughlin’s account of the deployment of classical allusion in O’Connell’s argument with another cleric, John O’Callaghan. It is difficult to pin down the sources of particular phrases in a period when Europe seems awash in a soup of mingled Latin quotations vaguely remembered from its schooldays.

Jason Harris is ambitious in setting out not only to assess the degree of rhetorical polish in two works of Stephen White, the Clonmel-born Jesuit, but to relate White’s choice of a comparatively unaffected style to the more dashing rhetoric of the text to which White is responding, Stanihurst’s humanist rendering of Cambrensis. Harris argues persuasively that the single extant manuscript, of a text which remained unpublished in the seventeenth century, represents an unfinished work—which complicates the discussion of its style perhaps more than he allows. His key text for rhetorical figures is the pseudo-Ciceronian Ad Herrennium, which was certainly in circulation throughout this period. It had been overshadowed by many Renaissance works on style, and especially in relation to a Jesuit text one might have considered whether the Jesuit rhetorics might not have been more influential. Still, the mix of tricks for writers in this period is not much changed whether the packaging is by Quintilian or Ramus, and the broad lines of his argument are convincing.

The attractiveness of this collection is perhaps why I wish it were larger, with more perhaps on those writers from Bale to James Ware who
considered Ireland’s medieval inheritance in the context of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—but this is a fine book, offering plenty of enlightenment and opening up possibilities for more research in the future.

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