

Kelleher, Margaret. **The Maamtrasna Murders: Language, Life and Death in Nineteenth-Century Ireland.** Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2018. 352 p.

In *The Maamtrasna Murders: Language, Life and Death in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, Irish Scholar Margaret Kelleher returns to the case of the murder of five members of the Joyce household who lived in the townland of Maamtrasna, County Galway, in Ireland, and the subsequent trials, executions and life imprisonments. Throughout her writing, Kelleher emphasizes the implications of language and linguistic identity issues in the Irish context, which determined the fate of Myles Joyce, a monoglot Irish speaker in a trial conducted in English. She points out that “The miscarriage of justice inherent in the conviction and execution of Myles Joyce has been central to the continuing notoriety of these cases, reinforced nationally through local histories, radio documentaries and theatrical treatments, and internationally, owing to references to Maamtrasna in the work of James Joyce” (xx). In 2018, the year of this book launch, Ireland’s President Michael D. Higgins delivered his presidential pardon to Myles Joyce.

Kelleher demonstrates that the significance of the Maamtrasna narrative, at once historical and contemporary, provides a vivid snapshot of a place and time in which the complex social dynamics within processes of cultural change are visible. She also highlights that “To write this historical study in the early twenty-first century, in the context of large-scale migration and newly-enforced state barriers to movement and citizenship, is also to be cognisant of the extent to which these dynamics continue to influence the destinies of monolinguals and bilinguals today, and the fate of language that they seek to retain” (xx).

The book is divided into three main parts: The first one, “Language Crossing”, has two chapters: 1. “Murders: ‘All Quite Dead’”, and 2. “Language Shift: ‘Have you Irish?’”. In the first chapter, Kelleher presents the case of the murders of five members of the Joyce family, John Joyce, Margaret Joyce, senior, Margaret Joyce, junior, and Bridget Joyce, on 17 August 1882, and seeks to investigate the economic and social conditions of the townland where the murders took place. In an attempt to understand what happened at Maamtrasna that year, Chapter 2 is devoted to reexamining the history of the linguistic change that occurred in nineteenth-century Ireland. Thus, before getting to the discussion on the unjust conviction of one of the suspects, Kelleher conducts a case study using census data from 1851 on to construct a linguistic map that raises questions about the coexistence of monolingualism and bilingualism in Ireland. As regards the implication of language change, she writes, “The events at Maamtrasna starkly illuminate the different fates of those who could speak English and those who were monoglot Irish speakers, when they were compelled to interact with the judicial system” (30). Still discussing language and society in pre-1851 Ireland, based both on the census data and some other studies, which were able to reveal that many people were afraid to acknowledge that they knew Irish, she concludes that “Irish was associated with subalternity and opposition from an official viewpoint, but also that Irish speakers were aware of this and adjusted their public speaking accordingly” (41). She manages to present the intricacies of Irish monolingualism and the rich and neglected history of bilingualism.

The second part of her book, “The Maamtrasna Case”, has four chapters: 3. “Arrests: ‘they would put people in the murder’”, 4. “Law and the State: ‘The language which he knew best’”, and 5. “Trials: ‘the shambles of Maamtrasna are avenged’”. Kelleher begins the second

section writing about the arrests of the Maamtrasna suspects, discussing at length about the initial encounter of the ten poorly-educated men and the judicial system. She explores the Crown briefs and compares what was being reported in different newspapers about the case. In the following chapter of the same section, she analyses the role of the interpreter in bilingual courtrooms and the changing discourse regarding the rights of Irish-language speakers. Still discussing the key role of the interpreter, she brings some fictional depiction of a bilingual courtroom in the Irish Literature. When discussing the trials and executions, she presents the details of the trials and the crucial moments of linguistic misunderstandings. Due to one of the misunderstandings, Myles Joyce had his right to an interpreter suppressed. “Myles Joyce’s answering in the affirmative (that he did understand the interpreter’s speech in Irish) was taken to mean that he understood evidence given in English, as a result, the service of the interpreter were not extended to him in the course of the trial and were restored only at the delivery of the verdict of guilty” (119). She, then, writes about the dramatic execution of innocent Myles Joyce and the other two condemned men, Patrick Joyce e Patrick Casey. Ironically, Myles Joyce was executed in the cruelest way.

The last section of the book, “Last Words”, has three more chapters: 7. “Aftermath: Judicial Murder”, 8. “Afterlives: These wretched heartbroken Men”, and 9. “James Joyce: Ireland at the bar”. Kelleher begins this section with the parliamentary inquiry prompted by the publication of Timothy Harrington’s pamphlet in 1884, which made the case public, denouncing a series of incongruences regarding the trials, and “emphasizing the linguistic chasm that existed between the accused Myles Joyce and the court in which he was tried” (153). Kelleher highlights that, from the immediate aftermath of the Maamtrasna murders down to the present, the events have been incorporated into larger political narratives. She closes the chapter pointing to the breakdown, complicity or failure of the British state in its dealings with Ireland and mentioning the consequence of a less welcome repercussion of the case, once “it has resulted in a simplified view of social and cultural factors; an underestimation of the part played by a judicial system ill-equipped to accommodate linguistic and class difference” (174). Chapter 8 examine the afterlives of the people involved in Maamtrasna murders. Those that were released after twenty years in prison and those that died there. She also investigates the fate of the orphan boys, Patsy and Martin Joyce.

Chapter 9 is about James Joyce, his relation to the Irish Language and his famous journalistic and literary references to the Maamtrasna murders. Joyce first wrote about the case in one of his essays written in Italian, “L’Irlanda alla sbarra” (“Ireland at the bar”), published in *Il Piccolo della Sera*, in 1907, and, after it, in *Finnegans Wake* (1939). According to Kelleher, the essay contains a number of significant errors with respect to the details of the Maamtrasna trials, which she attributes, in part, to Joyce’s distinctive authorial interests. She criticizes not only the errors in the essay but also its narrative effect, since, in her view, it “re-enacts the power of a dominant voice to reduce the complexity of speech in another language, firstly to monosyllables and ultimately to silence” (204). Regarding Joyce’s relation to Irish, she presents a myriad of evidence of its recurrence in his literary works, but specific references to the Maamtrasna murders are found only in *Finnegans Wake*. She criticizes Joyce’s first engagement with the case of Maamtrasna, but prizes him in part for his later writings about it: “Joyce would turn away from the silenced monoglot figure to embrace playful bilinguals” (212). She adds that “a continuing motif in his work, more sympathetically rendered in later writings, is an interest in communicative failure, or breaks in verbal exchange, which result from the (often willful) miscomprehension of listeners” (212). She concludes her discussion writing that, for Joyce, the article was intended as a form of “speaking-back” not only to historical misinterpretation but

also to contemporary misrepresentation (212).

The dying words of Myles Joyce, “*Táim co saor leis an leanbh atá’san gliabhán*” (“I am as innocent as the child in the cradle”) (215), are used in the epigraph of the conclusion of Kelleher’s book. She writes that those words “reverberated strongly on 4 April 2018, when President Michael D. Higgins delivered his presidential pardon (*maithiúnas*) at Áras an Uachtaráin, in the company of Minister for Justice and Equality Charlie Flanagan” (215). Kelleher reinforces the significance of “who spoke what language, and by whom they were understood in determining the accused’s fates” (218), and also strongly relates the issue of language to the present: “For those people today whose lives attest to “language crossings” –whether as migrants or refugees or other politically and culturally dispossessed –standing at the bar of judicial process and of public opinion remains a perilous place” (222).

Leide Daiane de Oliveira

Work Cited

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