

beyond the capacity of lawyers to correct. Lawyers can do right, they can do good, but they have their limits. The rest of the job is up to society” (p. 223).

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**Antonia McManus. *The Irish Hedge School and Its Books, 1695-1831*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002. Pp. 270.**

During the seventeenth century the Irish lost a few key battles to invading English forces. Those losses had a significance that is difficult to underestimate, for they led to the destruction of the old Gaelic society and paved the way for dispossession and centuries of repressive foreign domination. The penal laws, imposed by Britain on Ireland during the reign of William III (1689-1702), virtually placed Catholics outside of the law. Practitioners of the despised “popery,” the vast majority of the population, were forbidden to teach so that the country might be more easily subjected to Protestant proselytism and Anglo assimilation. The hedge schools, so called because they were often conducted outdoors and in remote places out of sight of the British overlords, were part of Ireland’s resistance to the colonial project. This book by Antonia McManus is the first substantial and comprehensive study of these unique educational institutions and is to be welcomed for its thorough scholarship, balanced judgement, and fine writing.

The hedge schools had their heyday in the eighteenth century and represented the determination of the Irish, in spite of poverty, to seek an education for their children. The system, if such it could be called, was private and non-sectarian in nature and usually functioned through a community pooling its resources to hire a teacher. As the penal laws were relaxed in the latter half of the century, the schools were able to move indoors and the teachers could advertise their services in newspapers. The British authorities may have become more tolerant, but they never really approved of the schools. Their great fear was that Irish children were learning their own history and “enmity to England, hatred of the government, and superstitious veneration for old and absurd

customs.” There were some grounds for these fears for, as McManus points out, the hedge school masters were often well versed in the radical writings of Paine, Rousseau, and Godwin and many were active in revolutionary movements such as the United Irishmen. Moreover, some of the masters were renowned Gaelic poets and musicians in their own right and helped sustain and perpetuate the people’s love of literature, music, dancing and conviviality – all disapproved of by the British, especially those of an evangelical inclination.

There are vivid and memorable portraits here of the masters, their curriculum, and teaching methods. McManus makes the point that the programs of study in the better schools were comprehensive and could range from the classical languages to bookkeeping. Much depended on the abilities of the master. Mathematics was highly prized by the people and teachers had to be good at it in order to secure employment. The comprehensive curriculum was in keeping with the ambitions of many parents to see their sons become priests, clerks, or schoolmasters. Hedge school education prepared young men for entry into the Irish colleges on the continent, the only places to study for the priesthood until the 1790s when seminaries were allowed to open in Ireland.

A substantial section of the book is devoted to an analysis of the books used in the schools for the teaching of English, a language that, because of its utility, was gradually replacing Irish or Gaelic. The most popular literary genres were chivalric romances, fairy tales, and criminal biographies which led critics to accuse the schools of corrupting the young. McManus disputes this allegation and argues that such works more likely instilled a love of reading. The pious evangelical tales of Mesdames Trimmer, More, and Sherwood did find their way into the schools because of their low cost, but they could never compete in popularity with works such as *A Genuine History of the Lives and Actions of the Most Notorious Irish Highwaymen, Tories and Rapparees* (1776).

An interesting sub-text to the book is the attitude of the Catholic Church to the hedge schools. In the darkest days of the penal laws the clergy tended to support the schools. A solidarity of the oppressed promoted co-operation between priest and master at the local level. And, after all, boys who wished to study for the priesthood received their basic education in the schools. But with the relaxation of the penal laws religious orders began to open their own schools and the hierarchy set its eyes on something more ambitious – a clerically controlled school system subsidized by the

state. This ambition was largely realized in the National School system inaugurated in 1831 as a joint initiative of church and state to regulate and control schooling in the interests of morality, political stability, and economic usefulness. The free enterprise hedge schools could not compete with the well-financed National Schools and quickly went out of business.

This book is a significant contribution to the history of Irish education and demonstrates a maturity of scholarship and theoretical sophistication that is rare in the field. In its analysis of curriculum it has few equals anywhere and should serve as a model to be emulated by other writers and researchers.

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