

Fin de Siècle na Gaeilge

Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh



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Brian Ó Conchubhair, *Fin de Siècle na Gaeilge : Darwin, an Athbheochan agus Smaointeoireacht na hEorpa*, Indreabhán, Conamara, An Clóchomhar/Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2009, x + 346 p., ISBN 978-1-905560-46-2

- 1 Based on his doctoral thesis, Brian Ó Conchubhair's book explores the origins of the Gaelic Revival in relation to European discourse. He argues that Darwinism and Fin de Siècle ideas about degeneration and cross-fertilization influenced Gaelic Revival debates about the Irish language. Irish was portrayed as a "pure" language as opposed to English which was a product of many sources. The proliferation of Anglicisms (Béarlachas) was of great concern to Revivalists as it was a mark of contamination, of cross-fertilization that would weaken the Irish language.
- 2 The Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language regarded the disappearance of older grammatical forms as evidence of a language in decline, and that dialects verged on patois. The Gaelic League, however, took a different view, shifting the focus to the vernacular language, as spoken in the Gaeltachtaí. Max Müller's theories on dialectic regeneration legitimized the position of the proponents of cainnt na ndaoine (common speech). Rather than a symptom of stagnation, even degeneration, canúnachas (vernacularism) was a sign of vitality in a language.
- 3 Questions of spelling, dialect, patois and print type are depicted in great detail here. Such vehement debates seem less eccentric and trivial when considered in this framework.
- 4 The last chapter is a study of two novels from 1901, *Cormac Ua Conaill* by Patrick Dineen (he of dictionary fame) and *Grádh agus Crádh* by Úna Ní Fhaircheallaigh. These works are some of the earliest novels published in Irish, though Yeats's epigraph here certainly bears true: "A great literature does not arise from the efforts of propagandists and grammarians." Ó Conchubhair's analysis situates these works within

the fin de siècle in terms of their treatment of illness, degeneration and suicide. A further chapter – a conclusion or recap of the main ideas of the book – would have been beneficial.

- 5 The Gaelic Revival, Ó Conchubhair claims, is best understood within the context of degeneration rather than concentrating solely on nationalism or postcolonialism. It is certainly an enlightening perspective from which to view this movement. His methodological approach involves an extensive use of a remarkable range of primary material.
- 6 *Fin de Siècle na Gaeilge* provides ample evidence that the intellectuals of the language revival were not limited solely to English discourse. It demonstrates an awareness among key revival figures of contemporary European debates and of anxieties with regard to miscegenation and degeneration. This impressive work is a most welcome addition to a growing body of work asserting the receptivity of Gaelic Revivalists to European thought.

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