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## Review of Foreign Tongues

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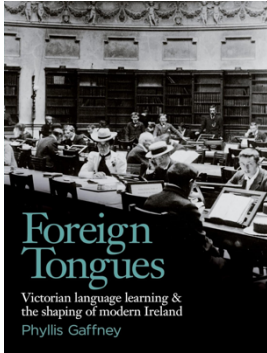
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## BOOK REVIEW

**Foreign Tongues: Victorian Language Learning and the Shaping of Modern Ireland**, by Phyllis Gaffney, Dublin: UCD Press, 2024, 380pp; ISBN 978-1-7390-8631-2 (paperback).



This truly is a book for the ages, a book that will never be dislodged by new theories or emerging critical discourses. It is a feast for the mind and for the soul – or to put it more colloquially – there’s eating and drinking in it. It is the book that one would love to have to have written – but that would have required the endless resilience, dedication, focus and forensic skills of its author, the redoubtable Prof. Phyllis Gaffney. It is a book that tells the story not just of language learning in Victorian Ireland but, by using languages as an entry point, it weaves a much wider and deeper story, that of nothing less than the shaping of modern Ireland. More than that: it places this story in a still wider international context spanning the centuries from the Serments de Strasbourg in 842 (which Phyllis quotes) down to contemporary Ireland and indeed contemporary Europe where 98% of EU schoolchildren study the *lingua franca* that English has become. With this long span and with the uncovering of the forces underlying it, Phyllis is faithful to the great medievalist Georges Duby whose concepts of *longue durée* and *mouvement de fond* she references.

With over 200 pages of analysis built on original, painstaking, meticulous archival research, scaffolded by well over 100 pages of footnotes (“an ocean of footnotes,” to quote Phyllis herself), the consultation of around 900 publications and compelling visual material (photos, drawings, advertisements...) along with *sorties* to archives in Ireland, Germany and France, it is difficult to imagine how just one person in just one lifetime could have carried off such a feat, such a *gaisce*. One of the innumerable delights of this book is the way in which Phyllis records its genesis, its backstory: Prof. Siofra Pierce’s question about how long languages had been taught in UCD – “the pebble whose ripples have shaped this book” (to quote Phyllis). Add to

that the unexpected role played by the tragedy that was Covid: we see Phyllis walking the permitted perimeter around her neighbourhood while listening to audiobooks that would feed into the research that underpins this book.

This is a book that can be read in one – admittedly long – sitting, or chapter by chapter (the two chapters on Irish should be required reading), or it can be dipped in to a few pages at a time, because on every single page you will find facts and comments guaranteed to stop you in your tracks. Early on, Phyllis traces the surprisingly different status and trajectory of modern languages in Victorian Ireland and Britain. The arguably deeper implantation of Greek and Latin in the British public school system with the notion that these languages were vehicles for inculcating Greek and Roman “manly” virtues may have hindered curriculum reform that could have favoured modern Continental languages. So strong in any case was the perceived hierarchy of languages in Britain that Harrow’s headmaster warned that giving more hours to French or German to enhance spoken fluency would “damage the intellectual tone of the place.” Ireland in that respect appears less hidebound. Focusing on the higher education sector in Ireland, Phyllis stresses that, unlike the British situation, “what was novel about Ireland’s four Victorian universities was the weight they ascribed to modern languages” from the get-go: “If it was exceptional for an English university to provide modern languages before the middle of the nineteenth century, for Ireland’s university sector it was the general rule.” Thus in 1776 Trinity set up two modern language chairs: one in French and German and the other in Italian and Spanish. Already in the late 1840s, in the “godless” Queen’s colleges in Cork, Belfast and Galway, professorships of modern languages were actually built into the founding structures. Practical reasons such as career opportunities in politics, the military and the British civil service (the Indian Civil Service entry examinations contained prerequisites in modern languages), the needs of the worlds of commerce, agriculture and science, the aspirations of the burgeoning upwardly mobile middle classes: all these forces hastened this *de facto* dethroning of classical languages, in Ireland at least.

Phyllis describes the fertile ground in which these new disciplines took root in Ireland. The flourishing French book trade (especially since the time of the Huguenots), the existence in Ireland of teachers at all levels, from universities to hedge schools, who had lived on the Continent (in the early days in Maynooth, French was spoken at the dining table making of the college “a rustic Sorbonne in North Kildare”!), age-old political, religious and even emotional affinity with Continental Europe (especially with France): all played their role. To quote Brian Friel (one of the wide range of writers from Joyce to Lewis Carroll to Blindboy Boatclub used by Phyllis to illustrate her points): Hugh, in *Translations*, quips that we in Ireland feel closer to the “warm

Mediterranean" than to Wordsworth and, by extension, to his country of origin. Then again the co-existence of Irish and English in Victorian Ireland may have resulted in a certain linguistic agility; an anecdote from the Irish Folklore Archives comes to mind: someone remembers being sent by his impoverished mother when he was young to borrow a plate from a neighbouring family: she instructed him to ask in English if the woman of the house came to the door and in Irish if her husband did. The young beggar had enough mental and linguistic agility to ask in the language most likely to produce the desired result.

Phyllis' dissection of gender and languages is fascinating. Different opposing currents are at work here, with French seen sometimes – for instance by nuns – as an accomplishment along with music and needlework, that prepared middle class girls for the marriage market. One is reminded of the Liberator, Daniel O'Connell, who wrote that he wanted his daughters to study French and his sons to study chemistry... The studies of the various professors of continental languages in Victorian Ireland could easily be expanded into several books. The messy, human side of many of these people, some of them "eccentrics to the core," is recounted for instance through jaw-dropping accounts of legal actions for libel and slander and of dismissals *in absentia*. A reminder that nothing changes! Phyllis refers to early appointees to these posts as "foreigners, refugees, academics and amateurs" – that is no understatement: one of them arrived in Ireland to escape a death sentence in Italy. On the question of amateurs: one imagines Phyllis trying to keep a straight face as she tells us of a professor of Spanish in University College Cork in those early days who had no formal qualifications in Spanish ... but did however have contacts in South America! On the other hand, one has to admire the seriousness of Padraig Pearse who, in order to witness at first-hand the latest cutting-edge language-learning methods which he would later apply back home in Dublin, took himself to see them in operation at first hand in Brussels, in particular in Molenbeek - in the news these days but sadly for all the wrong reasons.

Bringing the story up closer to date, Phyllis dissects for instance the travails of the Irish language since independence and partition. Its pride of place as a repository of idealism and its status as the country's first official language coexist with problems on the ground such as well-documented difficulties in teaching it and, one might add, disaffection on the part of many of the young people studying it. Prof. Eda Sagarra provides a powerful summary of de Valera's Ireland: "In almost every respect a static, hierarchical and paternalistic society, one in which the accident of your birth would generally determine your whole life." Hence the importance of the revolution brought about by Lemass, Whitaker and the 1965 ground-breaking blueprint, *Investment in Education*: "The old certainties that sustained Victorian

approaches to language education were losing their grip from the 1970s." The impact of linguists such as Saussure, Chomsky and Jakobson, the growing importance of oral skills and of communication, the demise of Latin in the school curriculum: all signalled changes across all languages, as did easier access the Continent, the impact of the EU and of the life-changing Erasmus scheme. Sometimes, tipping points occur in just a few seconds, as in the first line of Queen Elizabeth's address in Dublin Castle in 2011, just five words: "*A Uachtarain agus a chairde.*" Sometimes, the incredible turns out to be true, as in the example cited by Phyllis of the Irish language teacher employed by Udaras na Gaeltachta in the Uibh Rathach Gaeltacht in South West Kerry: the Moscow-born Victor Bayda whose perfect Irish (learned in Moscow) would convince you that he was Connemara born and bred.

On page after page, Phyllis' voice comes over loud and clear. As a gifted teacher, she draws us into her narratives, often through a cascade of questions at the beginning of a new chapter. As you read this book, you sense again and again how much she is enjoying herself, how much she relishes all this. Again and again, in serious analyses, her sense of humour breaks through, not something typical of many academic books! A memorable example is her reference to a professor of Irish in University College Cork, in Victorian times, who had no time for spoken Irish; he most certainly didn't want his students sounding like peasants from West Kerry or Connemara; instead he decreed that they should learn to speak Old Irish, a language last heard in these parts over a millennium ago: a challenge indeed! But as many students of Old Irish will tell you, the first twenty years are the hardest!

This book contains within itself the genesis of many, many others: one would love full-length studies of so many of the people cited in it, for instance of the numerous early appointees to chairs in modern languages, many of them women with glittering, unconventional trajectories, of individuals like the French-born Louise Gavan Duffy and indeed of Phyllis' own family members - the remarkable Ryan girls. It is nothing less than a goldmine for any postgraduate looking for a thesis topic especially in languages or history for, as Phyllis has shown us, the archives are indeed out there: they just need to be located, dusted down and explored.

I recently took this book with me to Paris. It was the most congenial of travelling companions: it spoke to me in cafés, it enthralled me in lulls during long meetings, it waited for me in my hotel in the evenings. As it travels far and wide around the world and all down through the years, it will delight, instruct and amaze its readers, as it did me.

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