

Review: *Pádraig Ó Laoghaire (1870–1896):
An Irish Scholar from the Béarra Peninsula*
(Ní Úrdail)



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Pádraig Ó Laoghaire (1870–1896): An Irish Scholar from the Béarra Peninsula. Méidhbhín Ní Úrdail. Cumann Staire Bhéarra/Beara Historical Society, 2021. ix + 445 pp. €30. ISBN 978-1-5272-7181-4.

The awakening of Irish national awareness we witness in the second half of the nineteenth century was to manifest itself in many areas of the political and cultural life of the country, not least in a renewed interest in the fortunes of the Irish language and its literature. The bleak picture the census returns of 1851 had painted highlighted the perilous state of the spoken language in the wake of the Great Famine and the revival movement that grew in response to this resulted in several initiatives being undertaken in attempt to reverse its decline. These efforts culminated in the foundation in 1893 of Conradh na Gaeilge (The Gaelic League), a body that was to exert considerable influence on the cultural and indeed on the political life of the country down until independence.

Two years after the census of 1851, Johann Caspar Zeuss published his *Grammatica Celtica*, a work that was to lay the foundations for the modern discipline of Celtic Studies. The interest shown by continental scholars in Irish and in its literature, and the emphasis laid on its importance to our understanding of Europe's linguistic and cultural history, served as no small degree of affirmation for those active in the language movement here. Scholars such as Heinrich Zimmer from Germany and his Danish student Holger Pedersen had already spent periods in the late nineteenth century on the Aran Islands learning the modern language. The Norwegian, Carl Marstrand, was to station himself on the Great Blasket Island in 1907 for the same purpose.

The establishment in 1903 of the School of Irish Learning under the guidance of Kuno Meyer and John Strachan provided a basis for the further development of Celtic Studies in Ireland. Many remarkable figures who would distinguish themselves in Irish political and cultural life were to emerge from the language movement. Both Douglas Hyde and Eoin MacNeill were founding members of Conradh na Gaeilge and others such as Pádraig Mac Piarais, Thomas MacDonagh, Éamonn Ceannt and Seán Mac Diarmada were subsequently drawn into its orbit. Several of the teachers and the students at the School of Irish Learning had been active in language circles and also were members of Conradh na Gaeilge.

But there were many others, whose names may not be so prominent now, who nevertheless made their own contribution to the revival movement and its development. One such figure was Pádraig Ó Laoghaire, who forms the subject of this book.

Ó Laoghaire was born in 1870 in the townland of Inches on West Cork's Bear Peninsula, an area in which Irish was still the dominant language at the time even though the early signs of the decline that would see it being replaced by English in the space of a few generations were by then in evidence. Although a native speaker, it is not clear what degree of formal education in the language he may have acquired at school. He clearly had been an able student for, following a period as monitor in the national school at Kilmacowen, he was appointed assistant teacher there in 1889. He was to assert that his interest in the further study of Irish was awakened when he was given a copy of *An Gaodhal*, the Irish-language newspaper which was published in Brooklyn between 1881 and 1889. Endowed with a bright and enquiring mind, Ó Laoghaire set about adding to the language he already spoke with native fluency mastery of the written idiom, a task he evidently completed in a short space of time.

By 1890, he was already corresponding with the editor of *Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge* about issues concerning vocabulary and usage in his own dialect, and soon gained respect as an authority on such matters. He published proverbs, songs and other material from the oral tradition of Béarra, mainly in *Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge* but also in a variety of other journals, and this part of his work culminated in the publication in 1895 of *Sgeuluidheacht Chúige Mumhan*, a collection of seven folktales from his native district. This was the first work of its nature to come from Munster and was received with critical acclaim, attracting favourable comments from scholars such as Eoin MacNeill and Douglas Hyde whose collections of similar material from Connacht tradition had inspired Ó Laoghaire. Like Hyde, he recorded the names of those who had provided him with the stories he collected, a practice that had not been followed by earlier collectors such as Thomas Crofton Croker or Jeremiah Curtin, who simply recorded, translated and adapted what they had got from the talented storytellers they had encountered but who were to remain anonymous.

By the time *Sgeuluidheacht Chúige Mumhan* appeared, Ó Laoghaire was married and had moved to Dublin. The circumstances of his marriage may not have been the most auspicious, for there is a suggestion that his wife-to-be, Ellen O'Neill, was already pregnant before they were wed and, in the prevailing moral climate of the time, was forced to leave her family home as a result. While this may have been a contributory factor in their move to Dublin in early 1895, a more pressing issue was that his position in the school at Kilmacowen was becoming precarious due to low enrolment. Having contemplated emigration to North America in the footsteps of some of his siblings, he eventually opted for Dublin where he took up a post as assistant teacher in a primary school in Terenure. But the happiness for which he would have wished with the fulfilment of family, career and his own research was denied him. His infant daughter, Bláthnuid, died on 16 October 1896 and Pádraig himself succumbed to the

widespread scourge of tuberculosis not a fortnight later. He was buried in a local cemetery in Castletownbere.

A life and career that had promised so much was thus cut short. Yet he left a considerable body of work and correspondence with some prominent figures in the revival and literary movements. The author, whose sympathies lie with the subject of her attention, has fully exploited this written legacy in the present study which documents Ó Laoghaire's life and work and contextualises it in the world in which he lived. Its eight chapters and epilogue cover the biographical details of his tragically short life, his emergence as a scholar and author, his interactions with Conradh na Gaeilge and with figures such as Hyde and Seosamh Laoide, a consideration of *Sgeuluidheacht Chúige Mumhan* and of his own compositions in verse. All of these are dealt with in the first 200 pages or so of the work, but there follow five appendixes, the most extensive of which presents a list of words and phrases excerpted from his written work and correspondence. The remaining ones deal with his publications (pp. 365–71), material held in the National Folklore Collection (pp. 371–80), biographical details concerning his immediate family (pp. 381–5) and those concerning the family of his wife (pp. 387–9).

From his correspondence with Douglas Hyde, to which reference is made in some of Hyde's own writings, it is clear that Hyde held Ó Laoghaire in very high regard indeed but felt that the punishing workload he had imposed upon himself took a fatal toll on his health.

One of Ó Laoghaire's more interesting associations was with the scholar and publisher Seosamh Laoide (1865–1939). Laoide had long been an admirer of his work and both advised and encouraged the young writer. A substantial body of correspondence from Ó Laoghaire to Laoide is preserved among the latter's papers now housed in the Royal Irish Academy and an examination of these letters forms the lengthy fifth chapter of the book (pp. 73–156). Much of this correspondence concerns songs and other material Ó Laoghaire had collected in Béarra and had sent to Laoide for his evaluation. Laoide apparently also sent material of his own to Béarra for Pádraig's opinion, a further sign of the regard in which he was held. Arising out of their correspondence, Laoide undertook to visit Béarra in 1893 at the behest of his young friend, but the visit did not proceed as either party may have hoped. Ó Laoghaire wished to ensure that his distinguished visitor from Dublin would have as comfortable a stay as possible, and so directed him to lodge in a hotel in Castletownbere where he and other Irish speakers would meet with him. Laoide, for his part, had evidently hoped to be out among the people, encountering the living language in its natural setting. Ó Laoghaire's regret that his friend's expectations had not been met is evident in subsequent self-deprecating correspondence where he expresses concern that Laoide may now have abandoned him and bemoans the fact that he had not brought him to his father's house while he was on his visit. He further expresses the hope that a further and more agreeable trip might be arranged.

This is a well-researched and handsomely produced volume. In shedding such focused light on its subject, the book also serves to illuminate many aspects of the Ireland in which he lived and of the people he encountered. It also is

encouraging to see that it has been published by a local history society, a society that clearly has taken pride in its Irish-language heritage and in those who helped to shape it.

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Douglas Hyde: Irish Ideology and International Impact. Edited by Liam Mac Mathúna and Máire Nic an Bhaird. *Éigse: A Journal of Irish Studies*, Foilseacháin/Publications 3. National University of Ireland: Dublin, 2023. 191 pp. €30. ISBN 978-0-9015109-5-2.

The collection of Lady Gregory's papers held in the New York Public Library includes what looks like a CV for Douglas Hyde, co-founder of the Gaelic League and the first President of Ireland. The document, entitled 'Some recent criticism and reviews', was compiled in advance of Hyde's highly successful tour of the United States in 1905–6 and includes a resumé of his achievements under the headings 'Honours gained by me in Trinity College and elsewhere' and 'List of works published by me'. It is odd to see someone who needs no introduction to students of Irish history or Celtic Studies having to present himself in this somewhat awkward manner. Yet it is precisely Hyde's status in the canon of modern Irish history that makes this self-evaluation so striking. It is a reminder that Hyde's biography is also an awkward construct and that our assumptions about him need to be regularly tested and revised.

The significance of the 1905–6 tour to Hyde's becoming a national and even international figure was remarked upon by its organiser, the Irish-American financial solicitor, John Quinn: 'Outside of the Irish Societies he was almost unknown here a year ago except to some Irish, who weren't numerous enough to make up a corporal's guard. Today he is almost an international figure.' Of course, the context of this assessment is important – writing to W. B. Yeats, whose 1903–4 American tour he had also organised, Quinn was vaunting his own organisational success while also commending Yeats for having generously publicised Hyde's work during his own tour. Nevertheless, it is hard not to agree with Quinn on the importance of Hyde's tour in his rise to prominence. The funds raised for the Gaelic League amounted to \$64,000 and it is doubtful that its President would ever have to produce a resumé to introduce himself again. This crucial international dimension to Hyde's work is the focus of this collection of seven essays, edited by Liam Mac Mathúna and Máire Nic an Bhaird in the third volume of the occasional supplementary series produced by *Éigse*. A short description of the scope of this volume explains that the essays draw on the 'latest research on diaries, personal correspondence, memoir reflections, and newspaper reports in library and State archives'. Besides tracing 'developments in the formulation and explication of Irish revival ideology', the collection also sets out to investigate 'pivotal aspects of the revival movement's impact and influence as well as its interaction with the Irish diaspora and Celtic scholars in North America and Continental Europe'.