

Robert Welch, *A History of Verse Translation from the Irish 1789-1897*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smyth. Totowa: Barnes and Noble, 1988. xii + 200 pages. STE16.00.

A couple of years ago, an English reviewer of one of the anthologies of Irish poetry which seemed to proliferate just then commented on how few interesting Irish poems were written in English before the birth of Yeats: "The 19th century is an especially dire period. . . . Yeats's own heroes, 'Davis, Mangan, Ferguson' are just dreadful" (*The Listener*, 10 July 1986). It would be nothing to the point to respond by seeking out instances where their poetry struggles out of the pit assigned them. Ferguson, the only one of the three to live long enough to read notices of his books, certainly had reviewers telling him that his poetry was dreadful. And even though those judgements were based on ignorance of what he was attempting to do, they were often right. The nub of the question must focus rather on the particular circumstances which meant that these poets had to bear such a weight of importance for Yeats in particular, and for succeeding Irish writers in general.

They were among the first to try and set up some lines of continuity between writing in Irish — whether the old bardic or lyric material, or the more recent folk-song — and the contemporary vernacular; as such their work assumes an importance considerably beyond that which the intrinsic worth of the poetry might warrant. Some knowledge of writing in the nineteenth century, which is more or less the period bracketed by this book, is fundamental to understanding the emergence of that flurry of activity generally tagged as "the Irish renaissance". Professor Welch sets out to trace the emergence of translation from the Irish as a mode of writing, and so puts us in touch with the central current of that age. He is also able to bring a knowledge of the literature of both languages to bear on the subject, and writes with a range and authority which makes him uniquely suited to survey the century and more under discussion. His is just the sort of scholarship which is needed to open up Irish Victorian poetry for re-evaluation, and this book must prove a major stimulus to that enterprise.

The starting-date, 1789, is in no way revolutionary, but is fixed by the publication in that year of Charlotte Brooke's versions: "The title she gave to her collection, the first anthology of Gaelic verse, was *Reliques of Ancient Irish Poetry*, which is significant, in that it echoed the title of Bishop Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* of 1775". Professor Welch has added some echo — there is no "Ancient" in Brooke's title — but the point is well made, and he is scrupulous in giving a sense of the literary events which preceded that departure. In general his method is to concentrate on names and texts rather than theory or background, thus furnishing a literary history which makes clearly

available to us the nature and extent of that central current. The chapters follow a broadly chronological pattern, from Callanan through to George Sigerson's *Bards of the Gael and Gall* which — in a pleasing numerological twist — makes for the terminal 1987.

J. J. Callanan, that attractive and fugitive figure from the early part of the century, is discussed in the chapter "Some Cork Translators". There is a page or so on some peripheral figures such as O Longáin and Windele (one translation apiece, the latter's putative, but then one of the strengths of this book is its inclusion of lesser-known names alongside the expected). Professor Welch has already written well about Callanan in *Irish Poetry from Moore to Yeats*, his earlier book which is in many respects complementary to the one under review.

Callanan's first published translations were the six pieces printed, with a prose commentary, in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* as "Irish Popular Songs" (February 1823). The songs themselves, which include "The Convict of Clonmel", a version of "A Drimin Donn Dilis", and two other Jacobite poems, are the first real translations to have any enduring quality as opposed to curiosity value. The accompanying prose — which Professor Welch rather severely calls "a pathetically shamefaced and apologetic note, showing Callanan's uncertainty about the worth of the material he was presenting" — has frequently been included, in whole or in part, alongside anthology reprintings of Callanan's pieces, as if almost integral to the poems. What has not, I think, been previously remarked is that the commentary on the poems (and therefore the uncertainty about their worth) is not Callanan's own, but came from the pen of his much more extrovert fellow-Corkman, William Maginn.

Maginn had been one of the liveliest contributors to *Blackwood's* for a number of years. And the end of July 1822 he wrote to his editor William Blackwood:

You need not suspect anything from me this month, except seven beautiful songs (*me judice* — but I always confess I do not know good verse from bad) — seven beautiful translations of Irish Songs, which I shall weave into an article on popular Irish poetry — & I think will make an agreeable — certainly an original article. If you print you must pay me however, for they are not mine. Although the prose is to be mine, yet I must bleed you for it too, because it is only in place of the verse-gentleman's, who does not shine in the prose departments, except in the nonsense line, wherein you do not need any new contributors, having enough of us already.

(National Library of Scotland, MS 4009 f 72)

Callanan is not mentioned by name, but he is obviously the "verse-gentleman" in question; he had taught for a time in the Maginns'

school in Winthrop Street, Cork, and looked to William as an experienced man of letters who could help to get his works placed. That the prose notes are indeed by Maginn is borne out by a number of internal features. The airy comments on Irish courtship and the references to the Malthusian debate are very much in Maginn's characteristic tone; more conclusively, there is a mention of the writer's having visited the golf club at Leith, near Edinburgh. Callanan had never visited Scotland; Maginn had been there in 1822.

Maginn's letter tantalisingly specifies seven songs, although only six appeared in the article as published. Could the missing piece be one of the other three which make up the sum total of Callanan's nine known translations, or an additional undiscovered piece? Whatever the facts of the matter, the correspondence sheds some light on the background to Irish verse translation, with Maginn prepared to be much more enthusiastic about the songs in correspondence to his editor than he is in print; it also indicates that the story of Maginn — solong discounted as a stage Irishman and banished to the wings — might be worth telling in the context of Anglo-Irish writing. Incidentally, in justice to Maginn as author of the prose, the footnote with the mistranslation of the Irish for Clonmel which, Welch remarks, suggests "a considerable degree of inexperience in the language" in the gloss on Callanan's versions, does not appear in the *Blackwood's* article but is apparently the addition of some later editor.

Professor Welch is clearly alive to the cultural complexities which feed into the activity of verse translation, and allows them consideration in so far as the ambit of his topic allows. But his primary aim, and rightly so, is to offer a straightforward history of the development of a strand of Irish verse in English during the nineteenth century. All the expected names are there: Mangan, Ferguson, Walsh, O'Grady, as well as some less familiar ones, such as that of Matthew Moore Graham from Louth. The five translators used by James Hardiman in 1831 for the *Irish Minstrelsy* are inevitably viewed through the refractions of Ferguson's aspersions on them in his review of the book, and it is good to find Welch according them the measured credit which is their due:

They served their purpose: they brought versions (however distorted) of Irish poetry before the public, framed in a style that public found amenable and to their taste. They did not shock, and readers found to their surprise that what they had expected to be strange and barbarous turned out to be very familiar, deeply polite, and devastatingly charming. Their acceptability did much to create a widerpublic for Irish writing in English with a declared Gaelic mode or intent.

As the involvement of Maginn in Callanan's career indicates, the business of finding an outlet and an audience was a real and relevant one.

In the chapter on Mangan, some of the most fascinating pages trace the genesis of "O'Hussy's Ode to the Maguire", from the original by O Heóghusa, through Hardiman's unpublished translation in the Egerton Mss. and Ferguson's copy, to its eventual delayed publication. The cold predicament of the chieftain hiding out in the countryside anticipates uncannily the mood and imagery of Seamus Heaney's "Exposure" at the end of *North*. Compare that poem with Mangan's descriptions of Maguire,

paralysed by frost —
While through some icicle-hung thicket — as one lorn and lost—
He walks and wanders without rest,
and
frozen, rain-drenched, sad, betrayed —
But the memory of the lime white mansions his right hand had
laid
In ashes warms the hero's heart!

There is surely some subliminal line of contact between the two poems.

One of the benefits accruing from Professor Welch's book is that it furnishes matter for like speculation, but he himself refrains from following through such instances of poetic atavism. This makes for a coherent and self-defining treatment, but occasionally one could wish for a fuller account of the career of the writers discussed; of course, it may simply require turning to *Irish Poetry from Moore to Yeats*, which contains chapters on Callanan and Mangan, for instance. But in the case of William Hamilton Drummond, who was already in his fifties and with a number of major works behind him when his Hardiman translations were published, and who then brought out his *Ancient Irish Minstrelsy* (an echo of Hardiman's title here, surely) two decades later, rather more than the brief paragraph sketching his background would not have been out of place. Among his early books was a verse translation of Lucretius; what, one wonders, was the relationship between nineteenth-century verse translations from the Irish and the contemporary tradition of translation from other languages? After all, quite apart from the complications of Mangan's sources, some of Ferguson's earliest and latest pieces were verse translations of Horace, and he also published an imitation of Juvenal's third satire — and indeed a verse rendering of Lucretius's opening passage.

Professor Welch's end-point is Sigerson's *Bards of the Gael and Gall*, making a convincing case that it, rather than Hyde's *Love Songs of Connacht*, is the culmination of the nineteenth-century tradition. This

claim is based not just on chronology, but on the evidence that it was Sigerson's work which stimulated "succeeding Irish poets to study [Gaelic] prosody and to think what might be done to bring something of its spirit into English".

This is a book which all students of Irish poetry will read with profit. The writer is an authority on the area, and he offers a balanced and lucid judgement on his material. His work is bound to give a healthy added impetus to work on Irish nineteenth-century writing. There is just one minor cavil to be entered. The book had its origins, as the author himself tells us, as a doctoral thesis, and in preparing the text for publication it is to be regretted that the "Bibliography" was not updated. The only post-1975 publication mentioned is Welch's own *Irish Poetry from Moore to Yeats*. A number of pertinent items of secondary material do not figure: Robert O'Driscoll's *An Ascendancy of the Heart: Ferguson and the Beginnings of Modern Irish Literature* (1976), David Lloyd's *Nationalism and Minor Literature* (1987) on Mangan, Cathal O Háinle's 1982 essay "Towards the Revival. Some Translations of Irish Poetry: 1789-1897" which looks at the same material over precisely the same time span (and in an earlier volume of Colin Smythe's "Irish Literary Studies", what is more: *Literature and the Changing Ireland*, ed. Peter Connolly). It would not be unreasonable to expect the bibliography to serve as a document of record of work in the field to date, given that *A History of Verse Translation from the Irish 1789-1987* is sure to become the foundational survey of its subject, and to be the benchmark against which other treatments of the topic are assessed. Professor Welch is to be congratulated for bringing to light so many salient features of the course of Irish poetry in the generations before Yeats.

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