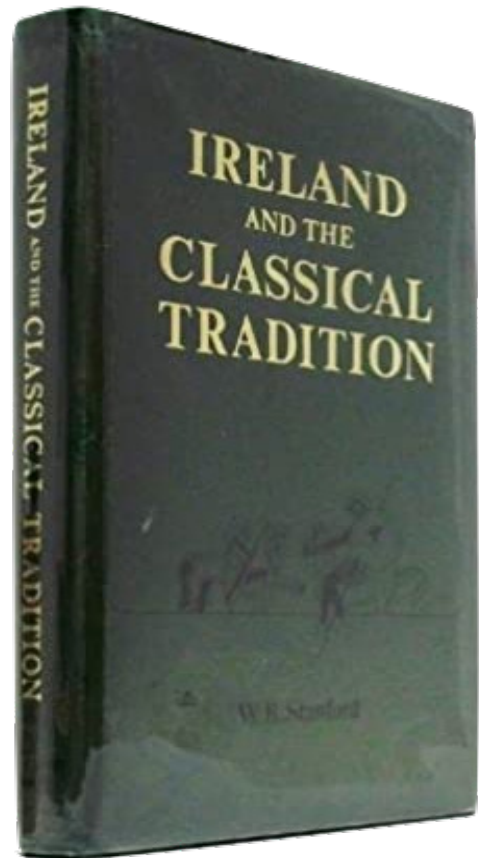


IRELAND'S CLASSICAL TRADITIONS: NEW PERSPECTIVES

By **DONNCHA O'ROURKE** and **ISABELLE TORRANCE**

Readers of this newsletter, and anyone anywhere with a scholarly interest in Ireland's relationship with the Classics, will likely be familiar with a work entitled *Ireland and the Classical Tradition* by the late TCD classicist and senator W. B. Stanford (1910-1984). A magnificent labour of love, it delivers in prose of apparently effortless elegance a learned and compelling history of the classical footprint in Irish cultural and intellectual life down to 1975, covering spheres as diverse as education and scholarship, literature in Irish and English, art and architecture, political activism and religion. As a pioneering foray into the vast cultural history of Irish engagements with classical sources, Stanford's work was in many respects ahead of its time. This is evidenced by Stanford's inclusive instinct regarding what counts as 'classical tradition'. The ostensibly democratic approach of Stanford's broad-ranging work aligns his analysis with reception studies *avant la lettre*, since the framework of reception studies emphasises the contexts of both the received and receiving cultures, as well as the diversity of engagement witnessed in the latter. Equally, and in ways that illuminate how classical reception differs from the model of the classical tradition, Stanford is also very much of his time. This is particularly apparent in his more or less implicit privileging of the 'pastness' rather than the 'presentness' of the Classics, and of a certain kind of (generally elite) education as a, or rather the only, means of accessing classical material. Recent research on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland by Laurie O'Higgins in *The Irish Classical Self* (Oxford, 2017), however, has dismantled this kind of privileging by showing, contrariwise, that the lower non-elite classes in Ireland were often well versed in Latin if not Greek. That being said, all researchers on Ireland's relationship with the classical world still need to consult Stanford, and his extraordinary work is of lasting value.

The task of editing a set of contemporary approaches to Irish classicisms in the twentieth century, as pursued by the eighteen different scholars who contributed chapters to *Classics and Irish Politics, 1916-2016* (Oxford, 2020), has been an opportunity to consider Stanford's legacy anew as a milestone from which his grateful successors can measure the distance travelled then and since. It is perhaps especially in the arena of politics – the lens through which the aforementioned volume examines Irish receptions of the Classics – that Stanford, as the son of a Church of Ireland clergyman and representative of Ireland's Protestant community in Seanad Éireann from 1948

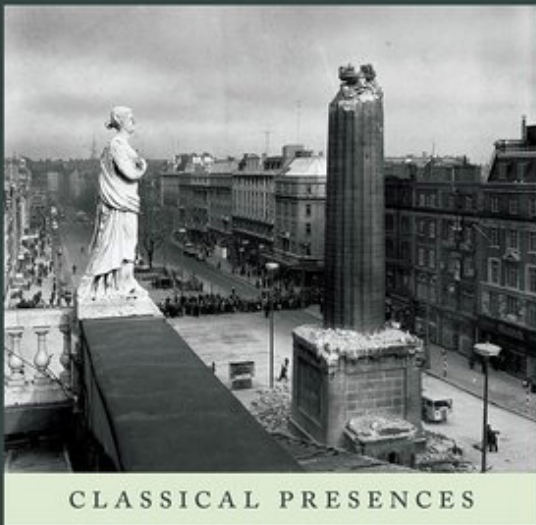


to 1969, could see more acutely than anyone the delicate political position (and potential) of the Classics in the Irish context. 'There is another aspect of the classical tradition in Ireland that has special relevance in the present unhappily divided state of the country', he writes in his introduction, perhaps aspirationally as much as objectively positioning the classical tradition as 'an area of common ground in which both sides shared similar ideals and admired similar examples'. Following on from this proposition, new research is being conducted on the potential of Platonism to transcend sectarianism across the thought of significant Irish intellectuals, including such disparate figures as the Anglican bishop George Berkeley, the devout Catholic translator Stephen MacKenna, the hermeticist poet W. B. Yeats, and the post-religious philosopher Iris Murdoch, in a tradition that looks back to Eriugena and medieval Ireland. Platonism is one of nine thematic strands of investigation in the Classical Influences and Irish Culture project funded by the European Research Council and hosted at Aarhus University in Denmark. (To learn more, visit <https://clic.au.dk/> and follow @CLIC_ERC on Twitter.)

In the troubled years that followed the first publication of *Ireland and the Classical Tradition*, Stanford's vision of an ecumenical classicism was to be espoused by the many Northern Irish writers for whom classical

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CLASSICS AND IRISH POLITICS, 1916–2016



OXFORD

models provided a medium through which to explore the psychological and physical violence of civil war in a way that transcended partisan politics. Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* (1990), which adapts Sophocles' *Philoctetes* with one eye on South African apartheid and another on divisions closer to home, transmits a message about reconciliation, while Michael Longley's 'Ceasefire' (1994) compresses Homer's account of the meeting between Achilles and Priam in a way that captures the swirling emotions and implications surrounding the recent IRA ceasefire. The message of reconciliation in Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* continues to be quoted by world leaders, most recently by Joe Biden, whose reading from this play went viral after his election victory.

It could be said, however, that Stanford's diplomacy and idealism occlude some of the darker pages of Ireland's classical tradition. While the book includes an account of how Stanford's TCD predecessor, J. P. Mahaffy, vetoed Patrick Pearse from delivering within the college walls what would, ironically, have been a classicising eulogy of Thomas Davis, no account is given of Mahaffy's disparaging stance against the Irish language. While the wrongs of this controversy fall outside the remit of the 'classical tradition',

consideration of the role played by Classics as received in the wider ideological currents of the time will show that Mahaffy weaponised his discipline against the Irish language revival, and so did much to fuel an antipathy to the study of classical language and culture in those quarters well into the next century, despite the endeavours of a progressivist translation programme overseen by An Gúm. This would no doubt have been sorely regretted by an educationalist and idealist such as Stanford. The consolidation of the Classics as an imperialist subject, used to inculcate in impressionable minds what Declan Kiberd has called the 'SPQR mentality' of the British Empire, was all the more regrettable given the scope for a counter-narrative, well documented by Stanford and promoted by other figures such as Brian O'Nolan, of medieval Irish scholarship in the Classics.

The way in which that narrative is told, of course, reveals its own story, and few would now subscribe to the extreme but once popularised view that the Irish saved western civilisation. Indeed, an approach informed by reception studies might wish to reframe many of the case-studies in *Ireland and the Classical Tradition* as illustrations of how the Classics are pressed into the service of one ideology or another, and so become an agent in the ideological flashpoints of Ireland's history. For example, 16th century testimonies by Edmund Campion and Richard Stanihurst as to an irregular vernacular Latin in Ireland might be said to attest, rather against the grain of their reports, not only to a highly evolved Hiberno-Latin, but also to an 'othering' assumption that classical Latin is the only touchstone of non-Irish civilisation. A man of Stanford's intellectual sensitivity was, of course, aware of how, as he puts it, 'as in Holy Scripture, one can find precepts for wide divergencies of doctrine in all classical history'. In his analysis of how Oscar Wilde's classical affiliation was manipulated against him in the dock, Stanford enlarges to a reflection that is remarkable in an Ireland still some twenty years away from the decriminalisation of homosexuality: 'Yet to blame the pagan authors for this is only to blame life as it is.' We might recall, by contrast, how the aforementioned Mahaffy was a major influence on the young Wilde, but later refused to support him after his downfall, calling him 'the one blot on my tutorship'. Since then, a countervailing use of classical models to give voice to the excluded and marginalised has been one of Ireland's major contributions on the cultural, intellectual, and political stage. Notable, for instance, is a 1920 production of Euripides' *Trojan Women* by the Dublin Drama League, with Maud Gonne playing Hecuba in a role that might well have exposed the brutalities of colonialism but whose reception refocuses our attention on the treatment of women in Irish society. Brendan Kennelly's 1993 version relates the same play to the 'Trojan women' of rural Irish

villages who are both victims and agents in their own oppression, while the Trojan women of Marina Carr's *Hecuba* (2015) are sexually liberated yet, for all that, still prisoners.

Ireland's capacity to reinvent and revivify the ideological power of the classics in such ways as these may catch traditionalists off-guard, but it is as old as the Irish Classical Tradition itself. This tension may be sensed in the concluding remarks of Stanford's review of old, middle, and eighteenth-century Irish-language versions of classical tales: 'This Gaelic nonchalance may seem irresponsible, even outrageous, to modern classical readers taught to venerate the ancient authors as supreme in their class and to translate their works as faithfully as possible. But what should be recognised in these Irish versions is that here we have a new literary fusion which is both scholarly and creative, derivative and inventive, classical and Celtic ... the conventional categories are broken down and new modes, sometimes monstrous or barbaric by conventional standards, come to birth.' As Stanford invokes here Horace's *Ars Poetica* and its tongue-in-cheek description of hybrid artistic creations, we sense an Irish classical scholar caught between two worlds. Yet the notion of hybridity remains thoroughly relevant both to classical reception studies and to the exposition of Irish identities. Two contrasting examples of classical reception in Ireland from 2020 may serve to demonstrate its continued vibrancy and diversity by way of conclusion here. Marina Carr's *The Boy* should have premiered at The Abbey Theatre in autumn 2020 in a production directed by Catriona McLaughlin, but was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is billed as 'loosely based on all three Theban plays' in 'one epic theatrical presentation'. The story begins and ends with a boy 'traumatically stolen from his family'. This must be Chrysippus, the boy abducted and raped by Laius, whose crime is often identified as the origin of the curse on the house of Oedipus. In the context of national recognition of the systemic abuse of children in state- and church-run homes, this myth will be timely.

For the Irish-language community, on the other hand, 2020 saw the publication of Plato's *Apology* and *Crito* in Irish (*Socráitéis: 'Ar a Chosaint Féin'*) and of Cicero's *Catilinarian Orations* (*Táinseamh Chaitilína*), while a podcast of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's Irish translation of Aeschylus' *Persians* featured in the 2020 Dublin Theatre Festival, an instance of reception which, in this Decade of Centenary Commemorations, links Greece and Ireland as nations which both successfully repelled imperial invaders.

Ancient Greece and Rome clearly still have much to offer the Irish community in all its diversity. The classical tradition, and new perspectives such as these, combine to form a rich cultural history of hybrid classical-Irish heritage as each new generation explores the possibilities of reading and expressing contemporary experiences through the lens of cultures past.



CAI LATIN SUMMER SCHOOL

21 June – 2 July 2021

The Classical Association of Ireland is pleased to announce the 2021 Summer School in Latin, which will take place on Zoom between 21 June and 2 July.

This course is designed for secondary school students between the ages of 15 and 18, and provides an exciting opportunity to learn Latin through a two-week immersion with qualified, inspiring, and fun teachers!

If you are not studying Latin or Classics, but you are interested in ancient languages, this is the place for you! Whether or not you are studying Classical Studies or the new Junior Certificate Classics, the Summer School offers an exciting opportunity to explore the culture of the Romans through their language. Perhaps you want to improve your language learning skills, or understanding, communicating, and writing in English? Or you are exploring your academic future? If you are you thinking about studying Classical Civilisation, Archaeology, Classical Languages, Ancient or Medieval History, Philosophy, Religion, History of Art, or Romance languages in college, the CAI Summer school is a great place to start!

Over the course of two weeks, you will immerse yourself in the language of Rome and engage in a variety of fun activities, led by experienced and passionate teachers. There will be interactive and online games, singing contests, Latin cartoons, and a bit of spoken Latin, too!

Customised materials are provided. After two weeks, students will be able to read simple Latin texts and have sufficient knowledge of the language to continue studying it independently or enter a higher-level course.

- Contact hours: three classes per day for two weeks
- Minimum age: 15
- Course fee: €200
- Information and registration:
Dr **Cosetta Cadau**
E-mail: cosetta.cadau@mu.ie

or

visit the Classical Association of Ireland at:

www.classicalassociation.ie