



James Barry, Portraits of Barry and Burke in the Characters of Ulysses and his Companion Fleeing from the Cave of Polyphemus (detail), c.1776. Collection Crayford Art Gallery, Cork.

Classical Literature & Irish Migration History

Throughout Ireland's history, the languages and literatures of ancient Greece and Rome have provided a vehicle for the articulation of the varied Irish experiences of migration.

By **Isabelle Torrance**

What has literature from ancient Greece and Rome to do with Irish migration history? This is one of the research questions that we seek to answer in our project 'Classical Influences and Irish Culture' (CLIC) funded by the European Research Council and hosted at the Centre for Irish Studies, Aarhus University.

Early History

Throughout Irish history, experiences of migration, travel and exile, whether effected by necessity or by choice, are commonplace. As far back as the 6th century CE, Ireland produced influential wandering scholars, *peregrini* (or 'exiles'), such as Columba and Columbanus, who led important missionary work and founded major monasteries throughout Europe. Expertise in the Latin language was a significant aspect of monastic training and dissemination of Christian values. However, manuscripts preserved in monasteries such as Bobbio in Italy, founded by Columbanus, show that training in the complexities of Latin grammar relied on paradigms taken from the pagan literature of ancient Rome, which were given as illustrative examples in classical grammatical treatises. New commentaries on ancient *grammatica* were produced, such as the *Ars Ambrosiana*

Merugud Uilix Maicc Leirtis is a remarkable blend of the traditional Irish *immram* and the story of Homer's *Odyssey*.

which is generally dated to the 8th century CE. It is not clear precisely who composed this important commentary, but recent research has uncovered evidence of specifically Irish influence in the construction of etymologies for Latin words through allusion to the Irish (or Gaelic) language.

Wandering scholars continued to be common in medieval Ireland, and the 'wandering hero' motif was a staple of the Old Irish *immrama* 'voyage tales'. The 12th or 13th century tale *Merugud Uilix Maicc Leirtis* 'Wandering of Ulysses son of Laertes' is a remarkable blend of the traditional Irish *immram* and the story of Homer's *Odyssey*, which recounts the numerous and often fantastical adventures of the Greek hero Odysseus on his long journey home after the Trojan War. Significantly, the Odysseus figure in the Irish tale is a polyglot, unlike the Greek original, and this multilingual aspect of the Irish hero reflects

contemporary cosmopolitanism among the Irish who were well-versed in Latin, the *lingua franca* of the Middle Ages, as well as their native Irish (Gaelic). Some exceptional Irish scholars were also experts in classical Greek, most famously the 9th century Neoplatonist philosopher Eriugena who was recruited to France by the Carolingian King Charles the Bald.

Colonization by Britain: *From the 'Flight of the Earls' to Hedge Schools*

The campaign of plantations by the English crown across Ireland in the 16th and 17th centuries involved largescale land confiscations from local Catholic Gaelic chieftains, and the redistribution of this land to largely Protestant settlers from Britain. A significant moment in this history was the 'Flight of the Earls' in 1607 when the leading families of Ireland's northern province of Ulster went into permanent exile destined for Spain. As a Protestant minority took control of Ireland's land and governing institutions, Irish Catholic exiles together with the Catholic majority at home continued to identify strongly with their connections to Rome, to the Latin language, and to Latin literature. As they

Classical literature from Greece and Rome was often a significant part of the curriculum in the Irish 'hedge schools'.

continued to produce their own literature in Latin, Irish scholars (many of whom were exiles) sought to promote an alternative to the English colonial narrative.

Along with colonization came a series of 'Penal Laws' designed to oppress Catholics and Protestant dissenters while supporting the ruling Protestant Ascendancy loyal to the British crown. These laws came to include a prohibition on education for members of 'non-conforming' faiths, which led to the creation of illegal 'hedge schools' throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, in particular, where Catholics and Presbyterians could be secretly educated. Classical literature from Greece and Rome was often a significant part of the curriculum in the Irish hedge schools, where Greek and Latin were taught through the Irish language thus entirely circumventing English. In the famous 1980 play *Translations* by Brian Friel, this scenario

of learning classical literature through Irish in a hedge school is enacted against the backdrop of a fictional 1833 ordinance survey exercise by British civil servants who create bizarre-sounding anglicized versions of meaningful Irish-language place names in rural Donegal. The kind of students depicted in Friel's play would have been among the estimated 8.5 million Irish who emigrated in the 1840s, often to escape starvation resulting from The Great Famine of that decade.

Colonialism and the Paradox of Exile at Home: *Ogygia, Ulysses, and Northern Irish Politics*

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the cultural antiquity of Ireland was sometimes asserted through identification of Ireland as 'Ogygia', the mystical island of the nymph Calypso in Homer's *Odyssey* which offers immortality but where Odysseus is trapped in distressed exile. This

identification was derived from the claim, made by the ancient author Plutarch in his treatise *The Face on the Moon*, that Ogygia was located to the west of Britain. If Ogygia represents Ireland, then the location of Odysseus' extended exile becomes 'home' in an Irish context. The fascination with tracing Homeric geography, which persisted into the 19th century, was part of what inspired James Joyce's concretization of wandering in his *Ulysses*. Radically, Joyce transposed the original exile experiences of Odysseus (Ulysses) from the outer legendary world to specific locations of contemporary 1920s Dublin. Joyce thus continues the motif of locating exile at home, while he was writing from a position of self-imposed exile in Europe.

The experience of being an 'exile' at 'home' in Ireland is a product of colonial subjectivity and of conflicting concepts of national identity. Nobel Prize-winning poet Seamus Heaney identified with the Roman poet Ovid, who was banished from Rome to the Black Sea for obscure political reasons at the peak of his career and died in exile ten years later. In Heaney's 1975 poem 'Exposure' from

the collection *North*, Heaney considers his own migration from the violent civil war in Northern Ireland, a province of the United Kingdom, to his new home in the Irish Republic. He is like Ovid writing exile poetry but as a paradoxical 'inner emigré'.

The Diaspora and Romanticization of Home

From most of the 20th century, as for the 19th, Ireland continued to have the highest emigration rates in Europe. The current diaspora of Irish descent is often estimated at 70 million. Research on the Irish diaspora experience shows that it includes notions of an original forced exile (even if this was not the case) and a dream of return

Members of a diaspora community can often develop outdated or unrealistic notions of the 'homeland'.

to the homeland. Members of a diaspora community can often develop outdated or unrealistic notions of the 'homeland', as is forcefully exposed in the *Odyssey*-inspired poems from Northern Irish poet Michael Longley's 1991 *Gorse Fires* collection. Odysseus' return is magical in 'Homecoming', but he finds deep depression in 'Laertes'. His mother is a zombie in 'Anticleia', and his dead dog is associated with other suffering creatures at home in 'Argos'. In 'The Butchers', Odysseus and his son Telemachus are murderers while the god Hermes is a clergyman rounding up dead souls. Longley captures romanticized notions of homecoming in exiles, and how these can be shattered on an actual return, by linking destructive political violence in Northern Ireland to Odysseus' slaughter of the suitors and maids in the palace on his return to Ithaca.

Throughout Ireland's history, then, the languages and literatures of ancient Greece and Rome have provided a vehicle for the articulation of the varied Irish experiences of migration, from the *peregrini* of early Irish Christianity to those fleeing conflict in contemporary Northern Ireland.



Photo: Lars Kruse

About the author:

Isabelle Torrance is Professor of Classical Reception at Aarhus University, Department of English, and Principal Investigator for the ERC-funded project 'Classical Influences and Irish Culture' (CLIC) (2019-2024). She earned her PhD in Classics from Trinity College Dublin in 2004 and is a former AIAS Fellow (2016-2019). Publications include seven books, most recently *Classics and Irish Politics 1916-2016* (Oxford University Press, 2020). See further <https://clic.au.dk/>

Forced Migration

A brief account of an antiquity looted from Greece



By **Christos Tsirogiannis**