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BOOKS

Review: The Maamtrasna Murders: Language, Life and Death in Nineteenth-Century Ireland by Margaret Kelleher

Myles Joyce was hanged for a crime he did not commit, in a period of history when he had no chance of a fair trial

Review by Richard Pine



Injustice at work The only survivor of the Maamtrasna murders at the trial

The Sunday Times, December 23 2018, 12:01am



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On August 17, 1882, five members of the Joyce household in the townland of Maamtrasna were murdered. The dead were John Joyce, his wife, mother, daughter and son. Only one child survived. Five men were imprisoned for life for their part in the killings, and three

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Maamtrasna is in the heart of "Joyce country", between counties Galway and Mayo, and almost all those involved in this case, including prosecution witnesses, were related. The killings, allegedly masterminded by another Joyce relative who was never brought to justice, involved intense disputes regarding land tenure, ownership of livestock, and "information". John Joyce was said to have given information to the authorities regarding other crimes in the vicinity, which was regarded locally as an offence in itself and punishable by reprisals.

Agrarian violence was bred by the landscape. Kelleher tells us of the "hatred and conflict within a small community and the gross breakdown of familial and affective connections". Calling it "the Valley of the Vendettas", she exposes the "community's hidden history". A harsh landscape will breed a harsh mindscape, alert to the dangers of co-existence with family, neighbours and the landscape itself. Life is a transaction, even a conversation, between the peasant and the land; where humans, animals, streams and rocks are the viscera, sensorium and musculature.

Myles Joyce, who spoke only Irish, was given no translation facilities at his trial. He was in a Kafkaesque situation where he understood little or nothing of the proceedings and, despite protestations of his innocence by himself, his wife and eventually the two who were hanged with him, he was the victim of a system utterly alien to him, and he to it.

Kelleher's account of the judicial proceedings, imprisonment and executions is as dispassionate as one can be when discussing a miscarriage of justice and the brutality of mass killings. But she is unashamedly passionate when looking at the wider context. The subtitle of her provocative and compelling account is *Language, Life and Death in Nineteenth-Century*

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The Maamtrasna killings provide an allegory of the mismatch between two languages and two cultures. Like the actors in the Maamtrasna trial, Ireland was trapped between two languages — one dominant, pre-emptive and imperial, the other dominated, weak and increasingly local.

Behind Kelleher's thesis is the essential question of communication: who says what, through what medium, to whom and with what effect? The central issue was not merely one of translation, but of the transition of a monoglot Irish-speaking world into an inevitable English-speaking world with different practices, mindsets and values. The tragic killings, the taking of evidence, the trials and their outcomes can all be traced to these failures of communication. In effect Myles Joyce was executed because he could not be heard through either the medium of his own tongue or that of the system.

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Joyce country
BRIAN DOLAN

As Kelleher observes: “The social reality of individuals’ monolingual (Irish) or bilingual practices came into collision with the monolingual (English) ideology of the state.” The value of her book is its exploration of the extent to which, in a world of migrations and state barriers, “these dynamics continue to influence the destinies of monolinguals and bilinguals today, and the fate of languages that they seek to retain”.

The Maamtrasna murders became a cause célèbre due to the conduct of the trials and the stark contrast between the civilisation offered by the legal system and the organic truths of the “Valley of the Vendettas”. But, thanks to Kelleher and those who worked for Myles Joyce’s eventual pardon, it continues to resonate not only in Ireland but internationally, wherever

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