

The Maamtrasna Murders: Chilling chronicle of tragic miscarriage of justice

The Maamtrasna Murders: Language, Life and Death in
Nineteenth Century Ireland

by Margaret Kelleher



Nine-year-old Patsy Joyce giving evidence in the Maamtrasna trial

Many times, while reading Margaret Kelleher's absorbing and very well-written book, I was reminded of Brian Friel's *Translations*.

Friel's play is a lyrical exposure of the failure of the English language to express Irish sentiment. Hugh, an Irish 'go-between' supporting the translation of Irish place names into English during the first Ordnance Survey, observes, 'it can happen that a civilisation can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of fact'. In *The Maamtrasna Murders*, linguistic imprisonment moves from being a metaphor to becoming a grim reality.

The extraordinary details of the Maamtrasna murders make compelling reading. The series of events that culminated in the execution of three Irishmen, are shot through with confusion, deception, and ignorance. Further, the unfolding drama betrays a kind of raw cruelty that has captivated reporters, researchers, and readers since the murders took place on the night of August 17, 1882.

The location of the murders was remote, some 40 miles from Galway city. Maamtrasna was set below mountains, and consisted of less than two dozen cottages and hovels. Not all of the inhabitants could speak or understand English, and some were monoglot Irish. Much of the land was poor, and locals were related and intermarried in a way that seemed almost incestuous. The peculiar sleeping arrangements of siblings, and the primitive living conditions which included keeping animals inside the dwellings, would feed English newspaper reporters with exactly the kind of detail that would be devoured by readers in Manchester, London, and eventually in America.



Myles Joyce, who pleaded his innocence to the end

But the details that were of greatest interest, were those surrounding the gruesome nature of the deaths of the Joyce family - John Joyce, his wife Bridget, his mother Margaret, his daughter Peggy, and his stepson, Michael. The men were shot and the women were beaten to death with such brutality that their brains poured from their skulls.

Michael survived briefly, long enough to give a deposition. His younger brother, Patsy, had also been shot, but somehow survived. Descriptions of the crime scene are eerie: John Joyce's body lay naked on the ground. Dogs had chewed at the mother's corpse, by the time two constables arrived from Finny. Equally chilling are the narratives that surrounded the event: the men who discovered the bodies did not immediately send for the police; locals who later arrived at the scene would not help young Patsy who was close to death. Nobody would enter the house for fear of somehow becoming implicated in the atrocities.

Confusion increased when, two days after the murders, the coroner's inquest began outside the house of the Joyce victims.

Margaret Kelleher's meticulously researched book provides details of the gruesome massacre at the outset, but signals at an early stage that this book is not merely a history of the events surrounding the murders. Rather, her aim is to interrogate ways in which the case of the murders and trials were 'a salutary example of an Irish-speaking man wrongly convicted of murder in an English-speaking court'.

From the moment the inquest commenced, the investigations failed to take account of the need for accurate translations of eyewitness statements and sworn accounts. Even the jury of 18 that was sworn in, included Irish monoglots with very limited understanding of what was going on. Kelleher's research, which included comparing newspaper accounts, police records, and crown records, shows how Irish-language testimonies were both misunderstood and concealed.

As Kelleher argues, 'Who spoke what language mattered greatly in the Maamtrasna trials'.

From the outset, there was no clear motive for the murders. However, when three Maamtrasna men went to the police to make a statement identifying 10 locals, the opportunity to make arrests and dispense justice was seized. Kelleher provides clarity and careful analysis of the events that followed, as two of the 10 'turned Queen's evidence', leaving eight men to face sentences.

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A complicated web of lies and deception threatened to derail the legal process. But, in a climate of unrest and land wars, the British public was baying for blood.

Only three months earlier, the Chief Secretary, Lord Frederick Cavendish, had been fatally stabbed in the Phoenix Park. Swift and decisive justice was demanded. The Lord Lieutenant, John Spencer, played a key role in expediting it. Queen Victoria, like a black widow spider, waited in anticipation.

Three of the eight men were executed: they were Patrick Casey, Patrick Joyce, and Myles Joyce. Their faces stare from the pages of Kelleher's book, in an inset of photographs that also includes the five men who were jailed for life, and the two 'approvers' who testified against them.

It would later emerge that one of the approvers was nowhere near the crime scene, and could not have known who committed the murders. Indeed, it is likely that some of the murderers were never charged, and may have been amongst those who gathered on the day of the inquest outside the Joyce house.

Many times in the years that followed the executions, there have been attempts to open inquiries into the murders and exonerate Myles Joyce, whose story is at the centre of Kelleher's work. He pleaded his innocence to the end. Both Patrick Casey and Patrick Joyce stated that Myles was innocent, even as they accepted their own death sentences. But Myles Joyce, who neither spoke nor understood English, was grossly misrepresented in court.

An executioner came from England to undertake the hangings at Galway jail. The skill of an executioner included knowing how to prepare the ropes, and how to calculate the weight of the condemned men and the distances that their bodies should drop in order to ensure instant death. Myles Joyce, pleading his innocence in a language that many did not understand, put up resistance to the end with the result that his death was not instant, and he died by strangulation.

Margaret Kelleher writes that the Maamtrasna murders is 'a story of violence, which includes the violence of the State'. The final section of the volume reminds us that this violence has not been consigned to history. With great clarity and precision, Kelleher writes that the injustices that arise 'from a State's failure to recognise languages other than those officially

sanctioned... also have contemporary significance, and recent asylum cases offer disturbing instances.'

A consequence of migration and mobility, is that there is an urgent need for public services interpreters. Here in Ireland, and elsewhere, this need is poorly addressed. Kelleher concludes, 'We can only begin to imagine the fateful encounters that are now taking place between the monolingual, or reluctantly bilingual, practices of our judicial and legal systems and the tremendously complex biographical trajectories of those seeking refuge and citizenship.'

If there is a single moment of consolation at the end of this compelling volume, it is knowing that in 2015, the Irish government commissioned an expert review of the case of Myles Joyce. Undertaken by Dr Niamh Howlin of UCD School of Law, the review concluded that 'his conviction was unsafe'.

Last year, on April 4, Myles Joyce was granted a posthumous pardon by President Michael D Higgins.

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