Ciaran O'Neill

Catholics of Consequence: Transnational Education, Social Mobility, and the Irish Catholic Elite 1850–1900. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. xi + 248. Hb, £65.

Ciaran O'Neill, Ussher Lecturer at Trinity College Dublin, sets out to provide a prosopographical study of some 1303 Irish boys educated at four English Catholic “public” schools between 1850 and 1900. The schools in question are Stonyhurst, Beaumont, both Jesuit establishments, Oscott College, a school and seminary, and the Benedictine school at Downside Abbey. In addition, he provides a similar study of a smaller cohort of girls, 203, in the Holy Child Convent school at St. Leonard's near Hastings. There is a final chapter on the Irish College, Paris, which, since it was a seminary and scarcely elite in any real sense, sits oddly with the rest of the work concerning Catholic lay elites.

Why should the Irish seek education outside Ireland? After all, to take only the Jesuit order, although the author does examine Blackrock College in Dublin run by the Holy Ghost fathers and Castleknock College, a Vincentian boarding school, there was already provision for elite education in the country at Clongowes Wood College, and, until its closure in 1886, at Stanislaus College in Tullabeg. In fact Tullabeg under the rectorship of Fr. William Delany, S.J., one of the great Irish educationalists of the century, had fair claim to be the best performing school in Ireland. Delany was, however, a profligate spender which earned him rebukes not only from his provincial but from Fr. General Peter Jan Beckx, and gave him a reputation in the Irish Jesuit province as unreliable in financial matters.

One advantage for the socially conscious Irish Catholic elite in Jesuit education was that places such as Clongowes tended to attract a more homogenous social class, unlike Blackrock College which did admit boys, on scholarships, from humbler backgrounds such as Eamon de Valera, the future prime minister and president of independent Ireland. Discussion of Irish educational provision for elites forms part one of the book.

The allure of an English education, as O'Neill convincingly demonstrates, was, for the most part, purely social. The possibility of associating with English Catholic aristocrats and upper middle classes, acquiring thereby “polish” and an accent proved well-nigh irresistible to those Irish families who could afford the fees. And it was an expensive business. In the 1870s the fees at Beaumont were a minimum of £120 per year. The salary of the average Irish intermediate school teacher was £82 per annum and if female this fell to £48, even as late as 1905. For comparison, the average yearly income of a small farmer in Co. Galway in the 1890s was £38.

O'Neill traces the subsequent professions of these elites, and for the girls this is relatively easy: their expensive education was a preparation for marriage. One such was Henrietta MacDonnell, the wife of the distinguished Irish Catholic civil servant, Sir Anthony Patrick MacDonnell, who served in various posts in India before becoming under secretary at Dublin Castle in 1902. Curiously, given that the work is concerned with elite status, O'Neill does not record that MacDonnell was raised to the peerage in 1908. Similarly in this vein there ought to have been some mention of Sir Denis Stanislaus Henry, the Jesuit-educated first lord chief justice of Northern Ireland, although admittedly he went to the relatively minor and lower status Jesuit public school of Mount St. Mary's, Derbyshire.

Post school employment trajectories were more varied for boys than girls, but O'Neill does find that twice as many girls from St. Leonard's entered religion than boys from Stonyhurst, and furthermore greater numbers of them returned to the religious life in Ireland than their male equivalents. Among the most popular post-school professions was the army. But military rank also implied some form of private income to cover mess expenses and to supplement meager army pay. Of the seven Victoria crosses awarded to old Stonyhurst boys (two in the Boer War, three in the First World War and two in World War II) four went to Irishmen and the rector of Stonyhurst had the, perhaps dubious, privilege of being able to nominate directly boys for the military academy at Sandhurst (130). Law was also a popular choice but here the motivation may simply have been the prestige attached to being "called to the Bar," since not all went on to practice the law (118).

One profession the English-educated Irish elite did not enter was politics, and this is a serious challenge to the idea first announced by Conor Cruise O'Brien that the Irish elite was denied their "rightful place" as governors of Ireland by the revolutionary events of 1916–23 (207). That elite education did not entirely obliterate sentiments of Irish separatism in everyone is well illustrated by Thomas Francis Meagher, an Irish revolutionary despite his education at both Clongowes and Stonyhurst.

Although the product of obviously herculean labors, the work is not without its faults. These are of two types. The more trivial include: Newman's conversion was in 1845 not "the 1830s" (71); the well-known historian H. C. G. Matthew was certainly not a clergyman (145n112); Andrew Bonaparte-Wyse was not the only Catholic to become a permanent secretary in the Northern Ireland civil service (149). More seriously: St. Columba's College in Dublin, was not the "only recognizably elect school for Irish Protestants" (10); between 1800 and 1900 there were 374 convents founded in Ireland, not 62 (169), and in post-revolutionary France it is not the case that the "Collège des Irlandais [...]" and

the Collège des Lombards remained live concerns" (193). Only the Collège des Irlandais was revived by Napoleon, but now thoroughly "rationalized." Further, O'Neill consistently confuses an archdiocese with an ecclesiastical province. Space does not permit the indication of other errors.

The work remains, however, a most important contribution to the social history of Ireland. It is a fascinating study of how a cross section of the Irish elite functioned, and the efforts of religious orders to secure the elite in its position in Irish society and to facilitate upward mobility. It builds on the work of scholars such as Fergus Campbell to show that the main barrier to the Irish Catholic elite's dominance in Irish society in the late nineteenth century was Protestant prejudice.

Oliver P. Rafferty, S.J.

Boston College

oliver.rafferty@bc.edu

DOI 10.1163/22141332-00201005-20