

Rezensionen

Lonerger, Dymphna, 2004. *Sounds Irish: The Irish Language in Australia*. x+145pp. ISBN 1 921013 00 1, Adelaide: Lythrum Press.

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The book is very likely a downsized version of the author's 2002 PhD thesis, although this is not openly acknowledged. Lonergan has traced genuine and rather doubtful examples of Irish and Irish English (IrE) in Australian writings from 1829-2002. She provides a discussion of the history of the Irish immigrants and their language(s) in nineteenth and twentieth century Australia. A glossary forms the main body of the book.

The book is divided into a preface, five chapters, the glossary, a bibliography and an index. The chapters do not follow an easily recognized order.

In the preface Lonergan laments that the survival of Irish and IrE in Australia have been underestimated and underresearched. Although there was some truth in such a statement, say twenty years ago, this is certainly not right now. Fritz (1996, 2000a/b, 2006), Jupp (1988, 2001), Leitner (2004a/b), Taylor (1998, 2000, 2003) and others have greatly advanced this field. None of the titles can be found in the book under review.

Lonerger claims (vii) that "during the peak periods when the Irish populated Australia the majority of the Irish people spoke Irish." This statement is misleading. Of course many Irish immigrants, forced or voluntary ones, had some knowledge of the Irish language. But even in Ireland this language was dying fast at that time (see Hindley 1990) and the use and usefulness of Irish in nineteenth century Australia was very limited. In the sources available for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there is hardly any trace of Irish to be found. There are many letters and diaries of Irish immigrants corresponding with their families both at home and in the antipodes, but they mostly contain only very few Irish words or phrases. This contradicts Lonergan's position.

Chapter One (*The Sweetest and Swiftest Tongue*) opens with cameo portraits of Irish migrants to Australia. Then Lonergan goes on to discuss the fate of the Irish language in Ireland and of the Irish in Australia.

She provides two maps showing the decline of Irish speakers in Ireland between 1800 and 1851 (2004:4). Since she does not acknowledge her source the map is difficult to interpret. Are 'Irish speakers' those who speak Irish only? If so, her numbers are greatly exaggerated. Hindley (1990:15) shows that in 1799 only ca. 14% of the population were monoglot speakers of Irish and 44% were bilingual. By 1851 this had declined to ca. 5% monoglot speakers and 23% bilinguals. This is much less than suggested by Lonergan's maps.

The following sentence is typical of Lonergan's style and line of reasoning (2004:5): "[...] until the end of the nineteenth century Irish was the primary language of many Irish people. For example, in 1845 [no reference given here], [...] there were more Irish speakers in the country than at any time in the history of the language."

Taken at face-value the reader is inclined to think that the Irish language was in a very strong position in 1845. While it is true that the total number of speakers was very high, this was a simple side-effect of the explosive growth of the population at that time. Importantly

this does not mean that many of the inhabitants of Ireland indeed used or had a knowledge of Irish.

Lonerger claims that it was the language that was the "fundamental difference" between the Irish and the English (2004:5). This is not the case. Religion, the Irish will to become independent and money were much stronger factors delimiting an Irish community in Australia and elsewhere.

Lonerger writes many passages in this vein in order to prove that her topic is valid, interesting and has been grossly neglected. It would be tedious to list all the misrepresentations and misleading statements. Let it suffice to say that less would have been much more here.

The Irish language has not been given due credit for its impact on the development of English. With this familiar train of thought chapter two (*The Irish language and Australian English*) starts.

Lonerger discusses isolated items and suggests, without adducing scientific evidence, Irish origins for some English words. Surface similarity is her most convincing argument. What she fails to take into account is the possibility that an Irish and an English word can be similar, because Irish has taken over an English word. Similarities could also be mere coincidence.

Her etymologies are mostly driven by imagination, not by empirical evidence. It does not come as a surprise that she is highly critical of many dictionaries. An example is the Australian English (AusE) work *cack*, 'to defecate'. Although she acknowledges that a similar word is found in many European languages, curiously omitting modern German here, an Irish origin seems most likely to her. The historically-oriented Australian National Dictionary does not mention *cack*, which suggests that the word is of more recent, twentieth-century, origin. Why Irish should have been able to influence twentieth century AusE with a greater likelihood than German is unclear to me.

On page 19 Lonergan ventures into the theory that words like *dale*, *glen*, *meadow*, *valley* and *wood* were lost in AusE, because in Britain they had been used mostly in works literature, but not in everyday language. This is very debatable. Almost everyone agrees that the loss of landscape terminology was caused by geographical differences between Britain and Australia.

Let it be clear that Lonergan's etymologies can make good reading, some are plausible, others not. But I take issue with her line of argumentation that starts with suggestions and later presents the outcomes as facts rather than as the speculations they are.

Writing Irish Australia, chapter three, begins with a discussion of Irish English. However, Lonergan does not properly distinguish between real features of IrE and literary conventions that developed in the course of several centuries and which are used by authors to depict Irish or lower class characters. This is annoying.

Her interpretation of the phrase *They all arrived and I not expecting one of them* as an emphatic use of *and* is wrong. For a detailed look at *and* in IrE and IrE in Australia see Fritz (2006).

"Whether the writer uses many or few of these Irish markers will depend to some extent on the education and class of the Irish character and the setting in which the dialogue occurs." (2004:36) Obviously Lonergan naively assumes that all authors are fully competent linguists and that their depiction of an Irish character only depends on plot, setting and character and not on their linguistic knowledge or cultural biases.

The examples she quotes from various novels clearly show that many authors are indeed not well acquainted with Irish or IrE. This can be seen in the following excerpt (2004:43): "just put yez fut well in the shtirrup, shove your knee toight agin the flap, and kape yer toe out of his girths, an' then lift yerself clane into yes sate widout jerking an'whin yer feels all right I'll let go." The wrong use of *yous* (the plural of *you*; in the text represented as *yez* and *yes*) as an alternative of *your* proves that the author is not well acquainted with IrE. Lonergan, discussing this quote, fails to notice that.

Another unacceptable sentence is "The language of living Irish in Australia was the same language that had caused linguistic and social concerns in England" (2004:39). First of all not the language had caused the concern but the people, second there were no linguistic concerns about Irish or IrE in nineteenth century Britain and third the social concerns the Irish caused were not a function of their language.

Lonergan commits a factual error when she claims that Edward Wakefield wrote from Sydney in 1829 that 'pure English' was not the language of the colony. In fact Wakefield had never been there, writing from a comfortable chair in England.

Lonergan freely mixes nineteenth and twentieth century examples and mistakes the language from works of fiction for real instances of Irish and IrE in Australia. This is a serious shortcoming of the book.

In chapter four (*Irish words in Australian writing*) Lonergan presents how frequently she found certain real or supposed Irish and/or IrE words or phrases in a body of Australian literature written between 1829-2002. This is to some extent contrasted with the frequencies she found in a collection of Irish literature 1800-1989, the subject of her MA thesis.

This could have been a very rewarding part of the book, but unfortunately it is not so. What is sorely missed is a description of the texts in the collection. Lonergan's 'bibliography', this should probably read 'references', list about 150 novels as primary texts. Some may not be novels but that information is not provided. We also do not know how long the novels are and whether they were investigated as full texts or if only excerpts were used. It seems unlikely that Lonergan has read all these works of literature scanning every book for a number of phrases. Instead she probably used a concordance program, but again we do not know that.

There is also no reason provided why exactly these texts had been chosen and why this particular genre. The results certainly depend very much on that choice. Finally, there is no indication whether the Australian authors were of English, Irish or of other origin. But this, again, should have influenced the results to a great extent.

First Lonergan lists the words and phrases according to frequency. But the frequencies do not mean anything, because we do not know from how large a body of language they were taken. The frequencies seem very low, the highest being 26, followed by 21, 21, 18, 17, 16,

etc. considering that 150 novels were consulted and that Lonergan probably deliberately chose novels which had a more or less pronounced Irish background.

Some words from the frequency list are not found in the book's index. Others are found there only in their English, not their Irish spelling.

Altogether Lonergan has 140 words and nineteen phrases and she goes on to group them according to their semantics or functions.

The frequencies she provides do not mean anything since we know nothing about the size or the composition of either the Australian or the Irish text collection. It is not revealing when Lonergan writes (2004:52) "Australian writers [1829-2002] use these terms more often than Irish writers, e.g. twenty-six uses of *ara* to fourteen in the Irish study [1800-1989] [...]." Maybe the Irish collection is only half as big as the Australian one. Then there would be a draw.

Another example is the following: "For example the slogan *fag an bealach*, 'clear the way', is found mainly in nineteenth century Australian writing, but Thomas Keneally uses it in 1998 in *The Great Shame*." First of all we do not know whether the nineteenth and the twentieth century are equally represented in the text collection. Second, there are only three instances of the phrase altogether. From a statistical point of view Lonergan's statement is simply untenable.

Chapter five is rightly called *Fragments*. In this chapter there are various poems and newspaper extracts either in Irish or dealing with Irish or IrE. There is no reason given why these texts were chosen or what they should mean to the reader. They testify that Irish and IrE were known and discussed in Australia from early on. Nothing more. In an anthology some of the texts could have had a place, but here their function is unclear.

The *glossary* contains many the words and phrases presented in chapter four, but surprisingly not all of them. Each entry has quotes showing where the word/phrase was found. Astonishingly only a fraction of the glossary entries can be found in the index of the book. This makes it impossible to look for more quotes or discussions of the word or for its frequency. The letter 'A' has eighteen entries in the glossary, only one of these is also in the index. For the letter 'F' there are eleven entries and only two can be found in the index.

The notes at the end of each chapter, the 'bibliography' and the book's index are full of mistakes and inconsistencies which gravely influence the usefulness of the publication at hand.

Chapter two, for instance, has 21 notes, 17 of which come from books. Only ten of the books mentioned here can be found in the 'bibliography'!! Seven are missing!

There is a long list of secondary sources at the back of the book, but hardly any of them can be found in the main body of the text. It looks as if Lonergan simply copied that list from her PhD thesis and did not bother to check whether she really used the references in the book under review. It is notable that her PhD thesis is missing from the list of secondary sources. So are many up-to-date linguistic or history books that a serious scholar of the Irish and their languages should read before attempting a study such as this one.

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