

BOOK REVIEW

Irish Literature in Italy in the Era of the World Wars

by Antonio Bibbò, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, xiv + 304 pp., €99.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-030-83585-9, 978-3-030-83586-6 (eBook).

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Irish Literature in Italy in the Era of the World Wars discusses the influence of Irish literature in Italy during the first half of the twentieth century. The author, Antonio Bibbò, manages to intertwine politics, culture, translation and literature to demonstrate the different approaches to Irishness in early twentieth-century Italy. The book is divided into six chapters, each of which traces the concept of Irishness from a different angle while highlighting various names associated with Irish literature and translation in the Italian arena as well as exploring the reasons for Italian mediators' commitment to the dissemination of Irish literature and promotion of its authors.

In his introduction, Bibbò clearly establishes that his main focus is to explore the Italian reception and perception of Irish writers and writings and differentiates between writers who are considered truly and 'nationally' Irish and those with Irish origins but whose 'Irishness' does not constitute a prodigious importance in their writing. He specifically cites James Joyce, whose presence occupies a liminal position between Irish and European literature due to his complex connection to his geographical roots. That is why the second section of the second chapter, 'Early Irlandesisti', is dedicated to exploring Joyce's role as a journalist as well as the work of John McCourt. Bibbò stresses the importance of translation as the mediator between Italian and Irish cultures, so he talks in detail about the significance of Joyce's translations of W.B. Yeats' and J.M. Synge's theatrical pieces. The book is, therefore, a transnational commentary on the marriage between culture and translation.

Drawing on books and articles produced in Italy about Irish literature and culture, in addition to pamphlets, literary histories, anthologies, and translations, Bibbò refers to two Italian academics, Ernesto Buonaiuto and Nicola Turchi, whose publications played an essential role in developing an understanding of Irish culture. In the third chapter, Bibbò highlights the importance of the role played by Carlo Linati in paving the way for Irish literature in Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to Bibbò, Linati 'had turned to Irish literature in an attempt to expand his sources of inspiration and reinforce his Lombard roots through his deep involvement in a cognate culture' (p.133). The chapter also highlights the connection between Linati and Joyce. In the fourth chapter, Bibbò refers to other contributing Italian mediators, including Mario

Rossi, Maria Burso and Gian Dauli, among others. The author clarifies that each had their reasons for publicising Irish literature – political, religious, literary, or even theatrical. The discourse on Irishness would differ each time based on the objective of the Italian mediator: Ireland, or ‘Irishness’ per se could be seen from many different perspectives – Catholic, Gaelic, Anglo-Irish, colonial, socialist, or post-Fascist.

Bibbò then proceeds to discuss in detail the national character of Ireland – an idea presented in the introduction. He reviews writers whose works were always perceived as nationally oriented and argues that they were more popular at times when Italy was antipathetic to England. Political and diplomatic relationships between the two countries, therefore, had a direct influence on how the Italian public received Irish translations. The author, hence, distinguishes between two categories of Irish authors: ‘cosmopolitan’ writers such as Wilde, Shaw, Moore and Joyce, whose work generated Italian interest purely on aesthetic principles, and those writers who belonged to the Irish tradition such as Yeats, Synge, Lady Augusta Gregory, and O’Casey. These ideas are discussed in detail in the fourth chapter, ‘Ireland in Fascist Italy’, which outlines a changing image of Ireland, considering it as a possible ally to Fascist Italy. Chapter 5, ‘We are All Irish in the Eyes of Mussolini: Irish Theatre in the War Years’, focuses on Irish theatre as ‘the role of Irish drama in the Italian literary scene during the Second World War was much more decisive than that of Irish narrative or poetry’ (p.253). The chapter calls into question the concept of ‘nationality’, and Eugene O’Neill is discussed as a case study.

The constant change in public response to Irish writing depended on both the political and cultural context of Italy as well as the variable goals of Italian mediators. That is why the concept of Irishness has been changing dynamically; each Italian reader would build an image of Ireland based on their own personal understanding of ‘Ireland’ and ‘Irishness’. Although Bibbò does not provide enough details to bring this topic into full view, he claims that these various images of Ireland had an impact on how an Irish tradition was construed in Italy and how it was received by Italians interested in understanding Irish culture and literature. He explains that after the end of the Second World War, Irish literature – with the exception of Joyce and Yeats – lost its place in the Italian literary arena. The reason for such radical loss of interest is still unknown.

The book makes clear the author’s meticulous research and in-depth analysis of the sources, from which he quotes judiciously to support his argument. To allow his readers to digest the complexity of how the concept of Irishness was received, criticised, and interpreted by an Italian readership, Bibbò refers to a vast number of sources, including translations from Irish to Italian, while interweaving a web of disciplines to produce a comprehensive perception of Irish literature. Towards the end of his book, Bibbò recommends further points of research and study by posing questions that remain unanswered in his book. He also underscores a few flaws in his study, such as his focus on particular writers while ignoring other canonical names, but mitigates this by clarifying that his book focuses only on the period between the world wars.