

Elaine Sisson. *Pearse's Patriots: St. Enda's and the Cult of Boyhood.* Cork: Cork University Press, 2004. ix + 233 pp. \$49.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-85918-325-0.



Reviewed by Timothy McMahon

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In the opening chapter of this stimulating work, Elaine Sisson notes that Patrick Pearse remains such an iconic figure in Ireland that his many legacies are a matter of frequent, sometimes provocative, debate. As the leader of the Easter Rising in 1916, Pearse's name is forever associated with the gun in Irish politics, and his prolific oeuvre (in English and Irish) has led to considerable conjecture about his personal and political life, including in Ruth Dudley Edwards's masterful biography *The Triumph of Failure* and Sean Farrell Moran's more recent psycho-history.[1] Seamas ?" Buachalla, meanwhile, has concluded that Pearse's greatest legacy may well have been as an educator who decried what he called the "murder machine" of the Irish national and intermediate school systems.[2] Sisson—in an effort to engage many of the questions raised about Pearse the revolutionary, educator, and man—turns her attention to the central project of his adult life: the founding of a bilingual intermediate school, St. Enda's, in 1908.

To be sure, there is irony in the ongoing fascination with the socially awkward Pearse

(1879-1916). Before his rather late conversion to revolutionary nationalism—he did not join the Irish Republican Brotherhood until 1913—he was a second-tier, if well-known, player in nationalist circles. Having taken a degree in law through the Royal University of Ireland, he became an advocate for the revival of the Irish language and Irish culture. A leading member of the Gaelic League and editor of its weekly newspaper for nearly six years, Pearse traveled widely to encourage the preservation of Irish as a medium of everyday speech and to study the ways in which other countries, including Belgium, incorporated more than one language into school curricula.

Never an original thinker, he nonetheless was creative, weaving lessons from this array of experiences into an educational philosophy that was child-centered and overtly nationalist. In 1908, he put these ideas into practice at St. Enda's School, which would differ from Ireland's leading secondary schools in three key areas: it would be a bilingual academy; it would be under lay control; and it would instill a love of things Irish in its students rather than directing their attention to edu-

cational and employment opportunities in the British empire. Critically, Sisson argues, this patriotic message was wrapped around the figures of boy-heroes, including especially the mythic hero Cúchulainn, whose image adorned the walls of the school and whose imaginative presence was so palpable that one former student considered him "an 'important if invisible member' of the staff" (p. 80). The impact of its message became apparent in 1916 when more than thirty current and former students volunteered to fight alongside Pearse in the General Post Office and when Pearse and four other members of his faculty faced firing squads for their roles in the rebellion.

At its foundation, as Sisson points out, St. Enda's created a buzz among Irish-language enthusiasts, including the founders of the Gaelic League, Eoin MacNeill and Douglas Hyde, as well as nationally-minded artists, such as W. B. Yeats. But its enrollment declined rapidly after 1910. For all his assimilative creativity, Pearse was never a business person, and for the rest of his life, the school's financial future was in doubt. (Indeed, its sister academy, St. Ita's, failed in 1912.) Although the association of St. Enda's with the revolutionary movement helped it to limp forward after 1916, the school eventually closed its doors in 1935.

Informed by postcolonial and gender studies, Sisson's work casts a fresh eye over the well-traveled ground of early-twentieth-century Dublin through its use of correspondence, newspapers, periodicals, and memoirs, as well as more ephemeral matter such as playbills and postcards. Even readers familiar with other major figures of the era, from Yeats to James Larkin, may find some revelations in the connections Sisson draws. While the author clearly states that the lion's share of attention to Pearse's project came from those nationalists associated with the Gaelic revival, she also demonstrates that it garnered interest from a broader spectrum of Irish and, indeed, British imperial society. Among Pearse's cor-

respondents were Sir Robert Baden Powell and Rabindranath Tagore, the latter of whom led a school that Yeats dubbed the "Indian St. Enda's" (p. 70).

The arc of the book moves from an examination of the college as an educational experiment toward an interpretation of Pearse's various idealizations of boyhood. According to Sisson, Pearse created an early-twentieth-century homosocial community designed to train young men not merely to be Irish nationalists but to be a particular kind of nationalist, much as medieval monasteries had created monks who lived by specific rules in male-only environments. She further situates the school in a variety of contemporary discourses, ranging from the cult of athleticism which addressed Social Darwinist fears of societal decline to Wagnerian opera, but she does so with varying degrees of success. Thus, while able to show that Pearse enjoyed opera and had actually visited the Wagner Festspiel at Bayreuth, Sisson claims perhaps too close a connection between the music drama and the school master's plays and tableaux vivantes. Over the span of two pages, for example, the adverb "undoubtedly" appears three times in assertions that are inspired conjecture and that may be correct, but they are not proved by direct evidence.

Sisson is on much firmer ground when interpreting the productions themselves in the context of Pearse's wider canon. Some readers, especially those wed to the image of the saintly martyr of 1916, may shy away from her frank discussion of Pearse's sexuality and its relationship to his art. Much like Thomas MacDonagh and Joseph Mary Plunkett, who tried to dissuade Pearse from publishing his pederastic 1909 poem "Little Lad of the Tricks," they may not want to acknowledge that such impulses existed. But as Sisson persuasively argues, there is a difference between impulse and action. And "it was," she notes, "the sublimation of Pearse's sexuality that produced such a remarkable interweaving of discourses on aesthetics,

martyrdom, masculinity and nationhood" (p. 152). In numerous plays, stories, and poems, Pearse the artist fixated on the figure of the fair-haired *macaomh*, who sacrificed for others or inspired them to act. Meanwhile, through stagecraft, Pearse the educator encouraged his students to embody these same boys, figuratively at least—a message which was not lost on the students themselves or on their audiences.

Ultimately, *Pearse's Patriots* is a noteworthy addition to Irish studies for its application of gender theory to images of masculinity and boyhood. Those with an interest in early-twentieth-century Irish cultural and political history will profit from its insights.

Notes

[1]. Sean Farrell Moran, *Patrick Pearse and the Politics of Redemption: the Mind of the Easter Rising, 1916* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994); Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Patrick Pearse: The Triumph of Failure* (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1979 ed.).

[2]. Seamas ?" Buachalla, *A Significant Irish Educationalist: the Educational Writings of P. H. Pearse* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1980).

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