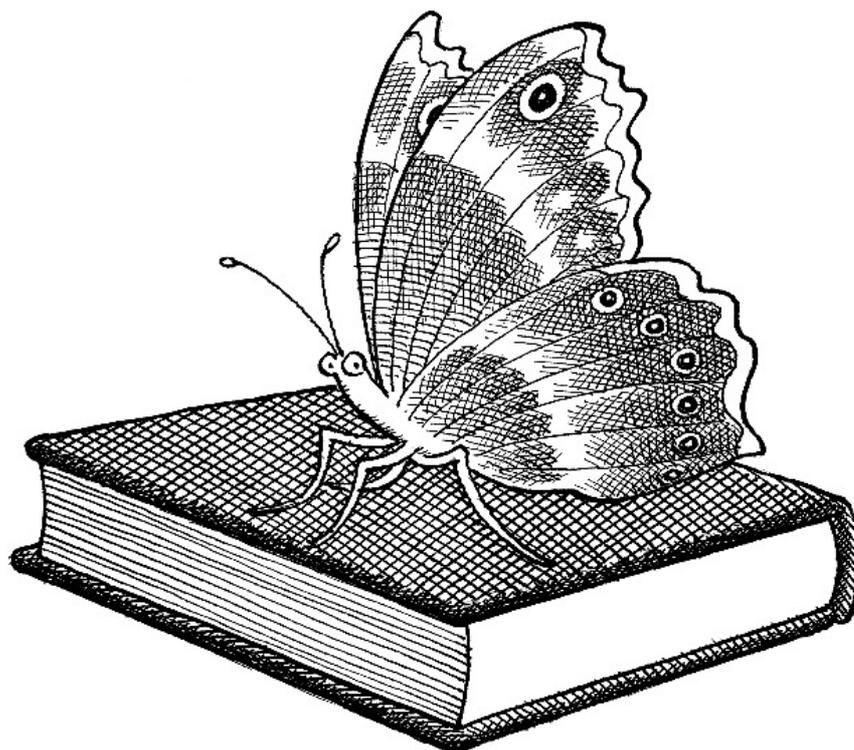


Margaret Kelleher
**THE MAAMTRASNA
MURDERS**

Language, life and
death in nineteenth-
century Ireland
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£20.



History

CHRISTOPHER CUSACK

A Spanish speaker in Texas requests a Bible in his own tongue to swear his oath in court. The sheriff objects: “If English was good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for anyone!” When I heard this story, I assumed it was spurious; indeed, multiple versions have been doing the rounds since at least 1881. Yet the issue behind it is crucial for jurisdictions that lay claim to enlightened rationality. How can a legal system be premised on fairness and equality if these are essentially contingent on a person’s command of the language in which the law is codified?

This question has been central to the memory of the infamous Maamtrasna murders in Ireland, as Margaret Kelleher’s exemplary study shows. In 1882, five members of the Joyce family were brutally murdered in Maamtrasna, a remote townland in Co. Galway. Ten men were arrested, including a cousin of the victims, Myles Joyce (Maolra Sheáin Seoighe), who was sentenced to death. Joyce was a monoglot Irish speaker who had not been assigned a court interpreter, and insisted he was “as clear of it as the child not yet born”. His innocence was confirmed repeatedly by other suspects. Despite petitions for a reprieve, he was hanged.

The Maamtrasna Murders, written with clarity and precision, describes the crime, the trial and the executions in meticulous detail, using a wide

range of contemporary sources, some newly discovered. Moreover, the book is a perceptive cultural history of the case's aftermath. It traces its periodic re-emergence as a symbol in Irish culture over the course of almost 140 years, from responses in 1882 through James Joyce's essay "Ireland at the Bar" (1907) to the pardon Myles Joyce was granted in 2018 by President Michael D. Higgins.

Partly because of the language issue, Myles Joyce's wrongful execution instantly became a rallying point for Irish nationalists. For many, the miscarriage of justice epitomized the wrongs of British colonialism in Ireland, and the case further bolstered the call for Irish self-government.

Yet this is not in fact the most powerful element of Kelleher's study: *The Maamtrasna Murders* is particularly notable for its strong analysis of the linguistic context. Kelleher argues that "the relationship between law and language" is not addressed sufficiently in Irish historiography. Her approach also shows the ongoing significance of Myles Joyce's tragic story. To be regarded as just, a state has a moral obligation to take into account the many ways in which people might be considered dispossessed – not least in terms of language.