

Leon Ó Broin, *The Irish Abolitionist. Richard Madden and the Subversion of Empire*, Translated and Edited by Mícheál Ó hAodha, Dublin, Nuascéalta, 2014, 483 pp.

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Juan José Delaney¹

Leon Ó Broin (1902–1990) was known as a short-story writer, playwright and essayist, and also as the editor of *Fáinne an Lae* (the bilingual journal of the Gaelic League). Having already published two other biographies (*Parnell* [1937] and *Emmet* [1954]), his account of Richard Madden – an Irishman who, as a British colonial administrator, fought against slavery and became a human rights crusader – was published in 1971. Madden, who lived between 1798 and 1886, was also a prolific writer and an altruist concerned with the deep, controversial, and historic troubles and difficulties that his native country went through, including the Great Famine (1845–1852). This biography of Madden, originally written and published in Irish, has been recently translated into English and edited by Professor Mícheál Ó hAodha.

A biography, by its very nature, is always shaped and limited by its author's point of view. Although sometimes Manichean, Ó Broin's vision of Madden and his days is a convincing one, revealing his effectiveness as a writer. While faithful to the original work, the English translation has changed slightly in tone, becoming a book that is read with the same interest and expectation devoted to a good novel.

According to renowned Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, a reliable biography should include contributions and insights from the relatives and friends of the central subject. Since such a thing is occasionally impossible, it can happen that, by focusing on the subject of the biography, the writer loses perspective and overpraises his/her words and deeds, which in turn affects how the subject is viewed in relation to contemporary actors. Though Ó Broin is not completely free from this restraint, his footnotes and a selected bibliography are useful in successfully contextualizing Madden in relation to key figures in his life.

Ó Broin's chronological account stresses the formation of Madden's character during his education and shortly thereafter, the trials and tribulations of his struggle to find his place in the world, and his vocation. Accounts are given of how Madden became a doctor after studying medicine in Paris, Naples and London, his travels from 1824 to 1827, and his appointment as a surgeon in London until 1833 when he was employed to oversee the Abolition of Slavery Statute in Jamaica. In fact, after joining the Anti-Slavery Association in London, Madden took various posts, not only in Jamaica (which he left in 1834 following a quarrel with planters), but in Havana (1836-1840) and Australia

¹ Juan José Delaney is a writer and is coordinator of the Irish Studies Program at the Universidad del Salvador (Buenos Aires).

(1847). In 1843, when jobless, he accepted an offer to become the Portugal correspondent for the *Morning Chronicle*. In each country, he not only encountered opposition (e.g. to the abolition process and attempts to redress the exploitation of settlers in Australia) but also internal and external enemies (e.g. manifesting themselves as death threats when he was a journalist in Portugal). Remarkably, he also found time to write and publish fiction, essays and reports of his experiences as a traveller, always on the move. Despite certain personal doubts and failures on Madden's behalf, the biographer proves that Madden's empathy and commitment to the human condition never waned. To illustrate this narrative, statements are substantiated by generous quotations generally taken from Madden's letters, essays, poems or memoirs.

The apparent aim of presenting Madden as a hero seems to move the writer to engage in partial or simplified interpretations of the facts that marked his subject's life, although copious editor's notes expand and illuminate the narrative. In more than one way, Richard Madden (his character and his works) anticipates and paves the way for that Irish giant of oppressed peoples, Roger Casement (1864-1916).

Ó Broin's writing is particularly eloquent when it portrays Madden through his actions. We see this when he deals with the Catholic Church in relation to slavery in Cuba; in the way he managed the situation that arose in the infamous slave ship *Amistad*, in August 1839; in his relationship with fellow abolitionist Lewis Tappan; and in his awkward unsuccessful encounter with the American President Martin Van Buren. In this context, in Chapter 10, the longest and probably most striking part of the book, by telling the story of the Irish in Australia within a web of political and religious intrigues, Ó Broin shows who Richard Madden really was, and his depth of character as a true humanitarian. Moreover, realistic descriptions (such as the one concerning a family being evicted from their cabin in Bantry, County Cork), reveal Leon Ó Broin as a powerful man of letters.

In the context of the Repeal Movement (1840s), the biographer writes:

Madden found himself caught up in these revolutionary rumblings when he gave a speech at a public dinner in Dublin shortly after his return from West Africa. Any Irishman who was familiar with oppression in his own country had a duty to do whatever he could to do away with tyranny in foreign lands also, he said. This statement reflected his personal philosophy on life, where there was no distinction made between love of country and love of humanity. The Irish and Black Africans were two races that found themselves in a similarly downtrodden position, in Madden's view. (2014: 177)

Curiously, there is no systematic assessment of Madden's contribution to literature. If we have to judge his work from what is quoted by Ó Broin, Madden was a minor poet (his name is ignored in *The Mercier Companion to Irish Literature*, published in 1998). Ó Broin writes: "Madden once said to Aubrey de Vere that he had never written a dozen lines of true poetry in his life and this was an assessment with which most of the literary critics of his day concurred"

(2014: 198). The fact is that he was the author of *A Twelve Months Residence in the West Indies* (1835), *The Island of Cuba* (1849) and *The History of Irish Periodical Literature from the end of the 17th to the Middle of the 19th Century* (1867), among many other books. It seems that *The United Irishmen, Their Lives & Times*, in seven volumes (1843-1846), stands as his literary legacy, although “The *London Times* gave an accurate account of Richard Madden’s life in its obituary page with no trace of hyperbole. Of all the books he had written the *Times* correspondent praised *The Life and Martyrdom of Savonarola* (1854) for its style and historical interest and *The Connexion of the Kingdom of Ireland and the Crown of England* (1845) as historical research that was as useful a tool then as it had been when first published” (2014: 420). Regardless of our estimation, the biographer explains how, in a slow but self-confident process, Richard Madden entered the last segment of his life engaged in religious meditation and in the ineffable realm of words.

Formerly limited to an Irish-language readership, it is thanks to Mícheál Ó hAodha’s efforts in completing such a scrupulous translation that this work is now accessible to a broader readership.

Beyond mere entertainment, those who read biographies to gain insights into the human condition or an interpretation of reality will not be disappointed by Ó Broin’s work on the days and nights of Richard Madden. Ó Broin illuminates his subject – who is relatively unknown, especially in America where he did a great deal of his humanitarian work – as a compelling, independent, rich and plural personality.