

In history and education, from Munster Blackwater to the Indian Ocean: an autoethnography

By Tom O'Donoghue

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The Irish diaspora has a very long history, with an especially tragic period during the Great Hunger in the mid-19th century. Tom O'Donoghue's is one story from the late 20th century of the millions of stories about the leaving, usually less than willingly, of Irish homelands. In O'Donoghue's case, the leaving was associated with the want of opportunity in building a career in higher education. It was difficult because, as the early sections of his autobiography demonstrate, he was firmly attached to his town and county in southern Ireland. He was and probably remains a "Lismore boy" from his beloved County of Waterford.

O'Donoghue identifies his story as autoethnography rather than autobiography. The special concern of autoethnography is to place the biographical subject within his/her/their social context, and this certainly occurs from time to time, but I suspect, not much more than would occur in most competent autobiographies. There is the material here to build an analysis of the class, gender and ethnic; family and community; religious; national, colonial and post-colonial, circumstances of the subject's life. But it does not occur to any great degree within this text. It is more autobiography than autoethnography. Then again, there are contradictory emphases. We learn so much about the personal relationships of O'Donoghue while growing up, and into adulthood, but strangely enough very little about the circumstances of his marriage and married life.

It is one of the older truisms of reviewing that one should concentrate on what is present rather than what is not. That truism is something of a shibboleth especially in recent times when reading textual absences has become a scholarly industry in its own right. In wanting more from O'Donoghue's text though, I guess what is being revealed is more about the reviewer than the subject. I give as an example my belief that O'Donoghue and Christine Trimingham Jack were responsible for at least two of the most significant revisionist works in the historiography of Catholicism in Australian educational history. They wrote works that substantially and necessarily dented the dominant, heroic narrative. This autobiography certainly outlines the subjects of O'Donoghue's historical research and writing, but we do not learn much about how he sees the significance of his work. (A bonus though, in this book, is a complete bibliography of his published work.)

As a history of an intellectual, a historian, whose early and later professional life has been intimately bound with the processes of education, and several of its institutions in Ireland, New Guinea, Australia and Southeast Asia, we are left wanting more. It is only towards the end that there is a substantial discussion of the subject's work in curriculum studies along with the projects he shaped as he took leadership roles in masters' degrees and then doctorates in education for the University of Western Australia. This discussion was illuminating and welcome. It will contribute to future histories of Australian higher education as education schools within universities were transformed in the era following the so-called Dawkins reforms from the 1980s.



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Who are the intended readers of this autobiography? Given the balance of the narrative, the subjects explored in depth, I suspect it is for the most part, friends, family and colleagues. And a substantial and often entertaining tale it is. It will answer the unspoken questions of many: “from where did this Tom O’Donoghue originate?”. His impact on the society that produces this journal, the Australian and New Zealand History of Education Society, was rather dramatic. His raising of new questions for local education historians to consider, his magnetic charm, his beautiful post-conference dinner solo singing voice, were all substantial enough for him to be elected president of the society in 2002.

We were glad O’Donoghue ended up in Australia – but what a back story! It is difficult to imagine what it was like for him and his family uprooting themselves from the “old world” and landing in New Britain (there is a ridiculous imperial irony in the naming of that tropical island off the northeast coast of New Guinea). Despite the challenging weather, new populations and their cultures, and the problems with teaching in circumstances with few resources, there was also the deeply familiar Catholic Church and its rituals. There, even the occasional Irish diasporic individual always waited to be discovered. Some of their families may even have lived only a county or two away from Lismore in Ireland.

I am aware of only one other Australian historian of education who published a full autobiography (Turney, 1996). It was interesting for the theme of the final displacement of a professoriate educated outside of Australia, usually in England or Scotland, by local men (women came later). Such reflections on professional lives have much to offer the educational historiography, especially their provision of clues about whence come the questions that historians of education seek to answer.

Wayne Urban (2011) edited a wonderful collection of autobiographical essays from American historians of education who researched and wrote from the late 1960s. It remains the most successful of the autobiographical studies in this sub-genre. As part of the afterword, Kate Rousmaniere had this to say:

The history of education is a peculiarly circular field: we study the processes and patterns in the past, driven by questions raised in our own educational experience as students, teachers, parents, or community members. We live and work in academic institutions, teach courses that engage in educational issues, and research education in the past while observing education in the present. Inevitably, our scholarly questions about the history of education spiral back to our own experiences as students and teachers . . . What is it about my own education that set a seed that then grew into a tough nut that I continue to try to crack? (Rousmaniere, p. 323.)

I doubt that Tom O’Donoghue ever read these words, but his autobiography contributes a substantial example of the phenomenon.

Craig Campbell
Independent Scholar, Elgin, UK

References

- Turney, C. (1996), *Tales Out of School, College and University: Memoirs of an Educator, 1931-1995*, Sydmac Academic Press, Sydney.
- Urban, W.J. (Ed.) (2011), *Leaders in the Historical Study of American Education*, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam.

Further reading

- Rousmaniere, K. (2011), “Afterword”, in Urban, W.J. (Ed.), *Leaders in the Historical Study of American Education*, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, pp. 323-325.