Julius Pokorny, 1887-1970: Germans, Celts and Nationalism

Julius Pokorny (1887-1970) was the foremost Celtic scholar of his generation on the European mainland. Born in Prague, he studied at Vienna University, and learned Irish in Mayo and Kerry. He was a German nationalist who also became a propagandist for both the Gaelic League and the Irish nationalist cause from 1908. In 1920 he succeeded Kuno Meyer as professor of Celtic Philology in Berlin. Douglas Hyde, Eoin MacNeill, Myles Dillon and Liam S. Gogan were counted among his friends in Ireland, while in addition Osborn Bergin and T.F. O'Rahilly were among his contemporaries in Celtic scholarship. He translated Pearse, Ó Conaire and An Seabhac into German, and he is mentioned by name in poetry by Bergin and Flann O'Brien; he is mentioned in Joyce's Ulysses, in which the belief that the ancient Celts had no concept of hell is attributed to him. In 1935 Pokorny lost his Berlin professorship because the Nazis discovered that, though he was a Catholic, his grandparents had all been Jewish. He led an uncertain existence in Berlin until, in 1943, he fled to Switzerland. The Swiss admitted him because he possessed an Irish visa, issued in 1940 in Berlin on the instructions of de Valera, at the instigation of Hyde. From then he taught Celtic at Zurich and Berne Universities and, after 1955, was Honorary Professor of Celtic at Munich University. This book examines the main issues surrounding Pokorny's life, including assimilationist Jewry in fin-de-siecle Austria, German involvement in Celtic scholarship and Irish nationalism, mythology in Joyce's Ulysses, Nazi anti-Semitism vis-à-vis Jewish German nationalists, Irish and Swiss attitudes to refugees, and the value of Pokorny's scholarship. It is a tight but comprehensive study based largely on original documents and correspondence that have been discovered by the author in Austria and Switzerland, as well as material from national archives in Vienna, Berlin, Berne and Dublin.

Item Type: Book (authored)

Faculties and Schools: Faculty of Arts

Research Institutes and Groups: Arts and Humanities Research Institute > Modern Languages

ID Code: 13044

Deposited By: Professor Pol Ó'Dochartaigh

Deposited On: 20 Apr 2010 08:42

Last Modified: 05 Jul 2011 13:36

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