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Bio-Bibliography: Stephen James Meredith Brown (1881-1962) 1

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STEPHEN JAMES MEREDITH BROWN, S.J., was born in County Down, Ireland, on 24 September 1881. He was educated at Clongowes Wood College and was ordained as a Jesuit in 1914. Brown also pursued studies at Tullabeg, Jersey, Paris, and Hastings. Teaching posts included Clongowes and University College. At the latter, he launched the post-graduate school of librarianship, serving on the faculty for 24 years. Brown founded the Central Catholic Library in 1922 and was its motive force for some four decades. He is remembered today as a major bibliographer of Irish literature.

Sidney Webb (1916)2 maintained that Brown (1916) made a significant sociological contribution — as a bibliographer — in providing a detailed compilation of prose fiction concerned with Ireland and all things Irish: Ireland in Fiction: A Guide to Irish Novels, Tales, Romances, and Folk-Lore.3 Specifically, Webb asserted, “one can imagine no more valuable ‘source-book’ of Irish sociology than this volume.”

In producing his “source-book,” Brown was in pioneering company. The immediate predecessor to Ireland in Fiction was Brown’s (1910) shorter work, A Readers’ Guide to Irish Fiction. It appeared on the temporal heels of William I. Thomas’ (1909) better known Source Book for Social Origins. Whereas Thomas focused on ethnological materials and bibliographies “for the interpretation of savage society,” Brown hoped to “be useful to the general reader who wishes to study Ireland.” Specifically, Brown (1910) noted in his preface:

The Author’s aim has been to get together and to print in a convenient form a classified list of novels, tales, etc. (whether by Irish or by foreign writers), bearing on Ireland — that is, depicting some phase of Irish life or some episode of Irish history — and to append to each title a short descriptive note.

1 SOCILOGICAL ORIGINS, Volume 5, No. 1, Fall 2006: 46-50. All rights reserved. Please visit our free website (www.sociological-origins.com) for additional information and other features. Photograph of Fr Brown courtesy of the Central Catholic Library, Dublin


3 A complete copy of Ireland in Fiction: A Guide to Irish Novels, Tales, Romances, and Folk-Lore, new edition (Brown 1919) is provided as a digital supplement on the CD accompanying this issue of SOCILOGICAL ORIGINS.

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Where Thomas looked fundamentally to the collective past of “savage society,” Brown catalogued materials illuminating the long social march forward into civilized society and modernity. Both Thomas and Brown compiled “source-books,” but each work is distinctive in format and purpose.


Sidney Webb (1916) argued that novels deserve serious sociological consideration, “It is time that a stand was made on behalf of the value, as scientific material, of works of fiction,” and, further, that:

In the hundred thousand or so of extant novels in the English language, to say nothing of the contributions of France, Germany, Russia, and Italy — there is buried a vast amount of observation and criticism, not only, as we are accustomed to say, of “human nature,” but also of its social environment at all ages and in all parts of the world.

For Webb, novels — taken collectively — were the essence of “descriptive sociology.” In so writing, he echoed the earlier conclusion by Harriet Martineau in *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1838) that:

The eloquence of institutions and records, in which the action of the nation is embodied and perpetuated, is more comprehensive and more faithful than that of any variety of individual voices. The voice of a whole people goes up in the silent workings of an institution; the condition of the masses is reflected from the surface of a record. The institutions of a nation — political, religious, or social — put evidence into the observer’s hands as to its capabilities and wants which the study of individuals could not yield in the course of a lifetime. The records of any society, be they what they may, whether architectural remains, epitaphs, civic registers, national music, or any other of the thousand manifestations of the common mind which may be found among every people, afford more information on morals in a day than converse with individuals in a year.

Novels, one of Martineau’s “manifestations of the common mind which may be found among every people,” provided Webb with “the momentary phases of color and human feeling out of which, in unbroken succession, human existence is actually constituted.” Brown (1919) offers a detailed guide to more than 1,700 prose fiction works on Ireland, including the work of Harriet Martineau herself.
Interestingly, Brown accurately perceived Martineau as “a sociologist,” and gave a favorable synopsis of her didactic novel, *Ireland* (Martineau, 1832). Brown’s (1919) entry on Martineau is a model of concise analysis:

**MARTINEAU, Harriet** (1802-1876), a distinguished writer, Author of a long series of works on economics, sociology, religion, travel, etc., etc. In her day she was a well-known literary celebrity. She was a Unitarian, but was not without sympathy for Catholicism. Among her numerous works was her series of “Letters from Ireland,” reprinted from the DAILY NEWS in 1852.

1102 — *IRELAND*, a Tale. 16 mo. Pp. 136. (London: Charles Fox). 1832. Intended as one of a series of illustrating economic conditions. The plot of the tale (concerning a family of the West coast in extreme poverty) is simple, but some of the scenes are highly effective. “No pains have been spared,” says the Author in a preface, “to ascertain the correctness of the data on which my story is constructed.” Shows throughout keen observation, independent thought, and reasonable sympathy. “She (the Author) speaks as a well-wisher to Ireland and an indignant witness of her wrongs.” (Pref). She sets forth the reforms which she believes to be needed. The little book well deserves to be reprinted.

It is a major tribute to Martineau’s fair-minded objectivity that her work received this discerning and astute assessment from an Irish Catholic Jesuit.

The inclusiveness of his compilations sometimes placed Brown at odds with the church hierarchy, so far as publication was concerned. When published, Brown’s bibliographic work typically received favorable notice. Sociologically, Brown is an important chronicler of institutionalized literary patterns in Ireland. Not surprisingly, Brown also wrote several works on decidedly religious topics. And, in addition to the many separately issued publications noted below, Brown was also a frequent contributor to scholarly journals, including *Studies*.

Stephen James Meredith Brown died on 5 May 1962, succumbing to the aftermath of injuries suffered in a London traffic accident.

SEPARATELY PUBLISHED WORKS BY STEPHEN J. BROWN


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4 A complete copy of Martineau’s *Ireland* is provided as a digital supplement on the CD accompanying this issue of *Sociological Origins*.

5 A complete copy of Martineau’s *Letters from Ireland* is provided as a digital supplement on the CD accompanying this issue of *Sociological Origins*. 


WORKS ABOUT STEPHEN J. BROWN


ARCHIVAL DEPOSITS


Irish Jesuit Archives, Dublin. Holds the papers of Fr. Brown (ref. code J54) and an 11-page finding aid has been prepared. The materials include bibliography, a partial inventory of his personal book collection, and correspondence regarding his publications, including his difficulty obtaining approval from the Province Censors to publish *Ireland in Fiction* and other works.

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