

## REVIEW

### BASIC IRISH: A GRAMMAR AND WORKBOOK.

*London and New York : Routledge. ix + 246 pages. ISBN10: 0-415-41041-X (book), ISBN10: 0-203-92737-0 (e-book) ISBN13: 978-0-415-41041-0 (paperback), ISBN13: 978-0-203-92737-3 (e-book).*

### INTERMEDIATE IRISH: A GRAMMAR AND WORKBOOK.

*London and New York : Routledge. ix + 246 pages. ISBN10: 0-415-41042-8 (book), ISBN10: 0-203-92709-5 (e-book) ISBN13: 978-0-415-41042-7 (paperback), ISBN13: 978-0-203-92709-0 (e-book)*

*Nancy Stenson. 2008.*

*Reviewed by Sheila Scott. University of Ottawa*

These new titles are the latest additions to Routledge's Grammar Workbook series. Nancy Stenson, a professor of Linguistics at the University of Minnesota, is particularly interested in Irish and Celtic linguistics, language contact and change, Native American languages and at a more theoretical level, syntax and morphology. She is well-known both in North America and in Ireland for her work on the Irish language. She has twice been a visiting professor at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, School of Celtic Studies and has published extensively on the acquisition and structure of the Irish language as well as on the influence of language contact on contemporary Irish.

In keeping with the general objectives of the Grammar Workbooks series in general, this book is intended specifically for the learner eager to do some independent work to complement what has been covered in the classroom. An effort has been made to minimize the use of grammatical jargon. This will broaden the appeal of the book, especially among independent learners and teachers of Irish who are not comfortable with

the technical language used in describing grammar and found in other grammar workbooks.

Overall, both books are developed in an accessible way. Each unit treats a specific grammar point. In some cases, a related or complementary grammar point is also provided within the same unit. A brief explanation of the point(s) is provided and this is followed by a selection of exercises to reinforce and support the acquisition of the point. Answers to the exercises are conveniently provided at the end of each unit allowing the learner to verify and confirm that he or she has successfully mastered the point(s) covered. An effort has been made to limit the vocabulary in the examples and exercises to common vocabulary items. All examples of Irish forms are in bold type typically given on the lefthand side of the page and the English translations are provided immediately to the right. Handy Irish-to-English and English-to-Irish glossaries are available at the back of the book.

*Basic Irish: A Grammar and Workbook* begins with four units devoted to the sound system, the structure of the language and the mutation patterns. The first unit on spelling and pronunciation offers the learner a very approachable summary of the extremely complex Irish spelling system and many examples are provided to help the learner. In the remaining 20 units, the author summarizes and explains many of the typical basic aspects of the language which would be covered in most beginner courses of Irish. Where the learning load of a particular grammar point is deemed to be heavy given its marked dissimilarity with an equivalent structure in English, the grammar point is treated over two or more units. The first unit provides learners with a description of the simple constructions, often those which can be encountered in other commercially available material developed for learners at this level. The second unit on the same topic provides the learner with additional examples and some exceptional constructions. There are two units on prepositions, irregular verbs, the copula is,

and verbal noun constructions in *Basic Irish*.

*Intermediate Irish: A Grammar and Workbook*, the companion to *Basic Irish*, begins with the first of two units devoted to relative clause constructions, conditional clauses, and word formation. There are two additional units on prepositions in this second book, in which, along with additional prepositions, the dative case, compound pronominal forms and genitive case are explained. The latter is often considered to be a difficult aspect of Irish to acquire. In this unit the author has quite aptly elected to provide the learner with a variety of examples illustrating the different iterations of the genitive form in Irish. She has not belabored the change in the noun forms, as these were provided in unit 6 in *Basic Irish*. Instead she has offered the learner useful and concrete examples of genitive constructions which provide the learner with a basis from which to extrapolate the change in the noun form and apply it to subsequent nouns in similar genitive constructions. There are four units dedicated to adverbs and their usage. In each of these units the author examines the structure and particular contexts in which adverbs are used, such as time, clausal constructions, directional adverbs and adverbs related to compass points. In each case the forms are presented clearly and in manageable quantities. In the last two units on adverbs, simple but effective illustrations support the descriptions of these complex forms.

Any student learning Irish is immediately confronted with aspects of dialect variation and while many elect to learn one dialect, they are exposed to all the dialects through Irish media in contact with Irish language speakers. Throughout both books, the author identifies dialectal differences which are present in particular grammar constructions such as the mutation patterns for prepositions or pronoun forms attached to certain verb tenses to name but two. The last four units in *Intermediate Irish* offer useful information on dialectal variation. Each unit examines a specific aspect of

the language: vocabulary, nouns and adjectives, verbs, and prepositions.

The author often judiciously crossreferences grammar points in earlier units (sometimes in the earlier *Basic Irish* book) which serve as a basis for an expanded description of usage in a subsequent unit. This allows the learner to easily refer to this earlier unit for review purposes. I would have liked to see the author refer the learner to unit 6 in *Basic Irish* where she provides the genitive singular and plural forms for the different noun declensions when she was providing examples of the genitive case in unit 19 in *Intermediate Irish*.

In keeping with the general objectives of any extensive description of the complex grammatical structure and conventions of a language, choices have to be made concerning which aspects of the language should be presented at a particular level, the order in which items are presented and the level of depth at which items should be examined. One of the interesting choices the author made was to dedicate a unit to each of the following: the use and spelling of Irish personal names and Irish place-names. This refreshing decision provides the reader with a comprehensive list of examples which are extremely useful. The unit called Basic Numbers is appropriate for beginners as it deals only with the cardinal numbers from one to twenty and their related word order and mutation rules. The author has wisely opted to introduce ordinal numbers and special numbers used for counting people in a unit called Higher Numbers in the second book. An intriguing unit called Causes and Onsets in *Intermediate Irish* explains causative, permission and onsets, structures which are very common and yet quite distinct from English. Another unit in the same book vaguely entitled Some Other Structures looks at an eclectic selection of less common constructions: subjectless verbs, headless relatives and verbless clauses introduced by 'ach' and 'agus' and abstract nouns combined with 'dá' to refer to degrees of quality. I would have been hard pressed to come

up with an all inclusive title for this unit.

In the final unit on prepositions in *Intermediate Irish*, the author indicates that only a selection of compound prepositions will be introduced at this time, leaving the learner to anticipate a third book. This third book would certainly be a welcome addition to this extremely useful and comprehensive two-book set. The author has set the bar very high for any future grammar books of Irish. This companion set has proven to be a first-rate practical resource for learners and a valuable classroom resource for teachers. Irish scholars as well as teachers and learners of Irish can use these books as wonderfully accessible reference tools.