Beealeraght

Christopher Lewin

I have been reading the essays of Michel de Montaigne recently. He was born in Gascony at the end of the Renaissance when Europe was awash with new ideas, but the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants were beginning at the same time, and France was drowned in blood and violence. Montaigne himself remained faithful to the old Church, but he was always decent, open-minded and sensitive to other people’s point of view.

Less than thirty years after the discovery of South America he wrote an essay entitled ‘On Cannibals’ in which he insisted that the native people in the New World were in no way inferior to his own people who burnt men at the stake and broke them on the wheel, and that Europeans looked at foreigners as barbarians only because they their customs were unfamiliar. He himself met some American Indians who were on a trip to Paris. In addition, he doubted the reality of the power of most ‘witches’ in a period when they were harshly persecuted.

There were new ideas about raising children as well. Instead of beating children and forcing them to learn things in a strict and tedious manner, Renaissance thinkers believed that the child himself should be at the centre and in control of his
own learning, that they should find out things and stretch their minds in a natural way. Does that look familiar in our own time?

Montaigne’s father had new ideas too about learning languages naturally: he wanted his son to be fluent in Latin as well as French, so he employed a special tutor who had no French to speak to his son in Latin, and the whole household had to learn it too, so that the boy would be a native speaker of Latin. We are not the only ones to see an advantage in bilingualism and immersing children in a language at a young age. We may consider ourselves to be more enlightened than our forebears but other generations had the same ideas before us. How true it is that there is nothing new under the sun.