

# Celticism: The Gaelic Revival, Race and Irishness

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**Abstract** This paper presents a brief overview of research conducted on the parallel phenomena of the advance of scientific racism in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the development of a ‘modern’ nationalism in Ireland, primarily through discourse around ‘Celticism’ and the Gaelic Revival of the period 1880 to about 1910. The concept of race, within the specific context of late 19th century and early 20th century Europe will be seen to be a critical influence on constructions of Irish identity in the period.

**Keywords** Identities, Irishness, Race, Celticism

## 1. Introduction

This paper will present a brief overview of research conducted on the parallel phenomena of the advance of scientific racism in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the development of a ‘modern’ nationalism in Ireland, primarily through discourse around ‘Celticism’ and the Gaelic Revival of the period 1880 to about 1910. I will argue here that the idea of race, as popularly conceived in the era, was a crucial element of formulations of Irish identity, and indeed, that Celticism and the Gaelic Revival were influenced by scientific racism, and in particular was constructed as an argument against the perceived rather lowly place of the Irish in the racial hierarchy of the era. While the confluence of these two historical phenomena appears almost intuitive when presented with the evidence, thus far it appears that most attempts to discuss race and the Irish in the era limit themselves to discussions of the racialisation of the Irish, as if it were entirely a one-way process of racial inferiority being imposed, rather than a multi-faceted conversation, with the Gaelic Revival and Celticism refuting such inferiorisation, and further, asserting the relative superiority of the ‘Gaelic race’.

## 2. The Development of ‘Race Thinking’ in the Second Half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

It became commonplace in western societies by the mid-

nineteenth century to speak of the ‘English race’, French race’, German race’ etc (Baum, 2008; 42). Certainly, race and racism figured increasingly in the struggles of nation states, national bourgeoisie, and national working classes to navigate the dislocations wrought by capitalist development. In his seminal work *Race: a History of an Idea in the West*, Ivan Hannaford posits the second half of the nineteenth century as the crucial era in the development of notions of race, nation and the state (1996; 233). Banton and Harwood further emphasise the middle of the century as the era which saw the peak of “race’s career as a scientific concept” (1975; 30). Those who insisted on the importance of race had by the 1850s achieved two things of great significance. Firstly the scientific world had accepted that comparative morphology (the study of the shapes and structures of the human body) was a valid procedure to distinguish a variety of anatomical types and to call them races. Secondly, the initiative lay with arguments advancing physical causes as the explanation of all human differences.

Therefore, between the 1840s and 1920s new theories about the ‘races of Europe’ flourished. Scientists were spurred by emerging social and political forces to adapt existing race ideas in novel ways, and certainly new nationalism was especially consequential... as John Higham succinctly put it, “under the pressure of a growing national consciousness, a number of European naturalists began to subdivide the European white man into biological types... for their part, the nationalists slowly absorbed biological assumptions about the nature of race, until every national trait seemed wholly dependent on hereditary transmission” (1967; 134). This racialisation was not a calculated effort by united ruling classes to divide and subdue working classes. Rather, this paper argues that racialisation was advanced by *both* ‘native’ elites, and working-class people from dominant ethnic groups who mobilised around racial ideas. Even some working people from subordinated groups, such as the Irish, reinforced racialisation processes. For example, in the late nineteenth century United States, Irish immigrants actively attempted to distance themselves from ‘Negroes’ to reposition themselves as racially white’ (see Roediger, 1991; 134 and Ignatiev, 1996; 34).

We suggest here that the inter-relationship between Anglo-Saxon and Celtic identities, in the commonly used

terminology of the era, became a key location for imagining and rearticulating notions of race, nation and particularly notions of 'civilisation'. As noted by George Stocking, 'the idea of civilisation, as it emerged in the eighteenth century, was seen as the destined goal of all mankind, and was in fact often used to account for apparent racial differences. By the nineteenth century more and more men saw civilisation as the peculiar achievement of certain 'races' (1982; 35). Europeans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were very ready to believe stories about the superiority of the white race (Banton and Harwood, 1975; 39). This was the case particularly for those narratives which somehow centralised their own national or racial identity. Certainly once the notion that the origins of state and nation were rooted in the pasts of Franks and Gauls, Anglo-Saxons, and Celts filtered into European's thinking, it became hugely influential, popular, and widely accepted as being 'evidently' so.

Of particular interest here is how this race thinking was formulated around notions of Anglo-Saxonism and Celticism. While clearly no one person can be 'credited' with inventing Celticism, Hannaford appears as accurate as ever in citing Ernest Joseph Renan as having a crucial influence on those who were to follow him. For Hannaford, he elevated the national history of the Celts, who, from his perspective, though disposed of by the industrial revolution, were blessed with the fixed disposition, condition, and character of a race remaining pure from all admixture (1996; 235). Interestingly here, Renan points to the supposed 'untouched' and 'pure' nature of the Celts, something which Gaelic revivalists also later stressed, particularly in opposition to Anglo-Saxon suggestions of Celtic racial inferiority. Terence Brown (1996; i) quotes at length from an enthusiastic- if eccentric - Scot, William Sharp who in 1895... prefaced a collection of... 'Celtic Tales' with a stirring open letter to the novelist George Meredith. It includes passages in which can be discovered the 'Celticism' idea, as developed from the works of Renan and others: 'in you the Celtic genius burns a pure flame. True, the Cymric blood that is in you moves to a more lightsome measure than that of the Scottish Gael, and the accidents of temperament and life have combined to make you a writer for great peoples rather than for a people. But though England appropriates you as her son, and all the Anglo-Celtic peoples are inheritors of your genius, we claim your brain. Now, we are a scattered band. The Breton's eyes are slowly turning from the sea... the Manxman has ever been the mere yeoman of Celtic chivalry; but even his rude dialect perishes year by year. In Wales a great tradition survives; in Ireland, a supreme tradition fades through sunset-hued horizons to the edge of darkness; but with you, and others not less enthusiastic if less brilliant, we need not despair. The Englishman may 'trample down the heather', say the shepherds of Argyll, 'but cannot trample down the wind'

Sharp here is in the grip of a powerful if inchoate idea, the idea of Celticism. He associates it with what he reckons a family of related tongues, but he also 'knows' it is a matter of

blood and spirit, which gave the idea its imaginative potency in the contemporaneous world. As we shall also see however, Sharp and Renan's quite positive analysis of Celts was hardly the international norm, quite the opposite in fact. Indeed, intriguingly Banton and Harwood note that Charles Darwin himself, who made no attempt to classify races observing that 'the naturalist had no right to give names to objects which he cannot define', appears to have held certain notions about Celts (1975; 36). In the *Descent of Man* he quotes approvingly an author who stated: 'given a land originally peopled by a thousand Anglo-Saxons and a thousand Celts- and in a dozen generations five-sixths of the population would be Celts, but five-sixths of the property, of the power, of the intellect, would belong to the Saxons who remained. In the eternal 'struggle for existence' it would be the inferior and less favoured race that had prevailed- and prevailed by virtue not of its good qualities but of its faults'.

### 3. The Irish, 'Celts' and Race

Before considering further the impact of race on formulations of Irish identity and nationalism, it would seem appropriate here to attempt to situate Irishness or the popular 'Celticism' of the era in terms of race thinking. The first great wave of Irish emigration, set off by the famine in Ireland between 1845 and 1849, was one of the first direct antecedents of the new European and North American conceptions of race. This new racialisation of the Irish was exemplified by similar responses in the United States, and the UK to Irish immigrants in the era. Social commentators from the dominant ethnic groups in the receiving countries- 'native' Scots and 'Anglo-Saxons' of England and the United States- increasingly described the immigrant Irish as racially deficient 'Celts'. The widespread belief in Victorian England, controversially outlined by L.P. Curtis in particular, that Englishmen and Irishmen were separated by clear-cut ethnic or racial as well as religious and cultural barriers was reinforced continually by political events in both countries (1997; 21). Intermittent rebellions and chronic agrarian unrest in Ireland, combined with the disorderly behaviour of some Irishmen in Britain, seemed to confirm the notion that Irish Celts were a sub-race with habits antithetically opposed to English norms. A rather similar perspective can be detected in U.S. culture in the period, as Jacobson notes; 'the racially inflected caricatures of the Irish at mid-century are well known, as when Harpur's depicted the 'Celt' and the 'Negro' weighing in identically on the scales of civic merit, though, by the 1890s even the Irish novelist John Brennan could write that the Irishness of the emigrants children showed in their 'physiognomy, or the colour of their countenances' (1997; 4).

Some of the most powerful language of racial differentiation in the period applied to the Irish according to numerous American commentators, particularly in recent years Ignatiev, Roediger and Jacobson. Beginning in the 1840s American comment on the Irish character became not

only more pejorative but also more rigidly cast in a racial typology... negative assessments of 'Irishism' or Celtism as a fixed set of inherited traits thus became linked at mid-century to a fixed set of observable physical characteristics, such as skin and hair colour, facial type, and physique... racialism thus provided a powerful frame for interpreting and explaining Irish immigrant behaviour of all sorts, and for rearticulating at every turn the unbridgeable chasm separating natives (Anglo- Saxons) from Immigrants (Celts). The confluence of US Anglo- Saxonism with burgeoning Irish immigration led Anglo- Saxon elites to produce a new racial discourse about the 'Celtic' Irish. By the 1850s references to the Anglo- Saxon and Celtic races in America and descriptions of the innate and ineradicable characteristics of each permeated many cultural institutions, indeed, in 1860 the US Bureau of the census divided the country's 'white' population into categories of 'native', foreign, and 'Irish' (Miles, 1982 p125). By the 1840s and 1850s the Irish were frequently described as 'a race, as a separate physical type... with (an associated) range of negative social and cultural characteristics' (Miles, 1982 p133). They came to be portrayed, in a largely negative and often sinister way, as the antithesis of the Anglo- Saxons, contrasting in all respects with the masculine qualities of industry, imperial vigour and progress of the latter. The Celtic peoples, ancient and modern, were characterised as 'timeless' in this way, and widely seen as primitive, even barbaric.

Crucially, from the perspective of this paper though, is the fact that this racial divide was evoked and respected on the Celtic side as well. Many of the Irish in America, in other words, fundamentally agreed with American commentators... that a discernable racial chasm separated the Celt from the Anglo- Saxon; and though these Irish observers rejected the argument of Celtic inferiority in all its shades, they rejected the idea of Celtic racial difference not at all. For them, no less than for their Anglo- Saxon contemporaries, physical differences marked an inner, natural 'difference' separating the two races undeniably... as Hugh Quigley wrote with considerable race pride, 'the modern Irish are the most genuine, unmixed, and unchanged Celtic race that exist on the globe. Even the most prejudiced writers against the Irish... acknowledge that Ireland, today, is the land where the world- renowned race is to be found in its purity and its ancient characteristics'. It is interesting that the discourse around racial purity, favoured by critics of the Celts, was the self- same discourse Celts used themselves in their defence. Irish editor James Jeffrey Roche indeed utilised this very notion to construct an inferiorisation of Anglo- Saxons, inverting the 'inferior Celt' discourse entirely; "let the Anglo- Saxon call the roll of his relations... and confess, with shame that a grand race like that of the puritan and pilgrim is vanishing... the fittest will always survive when they care to do so". Roche thus characterised the genetic contest between Saxon host and Celtic Immigrant in the very same terms as the staunchest of American Anglo-

Saxonists' (quoted in Jacobson, 1997; 53).

#### 4. The 'Celts' Write Back: The Gaelic Revival, Race and Celticism

This section must necessarily begin with an outline of the relative positions of Irish identity and Celticism in the context of the contemporaneous global racial order. Rather than engage in debate here as to Ireland's status as a colony, or not, this paper will presume that Ireland's colonial legacy is a rather ambiguous one. Neither was it as plainly one-dimensional as Irish nationalists have argued, nor was it entirely an element of Empire either. Alvin Jackson's description of Ireland as 'simultaneously a bulwark of the Empire, and a mine within its walls' appears persuasive (2004; 124). This very ambiguity however is even present in Irish attempts to assert race pride and counter arguments to Anglo- Saxonists' presumptions of superiority. As Hutchinson notes; the semi- colonial nature of British rule in Ireland underpinned not only Irish participation in Empire, but also, in some senses, Irish nationalism and the revolt against imperial rule (1987; 136). Hutchinson saw colonial rule in Ireland as a constraint upon the ambition of educated middle class Catholics, and he argued that these thwarted men and women found an alternative outlet for their aspirations within the cultural revival and the new nationalism of the late nineteenth century. They turned to Gaelic Revivalism as a way to draw together the idea of a 'natural' race or nation, based on supposed shared origins. A combination of factors can be seen to have influenced this attempted historicisation of Irish or indeed Celtic difference from the Imperial power. While disputing the lowly place in the racial hierarchy assigned to the Irish, a broader acceptance of racial discourse common to the era is clearly present in the contemporaneous Irish literature. When this was coupled with the slowly advancing modernity of the Irish nation state and its middle classes in particular, new modes of discourse and imagining of Irish identity were required. The Gaelic Revival, with its emphasis on the timeless purity of the Celtic Irish seemed to provide a means of both responding to the perceived racial ambiguity of the Irish, and the frustrations inherent in Ireland's failure to prosper.

This point is further supported by the work on nationalism of Benedict Anderson and to an extent Ernest Gellner. Both emphasise how nineteenth century nationalisms expressed modern forms of 'mass identity' which only became possible with mass literacy and education (see Fanning, 2009; 9). Fanning argues that the dominant sense of what it was to be Irish drew heavily on the nationalist cultural revival, itself founded on a romanticised 'Celticism' of the previous century in works by Renan, Lhuyd, and others (2009; 10). In the case of Ireland's supposed Celtic origins however, Fanning's utilisation of Gellner's 'amnesia' appears a rather generous interpretation, describing a 'sifting' of the past. This paper would argue that a far more inventive process occurred, with large swathes of the Irish 'past' being created

out of very little, if any, actual evidence. The 'Celtic Revival' of the end of the last century did much to foster what Kenneth Jackson terms this 'preposterous idea' (1971). A group of writers, approaching the Celtic literatures (about which they usually knew very little, since many of them could not read the languages at all) with a variety of the above prejudice conditioned by Aesthetic movements and their own individual turns of mind, were responsible for the still widely held belief in the dim 'Celtic Twilight' (Yeats' term). Although scholars have long known, and all educated people really acquainted with the Celtic literatures now know, that this is a gross misrepresentation, the opinion is still widely held (Sims- Williams 1996; 97).

It appears valid to pause for a moment to briefly consider the extent to which there is any historical, genetic or archaeological merit to assignments of 'Celtic' origins to the Irish. It is certainly the case that as Sims- Williams notes, there are several uncomfortable problems relating to 'Celticity' include the following: ancient and medieval writers never used the term 'Celtic' to describe the people and languages of Britain and Ireland; the medieval Irish, Scots and Welsh did not believe that they sprang from a common stock and showed no fraternal feelings for each other, the Irish and Welsh seem hardly to have perceived the special affinity between their languages before Edward Lhuyd; and the idea of 'Celtic literature' hardly existed before Ernest Renan (1996; 98). It seems no ancient people calling themselves Celts lived in Ireland and, though there was certainly some exchange of population, there were no major migrations of continental Celts to the island either. Where then does the notion of 'Celts' come from, if not from the archaeological evidence- on the ground- as it were? McCaffrey and Eaton suggest that the widespread use of the word 'Celtic' in its application to things Irish is actually rooted mainly in the nineteenth century, firstly as a label for the 'racially deficient' Irish migrants to the US and UK, and later, in what became known as the Gaelic Revival (2002; 51). Celticism therefore, operates as an example of the 'imagining' of the nation that Anderson so famously discussed, and certainly in the Irish case suggests the accuracy of Karl Deutsch's definition of a nation as being a group of persons 'united by a common error about their ancestry and a common dislike of their neighbours'!

The construct 'Celt' carries with it, in its origin and original currency, the echo of a specific power relationship. Those who were called 'Celts' in British and American public discourse as we have seen, had, at first, little power over the fact that they were called that name; they underwent, passively, a process of scrutiny, investigation and classification over which they had no control. To name the world around us means, at least to some extent, and at least intellectually, to control it. To be so named means to be subject to someone else's control. That state of affairs recalls similar processes elsewhere. It recalls the construction of concepts like 'the Negro' or the 'oriental' as analysed in its hegemonic intent by critics such as Franz Fanon and Edward Said. the idea that a periphery is backward, bypassed by

history, lost in time, is constant and almost universal in modern historical consciousness... and to the extent that Ireland is the most peripheral of all the Celtic regions, Ireland became, paradoxically, the most centrally Celtic of them all. Attempts to take control then of Ireland's supposed Celtic- ness operate at the centre of what the Gaelic Revival was for its participants.

The literary and cultural movement known as the Gaelic Revival then, was an attempt by Irish writers and folklorists of the period to establish a sense of identity for the Irish at a time when its very status as a white European race was being interrogated as never before. The aforementioned 'darker side' to the enthusiasm for Celtic distinctiveness which came more to the fore in the nineteenth century: racial, as well as cultural distinction came to be made between Celts and Anglo- Saxons. This could be to the political advantage of the former, as it might give them the prestige of being a distinct population with prior claim to the islands; however, it was fashionable among (largely Anglo- Saxon) scientists, and useful to many politicians, to rank racial groups... Celts- especially the Irish- were widely deemed to be whites inferior to Anglo- Saxons. This helped to give a scientific gloss to discrimination. The insular Celts, ancient and contemporary, came to be conceptualised in terms of, and in resistance to, these dominant modes of thinking. The Gaelic Revival then, can be best considered as on one hand an assertion of the ancient origins of the Irish, and therefore their right to nationhood, and on the other, a refutation of presumptions of Celtic racial inferiority (Mathews, 2003; 45).

## 5. Conclusions

JRR Tolkien, a noted scholar of old and middle English, was- over half a century ago- rather cynical concerning the 'Celtic' origins of the Irish, he noted somewhat caustically that; "to many, perhaps to most people outside the small company of the great scholars, past and present, 'Celtic' of any sort is... a magic bag, into which anything may be put, and out of which anything may come... Anything is possible in the fabulous Celtic twilight, which is not so much a twilight of the gods as of the reason". This quote captures effectively the extent to which Ireland's 'Celtic' past is invented, or imagined, in Anderson's sense.

The historical evidence tends to suggest that, prior to the late nineteenth century, the term 'Celtic' was hardly used, and certainly those peoples who later became 'Celts' had no sense of ethnic solidarity with each other. Further there is little, if any, archaeological, genetic or historical evidence to support the notion that contemporary Irish people have a genetic link to continental Celts at all. Rather, Ireland's apparent Celticism became in the nineteenth century a location or container for contesting the supposed racial inferiority of the Irish. For Anglo- Saxonists, Celts were by definition racially inferior. The Irish embrace of their supposed Celtic ancestry and origins can be read as an attempt to assert claims of a natural or 'rightful' difference

and therefore independence, as well as a symbol around which a new 'race- pride' could be asserted.

Finally, why then has race not been assigned a more significant role in discussions of the Gaelic Revival? It seems evident that the language of racial unity was among the staples of Irish nationalist polemic, and nationalist leaders continually sounded the chords of racial obligation and a race bound group destiny. This paper would agree with Catherine Nash in noting that the construction of the categories of Celtic and Anglo- Saxon by nineteenth century philologists should be situated within wider nineteenth century efforts to scientifically establish racial groups and thus categorise human difference (2008; 51). The evidence suggests to this researcher that ideas of race served both colonial *and* Irish nationalist discourses of difference. Numerous commentators have discussed the racialisation of the Irish in the UK, and the US, yet little research exists which places race at the centre of internal Irish discourses of Celticism, nationalism and history. In this era it seems -at least possible- that the very historical ambiguity of Irishness within a colonialist and racial hierarchy, made questions of race rather less comfortable ones for scholars to address, particularly after independence in 1922, serving as a reminder of the insecurity of Ireland's assertion of a noble, pure Gaelic and Celtic past? The overview of this topic presented above is clearly far from exhaustive, and is certainly not intended to serve as the 'last word' on the matter. Evidently, this is a very under researched area of inquiry, and considerably more work is required before the nuance inherent in interactions between notions of scientific racism on one hand, and Irish identity on the other, can be fully understood. Therefore it is this researcher's hope that this article can serve as an opening to a scholarly conversation on the topic.

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