

# HISTORY AND THE IRISH QUESTION

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'HISTORY is more backward in Ireland than in any other country', wrote J. R. Green's Anglo-Irish widow fiercely in 1912.

> Here alone there is a public opinion which resents its being freely written, and there is an opinion, public or official, I scarcely know which to call it, which prevents its being freely taught. And between the two, history has a hard fight for life. Take the question of writing. History may conceivably be treated as a science. Or it may be interpreted as a majestic natural drama or poem. Either way has much to be said for it. Both ways have been nobly attempted in other countries. But neither of these courses has been thought of in Ireland. Here history has a peculiar doom. It is enslaved in the chains of the Moral Tale—the good man (English) who prospered, and the bad man (Irish) who came to a shocking end.[1]

Through her own works on early Irish society, Mrs Green had set herself, not to produce a scientific or a poetic history, but simply to reverse the moral of the story; and with the establishment of the Irish Free State ten years after this outburst, events seemed gratifyingly to show that the good had come into their kingdom. The re-writing of history after this consummation, following the practice of most irredentist states, is part of the subject of this paper; but more important, perhaps, is the intention to establish such a process in a wider framework, stretching back over a longer period.

If the connections seem at times tenuous, and the omissions glaring, they may charitably be accounted for by the relief of abandoning the microscopic detail of high politics in favour of drawing a more general picture. Nonetheless, the use of history by politicians and intellectuals provides a theme which will recur: the frequent personification of 'Ireland' in nationalist writing is matched by the personal identification, on the part of a long line of Irish activists, of their country's history with their own identity. 'The general history of a nation may fitly preface the personal memoranda of a solitary captive,' wrote John Mitchel in his *Jail Journal*; 'for it was strictly and logically a *consequence*

[1] Alice Stopford Green, *The Old Irish World* (Dublin and London, 1912), 9.

of the dreary story here epitomized, that I came to be a prisoner.'[2] Time and again national history is presented as an actor in personal autobiography; by the same token, Irish leaders emphasised the apostolic succession of nationalism by identifying themselves with specific evangelists from the country's past.[3]

This was just one way in which past history was made to serve a legitimising function for present commitment. In a wider sense, moral attitudes could be inferred from ideas of 'Gaelic' or even 'Celtic' practice and traditions, overlaid and corrupted by conquest. In late nineteenth-century Ireland, egalitarianism was held to have flowered in the Celtic mists, much as in England democracy was supposed to have flourished in the Teutonic forests. As professional historians, we can ignore both myths; as revisionists, Irish scholars have gone so far as to dismiss most of the canon of Irish history as conceived by the generation of 1916. However, mid-twentieth-century revisionism can itself be seen as part of the pattern whereby the study of Irish history reacts in a Pavlovian way to the dictates of politics; and the whole process can only be elucidated by considering the roots of the Irish discovery of their past, and the resulting interpretations of that past, on both sides of St George's Channel. It must also involve, at the conclusion, some consideration of very recent history, trenching upon politics. In so doing, this paper exposes itself to most of the criticisms it levels at history's treatment of the Irish question; and thus becomes part of the process.

The concept of nationalism has been defined and analysed with increasing rigour in recent years; the history of the Irish case, for obvious and pressing reasons, has been the subject of a spate of recent enquiry.[4] Fortunately, this is no part of my brief; but it is relevant to examine the point when the writing of Irish history came to have an effective political function in the public domain. The background to this is *not* to be found in the series of explanatory 'histories' from the time of Giraldus Cambrensis, and including Fynes Moryson, Edmund Spenser, Edmund Campion, Sir John Davies and company.[5] The didactic

[2] John Mitchel, *Jail Journal* (Dublin, 1918 edn.), xlvi. All the Young Irelanders adopted this approach; see also Sir Charles Gavan Duffy's 'A Birdseye view of Irish History', interposed as chapter 4 of *Young Ireland: a fragment of Irish History* (1880).

[3] Parnell with Grattan, for instance, and Pearse with Emmet; see D. Ryan, *Remembering Sion* (1934), 119.

[4] S. Cronin, *Irish Nationalism: a history of its roots and ideolgy* (Dublin, 1980); T. Garvin, *The Evolution of Irish nationalist politics* (Dublin, 1981); D. G. Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland* (1982).

[5] Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald de Barry), *The Irish Historie composed and written by Giraldus Cambrensis* (completed in 1185), in Raphael Holinshed, *The First Volume of the Chronicles of England, Scotlande and Irelande* (1577); Edmund Spenser, *A view of the State of*

nature of their work was self-confessed, and obvious to contemporaries; their function can only be understood in terms of their time. In some quarters, much emphasis is put on the fact that these works represent English manipulation of early Irish history in order to excuse the Conquest.[6] So, indeed, they do; but to expect otherwise is to require a detached historical sense exercised on behalf of Irish history, at a time when it was not applied to English history, or any other. The more sophisticated tradition which concerns us begins with antiquarian explorations in the late eighteenth century, compounded with the various senses of nationalism—colonial, Gaelic and revolutionary—stirring in Ireland at the time.

The coherent effort to establish an Irish past did, of course, rely on some of the material in the earlier histories just mentioned; but the work of the Royal Irish Academy (founded in 1786) and other learned institutions of the time was far more directly inspired by the exploration of bardic tradition, the archaeological evidence scattered profusely throughout the island, and the exploration of indigenous folk culture.[7] As elsewhere in Europe, those most enthused by the process were rarely themselves of the 'indigenous folk'; as so often in Irish history, they were largely the Anglo-Irish middle classes, and the sociological explanations for this (especially in the age of surviving, if largely ignored, penal legislation against Catholics) are obvious. But antiquarianism reacted with the discovery of folk tradition and the Ossianic cult to produce history-writing which attempted to use evidence in place of hearsay, and to present a history of the land and its various peoples, rather than a rationalisation of administrative or religious policy in the guise of history.[8] Liberal nationalism both used and was reinforced by the antiquarian and romantic view of early Irish history; the capacity of the land to assimilate its invaders, a matter for censure in earlier commentaries, was implicitly now approved of.

A number of caveats should be established early on. For one thing,

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*Ireland* (completed 1596); Edmund Campion, *A Historie of Ireland: written in the yeare 1571*; Richard Stanihurst, *The Historie of Ireland* (1577; Stanihurst edited Campion and Cambrensis); Sir John Davies, *A discovery of the true causes why Ireland was never entirely subdued* ... (1612); Fynes Moryson, *An history of Ireland from the year 1599 to 1603* (written *c.* 1617).

[6] See for instance N. Lebow, 'British Historians and Irish history' in *Eire-Ireland*, viii, no. 4 (1973), 3-38.

[7] See Norman Vance's pioneering article 'Celts, Carthaginians and constitutions: Anglo-Irish literary relations, 1780-1820' in *Irish Historical Studies*, xxii, no. 87 (1981), esp. 220 ff.

[8] Especially Charles O'Conor, *Dissertations on the ancient history of Ireland* (1780) and Sylvester O'Halloran, *Introduction to the study of the history and antiquities of Ireland* (1772).

the scholarship of these polite enthusiasts was far from impeccable, and remained prone to wishful thinking; the seductive spirit of Ossian beckoned them down false trails like a will-o'-the-wisp. The real importance of the Royal Irish Academy in collecting Irish antiquities did not come until later, with George Petrie's advent to the Council in the 1830s. And a certain amount of hokum was inseparable from the fashion: the philology of Charles Vallancey, obsessed with the Punic root of the Gaelic language and culture, is one example;[9] the later controversy over the origins of the Round Towers another;[10] the work of Thomas Comerford, who attempted to relate Gaelic culture to that of ancient Greece, might also be instanced.[11] Nor should 'liberal nationalism' be anachronistically defined; Petrie, Caesar Otway, Frederic Burton and other enthusiasts could still be of Unionist beliefs as well as of Protestant stock;[12] and while it is always remembered that the 'Patriot' politician Henry Flood left a celebrated bequest to encourage study of the Irish language, it is often forgotten that he did so for antiquarian, not revivalist, purposes.[13] But artistic and literary evidence shows that it was from this time that the currency of thought, running on antiquarian and historiographical lines, familiarised the Irish mind with shamrocks, wolf hounds, round towers, the cult of Brian Boru, and the image of an ecumenical St Patrick. And the historical work of Thomas Leland and John Curry combined a repudiation of the old propagandists with the discoveries of the new antiquarians, to produce detailed and fairly scholarly interpretations of Irish history.[14]

By 1800, political developments in America and France as well as in Ireland itself infused a new direction into the current of historical thought; but even after the trauma of rebellion and Union, the political uses of antiquarianism and of early Irish history continued. An improving Ascendancy landlord like William Parnell produced amateur histories with titles like *Enquiry into the causes of popular discontent in Ireland* (1805) and *Historical Apology for the Irish Catholics* (1807), in

[9] Charles Vallancey, *An essay on the antiquity of the Irish language, being a collation of the Irish with the Punic languages* (1772): see Vance, op. cit., 226–7.

[10] See J. Sheehy, *The rediscovery of Ireland's past: the Celtic Revival 1830–1930* (1980), 62. An antiquarian priest, Father Horgan of Blarney, finally in desperation built one himself, 'to puzzle posterity as antiquity has puzzled me'. See W. R. Le Fanu, *Seventy years of Irish Life* (1893), 175–6.

[11] Thomas Comerford, *History of Ireland from the earliest accounts of time to the invasion of the English under King Henry II* (1751).

[12] See F. Grannell, 'Early Irish ecclesiastical studies' in *Irish Anglicanism 1869–1969* (ed. Fr. M. Hurley, S.J.) (Dublin, 1970), 39–50.

[13] See Sir Laurence Parsons, Bt, *Observations on the bequest of Henry Flood* (Dublin, 1795).

[14] Thomas Leland, *The history of Ireland from the invasion of Henry II* (London, 1773); John Curry, *An historical and critical review of the civil wars in Ireland* (1775).

between prospecting for antiquities and restoring a seventh-century church at Glendalough.[15] The Gaelic Society of Dublin was founded in 1807, declaring that 'an opportunity is now, at length, offered to the learned of Ireland, to retrieve their character among the Nations of Europe, and shew that their History and Antiquities are not fitted to be consigned to eternal oblivion'; others followed.[16] In fact, the heyday of patriotic antiquarianism was nearly past; but the heyday of patriotic historiography was at hand.

The nature of the 'patriotism', however, was not yet exclusive. From the 1830s, Church of Ireland scholars devoted themselves to research into early Irish ecclesiastical history; their findings had a forum in Petrie's *Irish Penny Journal*, founded in 1840 to explore 'the history, biography, poetry, antiquities, natural history, legends and traditions of the country'. Of course, Irish Anglicans had an apologetic and propagandist motivation, besides a 'patriotic' one; their preoccupation, then and later, was to establish their church as the true 'Ancient, Catholick and Apostolic Church of Ireland', the uncorrupted continuation of early Irish Christianity rather than the offshoot of Tudor statecraft.[17] This aim vitiated much of their research. Nonetheless, a tradition of restoration, fieldwork, and the recording of antiquities helped towards the understanding of the past. This was greatly reinforced by editions of early Irish texts prepared by the Irish Record Commission (1810–30) and the Irish Historical Manuscripts Commission (founded in 1869), and by the facsimile edition of medieval codices issued by the Royal Irish Academy; if commentaries tended to apologetics, texts remained relatively uncorrupt. And some Irish historians at least had already been impressed by the sceptical spirit of Henri Bayle, and were determined to doubt all testimony and tradition; notably Edward Ledwich, whose *Antiquities of Ireland* consciously attempted to demolish 'bardic fictions'.[18]

These developments were accompanied by a new wave of predictable but sound histories of Ireland, too long to detail here, but vitally important in considering the early nineteenth-century background to intellectual patriotism in the age of Young Ireland. Many used ori-

[15] See my *Charles Stewart Parnell: the man and his family* (Brighton, 1976), chap. 3. Parnell used illustrations from early Gaelic customs and history which show familiarity with the historiographical developments of the day.

[16] See *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Ireland*, i (1808). Other societies included the Iberno-Celtic Society (1818), the Irish Archaeological Society (1848), the Celtic Society (1848), and the Irish Archaeological and Celtic Society (1853).

[17] See Grannell, op. cit., for a consideration of this.

[18] Rev. Edward Ledwich, *The antiquities of Ireland* (1790). For a full critique see D. Macartney, 'The writing of history in Ireland 1800–1830', *Irish Hist. Stud.*, x, no. 40 (1957), 347–63.

ginal records, critically analysed; many attempted to distance themselves from contemporary political preoccupations. But the overall impression was to show early Ireland as bright with culture, not dark with barbarism; the Celt was no longer considered congenitally addicted to massacre; the methods of conquest employed by England in Ireland were generally deprecated. Such reassessments did not, of course, percolate through to the English public;[19] but, aided by Thomas Moore and the fashion for Irish ballads, they helped reinforce the sense of Irishness which the ideologues of Young Ireland exploited so astutely in the 1830s and 1840s.[20] 'On the neutral ground of ancient history and native art', wrote Sir Charles Gavan Duffy long afterwards, 'Unionist and nationalist could meet without alarm.'[21] This was not, however, the case; and it is a disingenuous statement, reflecting the position of Gavan Duffy the federalist and ex-colonial governor in 1880, not of Gavan Duffy the ardent Young Irelander in 1840. Ancient history and native art could be easily manipulated; for instance, those who wrote slightingly of the reliability of annalistic evidence were often consciously criticising the strain which identified with the Gaelic polity and thus implicitly attacked the Union. And even the membership cards of Young Ireland made their own statement, being embossed with images from Irish history establishing the iconography of sustained struggle which was to characterise the nationalist version of Irish history. The figures of Brian Boru, Owen Roe O'Neill, Patrick Sarsfield and Henry Grattan were posed against harps, sunbursts, and the Parliament House in College Green, wreathed by shamrock.[22] Young Ireland politicians like Thomas Davis graduated into politics by writing historical studies—in Davis's case a vigorous but tendentious rehabilitation of the 'Patriot Parliament' of James II.[23] And though Davis combined this with a belief in 'learning history to forget quarrels',[24] his successors took a directly contrary approach.

For, even as the materials for studying Irish history were slowly being collected and arranged in a way that might facilitate dispassion-

[19] See Lebow, op. cit., 33–5.

[20] On ballads see G. D. Zimmerman, *Irish political street ballads and rebel songs 1780–1900* (Geneva, 1966) and M. Murphy, 'The Ballad singer and the role of the seditious ballad in nineteenth-century Ireland: Dublin Castle's view', *Ulster Folklife*, xxv (1979), 79–102.

[21] Gavan Duffy, *Young Ireland*, 280.

[22] Sheehy, op. cit., 37. Also see ibid. on subjects of Irish historical painting at this time.

[23] *The Patriot Parliament of 1689, with its statutes, votes and proceedings*, edited with an introduction by Sir Charles Gavan Duffy (New Irish Library, Dublin, London and New York, 1893).

[24] See B. Farrell, 'The paradox of Irish politics' in *The Irish Parliamentary Tradition* (Dublin, 1973), 19–20.

ate analysis, a tendentious and political priority was taking over. It is doubtful if the great antiquarians John O'Donovan, Eugene O'Curry and George Petrie would have recognised themselves under the title given by the Reverend Patrick McSweeney to his study of their historical work in 1913: *A Group of Nation-Builders*. But that is what constituted their importance to retrospective opinion. And history-writing after the Union, even under titles which trumpeted themselves as 'impartial', very often directed itself at a political moral.[25] In the campaign for Catholic Emancipation both sides used 'history' to prove and disprove massacres and disloyalty over the centuries; during parliamentary debates 1641 and the Treaty of Limerick were as bitterly contested as the actual issue of Catholic rights in 1829, rather to the bewilderment of English Members.[26] This was emblematic of what was to come.

Ironically, in the early nineteenth century, a composite—one might almost dare to say interdisciplinary—approach to the Irish past was just becoming possible; it was represented by the epic effort put into the early work of the Ordnance Survey, which was contemporarily described as associating geography with 'the history, the statistics, and the structure, physical and social, of the country'.[27] Thomas Larcom recruited scholars of the quality of O'Donovan, Petrie and O'Curry, and furnished his researchers with demanding and densely written instructions about discovering the traditions of their designated areas.[28] To explore the history of place-names alone meant embarking on something very like the history of a locality. But the finished result of this magnificent conception stopped at one parish study, finally produced in November 1837, and so loaded with accretions and detail that the original idea of accompanying every map with a similar study

[25] See Rev. Denis Taaffe, *An impartial history of Ireland, from the time of the English invasion to the present time, from authentic sources* (4 vols., Dublin, 1809–11); cf. Francis Plowden, *An historical review of the state of Ireland, from the invasion of that country under Henry II, to its union with Great Britain on the first of January 1801* (2 vols., London, 1803).

[26] Macartney, op. cit., 359.

[27] *Dublin Evening Mail*, 27 Mar. 1844.

[28] 'Habits of the people. Note the general style of the cottages, as stone, mud, slated, glass windows, one story or two, number of rooms, comfort and cleanliness. Food; fuel; dress; longevity; usual number in a family; early marriages; any remarkable instances on either of these heads? What are their amusements and recreations? Patrons and patrons' days; and traditions respecting them? What local customs prevail, as Beal Tinne, or fire on St John's Eve? Driving the cattle through fire, and through water? Peculiar games? Any legendary tales or poems recited around the fireside? Any ancient music, as clan marches or funeral cries? They differ in different districts, collect them if you can. Any peculiarity of costume? Nothing more indicates the state of civilisation and intercourse.' J. H. Andrews, *A paper landscape: the Ordnance Survey in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Oxford, 1975), 148.

was abandoned.[29] The controversy over this has been long-lived and need not be disinterred here; Alice Stopford Green, who grandiloquently interpreted the Ordnance Survey team as 'a kind of peripatetic university, in the very spirit of the older Irish life', believed that their work magically 'revealed the soul of Irish Nationality and the might of its repression', and was accordingly suppressed by the Government.[30] The Survey's most recent historian, in a classic study, points out the injudiciousness and impracticality of the original concept, and the shapelessness attendant upon interpreting 'modern topography' as 'ancient history'.[31] The politics of the Report irrepressibly assert themselves; but its historiographical background is of at least equal significance, for here can be seen archaeology, geography and a cautious sense of historical enquiry working together.

However, as Gavan Duffy cheerfully admitted, that 'cautious and sober strain' of learning was chiefly the province of middle-class scholars, some of the gentry, and dilettante Protestant clergy;[32] and the future was with Young Ireland's *Library of Ireland* series of pocket histories, the street ballad, the pious cliché, and the historical novel (to write one of which was Davis's great unfulfilled ambition).[33] The revival of Irish historiography which was built upon by Young Ireland, by Celtic Revivalism, and even by an impeccable Unionist like W. E. H. Lecky, was dominated by this consciousness—as evident in the assumptions of learned pamphlets as in those of hedge schools. A history lesson delivered by a teacher in a Munster hedge school in the early nineteenth century was described by a contemporary:

> He praises the Milesians, he curses 'the betrayer Dermod'—abuses 'the Saxon stranger'—lauds Brian Boru—utters one sweeping invective against the Danes, Henry VIII, Elizabeth, Cromwell, 'the Bloody' William of the Boyne, and Anne; he denies the legality of the criminal code, deprecates and disclaims the Union; dwells with enthusiasm on the memories of Curran, Grattan, 'Lord Edward', and young Emmet; insists on Catholic Emancipation; attacks the

[29] T. F. Colby, *Ordnance Survey of the county of Londonderry, volume the first: memoirs of the city and north-western liberties of Londonderry, parish of Templemore.* See Andrews, op. cit., 157 ff.

[30] A. S. Green, op. cit., 56–61. Also see M. Tierney, 'Eugene O'Curry and the Irish tradition' in *Studies*, li (1962), 449–62.

[31] Andrews, op. cit., 173–7.

[32] *Young Ireland*, 75, n.

[33] Ibid., 289. See also John Banim, *The Boyne Water* (1826), reprinted in 1976 by the Université de Lille with an introduction by Bernard Escarbelt. On the *Library of Ireland* see also M. Buckley, 'John Mitchel, Ulster, and Irish nationality, 1842–1848', in *Studies* lxv (1976), 30–44, which analyses Mitchel's contribution to the series, and Boyce, op. cit., 161–2. Gavan Duffy remarked that Irish history was 'ransacked' for suitable examples and arguments; *Young Ireland*, 104.

> Peelers, horse and foot; protests against tithes, and threatens a separation of the United Kingdom . . .[34]

This vividly depicts history being elided into politics, and into the sense of national identity built upon a powerfully articulated consciousness of past grievances as much as present discontents.

And this was the historical consciousness displayed at popular levels by the Irish to countless Victorian travellers, who on their fact-finding missions were constantly exposed—half fascinated and half appalled—to the rhetoric of Irish nationalist history. Sometimes, indeed, they seem to have been unconsciously subjected to the Irish taste for guying their own image; the experiences of innocents like Mr and Mrs S. C. Hall, as well as those of the hard-headed Thackeray and Carlyle, record many ironies enjoyed at their unwitting expense by the cynical natives.[35] Travellers from the Continent, like de Tocqueville and de Beaumont, may not have been exempt either.[36] But de Beaumont, if he did not originate it, popularised the genocidal theory of England's historical policy towards Ireland; and the same note of vehement moralising enters the history of his compatriot Thierry, warmly praised by Gavan Duffy.[37] Other foreign publicists entered the field, including Karl Marx.[38] And, finally, the demotic view of Irish history found its way by unlikely channels into the English consciousness.

This was not always acknowledged, at the time or since; and some of those responsible tried later to cover their tracks. Macaulay's *History* is notable for its scathing remarks on Irish barbarianism,[39], Robert Southey's Toryism was notoriously unreconstructed, and Lord Lytton

[34] P. J. Dowling, *The Hedge Schools of Ireland* (1935), 111–12.

[35] See Mr and Mrs S. C. Hall, *Ireland, its scenery, character etc.* (3 vols., 1841–3); Thomas Carlyle, 'Reminiscences of my Irish Journey' in *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* xxiv (1882), May–July; William Thackeray, *The Irish Sketch Book* (1843). On this Irish tendency see my article 'Parnell and his people: the Ascendancy and Home Rule', *Canadian Jnl. of Irish Studies* vi, no. 1 (1980), 110–11.

[36] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, ed. J. P. Mayer (1958); Gustave de Beaumont, *L'Irlande sociàle, politique et religieuse* (Paris, 1839).

[37] *Young Ireland*, 167; Augustin Thierry, *Histoire de la Conquête de l'Angleterre par les Normands* (Paris, 1825).

[38] Marx notably in his articles in the *New York Tribune*: 'A small *caste* of robber landlords dictate to the Irish people the conditions in which they are allowed to hold the land and live on it' (11 July 1853); 'the Irish landlords are confederated for a fiendish war of extermination against the cottiers' (11 Jan. 1859), etc. Engels's view was that 'Irish history shows one what a misfortune it is for a nation to have subjugated another nation; all the abominations of the English have their origin in the Irish Pale': Engels to Marx, 24 Oct. 1869, in *Ireland and the Irish Question* (Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1971), 274. Both Marx and Engels laid heavy emphasis on Irish 'national character' as a motive force in Irish history; see I. Cummins, *Marx, Engels and National Movements* (1980), 109.

[39] See especially *History of England from the Accession of James II*, ii. 128.

became the rabidly anti-Irish hymnologist of the Primrose League. But in youth Macaulay wrote epic poetry about the Gaelic resistance to Strongbow, Southey eulogised Robert Emmet, and Lytton produced verses commemorating Hugh O'Neill's war against Elizabeth.[40] Even as unlikely a figure as Samuel Smiles was inspired to write the history of a people whom one would have expected him to condemn as more opposed to self-help than any in the world. 'It is necessary that Irish history should be known and studied for we are persuaded that *there* only is the true key to the present situation to be found—*there* only are the secret springs of Irish discontent to be traced.'[41]

Most Victorian intellectuals felt that this was so; though the argument is not, in fact, self-evidently true, and in terms of economic policy at least it may be strongly contested.[42] But every Victorian pundit dipped into Irish history and whatever panacea he was manufacturing emerged subtly altered.[43] 'I know tolerably well what Ireland was,' confessed John Stuart Mill to an Irish economist, 'but have a very imperfect idea of what Ireland *is*.'[44] This could stand as an epigraph for the ruminations of others as well as himself; and it was reflected in the lacunae and contradictions so evident in Mill's own writings on

[40] In May 1885 Lytton sent Churchill, as commissioned, 'The Lay of the Primrose', of which the last verse ran:

> When, O say, shall the Celt put his blunderbuss down,
> Cease to bully the Commons, and menace the Crown?
> When shall Erin be loyal, and Britain repose,
> Neither fawning to rebels, nor flying from foes?
> That shall be, saith the Primrose, nor ever till then,
> When the country is honestly governed again,
> When the realm is redeemed from the Radical's hand
> And the Primrose comes blossoming back to the land.

(Lytton to Churchill, 18 May 1885; Churchill MSS., Churchill College, RCHL v/601.) It does not appear to have found its way into print.

[41] Samuel Smiles, *History of Ireland and the Irish people, under the government of England* (1844), iv. Cf. Gavan Duffy, *Young Ireland*, 81: 'Many men refrain from reading Irish history as sensitive and selfish persons refrain from witnessing human suffering. But it is a branch of knowledge as indispensable to the British statesman or politician as morbid anatomy to the surgeon.'

[42] See especially B. Solow, *The land question and the Irish economy 1870–1903* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973).

[43] Carlyle, predictably, was the exception. Towards the end of his Irish tour he concluded: 'Remedy for Ireland? To cease generally from following the devil ... no other remedy that I know of ...' ('Reminiscences of my Irish Journey', iii, 440). Earlier he had, however, been impressed by the Royal Irish Academy museum: 'really an interesting museum, for everything has a certain *authenticity*, as well as national or other significance, too often wanting in such places'. Ibid, 27.

[44] J. S. Mill to J. E. Cairnes, 29 July 1864, quoted in E. D. Steele, 'J. S. Mill and the Irish Question: *The Principles of Political Economy* 1848–1865' in *Hist. Jnl.* xiii, no. 2 (1970), 231.

Ireland.[45] It has been shown how untypical was his pamphlet *England and Ireland*, when viewed in the canon of his work; but it is with this strident piece, subjecting economics to a moral and political approach to landholding, that his views on Ireland are identified. And though the pamphlet argued—as he himself reiterated afterwards—*for* the Union, its effect was to reinforce the nationalist opposition to the measure. On a different level but in a similar manner, Matthew Arnold's belief in Celtic qualities, though part of an argument for bringing Celtic culture fully into the Anglo-Saxon cultural and political system, reinforced a view of early Irish history and an interpretation of Celticism which strengthened irreconcilable ideas of separatism.[46] The most influentially misinterpreted authority, however, in this unintentional *trahison des clercs*, was the historian W. E. H. Lecky.

Sitting down to write his *History of England in the Eighteenth Century*, Lecky was increasingly preoccupied by the history of Ireland: both as an Anglo-Irishman and as a rather troubled liberal. He knew the dangers, seeing Irish history as 'so steeped in party and sectarian animosity that a writer who has done his utmost to clear his mind from prejudice, and bring together with impartiality the conflicting statements of partisans, will still, if he is a wise man, always doubt whether he has succeeded in painting with perfect fidelity the delicate gradations of provocation, palliation and guilt'.[47] His *History of Ireland*, extracted from the original production for a special edition in 1892, remains a classic of liberal historiography; but despite his commitment to rationality and cool scepticism, it was dictated as much by topical preoccupations as guided by the pure light of research.[48] For one thing, he was writing *contra* James Anthony Froude, whose study of *The English in Ireland*[49] had maligned and belaboured the native Irish in a manner not to be seen again for a hundred years.[50] Lecky wrote against Froude, not for nationalist reasons, but because, as an Anglo-Irish Unionist, he feared that Froude's distortions by their very exaggeration would support the case being made by the nationalists for Home Rule. (He also worried deeply about the unintended effect of

[45] As incisively demonstrated in ibid., and in 'J. S. Mill and the Irish question: reform and the integrity of the Empire, 1865–1870', *Hist. Jnl.*, xiii, no. 3 (1970), 419–450.

[46] See J. V. Kelleher, 'Matthew Arnold and the Celtic Revival' in *Perspectives of Criticism*, ed. H. Levin (Cambridge, Mass., 1950), 197–221.

[47] His preface to the separate edition of the *History of Ireland* considers at some length the problems of writing Irish history and the steps he had taken to obviate them.

[48] See A. Wyatt, 'Froude, Lecky and the humblest Irishman', *Irish Hist. Stud.*, xix, no. 75 (1975), 267–85.

[49] J. A. Froude, *The English in Ireland in the Eighteenth Century* (1872–4). There is a large secondary literature of refutation by Thomas Burke, W. H. Flood, John Mitchel, J. E. McGee, and others.

[50] Until, that is, E. R. Norman's *History of Modern Ireland* (Harmondsworth, 1971).

his own early *Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland*, and opposed what would have been a very profitable reprint.) Both Froude and Lecky, in the context of the 1880s, saw their histories as relevant to the contemporary struggle for Home Rule. Froude argued, in Salisburian terms, the 'Hottentot' case of Celtic incapacity for self-government. Irish criminality 'originated out of' Irish Catholicism; Protestant virtues were commercial and social as much as religious. (This is not an anticipation of Weber and Tawney, but reflects the more exotic fact that Froude had regained his lost faith through a sojourn in a Wicklow rectory.) Culture as well as worship could be defined in religious terms, and 'Irish ideas' were a debased set of beliefs which should have been socialised out of the natives. Moreover, Anglo-Irish colonial nationalism was equally corrupt; Irish declarations that they would fight for nationhood should, then and now, be seen as bluff.

In contradicting the former statements, Lecky came near to implicitly refuting the latter: notably in his use of Grattan's parliament of 1782 to rehabilitate the Ascendancy class under siege in his own lifetime. He treated Orangeism and Protestant evangelicalism with faint distaste; not only a reaction against Froude, but a reflection of the fact that he was also the historian of the rise of rationalism. The exclusion of the Catholic gentry from political rights, and the ensuing development of the priest in politics, distressed him; he believed 'the secularization of politics is the chief measure and condition of political progress',[51] by which criterion Irish politics were regressing back to infinity. But this was precisely the lesson which many of his readers did *not* learn from his book; they came away from it imbued with ideas of Irish nobility, English pusillanimity, the missed chance of Grattan's Parliament, and the perfidiousness of the Act of Union. Lecky himself, by this stage of his life, did not want to see Grattan's Parliament restored; an opinion in which he believed Henry Grattan would concur.[52] But the immorality of Union seemed to many the moral of his book.

It was, moreover, a moral drawn by politicians. 'I read for the History School at Oxford in the 'seventies', recalled Herbert Gladstone, 'and subsequently lectured on history. Froude, Lecky, Matthew Arnold, Goldwin Smith and John Bright brought me to conviction on Irish affairs. Four of my guides lived to be distinguished Unionists. Nevertheless their facts and arguments led me to an opposite conclusion.'[53] Politicians of all colours had this nodding familiarity with

[51] H. Montgomery Hyde (ed.), *A Victorian historian: private letters of W. E. H. Lecky, 1859–1878* (1947), 41–2.

[52] Letter to *The Times*, 9 June 1886.

[53] 'The trouble with Ireland was not only social and racial. It could not be explained by unjust land laws or the sway of an alien established church. These were superadded embroilments. The root cause was English autocracy.' H. Gladstone, *After Thirty Years* (1928), 263–4.

Irish history (the most dangerous kind of acquaintance); and in private correspondence as well as public exchanges they wrangled good-naturedly about recondite issues. Thus Sir William Harcourt and Lord Randolph Churchill beguiled their time in 1889 with letters detailing the arguments for and against the honesty of Irish politicians in the eighteenth century.[54] The effect on W. E. Gladstone of his readings in Irish history was more cataclysmic. He had Gavan Duffy's word for it that Carew's campaign in sixteenth-century Munster was the closest historical parallel to the Bulgarian atrocities;[55] he had Lecky's authority for the iniquity of the Act of Union. 'He talked of the Union—' recorded Lord Derby:

> called it a frightful and absurd mistake, thought Pitt had been persuaded into it by the King, who believed it would act as a check upon the Catholics, said that every Irishman 'who was worth a farthing' had opposed it, and if he had been an Irishman he would have done so to the utmost ... quoted as I have heard him do before, a saying of Grattan about 'the Channel forbidding Union, the Ocean forbidding separation'—which he considered as one of the wisest sayings ever uttered by man—then dwelt on the length of time during which Ireland had possessed an independent, or even a separate legislature.[56]

Gladstone, as so many others, was dazzled by the historians' notions of Grattan's parliament: the acceptable face of Irish nationalism. The Irish pamphlet literature of the 1860s and 1870s, much of it written by insecure or improving landlords, adverted constantly to this; it had been much in the minds of those who initially supported Isaac Butt.[57] Samuel Ferguson, despite Ulster and Tory associations, had once called for the restoration of Grattan's Parliament (though the 'plebeianizing' nature of the Home Rule movement, and the Phoenix Park Murders, later moderated his ardour); it was a reaction shared by an important element of the gentry before the political polarisation

[54] See Churchill to Harcourt, 29 Nov. 1889, Harcourt MSS. 217/63, writing 'in support of a plea of "not guilty" to your charge of "bumptious ignorance"', and enclosing a pamphlet based on a speech at Perth (5 Oct. 1889) which involved a lengthy historical exegesis on the Union. Harcourt, who had earlier stated that not 'one honest man' in Ireland approved of the measure, replied at great length, with much historical reference to back up his case (Churchill MSS., RCHL xiv/3340).

[55] *Young Ireland*, 93.

[56] Derby's diary, quoted in J. R. Vincent, 'Gladstone and Ireland', *Proc. Br. Academy*, lxiii (1977), 223.

[57] A good example is H. M. D'Arcy Irvine's *Letters to the rt. hon. W. E. Gladstone on the Irish Land Bill* (1870), which speaks on behalf of 'the descendants of the Irish patriots of 1800, and the great body of the middle classes of all creeds', invoking the hallowed date of 1782.

of the 1880s. The idealisation of the late eighteenth century, a direct result of the way history had been written, remained; wandering in Wicklow in 1911 John Synge, no admirer of the class whence he sprang, mused that 'the broken greenhouses and moth-eaten libraries, that were designed and collected by men who voted with Grattan, are perhaps as mournful in the end as the four mud walls that are so often left in Wicklow as the only remnants of a farmhouse'.[58]

Among those politicians who idealised 1782, of course, the prime example was a Wicklow gentleman whose ancestors included both a famous anti-Union patriot, and the improving pamphleteer quoted earlier: Charles Stewart Parnell. He was not, in fact, a reader of the literature discussed above; his strength as an Irish politician lay in his *not* knowing Irish history.[59] But his preoccupation with Grattan's Parliament, as invented by popular history, irritated those of his followers who had thought Home Rule through. 'There is no subject about which Mr Parnell is so ignorant as that of Irish history,' wrote James O'Connor Power,

> and his contempt for books is strikingly shown in his reference to Grattan's Parliament. Mr Parnell deceives himself, through sheer indifference to history and a dislike of the trouble of inquiry into facts, when he tells us he wants Grattan's Parliament. Does Mr Parnell want a parliament in Dublin controlled by a few nominees of the British Cabinet who, under the Viceroy, constitute an Irish government in no way responsible to the Irish House of Commons? If not, then it is not Grattan's Parliament he wants, and it is not Grattan's Parliament he should ask for.[60]

But Grattan's Parliament, as legitimised by historians, remained the objective to be cited, for most of Parnell's audience. The idealisation was based on Sir Jonah Barrington's account of an Irish 'nation' that never was,[61] on Thomas Newenham's erroneous ideas of Irish prosperity as created by the parliament of 1782,[62] on Lecky's misplaced

[58] *In Wicklow and West Kerry* (Dublin, 1912), 17.

[59] For Parnell's knowledge of Irish history see F. S. L. Lyons, *Charles Stewart Parnell* (1977), 37–8, and 'The political ideas of Parnell', *Hist. Jnl.*, xvi, no. 4 (1973), 749–75.

[60] *The Anglo-Irish quarrel: a plea for peace* (1880).

[61] *The Rise and Fall of the Irish Nation* (Paris, 1933).

[62] T. Newenham, *A series of suggestions and observations relative to Ireland submitted to the consideration of the Lord President and Council* (Gloucester, 1825); for Newenham's ideas and influence see H. D. Gribbon, 'Thomas Newnham 1762–1831' in *Irish population, economy and society: essays in honour of the late K. H. Connell*, ed. J. M. Goldstrom and L. A. Clarkson (Oxford, 1982), 231–47. His ideas were repeated in Alice Murray's influential *Commercial and financial relations between England and Ireland from the period of the Restoration* (London, 1903).

faith in the influence of Foster's Corn Law,[63] and in the general prescription of nationalist historians that prosperity was automatically induced by native government and poverty by alien rule.

By the end of the nineteenth century, given that many such assumptions had become articles of faith for the English intelligentsia as well as the Irish people, it need not surprise us to find them governing the popular mind. What Lecky did for readers of the journals, A. M. Sullivan's *Story of Ireland* did for the general reader.[64] While Irish literacy seems to have been remarkably high in the late nineteenth century, the Irish literature which preoccupied the populace still awaits its historian; but a pioneering impressionist survey carried out in 1884 is of some interest in showing the hegemony enjoyed by Davisite poetry and history in one Cork parish. The list of histories most often borrowed from the Catholic Young Men's Society Reading-room told its own tale.[65] A popular conception of history facilitated the general view that saw the Home Rule movement as 'the heirs of all the ages that have fought the good fight after their several ways':[66] a notion which, while enabling Parnell to walk the political tightrope, was very far from the truth. And when Parnellism collapsed, the popular conception of history instantly located the catastrophe in the context of a long succession of Saxon (rather than Anglo-Irish) betrayals.

Sinn Fein was to prove the successor movement to the Irish Parliamentary Party, but in everyday ways which were strategically underplayed at the time;[67] its emphasis was rather upon a specific reading

[63] 'One of the capital acts in Irish history; in a few years it changed the face of the land and made Ireland to a great extent an arable instead of a pastoral country.' The case against this and other misconceptions is trenchantly summarised by Joseph Lee, 'Grattan's Parliament', in Farrell, op. cit., 149–50. 'Foster's Corn Law did not reverse an existing trend; at the very most it slightly accentuated it.'

[64] First published 1867; acutely analysed in Boyce, op. cit., 247 ff.

[65] J. Pope Hennessy, 'What do the Irish read?', *Nineteenth Century*, xv (Jan.–June 1884), 920 ff. 'Abbé MacGeohegan's *History of Ireland from the earliest times to the Treaty of Limerick*, with John Mitchel's continuation; D'Arcy McGees's *History of Ireland to the Emancipation of the Catholics*; Duffy's *Four Years of Irish History*, with the preceding fragment, *Young Ireland*; A. M. Sullivan's *Story of Ireland*; Justin H. McCarthy's *Outline of Irish History*; Lecky's *History of the Eighteenth Century*; Walpole's *History of Ireland to the Union*; O'Callaghan's *History of the Irish Brigade in France;* Justin McCarthy's *History of our own Times*—, these are the most read; but the works of Macaulay, Hallam, Froude, with Father Tom Burke's *Refutation of Froude*, are read also. In biography Madden's *Lives of the United Irishmen*, *The Life and Times of Henry Grattan*, Moore's *Life of Lord Edward Fitzgerald*, Wolfe Tone's *Memoirs*, Mitchel's *Jail Journal*, Maguire's *Father Mathew*, seem to be favourites.' Ibid., 926.

[66] *United Ireland*, 13 Aug. 1881.

[67] See D. Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish Life 1913–1921: Provincial experience of War and Revolution* (Dublin, 1977).

of history. The founder Arthur Griffith's ideas of autarky in economics and racial purity in politics fused an idealisation of Grattan's Parliament with a belief in Celticism which brought together the teachings of nineteenth-century historians, ancient and modern: the very name of his first weekly, *United Irishman*, was a reference to Mitchel and Tone, and the politics of Sinn Fein synthesised constitutionalism with implicit violence.[68] Griffith's 'Hungarian policy' of boycotting institutions in order to win separate but equal status under the crown was itself based upon misapplied historical 'parallels': as George Birmingham acidly pointed out, if Griffith was really following the Hungarian model he should have seen that the equivalent of the Magyars were the Anglo-Irish.[69] But Griffith, and still more his contemporaries among nationalist ideologues, defined 'Irish' in a way that implied, or even stated, its congruence with 'Gaelic' and 'Catholic'. And this sectional reading, the result of sectional history, set the tone of twentieth-century nationalism.

It was an identification which contradicted the official spirit of Young Ireland, but which had achieved dominance in the late nineteenth century, for political and educational as well as intellectual reasons.[70] Its articulation by the Gaelic Revival has been too much, and too ably, analysed to be worth pursuing here.[71] Shaw remarked that 'there is no Irish race any more than there is an English race or a Yankee race [but] there *is* an Irish climate which will stamp an immigrant more deeply and durably in two years, apparently, than

[68] See D. Macartney, 'The political use of history in the work of Arthur Griffith', in *Jnl. of Contemporary Hist.*, 8 (1973), 67. It is worth, however, quoting Griffith's utilitarian view of the ends of education: 'The secondary system of education in Ireland ... was designed to prevent the higher intelligence of the country performing its duty to the Irish State. In other countries secondary education gives to each its leaders in industry and commerce, its great middle class which as society is constructed forms the equalizing and harmonizing element in the population. In Ireland secondary education causes aversion and contempt for industry and "trade" in the heads of young Irishmen, and fixes their eyes, like the fool's, on the ends of the earth. The secondary system in Ireland draws away from industrial pursuits those who are best fitted to them and sends them to be civil servants in England, or to swell the ranks of struggling clerkdom in Ireland.' *The Sinn Fein Policy* (Dublin, n.d., but delivered as a speech to the first annual conference of the National Council, 28 Nov. 1905).

[69] George Birmingham, *An Irishman looks at his world* (London, 1919), 12–13.

[70] In 1868 Gerald FitzGibbon's pamphlet *Ireland in 1868* (noted by Marx as the distillation of the Ascendancy case) emphasised the complete lack of tension between Protestant and Catholic at university, on the Bench, and in professional life; but the same author's *Roman Catholic priests and national schools* (1871) held that the denominational nature of national schools had bred the idea of the true Irishman as Catholic and Celtic, and driven a wedge between those whose interests were objectively identical. The polarisation of politics in the 1880s saw the solidifying of this process.

[71] See especially F. S. L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890–1939* (Oxford, 1979).

the English climate will in two hundred';[72] but this reading of Irish history went as unheard as the expostulations of John Eglinton, George Russell, W. B. Yeats and others who saw themselves as no less Irish for being of identifiably settler descent. What happened instead was that the period of nationalist irredentism saw the culmination of historical writing which mined the past for political continuities and extrapolations.

Patrick Pearse is of course the prime mover in this process, and in recent years much has been done to clarify the misinterpretations and elisions upon which he built his view of history: a visionary world of early Celtic traditions where racial identification was automatic, a national sense was the paramount priority, and the sacrificial image of the ancient hero Cuchulainn was inextricably tangled with that of Christ.[73] Not only Pearse's youthful *Three Lectures on Gaelic Topics* (1897–8), but all he wrote and taught up to his execution in 1916, owed everything to John Mitchel and the *Library of Ireland*, and nothing to the researches of Eoin MacNeill, whose path-breaking lectures on early Irish society were delivered in 1904 and published two years later.[74] Pearse's use of Irish history was that of a calculatedly disingenuous propagandist; it was this that enabled him, for instance, so thoroughly to misinterpret Thomas Davis.[75] But if it is argued—as it might be—that the importance of Pearse's distortions is diminished by the fact that he was very far from being an accepted historian, it is instructive to turn to Alice Stopford Green, with whom this paper began.

Daughter of an archdeacon in County Meath, and wife of the greatest popular historian of the age, Mrs Green moved from revising her husband's works to writing medieval history on her own account, and ended as a formidable and virulently partisan advocate of Irish nationalism. This identification was reflected in works like *The Making of Ireland and its undoing* (1908), *Irish Nationality* (1912) and *The Irish State to 1014* (1925). A Freudian, or a seeker after symbols, might note that from the age of seventeen she spent seven years in semi-blindness, and during the ordeal relied upon an already well-stocked mind and

[72] G. B. Shaw, *Prefaces* (1938), 443–4. Cf. E. E. Evans, *The Personality of Ireland: habit, heritage and history* (revised edn., Belfast, 1981), 43–4, where an elegant demonstration is given of the 'mongrel' nature of the Irish 'race'.

[73] See Fr. Francis Shaw, 'The Canon of Irish History: a challenge' in *Studies*, lxi (1972), 113–52; R. Dudley Edwards, *Patrick Pearse: the triumph of failure* (1977); J. V. Kelleher, 'Early Irish history and pseudo-history', *Studia Hibernica*, 3 (1963), 113–27.

[74] On MacNeill see Michael Tierney, *Eoin MacNeill: scholar and man of action*, ed. F. X. Martin (Oxford, 1980), esp. 90–6.

[75] He identifies Davis with a commitment to physical force (*Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin, 1924), 323–4); but Davis, especially in a celebrated essay on 'Moral Force', specifically denied that this was an answer. See B. Farrell, op. cit., 19.

a remarkable memory; for her view of Irish history represented a similarly restricted vision, and an ability to feed omniverously on preconceptions. The concept of 'the Irish national memory', indeed, recurs obsessively in her works;[76] she may be seen as a representative of those Ascendancy Irish whose insecurity drove them to extremes of identification,[77] much as the urban nationalist intellectuals of the era embarked upon a narodnik search for 'the West'.[78] Mrs Green's pre-invasion Ireland was a classless, egalitarian 'Commonwealth', where 'the earliest and the most passionate conception of "nationality"' flourished;[79] 'democratic' continuities were asserted, the purity of 'Gaelic' culture emphasised, and the moral as well as aesthetic superiority of 'Gaelic civilization' trumpeted.[80] Despite her declarations in introductions and footnotes of indebtedness to Eoin MacNeill, the scholarly subtlety and tentativeness of his approach to the early Irish past had no part in Mrs Green's productions; and probably for that reason they entered the mainstream of Free State culture.

Here they remained, despite the accumulated findings of historians who showed that land patterns in early Christian Ireland argue for a landholding system very far from her idealised version of Gaelic society,[81] that the so-called High-Kingship of Ireland did not exist before the middle of the ninth century,[82] and that—as MacNeill indicated in 1904—the received framework of early Irish history was an invention of chroniclers from the ninth century and later, working assiduously for the glorification of their patrons. If, however, Mrs Green was fooled by what a later historian has crisply called 'the concoctions of the Annals',[83] she had a real and immediate reason for being thus fooled: the desire to establish a legitimate continuity for Irish separatism. George Russell, on the other hand, knew and

[76] See for instance *A history of the Irish State to 1014*, ix, 85, etc.

[77] Cf. George Moore on Douglas Hyde: 'By standing well with ... MPs, priests, farmers, shopkeepers ... Hyde has become the archetype of the Catholic Protestant, cunning, subtle, cajoling, superficial and affable.' *Vale* (1914), 249.

[78] This was, however, a process of some antiquity; see J. Sheehy, op. cit., 26–7, for a delightful description of Sir William Wilde's journey to the Aran islands in 1857 with a 'freight of Ethnologists and Antiquarians'.

[79] *History of the Irish State*, chap. 6.

[80] See especially *Irish Nationality*, 13, 14, 20–1, 28, 76, 95, 165.

[81] Notably the work of Kathleen Hughes; for a summary see Evans, op. cit., 58–9.

[82] See especially D. A. Binchy, 'The origins of the so-called High Kingship', Statutory Lecture, Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, 1959.

[83] Kelleher, 'Irish History and pseudo-history', 120–2, for the case against the 'Book of Rights' and other sources as twelfth-century creations. 'So extensive was the revision of historical evidence that we have, I would say, about as much chance of recovering the truth about early Christian Ireland as a historian five hundred years from now would have if he were trying to reconstruct the history of Russia in the twentieth century from broken sets of different editions of the Soviet encyclopaedia.'

accepted that his view of early Ireland was legendary and symbolic, and thus 'more potent than history'.[84] But the spirit of the Free State was more in accord with Mrs Green's literalism. Thus the *Catholic Bulletin*, bemoaning modern times in 1925, reflected Mrs Green's vision when it remarked 'it is very different in Ireland now to those old days when the poorest Catholic family would, on assembling in the evenings, discuss scholastic philosophy and such subjects'. And in the same year the same journal recommended Daniel Corkery's *Hidden Ireland* to 'G. W. Russell and his clique ... they will there see how the Gael, the one Irish nation with the Irish literature, regards and dealt with and will deal with that mongrel upstart called Anglo-Irish tradition and culture'.[85]

What followed was the institutionalisation of a certain view of history in the Free State, as instructed by the Department of Education from 1922, and memorialised in textbooks that did duty for the next forty years. Teachers were informed that 'the continuity of the separatist idea from Tone to Pearse should be stressed'; pupils should be 'imbued with the ideals and aspirations of such men as Thomas Davis and Patrick Pearse'.[86] Thus history was debased into a two-dimensional, linear development, and the function of its teaching interpreted as 'undoing the conquest'; even the architecture of the Irish eighteenth century was stigmatised as ideologically degenerate. One must be wary of falling into the same trap as those who, by condemning the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century historians, imply that scientific objectivity was possible at that time; textbooks in English schools in the 1920s and 1930s were hardly models of fairminded detachment. Moreover, in the new state of Northern Ireland, the recommendations of the Lynn Committee (established in 1921) reflect an equally strong sense of history as a tool, or weapon, to be manipulated through the schools.[87] But the popularisation of synthetically invented traditions in the Free State and the Republic served a directly political function important enough to bear analysis; and it came about as the result of a longer process than is sometimes assumed, a development which I have attempted to sketch in this paper.

[84] Æ (G. W. Russell), 'Nationality and Cosmopolitanism in Art', 1899, printed in *Some Irish Essays* (Dublin, 1906), 18.

[85] *Catholic Bulletin*, Feb. and June 1925, quoted in M. O'Callaghan, 'Language and religion: the quest for identity in the Irish Free State' (M.A. thesis, University College, Dublin, 1981).

[86] Ruth Dudley Edwards, op. cit., 341.

[87] 'We think that the powers of the Ministry to regulate and to supervise the books used in schools should be very strictly exercised in the matter of historical textbooks. No books bearing on the subject of history should, without previous official sanction, be permitted to be used in any schools under the Ministry.' Quoted in John Magee, 'The teaching of Irish history in Irish schools', *The Northern Teacher*, x, no. 1 (1970).

Moreover, the process itself created some contradictions and paradoxes which bring me to my conclusion. One is that the exclusive glorification of one strain in Ireland's complex history caused as a reaction the equally tendentious glorification of another, and led to an idealisation in some quarters of the 'Anglo-Irish': a sentimentalisation of the Bourbon spirit which distinguished a class notable in the main for their philistinism and bigotry, who, when the testing time came, failed in everything—social duty, political imagination, and nerve.[88] More important for my purpose is the major paradox: the fact that the institutionalised debasement of popular history was accompanied from the 1940s by a historiographical revolution in academic circles which, within twenty-five years, reversed nearly every assumption still being made by the textbooks. The foundation under Eoin MacNeill of the Irish Manuscripts Commission in 1929 had something to do with this; so did the formation of the Ulster Society for Irish Historical Studies, and the Irish Historical Society, a few years later. Bureaucratic philistinism, and an idiosyncratic attitude to the availability of government records, provided obstacles in North and South—as they still do. But a school of Irish history evolved, at the research level, which transcended traditional divides within Southern society and culture, as well as across the new border.[89]

By the 1960s, the work of a whole generation of scholars had exploded the basis for popular assumptions about early Irish society, the conquest, the plantations, the eighteenth-century parliament, the record of landlordism, and most of all the continuities between the various manifestations of 'nationalism': in some cases, reverting to ideas held in the past by minority opinion, but contemptuously dismissed.[90] By the mid-1960s, coinciding with signs of realism and adaptation in Irish politics, a number of indications presaged the establishment of a new interpretation of Irish history as a complex and

[88] This is reflected by the adoption among historians of George Russell's *Irish Statesman* as the agreed source for quotations showing the sanity and cosmopolitanism of the Anglo-Irish in the Free State; but as O'Callaghan (loc. cit., note 85) reminds us, it spoke for far fewer of them at the time than did the less liberal *Church of Ireland Gazette* or *Irish Times*.

[89] For a retrospect and a commentary see R. Dudley Edwards, 'Irish History: an agenda' in *Irish Hist. Stud.*, xxi, no 81 (1978), 3–19.

[90] The case for interpreting the Land War of 1879–82 as a revolution of rising expectations has been established by Solow, op. cit.; P. Bew, *Land and the national question in Ireland 1858–82* (Dublin 1978); W. E. Vaughan, 'An assessment of the economic performance of Irish landlords 1851–81' in *Ireland under the Union: varieties of tension* (Oxford, 1980), ed. F. S. L. Lyons and R. B. Hawkins, 173–200; J. Donnelly, *The land and the people of nineteenth-century Cork* (1974), and others. But it is also to be found in Anna Parnell's astringent 'Tale of a Great Sham' (N.L.I. MS. 12,144) and in Terence McGrath's *Pictures from Ireland* (1880) which described the Land War in terms of an adroit takeover by the middling tenantry, manipulating a credit squeeze.

ambivalent process rather than a morality tale. The Institute of Irish Studies was founded in Belfast in 1965, with the object of co-ordinating research in different disciplines. An important Report on the teaching of history in Irish schools appeared in 1966.[91] In the same year, a new Irish history school textbook was launched which at last replaced the didactic tracts that had done duty for decades.[92] Most symbolically, the commemoration of the 1916 Rising produced some unexpected historiographical results. One was a work by an Old Republican scholar which portrayed Dublin Castle in 1916 as characterised by well-meaning muddle and a vague acceptance of the desirability of Home Rule.[93] More strikingly, a Jesuit historian, commissioned to write an article on Patrick Pearse to celebrate the anniversary, produced an intemperate and violent attack on Pearse's preference for striking a rhetorical blow against an England that had put Home Rule on the statute book, instead of taking on the Ulster Volunteers who had prevented its implementation; and went on to denounce Pearse's falsification of past history in the interests of present politics.[94]

Not the least significant thing about this outburst, however, was the fact that the article was deemed unsuitable for publication in 1966, and saw the light of day six years later, only after its author's death. And this points up the paradox mentioned earlier. Revisionism in Irish history-writing has reached the point where a great deal which the nationalist historians tried to overturn has been dispassionately re-established.[95] It would be tedious as well as time-consuming to detail the areas of Irish history where the stereotypes have been upset.[96] This has been done with the aid of sociology, geography,

[91] See report on 'The Teaching of History in Irish Schools', 1966, in *Administration* (Journal of the Institute of Public Administration, Dublin), Winter, 1967, 268–85. This committee included historians who were influential in the new school of history-writing, and emphasised throughout the need for impartiality and an international perspective. Also see John Magee, *op. cit.*

[92] T. W. Moody and F. X. Martin, *The course of Irish History* (Dublin, 1966). Previously the field had been held by M. Hayden and G. A. Moonan, *A short history of the Irish people from the earliest times to 1920* (Dublin, 1921), and J. Carty, *A junior history of Ireland* (Dublin, 1932).

[93] L. Ó Broin, *Dublin Castle and the Easter Rising* (1966).

[94] See Fr. Francis Shaw, op. cit.; and for comments, F. S. L. Lyons, 'The dilemma of the Irish contemporary historian', *Hermathena*, cxv (1973), 53; Ruth Dudley Edwards, op. cit., 341–2; T. Brown, *Ireland: a social and cultural history* (1979), 287–9.

[95] See A. S. Green, *The old Irish World*, 38–9, which attacks as unhistorical the propositions that there was no national sense in early Ireland; that early Irish society had no parliament; and that the Celtic 'race' in Ireland was inextricably mixed with immigrant stock.

[96] A useful commentary is to be found in T. W. Moody, 'Irish history and Irish mythology', *Hermathena*, cxxiv (1978), 7–24; and a guide to recent research in *Irish historiography 1970–79*, ed. J. Lee (Cork University Press, for the Irish Committee of

economics, and most of all a new approach to statistics. Mentalities, Presbyterian as well as Catholic, have been examined.[97] In the early period the Irish Sea has been reinterpreted as the centre, not the frontier, of a cultural area. In the plantation era, patterns of settlement and the very framework of dispossession have been revised. Divergent local socio-economic and political cultures have been analysed; our sheer ignorance about—for instance—the effects of the Famine have been stringently exposed. In recent years Irish historians have presented their readers with a version of ancient Ireland where some estates were worked by slaves,[98] and of early Christian Ireland where much of the damage to churches was done, not by invaders, but by marauding rival abbots;[99] we have even been shown a Dermot McMurrough who is not the villain of the piece.[100] To take another period, the Fenians have been presented as 'easily recognisable and fairly typical mid-Victorians', using the movement as a vehicle for leisure activities and not particularly committed to Republicanism;[101] Sinn Fein has appeared as a similarly utilitarian and ideologically uncommitted machine for the brokerage of local power politics;[102] the Land War has been seen as 'sacrificing economic progress on the altar of Irish nationalism';[103] and 'traditional Ireland', so far from a frugal rural community exempt from the taint of materialism and modernisation, has been explosively derided by an Irish economic historian as 'full of rats who just did not know how to race'.[104]

It might be assumed that the point had been reached for which Shaw hoped in the 1920s, when he wrote of the national history:

> There are formidable vested interests in our huge national stock of junk and bilge, glowing with the phosphorescence of romance. Heroes and heroines have risked their lives to force England to drop

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Historical Sciences, 1979). Also see M. J. Waters, 'Irish history without villains: some recent work on the nineteenth century', *Victorian Studies*, xvi, no. 2 (1972), 223–4.

[97] See for instance D. W. Miller, *Queen's Rebels: Ulster Loyalism in Historical Perspective* (1979) and 'Irish Catholicism and the Great Famine' in *Jnl. of Soc. Hist.*, 9 (1975), 81–98; E. Larkin, 'The devotional revolution in Ireland, 1850–75', in *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, 77 (1972), 625–52; and the work of the late K. H. Connell, in *Irish peasant society: four historical essays* (Oxford, 1968).

[98] Evans, op. cit., 59.

[99] A. T. Lucas, 'Plundering of churches in Ireland' in *North Munster Studies*, ed. E. Rynne (Limerick, 1967), 172–229.

[100] F. X. Martin's 1975 O'Donnell lecture presented this unexpected picture.

[101] See R. V. Comerford, 'Patriotism as pastime: the appeal of Fenianism in the mid-1860s' in *Irish Hist. Stud.*, xxii, no. 87 (1981), 239–50.

[102] D. Fitzpatrick, op cit.

[103] B. Solow, op. cit., 204, and R. D. Crotty, *Irish agricultural production: its volume and structure* (Cork, 1966).

[104] J. Lee, 'Continuity and change in Ireland, 1945–70' in *Ireland 1945–70* (Dublin, 1979), 177.

> Ireland like a hot potato. England, after a final paroxysm of doing her worst, has dropped Ireland accordingly. But in doing so she has destroyed the whole stock-in-trade of the heroes and heroines ... We are now citizens of the world; and the man who divides the race into elect Irishmen and reprobate foreign devils (especially Englishmen) had better live on the Blaskets where he can admire himself without disturbance. Perhaps, after all, our late troubles were not so purposeless as they seemed. They were probably ordained to prove to us that we are no better than other people; and when Ireland is once forced to accept this stupendous new idea, goodbye to the old patriotism.[105]

But what has happened is a contrary process: academic revisionism has coincided with popular revivalism. The version of Irish history presented in P. S. O'Hegarty's influential *Ireland under the Union* persists: 'the story of a people coming out of captivity, out of the underground, finding every artery of national life occupied by the enemy, recovering them one by one, and coming out at last into the full blaze of the sun ...'.[106] This is true not only among politicians, but also among popular historians (and *a fortiori* television historians).[107] The simplified notions have their own resilience: they are buried deep in the core of popular consciousness, as recent analysis of folk attitudes in rural Ireland has shown.[108] The point should also be made that the triumph of revisionism in Irish academic historiography is a particularly exact instance of the owl of Minerva flying only in the shades of nightfall: events in the island since 1969 have both emphasised the power of ideas of history, and the irrelevance of scholarly revolutions to everyday attitudes.[109] (Nor have Irish readers, at any level, been particularly anxious to explore the historical analysis offered by scho-

[105] G. B. S[haw], 'On Throwing out Dirty Water', in *Irish Statesman*, 15 Sept. 1923; quoted in Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy*, 165.

[106] Dedicatory Preface to *A history of Ireland under the Union* (Dublin, 1952). It might be added that this is a work of wide reading and dense texture, in which original documentation and personal reminiscence is used to powerful effect; but it is nonetheless pervaded with an obsession.

[107] See for instance S. Cronin, op. cit., and R. Kee, 'Ireland: a television history'.

[108] See H. Glassie, *Passing the time: folklore and history of an Ulster community* (Dublin, 1982), 83, which records the 'education' transmitted in rural Fermanagh. '"It took the boys in Fenian days to carry it on until the Men Behind the Wire came ... The old fight had to be fought, and it had to be fought from the days of eighteen and sixty-seven, and indeed it went back further. Seventeen and ninety-eight, that was the first Rising. That's what you want to know: the background to everything."' Also see ibid., 639 ff., for observations about the keeping of 'alternative history' in local communities. In a similar manner, the memory of dispossession lasted on at atavistic levels, noted by Arthur Young, and often since (see for instance T. Garvin, op. cit., 16).

[109] Cf. however, P. M. Kennedy, 'The decline of nationalistic history in the West, 1900–1970' in *Jnl. of Contemporary Hist.*, 8 (1973), 77–100.

lars from other countries.)[110] But the discrepancy between beliefs in the university and outside it raises some questions. The transition from piety to iconoclasm may have been too abrupt for the change to percolate through. But the depressing lesson is probably that 'history' as conceived by scholars is a different concept to 'history' as understood at large, where 'myth' is probably the correct, if over-used, anthropological term. And historians may overrate their own importance in considering that their work is in any way relevant to these popular conceptions: especially in Ireland. The habit of mind which preferred a visionary Republic to any number of birds in the hand is reflected in a disposition to search for an Irish past in theories of historical descent as bizarre as that of 'the Cruithin people' today,[111] the Eskimo settlement of Ireland postulated by Pokorny in the 1920s,[112] the Hiberno-Carthaginians of Vallancey, or the Gaelic Greeks of Comerford.

Such an attitude goes with the disposition to legitimise, to praise and to blame, conspicuously evinced by the traditions of Irish history-writing as surveyed in this paper. Recent scholarship has, however, inclined towards the line of Goldwin Smith, articulated by his study of *Irish History and Irish Character* in 1861: 'There is no part of all this which may not be numbered with the general calamities of Europe during the last two centuries, and with the rest of these calamities buried in oblivion.' Elsewhere in his rather weary and acerbic, but essentially sympathetic study, the same author remarked that the 'popular writer on Irish history' should 'pay more attention than writers on that subject have generally paid to general causes, [should] cultivate the charities of history, and in the case of the rulers as well as the people, [should] take fair account of misfortunes as well as crimes'.[113] Professional Irish historiography has turned this corner; but the question which should interest future historians is why the 'popular Irish history' is taking so long to follow.

[110] The work of M. W. Heslinga, *The Irish border as a cultural divide* (Assen, Netherlands, 1962) has received less attention than might be expected; and Erhard Rumpf's pioneering *Nationalism and socialism in twentieth-century Ireland*, published in German in 1959, had to wait until 1977 for an English translation (under the imprint of Liverpool University Press). When carrying out research, Dr Rumpf was told 'by an authority on Irish politics' that he could not hope to analyse the dynamic of Irish nationalism: 'There was no sociological, sectarian or class problem or angle in the Sinn Fein movement, or any part of it, from beginning to end' (xv).

[111] I. Adamson's book *Cruithin: the ancient kindred* (Newtownards, 1974) is interpreted by Unionist ideologies as arguing for an indigenous 'British' people settled in Ulster before the plantations.

[112] Elegantly mocked by E. Curtis in the *Irish Statesman*, 7 Nov. 1925: 'We must beat our harps into harpoons and our wolfdogs into walruses.'

[113] Goldwin Smith, *Irish History and Irish Character*—'an expansion of a lecture delivered before the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society at their Annual Meeting in June 1861'—(1861), preface, and 193.