The Question of Celticism

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Abstract and Keywords

No account of Anglo-Irish literature can be complete without some attention to the question of its relation to Gaelic culture, the 19th-century decline of Gaelic as a vernacular and the movement to revive it. This chapter focuses on Celticism and the three dominating scholars of Celtic language. In the subsequent sections of this chapter, attention is focused on Ernest Renan and his scholarly interest on Celtic literature. The works of Matthew Arnold and his sentiments on the Celtic language are discussed in this chapter as well. In addition, the irritating yet instructive feature of Irish cultural life in the 19th century wherein there was a proliferation of similar or identical individuals is also discussed. Particular attention is given to Standish O'Grady who attempted to revive Anglo-Irish literature and who was a believer of the repetitive patterns of name in Irish culture as not mere biographical or social steps but visible features of a largely concealed totality in which the broader activities of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland took place.

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No account of Anglo-Irish literature can be complete without some attention to the question of its relation to Gaelic culture, the nineteenth-century decline of Gaelic as a vernacular, and the movement to revive it. An inspection of most books in the field will readily establish that such an attention is rarely granted. In so far as Anglo-Irish studies have been dominated by American and British critics, or by specialists whose academic training has steered them away from the necessary competence in the Gaelic language, this state of affairs can only be noted in silence. There is in addition, however, a symptomatic value in the studious neglect of Gaelic: it mutely signals the extent to which Anglo-Irish literature required the eclipse of Gaelic culture, and signals also the conflicting assumption of self-sufficiency on the part of the Gaelic Revival movement.

The movement associated with the foundation of the Gaelic League in 1893 should be seen in a European perspective of at least a century in duration. The underlying assumptions of the Gaelic Revival, in relation to nationality, culture, and language, form a distinctive part of the legacy of German romanticism. Doubtless there are unique and local factors at work in the Irish experience, just as the romantic origins of its philosophical formulation are not exclusively German. Nevertheless, the name of Johann Gottfried von Herder economically focuses the drastically new view of language initiated by his publication in 1772 of *On the Origins of Speech*. The comparative study of philology, which developed from Herder’s work, in turn gave rise to the indefatigable industry of Celtic philologists (many of them German). (p. 220) There is no doubt that scholarship in the area of Celticism constitutes perhaps the most refined and intellectually demanding exercise of the academic mind, but this should not blind us to the specific ideological and historic origins and affiliations of the discipline. No more than Practical Criticism, or sociology, can Celticism boast of an immaculate conception.
Professor Edward Said has written a provocative and persuasive analysis of the ideological investment of European colonial and imperial ambitions in the academic study of Orientalism. No comparable account of Celticism exists, nor indeed is there even any extensive history of the study of the Celtic languages written from within the assumptions of the discipline. There are certainly overlapping areas of impact—the poets who wove the Oriental theme into their work included (with Byron, de Nerval, etc.) Thomas Moore whose *Lalla Rookh* was published in 1817. More substantially, Yeats's early use of Indian imagery does have a specific (if concealed) line of communication with the British interest in the Indian Empire. These will seem isolated examples and unconvincing as such, for our criticism has inculcated in us a respect for the luminous integrity of texts, which are merely sullied by attempts to string up lines of communication with the equally atomized world of events. The totality lying behind the romantics' exploitation of the East, or the modernist commitment to the primitive, can only be recovered by the incorporation of every aspect of human production, behaviour, and speculation into a comprehensive history. Such an endeavour is repeatedly jeopardized by the discovery of potent, guilty, silences—questions which cannot be asked, let alone answered. Said enumerates a series of these in relation to 'western' attitudes to Arab culture, and a similar project is long overdue in the area of Celticism and the Gaelic revival which is its populist equivalent. One Oriental theme which has a long and orthodox history
One Oriental theme which has a long and orthodox history in Europe, a history transformed and rendered problematic in the nineteenth century is, quite simply, Christianity. Three particular aspects of the notorious Victorian crisis of belief (p. 221) deserve attention here, though their provenance lies well beyond that normally implied by the term ‘Victorian’. With the undermining of religious faith as a philosophical position, the sense of comprehensibility which religion had provided was in part replaced by an increased valorization of race as the living guarantee of the reality of the past and the cohesion of a secular society. The erudition of Ernest Renan and the violent irrationality of Julius Langbehn were alike assimilable to the nineteenth-century preoccupation with race, and Renan is particularly relevant in that his scholarly interests included Celtic literature.3 A further area of comparison between France and Ireland might be identified in the doctrines of political messianism optimistically enounced by Edgar Quinet in 1848 and the pervasive symbolism of messianic sacrifice and redemption found in Patrick Pearse’s life and works.4 Finally, and more familiarly, in Matthew Arnold (and others) there is the investment in literature and in culture generally of the sublime Hope which religious belief had previously entertained. All three of these aspects of Christian decline have a bearing on the emergence of Anglo-Irish literature and its relations with Celticism.

1. Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold
Ernest Renan (1823–92) is best known in the English speaking world as the author of the Vie de Jesus (1863), a humanist biographico-romance which led one inspired reader to deplore the absence of a climactic marriage at the end of the story. Renan had studied for the priesthood, and his abandonment of the Church resulted from doubts raised by his philological study of the scriptures. Essentially a humanist who perceived definite laws of progress in Nature and Man, he embarked on a vast examination of the evolution of languages, cultures, and religions as manifestations of the development of the human mind. Philosophically he owed much to Hegel, and while he spoke respectfully of science he was no positivist of the Comtean kind. In turning to examine the remains of Celtic civilization within France, he had available to him conventions as to the desolate beauty of Brittany but his treatment of them is distinctive:
Every one who travels through the Armorican peninsula experiences a change of the most abrupt description ... A cold wind arises full of a vague sadness, and carries the soul to other thoughts; the tree tops are bare and twisted ... a sea that is almost always sombre girdles the horizon with eternal moaning. The same contrast is manifest in the people: to Norman vulgarity, to a plump and prosperous population ... succeeds a timid and reserved race living altogether within itself, heavy in appearance but capable of profound feeling, and of an adorable delicacy in its religious instincts. A like change is apparent, I am told ... when one buries oneself in the districts of Ireland where the race has remained pure from all admixture of alien blood. It seems like entering on the subterranean strata of another world, and one experiences in some measure the impression given us by Dante, when he leads us from one circle of his Inferno to another.5

The essentially linguistic term Celtic is here seen almost fully clothed in its new usage— the Celts are a race, living virtually outside history, materially disadvantaged but, wonderfully spiritual and poetical. Although ‘reserved’ and ‘living altogether within itself, this race is in practice established by a process of comparison— the Celt is different from the Norman or the Briton, he lacks certain attributes of these more mundanely successful races and possesses other characteristics in greater proportion or in an intenser form, by comparison. The Celt vicariously maintains a piety and nobility now rendered impossible for Norman and Briton obliged to live in the world of time, happiness, plenty, and vulgarity. He is a godsend.

Renan's evocation of the Celtic other-world is punctuated with comments which acknowledge to some degree the strategies at work. Its religious genius is noteworthy because ‘nowhere has the eternal illusion clad itself in more seductive ... hues’ [my emphasis]; and, for all its eternality, ‘alas! it too is doomed to disappear, this emerald set in the Western seas.’6 Seductive appearance, spirituality, impermanence— it is not surprising to find that the Celt has a distinctive place in the sexuality of politics:
If it be permitted us to assign sex to nations as to individuals, we should have to say without hesitation that the Celtic race ... is an essentially feminine race. No other has conceived with more delicacy the ideal of woman, or been more fully dominated by it. It is a sort of intoxication, a madness, avertigo.7

Sex, nationhood, and race blur in this passage in a manner which is not characteristic of Renan, but still characteristic of the intellectual movement of which he was usually a more cautious proponent. It is at first reassuring to read that race, though ‘of capital importance to the student who occupies himself with the history of mankind ... has no application in politics’.8 Renan’s concern with race, then, is to be seen as part of a historical enterprise without any practical application in contemporary affairs: it is a category of research and not an objective. Yet the difference between this academicism and the followers of Langbehn is less great than first appears: the practical racists simply deny that there is a politics other than that of race, and Renan’s research ultimately is no counter to the philosophical application of Zyklon.

*Poetry of the Celtic Races* indicates one strand of European thought in mid-century already evident in rough narrative form in Lever’s *Luttrell of Arran*. Districts of Ireland where the race has remained pure from all admixture of alien blood provide the guilty, harassed gentleman of the world with a bride, and will provide his son with another: the virtue of Arran, sullied by John Luttrell’s intervention, will be restored by his son’s marriage to his cousin/sister. Through the lectures of Henri d’Arbois de Jubainville which J. M. Synge attended at the College de France in 1898, Renan and Lever are held in continuity with the more renowned Aran of the *Celtic Revival*. More than any figure of his generation Synge was aware of the bearing, not to say overbearing, of Herder, Renan, the *Revue celtique*, and *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* on the local endeavours of Douglas Hyde, Tomas O Criomhthain, and others.9
Renan’s essays then form a meeting point between the high sophistication of comparative philology as developed in Germany, France, and Britain from the initiative of Herder, and the popular perception of a Celtic fringe as an aesthetic survival in the industrial age. German scholarship has its part in that transition, but is less immediately documentable in its ideological negotiations. In Britain, where philology was dominated by Max Müller and the controversies he excited, Celticism became not so much an academic discipline—though there are important Welsh, Manx, and Scots Gaelic areas of inquiry—as it became the idiom of a new exchange between the elements of the United Kingdom, notably in the great election of 1868.

Matthew Arnold’s Oxford lectures On the Study of Celtic Literature (published 1867) stand at a junction between the German philology of Zeuss and Meyer and the ‘Celtic Twilight’ of Yeats. Though Arnold begins with memories of a holiday in Llandudno, and alludes to conditions in Ireland, the real source of his inspiration is Renan’s essay on Celtic poetry, at that time as yet untranslated into English. These lectures, together with the later Irish Essays (1882) present a fascinating insight into changing British attitudes towards Ireland. Notoriously, Arnold speaks of the Celt ‘always ready to react against the despotism of fact’ but, as he acknowledges, the phrase properly belongs to Henri Martin. The Gallic debt should not persuade us that Arnold is here indulging yet another of his preferences for continental authority so as to show up the paucity of local examples: Arnold’s Celticism is British through and through in its priorities and in its objective function, but his allusion to Henri Martin neatly indicates that Celticism is a strategy not exclusively British.

Seamus Deane has remarked the racial connotations of Arnold’s vocabulary, and this is only to be expected given its sources and antecedents. It is however an oversimplification to suggest that ‘Celtic Ireland did not in fact die with Lady Morgan or with Thomas Moore. It simply removed itself to England, encased in Burke’s capacious reputation, then blossomed there again in Arnold’s essays.’ The opening of On the Study of Celtic Literature dramatizes the diverse elements in Arnold’s strategy: echoes of Renan and Burke are simultaneously adjusted so as to produce a new synthetic and British Celticism:
The summer before last I spent some weeks at Llandudno, on the Welsh coast. The best lodging-houses at Llandudno look eastward, towards Liverpool ... At last one turns round and looks westward. Everything is changed. Over the mouth of the Conway and its sands is the eternal softness and mild light of the west; the lowline of the mystic Anglesey, and the precipitous Penmaenmawr, and the great group of Carnedd Llewelyn and Carnedd David and their brethren fading away, hill behind hill, in an aerial haze, make the horizon; between the foot of Penmaenmawr and the bending coast of Anglesey, the sea, a silver stream, disappears one knows not whither. On this side Wales,—Wales, where the past still lives, where every place has its tradition, every name its poetry, and where the people, the genuine people, still knows this past, this tradition, this poetry, and lives with it, and clings to it; while, alas, the prosperous Saxon on the other side, the invader from Liverpool and Birkenhead, has long ago forgotten his. And the promontoy where Llandudno stands is the very centre of this tradition; it is Creuddyn, the bloody city, where every stone has its story ...

The rhetorical exploitation of a topographical stage has rarely been so strenuously attempted. As in Renan's opening paragraph, the scene is divided between a prosperous horizon represented by lodging-houses (temporary dwellings) and an eternal horizon represented by the philology of stones, places, names. Arnold's second paragraph is just as deft in its manoeuvres:

(p.226) As I walked up and down, last August year, looking at the waves as they washed this Sigeian land which has never had its Homer ... suddenly I heard, through the stream of unknown Welsh, words, not English, indeed, but still familiar. They came from a French nurserymaid with some children. Profoundly ignorant of her relationship, this Gaulish Celt moved among her British cousins, speaking her politeneo-Latin tongue, and full of compassionate contempt, probably, for the Welsh barbarians and their jargon. What a revolution was here!
It is not excessive to see the maid as Arnold's reworking of Burke's Marie Antoinette, and indeed what a revolution there is in such a transformation. The maid is royal Celt compared with her hosts, the incomprehensible Welsh: for Arnold, she speaks a language which can be variously related to that which he speaks and that which he hears around him at the Llandudno eisteddfod. In the strict sense, then, he is not racialist in his thinking in that he stresses the fusion of peoples and the reduction of linguistic frontiers:

The fusion of all the inhabitants of these islands into one homogeneous, English-speaking whole, the breaking down of barriers between, the swallowing up of separate provincial nationalities, is a consummation to which the natural course of things irresistibly tends; it is an necessity of what is called modern civilisation, and modern civilisation is a real, legitimate force ...

The function of the Celtic element in this homogeneous United Kingdom is clear— as with Renan, Arnold sees the Celt as poetically unsuccessful, spiritually intense but disorganized, an embellishment without which 'the Philistinism of our Saxon nature' would be intolerable. Celticism is, therefore, part and parcel of the larger campaign mounted in *Culture and Anarchy*, a campaign directed against middle-class Philistines in high places. In 1865 when Arnold delivered the lectures— and even more so in 1867 when they were published— the Celtic lands of Wales and Ireland distinguished themselves drastically. Wales, as the holiday interlude demonstrates, is happily non-political: all that can be safely said of contemporary Ireland is hedged in regret:

**(p.227)** I know my brother Saxons, I know their strength, and I know that the Celtic genius will make nothing of trying to set up barriers against them in the world of fact and brute force, of trying to hold its own against them as apolitical and social counter-power, as the soul of a hostile nationality. To me there is something mournful (and at this moment, when one sees what is going on in Ireland, how well may one say so!) in hearing a Welshman or an Irishman make pretensions,— natural pretensions, I admit, but how hopelessly vain!— to such a rival selfestablishment ...
It is striking how little of contemporary Ireland Arnold allows his readers to see, allows himself in contrast to the panorama of Llandudno. Though he had been private secretary to the Marquis of Lansdowne when that great Irish land-owner was Lord President of the Council in Lord Russell’s government (1846–52), Arnold knew nothing of Ireland at first hand. The despotism of fact was unlikely to influence his view of the Irish Celts whom he increasingly identified with Irish Catholics. Indeed, the central strategy of Arnold’s Celticism is not racial in any sense that Langbehn would have accepted, but a modernized synthesis of imperialist and sectarian tactics. A most revealing passage in On the Study of Celtic Literature demonstrates the way in which comparative philology could be turned to such purposes, and in the course of it we see how unconsciously Arnold accepts the government of India as a Saxon responsibility, a matter of ‘brute fact’:

when Mr. Whitley Stokes, one of the very ablest scholars formed in Zeuss’s school, a born philologist,— he now occupies, alas! a post under the Government of India, instead of a chair of philology at home, and makes one think mournfully of Montesquieu’s saying, that had he been an Englishman he should never have produced his great work, but have caught the contagion of practical life, and devoted himself to what is called ‘rising in the world’,— when Mr. Whitley Stokes, in his edition of Cormac’s Glossary, holds up the Irish word triath, the sea, and makes us remark that, though the names Triton, Amphitrite, and those of corresponding Indian and Zend divinities, point to the meaning sea, yet it is only Irish which actually supplies the vocable, how delightfully that brings Ireland into the Indo-European concert!\(^{18}\)

\((\text{p.228})\) It is a pity that the proponents of Practical Criticism shunned the examination of such prose passages as this, for the very shape of the sentences is instinct with subliminal meanings— consider how the regret at Stokes’s purely useful exile in India, followed by the allusion to French authority, postpones and then sanctions the bringing of Ireland into the concert; and consider how gracefully ‘concert’ serves to indicate and conceal what modes of incorporation are ultimately invoked.
Though Arnold emphasizes what he regards as the Celtic element in English literature, and reveres the sanctity and poetry of the Celtic genius, it goes without saying that his assumed norm is industrial, nineteenth-century England. This may seem paradoxical in the author of *Culture and Anarchy*, the apostle of European culture to a philistine people, but the comparative study of Celt and Saxon obliges him to take up a distinct position. The ‘steady-going habit’ of the Saxon leads up at last ‘to the comprehension and interpretation of the world’, a world fortunately supplied with ‘doors that open, windows that shut, locks that turn, razors that shave, coats that wear, watches that go, and a thousand more such good things … the invention of the Philistines’. Flippancy cannot be dismissed as irrelevance, and the drift of Arnold’s totting-up of the comprehended world is that it is the world of commodities, all that the Celt has been blessedly unable to master. Thus Celticism serves not only to impose a certain identity on the Irish who are seen entirely outside history and outside any rudimentary sociology, it also serves to legitimize the activities of British industrial capitalism in the world. Far from being the soul of national resistance Celticism, as Arnold presents it, is a consolation, anodyne, or opium.

2. Standish O’Grady
One of the irritating and yet instructive features of Irish cultural life in the nineteenth century is the proliferation of similar or identical names among different individuals. (p. 229) Savants are irritated by the outsider's confusion of George Thomas Stokes (author of *Ireland and the Celtic Church*) and Whitley Stokes (co-editor of *Thesaurus Paleohibernicus*), or the fusion of Standish Hayes O'Grady (1832–1915) and Standish James O'Grady (1846–1928). Outsiders, on the other hand, are more likely to inquire as to the significance of this repetitious pattern. More closely defined, the area involved was the Protestant gentry and professional middle-class, a small and energetic aspect of Irish society. It is easy to accept the elevated and self-referring memoirs of members of this elite at face value, but Victorian Ireland was in practice a more various and complex society than is often admitted. Reiterated names indicated a desire to confirm identity and demonstrate continuity, just as the acquisition of property and a country 'place' enacted the need for security. In the aftermath of the Famine, and the Encumbered Estates Court sales of property, William Wilde built a villa on the shores of Lough Corrib, and named it Moytura after the legendary battle of the gods and aboriginal Irish. He and his wife christened their famous son, Oscar Fingall O'Flahertie Wills Wilde.
When Lord Chancellor Fitzgibbon and Dr Patrick Duigenan conducted their visitation in Trinity College early in 1798, the central figure in their investigation was Whitley Stokes (1763–1845), then a fellow of the college attached to the medical school. Stokes had been friendly with members of the United Irishmen, including Wolfe Tone, and was suspended from his fellowship for two years. Whether or not Lever had Stokes in mind as he wrote in *Luttrell of Arran* of subversion and discrimination in ‘the Irish university’ is an unanswerable question, but by the time the novel was published the Stokes family—like the fictional Luttrells—were looking towards the west of Ireland for mental sustenance. William Wilde led a party from the British Association to the Aran Islands in 1857 which included Samuel Ferguson, George Petrie, and William Stokes, son of the suspect United Irishman. While Lever's novel contributes to one transformation of the United Irishmen in the Victorian imagination by inserting an aristocratic participation in his fictionalizing of the movement, the descendants of those essentially middle-class radicals were channelling their disaffection with the Union into antiquarianism. William Stokes of 1857 was by profession a medical man and his antiquarian interests were those of a gifted amateur; his son, Whitley Stokes (1830–1909), completed the transformation in classic style by combining a career in the Indian civil service with a brilliant scholarly achievement as Celticist. Practical orientalism and philological rigour come together in a paradigm of ‘patriotism without nationalism’.
It would be wrong to dismiss such patterns as simply the haphazard product of a small community. They are neither accidental at the social level nor deliberate at the biographical level. Instead they should be seen as visible features of a largely concealed totality in which the broader activities of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland take place. One insistent advocate of this latter point of view was Standish James O’Grady who— it must be conceded— was as much victim as author of the politics he espoused. Here again, the duplicity of names is symptomatic— while Standish O’Grady (as I shall call him exclusively) was a historical explorer, novelist, and political propagandist, his cousin Standish Hayes O’Grady was a meticulous Celticist, editor of *Silva Gadelica* (2 vols., 1892). In the O’Gradys the immaculate non-politics of Celticism sets off its opposite like the distant explosion caused by a serene grenadier.

Standish O’Grady (1846–1928) was born in County Cork, at Castletown Berehaven. His father, Viscount Guillamore, was rector there, but the boy’s education at the local school and Tipperary Grammar School, followed by Trinity College Dublin and the Irish bar, was not the usual course for one of his class. In 1899 he recorded a more pertinent educational experience:

> I think I was in my 24th year when something happened which has since then governed the general trend of my life, and through me that of others. In a country house in the west of Ireland, near the sea, I had to stay indoors one rainy day, and though my appetite for literature was slender enough then, in default of other amusements I spent the time in looking over the books in the library. So I chanced upon O’Halloran’s History of Ireland, in three volumes— the first History of Ireland into which I had ever looked. He wrote, I think, in (p.231) the second decade of this century and before the rise of the Vallency School.20
Although the material is obscure to most readers, here is a dramatic conflict between the significance of form and that of content. Psychologically, the passage conforms to many of the conventions of the evangelical testimony—the inauspicious occasion, previous ignorance, the chanced-upon all-changing text. Such considerations might prompt the inquiry as to why the Anglo-Irish Revivial was called a ‘revival’—is it not in several of its personalities (Yeats, Synge, and O'Grady himself, and in a varied form, Lady Gregory) the achievement of displaced Irish evangelicals? Certainly, on the basis of the passage quoted, O'Grady is likely to fare better in a discussion of formal rhetoric than of intellectual content, for his remarks on Sylvester O'Halloran and Charles Valiancy are a tissue of impossible dates.21

Fired by his reading of O'Halloran, and later of Eugene O'Curry, O'Grady became a Victorian Sage. Carlyle and Marx featured in his reading as diversely as polemic, fiction, history, and journalism featured in his writing. It is easier to classify his work without regard to genre, and then subsequently to consider his drastic demolition of generic distinctions in the light of his outlook. First, O'Grady became preoccupied with early Irish history and epical material: in this area he wrote what purported to be histories as well as ostensibly fictional material set in this historical setting. Second—and this is not a chronological list of O'Grady's works—there are his various writings on Elizabethan Ireland, including his edition of *Pacata Hibernica*, a contemporary account of the war in Munster. Finally, there are his polemical works commencing with *The Crisis in Ireland* (1882) and including the editing of *The Kilkenny Moderator* and the *All Ireland Review*. 
O’Grady has been called the father of the Anglo-Irish revival, and in this regard his versions of the Cuchulain epic have a historical importance in their influence upon Lady Gregory and hence on W. B. Yeats. His writings on Elizabethan Ireland are extensively cast in stories and novels of an adventurous kind, principally intended for a juvenile readership. But the distinctions between history and fiction are jeopardized in the telling inscriptions O’Grady regularly added to presentation copies of his books. *Red Hugh’s Captivity* (1889) is described in its subtitle as ‘A Picture of Ireland, Social and Political in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth’, but an inscription added by O’Grady on the copy he presented to John Quinn reads ‘This book is history very slightly dramatized and historical fiction’, a remark which can hardly have guided the recipient excessively. On the other hand, *The Bog of Stars* (1893) is annotated by the author ‘All the tales ... may be read as History except the first ...’. Or again, *The Story of Ireland*:

I wrote this outline of Irish history rapidly in less than a month; looking up no authority during its composition except for the Battle of the Boyne. I wrote it thinking that the things I remembered because I felt an interest in them, might be interesting to the reader.

This is hardly encouraging to those who are in search of a literary history in which some kind of methodological procedure will be maintained. And yet O’Grady, for all his slipshod enthusiasm and missionary heat, is a useful indicator of the interactions of Ascendancy and Celticism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.
'The things I remembered because I felt an interest in them, might be interesting to the reader ...'. True it is merely an annotation hastily scribbled perhaps as he posted (p.233) the book to John Quinn in America. Nevertheless, it implies a greater importance lying in the subjective consideration of material than in the material per se: clearly O'Grady as historian has no truck with the von Ranke school of documented fact. In a further annotation on a copy of In the Gates of the North (1901), O'Grady comments: 'As to the manner of composition— I read all the old stories of Cuculain that I could find and the tale found here just emerged out of the consequent memories and meditations'.24 (Original emphasis). No historical writing of any worth descends direct from the facts in a simple and wholly straight-forward manner— so much may be agreed. But O'Grady's recurrent emphasis on the emergence of his writing 'out of the consequent memories and meditations' which follow his encounter with the latterday evidences of history should be distinguished from any dialectical notion of history as mediation. As the passage recording his first discovery of Irish history (or was it literature? He is unsure) O'Grady's forte is a kind of style. He admires the heroic gesture of Cuchulain, and is uninterested in the distinction between myth and chronicle. The validity of words is established by the memories they evoke; time is essentially conceived as the barrier between inner and outer worlds rather than the index of change and process in an objective social existence.
A predictable assessment of Standish O'Grady is that, in attempting many things, he failed in all. As a scholar he is frankly incompetent; as a novelist, he is concerned only with rudimentary aspects of the form; as a political writer, he is intermittently loud and silent. A more telling analysis might suggest that O'Grady symbolized in an uncanny way an incompleteness of social character which is highly relevant to the consequences of the ideology of Protestant Ascendancy. The O'Gradys of Limerick (where the family originated) were emerging in the years from 1820 onwards as a politically powerful and active family. His father having taken holy orders, Standish O'Grady grew up in Castletown Berehaven rectory at a time when the Church, as a profession (p.234) and a source of income, was staggering out of the disaster of the Tithe War and staggering towards Disestablishment. The family's legal background in the late eighteenth century placed them above the level of corporation politics where Protestant Ascendancy first took root, but landlordism on a small scale combined with dependence on a clerical income in the nineteenth steered the O'Gradys (or at least this branch of them) precisely towards those areas of Irish society in which the metamorphoses of Protestant Ascendancy were to take place. With an irony I fear unconscious, O'Grady's political writings expose the pretensions of Protestant Ascendancy in late Victorian days while his researches into the past demonstrate the allurement of Celticism at its least rigorous. These alternating commitments in his work are as it were the rival identities between which he never ultimately chose, not out of weakness but out of an apprehension of their partial unreality. The Standish O'Grady we meet in Yeats's writings is largely a creation of the poet's, the poet having experienced a similar self-division but having also pressed it to the point of dramatic confrontation.
Absurdity is all too easy to find in O'Grady. Take the episode of his editing *The Kilkenny Moderator*: in 1898, O'Grady took control of this thoroughly obscure and undistinguishedly loyal newspaper at the behest of a local magnate, Otway Cuffe, heir to the earldom of Desart, and within months he had involved his patron and his paper in a teacup scandal touching upon two continents. At the height of the Boer War, O'Grady decided to recruit an embryonic army through whom Irish consciousness might assert itself: with the militia training to fight for the British in the Transvaal and an ‘Irish Brigade’ recruiting support for the Boers, O'Grady was obliged to look elsewhere for his recruits and lighted upon the Church Lads Brigade, the Boys' Brigade, and the local Foxhounds. So far, the business was merely pathetic, but when the Colonel of the Kilkenny Militia was discovered to have appropriated (£6,000 from the Desart estate (of which he had been agent) local passions were raised. The Bishop of Ossory then invited the Colonel (in his official capacity) to address a review of the Church Lads Brigade, and O'Grady's newspaper intervened wrathfully:

(p.235) We are not at war with the Bishop but with the great and dominant social power in our midst, reaching up to the Throne and down to the smallest Kilkenny huxter, a power which has almost obliterated a sense of honour and public morality in the minds of a few and dulled and paralysed the conscience of the community. 26

The great power was the Marquis of Ormonde who had indeed been recently visited by the future George V and his wife and was shortly to receive Edward VII and his queen. Not surprisingly libel writs were thick in the air. O'Grady had earlier accused the Marquis of neglecting important political interests, and the Church Lads Brigade provided a convenient but ludicrous focus for the quarrel. More coldly considered, however, the episode exposed the largely decorative nature of Irish class terminology and the futility of cultural enterprise within the preserves of what was assumed to be the Protestant Ascendancy. It was O'Grady, however, rather than the Marquis who represented the Ascendancy, and his class rather than any residual aristocracy which led the movement known as the Celtic Revival.
O’Grady’s political writings per se commenced with *The Crisis in Ireland* (1882) in which he exhorted the landowners—or ex-landowners as they were soon to be—to take real heed of the existence and reality of the Land League and the epochal changes implied for Irish society. This was followed by *Toryism and the Tory Democracy* (1886) in which he took his lead from Randolph Churchill’s perception of the conservatives’ need to protect landlordism from a combination of capital and labour: this extended pamphlet is classically evangelical in its approach, addressing Irish land-lords first as a group and then singling out one nameless representative who is earnestly exhorted to take up his cross. The third political booklet, *All Ireland* (1898), deals with the revelations of the Childers Commission, a governmental body whose report proved the over-taxing of Ireland under the Union by a gross amount. All three works, in common with the novels and the ‘histories’ are obsessed with the notion of leadership, a quality singularly absent in the Ireland O’Grady (p.236) sees around him, where no one is willing to forgo simple pleasures in order to assume the role of national saviour. Two subsidiary elements, however, are in truth of great significance—the first is O’Grady’s recurrent attention to the condition of Irish aristocracy, and the second is his recurring metaphor of illusion.

In his introduction to *Pacata Hibernica* (1896) he condemned as doubly false ‘Mr Froude’s picture of the upright, God-fearing, and civilized Englishman contending against a flood of Celtic barbarism’ in the Tudor period.\(^{27}\) The Celtic element, identified here with the Irish population as a whole, is seen as elevated, civilized, and yet demotic. And when he is seeking to explain the condition of Ireland under the Union, he alludes to ‘The Stupefaction of the Ultonians’, one of his favourite episodes from primitive literature in which a great enchantment is at work:

> The political understanding of Ireland today is under a spell and its will paralysed. If proof be demanded for this startling assertion, how can proof to any good result be supplied? It is the same spellbound understanding which will consider the proof.\(^{28}\)

The imagery of spells, enchantments, and phantoms pervades the entire work, and the operations of ideology are well described in such terms:
We worship phantoms, and phantoms powerless *per se* once worshipped— so they tell me— become endowed with a terrible and mal ignant vitality and activity ... Heavy as lead, cold as death, the Great Enchantment ob ses ses the soul of the land, and not one but all classes lie supine under its sway— supine under the fanning of gigantic wings.

It covers the whole land, every class and order of men in this Island are held inescapably in the grip of that dead hand. With such a document in our possession as the Report of the Childers Commission, with such a preponderating political power as ours, and with such hosts of good British friends, why can we do nothing?— strengthless, purposeless and resourceless, as were the Ultonians sunk under the curse of the great mother and queen whom they had outraged, drowned in the avenging tides of that fountain of their life which they had polluted.  

**(p.237)** Paralysis and pollution are metaphors which will reappear in more familiar contexts in Joyce's *Dubliners* and Yeats's 'Purgatory'— here at least their political sense is inescapable. Politics, in such a condition as he sees Ireland, is described by O'Grady in two further metaphors emphasizing the unreal or partly apprehended nature of reality— Ireland is confronted by 'the Veiled Player', or her cards are in the hands of 'the Unknown Dealer'. The implication O'Grady obsessively strives to convey is the hidden or but partly known nature of that which confronts him. The spells and enchantments which have woven this condition are located, he claims, in the imperial parliament, 'that seemingly august yet really absurd assembly'. Parliament is the forum of class conflict, says O'Grady, and class conflict detracts from the national unity which is required in the crisis. Yet, this contempt for class politics is followed immediately by the most passionate outburst of the essay in which a specific class is denounced at length:
Aristocracies come and go like the waves of the sea; and some fall nobly and others ignobly. As I write, this Protestant Anglo-Irish aristocracy which, once owned all Ireland from the centre to the sea, is rotting from the land in the most dismal farce-tragedy of all time, without one brave deed, one brave word. Our last Irish aristocracy was Catholic, intensely and fanatically Royalist and Cavalier, and compounded of elements which were Norman-Irish and Milesian-Irish ... Who laments the destruction of our present Anglo-Irish aristocracy? Perhaps in Ireland not one. They fall from the land while innumerable eyes are dry, and their fall will not be bewailed in one piteous dirge or one mournful melody.30

The meaning of ascendancy implies the inevitability of a fall, just as it had arisen like a star in the astrological charts. O’Grady’s bitter condemnation of the Protestant Anglo-Irish aristocracy is remarkable in its total avoidance of the term Protestant Ascendancy, and its sarcastic insistence on the aristocratic status of the useless class under pressure. It remained to Yeats in particular to provide a suitable dirge and melody for the fall of the Protestant Ascendancy.
Ernest Boyd characterized O’Grady’s politics as a ‘detestation (p.238) of triumphant commercialism’. His separatism is based on a rejection of middle-class hegemony in the Union, and that founded on the notion that no such hegemony operated in Irish society. Given the evidence of the rich shop-keeper sailing at Kingstown while his son hunts with a fashionable pack, ‘the brewer and distiller, the successful manufacturer and contractor, the stock-broker’, such a notion is at least unstable. And at this point, the operations of Celticism once again become evident, not as the regalia of antiimperialism but as the eternal source of an unassailable aristocracy, unassailable because enchantingly unreal. In George Bernard Shaw’s Man and Superman (1903) Don Juan observes that ‘nothing is real here. That is the horror of damnation’ It would be rash to interpret Shaw as intending an expose of colonialism with its elaborate simulacrum of a metropolitan society, its theatrical representations— in Arnold’s term— its concert. It would be rash so to interpret Shaw, and yet he allows us to recall that curiously unnecessary image in Renan’s essay on Celtic poetry in which he compares entrance into Brittany or Ireland to ‘the impression given us by Dante, when he leads us from one circle of his Inferno to another’. Truly it is Yeats’s ‘Purgatory’ which alone can rid us of such hellish notions.

Notes:


(4) Francis Barker et al., edd., 1848: The Sociology of Literature (Chelmsford: University of Essex, 1978), pp. 265-


(6) Ibid.

(7) Ibid.
The Question of Celticism

(8) Ibid.


(11) Ibid.


(13) op. cit.

(14) Ibid.

(15) Ibid.

(16) Ibid.

(17) Ibid.

(18) Ibid.

(19) Ibid.


(21) O'Grady's carelessness and unreliability as a scholar see V. H. S. Mercier, ‘Don Quixote as Scholar: The Sources of Standish James O’Grady's *History of Ireland*, Long Room, vols. 22/23 (Spring/Autumn 1981), pp. 19–General History of Ireland DNB

(22) Ernest A. Boyd's *Ireland*s Literary Renaissance* (New York: John Lane, 1916), pp. 26–54Revue celtique;

(23) John R. McKenna, *The Standish O'Grady Collection at Colby College: a Checklist*,Colby Library Quarterly

(24) Ibid.


(27) Standish O'Grady, *Selected Essays and Passages*, p. 163.

(28) Ibid.

(29) Ibid.

(30) Ibid.

(31) Ibid., 'Introduction', p. 16.

(32) Ibid.


(34) op. cit.