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From Region to Nation: the Development of Irish Nationalist Historiography, 1880-1920

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will examine the major Unionist historians of Ireland in the 19th century, J.A. Froude and W.H.E. Lecky. It will then trace the growth of popular history in Ireland and the politicisation of history in the later 19th century by both Unionist and Nationalist, and the impact of this on the writing and teaching of history. Finally it will examine the development of Irish nationalist historiography in the early years of the 20th century, subsequently enshrined as orthodoxy by the Irish Free State after its foundation in 1922. If one looked at the cultural tropes associated with Ireland in the middle of the 19th century one would, without doubt, have viewed Ireland as a region of England. In terms of language, law and custom English was the only show in town, politically Ireland was part of the United Kingdom, economically it was dependent on England as a market for her agricultural produce, and her ruling, landed and state elites all looked to London. With the evolution of popular literacy in Ireland, however, along with the development of mass moral and political movements, Irish nationalism fed off a mixture of antiquarianism, propagandist histories and newly accessible documents to re-invent Irish history as a national history, meeting the political needs of the constitutional nationalists of the 19th century such as Daniel O'Connell and Charles Stewart Parnell, and the revolutionaries of the early 20th century such as Pádraig Pearse.

Déanann an páipéar seo anailis ar J.A. Froude agus W.H.E. Lecky, staraíthe Aontachtacha na hÉireann sa 19ú haois. Léiríonn sé fás stair an phobail, an dóigh gur iarr Aontachtaithe agus Náisiúnaithe sochar a bhaint as an stair go polaitiúil sa 19ú haois deireannach, agus an dóigh ar chuir an méid seo i gcion ar scríobh agus teagasc na staire. Scrúdaíonn sé, chomb maith, fás staireolaíocht náisiúnach na hÉireann ag tús na 20ú haoise - staireolaíocht lenar ghlac Saorstát Éireann go hoifigiúil i ndiaidh a bhunaithe i 1922. Má bhreathnaíonn muid ar Éirinn i lár na 19ú haoise, tchíonn muid ó thaobh teanga, dlí agus nósanna de gur réigiún de chuid Shasana í. Go polaitiúil, ba chuid den

Ríocht Aontaithe Éire; ó thaobh cúrsaí eacnamaíochta de bhí talmhaíocht na hÉireann spleách ar mhargadh Shasana, agus bhreathnaigh uasaicme na hÉireann, idir talaimh agus stáit, i dtreo London. Le fás litearthacht an phobail in Éirinn, áfach, chomh maith le forbairt mórghluaiseachtaí polaitiúla, thosnaigh an náisiúnachas Éireannach ag cumadh stair na hÉireann athuair mar an stair náisiúnta. San imeacht seo, bhain sé úsáid as an ársaíocht, as an bholscaireacht, agus as doiciméid a cuireadh ar fáil don chéad uair leis an stair náisiúnta a scríobh le baghaidh riachtanaí na náisiúnaithe bunreachtúla sa 19ú haois, cosúil le Daniel O’Connell agus Charles Stewart Parnell, chomh maith le riachtanaí na réabhlóidithe sa 20ú haois luath, cosúil le Pádraig Pearse.

During a sleepy summer afternoon in the House of Commons, London, on 30 June 1899 votes were being taken on the provision of parliamentary subsidies for various charitable bodies and public institutions. The Chief Secretary for Ireland, Mr Gerald Balfour, proposed the sum of £5,900 for the Public Record Office of Ireland and the Keeper of the State Papers in Dublin. The Member of Parliament for South Donegal, Mr MacNeill asked why he had been refused access to documents from the 1798 rebellion and the Act of Union, documents which another Member of Parliament, Mr Lecky, had been allowed to see. He publicly accused the Chief Secretary “of only allowing the perusal of those State documents by his own friends who would use them gingerly and not against the Union”. Mr Balfour commented that these archives could only be used by historians of repute, and not for partisan purposes. This drew a storm of protest from the Irish Nationalist benches. Mr Dillon (representing Mayo East) denounced the Irish Chief Secretary for favouring Unionist historians. “No one who has read Mr Froude’s *History of the English in Ireland* would deny that it was a most outrageously partisan history. The history of the right honourable member for Dublin University is infinitely more fair; but his later books showed evidence of partisanship”. Mr Balfour retorted that Mr MacNeill had published two documents he had been given access to in the “Freeman’s Journal” (Ireland’s most widely read newspaper at the time), using them “not so much to throw light on the evidence of a previous period as to inflame men’s passions in the present time”. The debate raged on for two hours until the vote was finally agreed¹.

Aspects of Irish history were often debated in the House of Commons in the later 19th century. The Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869, the various land acts and Irish affairs in general ensured this was the case. However, debates on the use of Irish history were rare, and Mr Balfour’s differentiation between historians of repute and those who used history to “enflame men’s passions” reveals the fault-lines between academic and popular histories of Ireland at the time, as well as divisions between Unionist and Nationalist views of Irish history – or, to put it another way, between those who viewed themselves as English and those who viewed themselves as Irish. It also reflects the fact that Ireland, while conceived within the framework of nationhood and



Map 8
Map of Ireland with places mentioned in the text.

race, was economically, politically and culturally a region of the British state. The view of Ireland as “provincial” was enunciated by Anglo-centric historians, who sought to reconcile Ireland’s past with her current position within the United Kingdom. A second school of history was tied into the cultural momentum associated with the resurgence of interest in the Irish race and nation². As the debate on the floor of the House of Commons showed, the use of history in relation to Ireland in the period under study was as much a political issue as it was an academic one.

This chapter will begin by examining the major Unionist historians of Ireland in the 19th century, J.A. Froude and W.H.E. Lecky. It will then examine the growth of popular history in Ireland and the politicisation of history in the later 19th century by both Unionists and Nationalists, and the impact of this on the writing and teaching of history. Finally it will examine the development of Irish nationalist historiography in the early years of the 20th century, subsequently enshrined as orthodoxy by the Irish Free State after its foundation in 1922.

A central figure in the development of Irish historiography in the later 19th century was James Anthony Froude. Born in Darlington Rectory in Devon in 1818, after a harsh upbringing he found his way to Oxford University. Influenced by J.H. Newman and the Tractarian movement, he soon rejected it, choosing to approve of the English Reformation and its doctrines, as well as German theological scholarship. He visited Ireland a number of times. In his work as tutor to a Wicklow clergyman’s family in the summer of 1840 he formed an unfavourable impression of the influence of the Catholic church and the Irish peasantry. A second sojourn in Ireland in 1845 coincided with his decision not to become an Anglican priest: he chose instead the role of writer. Heavily influenced by Carlyle, he wrote a history of the English Reformation. A close friendship with the Parker family of London led to him taking over the editorship of “Frazier’s Magazine” (an influential gentleman’s magazine) between 1860 and 1874. Later he found himself closely associated with the British government’s policies in South Africa. The 1880s were given over to a wide range of writings, including a novel based on his reading of Irish history, *The Two Chiefs of Dunboy*, published in 1889³.

It was because of his lonely childhood, a sense of moral righteousness, and a need to defend the British Empire that, in the summer months of 1869-1870, he took a house in the south-west of Ireland and wrote *The English of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*. The twin problems, the Irish perceived as inferior to the English, and the inefficiency of English rule in Ireland were seen by Froude as being at the heart of the Irish problem. These basic points were set out at the beginning of the book, and the three volume history that followed was simply written to reinforce those views. He viewed the Irish, by which he meant everyone on the island except the Ulster Presbyterians, as being innately incapable of self-government and destined to be ruled by a superior race, the English. He also felt that the English had failed to govern their colony in Ireland because they had treated the Irish as their equals rather than as their inferiors, humouring them instead of

disciplining them. The one person who had meted out true justice to the Irish, according to Froude, was Oliver Cromwell, who had protected the industrious, the honest and the worthy⁴. Written between 1869 and 1873, Froude's *English of Ireland* was as much an attack on the system of self-government for Ireland, as it was an attempt to write an objective history. It is also true to say that Froude was reflecting not only the racist views of his intellectual mentor Thomas Carlyle, his own sense of what it meant to be an active citizen in the British Empire, but also the long legacy of history-writing associated with English colonists in Ireland stretching back to Edmund Spenser in the 16th century⁵. In declaring the Irish unfit to govern, Froude was going against the Liberal idea, later articulated by the Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone in 1882 when he stated that his aim was to create "a state of things which will make the humblest Irishman realise that he is a governing agency and that the government was to be carried on by him and for him"⁶. It was Gladstone's vision of a regional government devolved to Ireland, keeping foreign affairs and defence within the remit of the London government, which was anathema to Froude, and was his political target when he wrote his history.

If Froude is perceived as the great offender in 19th century Irish historiography, then W.H.E. Lecky was something of the grand old man of Irish history. Without doubt the greatest virtue of Froude's work was his use of original records. He was the first to use the archival sources from the State Paper Office in London as well as the archives of Dublin Castle, and he also introduced the extensive archives at Brussels and Simancas to an English-reading public. The problem with Froude, according to one recent commentator, was "his extraordinary decision to impose upon his complex and original archival discoveries an interpretive scheme that appeared at once to be rigidly determinist, wilfully biased, internally inconsistent and above all deeply offensive to almost all interested parties"⁷.

One strand of opposition to Froude's *The English of Ireland* centred on his contention that the English of Ireland had failed to live up to their moral responsibilities. Naturally this antagonised the Dublin establishment, and Froude was heavily criticised, most notably by the historian W.H.E. Lecky, as well as the economist John Elliot Cairnes and Froude's former guide through the archives of Dublin Castle, John Prendergast – all committed Unionists. Lecky in particular attacked Froude, considering his history flawed, a polemic against liberalism and reform, and a panegyric to unbending authority and brute force. Lecky highlighted innumerable inaccuracies in the work, and highlighted a large number of interpretative inconsistencies, for example, Froude's condemnation of absentee English landlords and also his condemnation of the independent Irish parliament of 1782 (a parliament led, incidentally, by Lecky's grand-uncle Henry Grattan). He also dismissed Froude's proposition that the emancipation of Catholics in 1829 had been a "disastrous mistake" as absurd political polemic that had no place in history writing⁸. John Elliot Cairnes highlighted where Froude contradicted himself, commenting that the final chapters of Froude's book could be summed up with: "It would have been better and happier by far had England never encompassed the rule

of the Irish and never attempted to force upon them a landed gentry of alien blood”⁹ John Prendergast, who worked in the newly formed Public Record Office of Ireland at the time, condemned Froude’s selective use of original material, and his ignoring of documents which went against the thesis argument he was trying to get across. What is clear from all three reviewers is that, while they were politically close to Froude and his views on the Union and the place of Ireland and the Irish within the United Kingdom, they felt he had written a failed polemic that was in danger of discrediting their own position. Furthermore, his use of history had debased it, and there was a need to restore history writing on Ireland to a more objective and scientific level. In Lecky’s view, he would have to write a proper history of Ireland to repudiate Froude:

I have always hoped to get through my literary life without a quarrel, but I believe that in putting on record my views about Mr Froude’s book and the grounds on which those views are based, I am doing some real service to history, to the cause of truth and the reputation of Ireland¹⁰.

W.H.E. Lecky was born on 26 March 1838 in Newtownpark, County Dublin. His father lived comfortably off landed estates in south-eastern Ireland, and Lecky, after moving through a number of schools in the British Isles, arrived in Trinity College Dublin in 1855, and became good friends with a number of men who would become the political and judicial elite in Dublin during the later 19th century. His early book, *The Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland* was published in 1861, where his biographies of Jonathan Swift, Henry Flood, Henry Grattan and Daniel O’Connell reflected his inclination towards Christian rationalism engendered by his readings of Richard Whately and Joseph Butler at Trinity College Dublin. His most enduring work was his *History of England in the Eighteenth Century* (eight volumes, 1878-90), for which he did a lot of archival work, particularly in Dublin, where he crafted his chapters on Ireland to refute Froude. In particular, he viewed the constitution of 1782, and the independent Irish parliament of the time as the highpoint of English rule in Ireland, where careful aristocratic government shielded the country against more radical and blood-thirsty elements. Indeed his views on 19th-century politics come to the fore in many passages, indicating his own political viewpoints very clearly.

Few things can be more grotesquely absurd than to suppose that the merits or demerits, the failure of the success, of the old Irish parliament has any real bearing on modern schemes for reconstructing the government of Ireland on a revolutionary or Jacobin basis; entrusting the protection of property and the maintenance of law to some democratic assembly consisting mainly of Fenians and land-leaguers, of paid agitators and penniless adventurers¹¹.

However, in seeking to provide a balanced and objective history of Ireland, Lecky provided both Nationalists and Unionists with plenty of ammunition. Politically close to Froude, Lecky could not condone his prejudicial views on the Irish and – more importantly for Lecky – the English colonists of Ireland, he also had a distaste for Froude’s sectarianism. Yet, at the back of it all, it was really only Froude’s view of the independ-

ent Irish parliament of 1782 that separated them: both viewed the Irish as genetically unfit to govern, both feared “Home Rule” (plans to give self-government to Ireland) and sought to maintain Ireland as a political, cultural and economic region of England, its needs subservient to the needs of the British polity. It is, perhaps, telling that in the 1890s, as the political landscape became more divided between Nationalists and Unionists, Lecky was the first to congratulate Froude when he got the Regius Chair of History at Oxford in 1892. In her review of Irish history writing from the 17th to the end of the 19th centuries, Clare O’Halloran has stated:

Thus, the Renaissance belief that political lessons might be learned from history became, in Irish historical writing, a fear that the past, in its manifestations of war and bloodshed, would endlessly repeat itself. ... As long as the central question of who on the island should hold political and economic power remained to be answered, Irish history could never be safely contained within the covers of a book¹².

While history was progressing slowly in the universities (and very much along the lines enunciated by Froude and Lecky, bemoaning the lack of integration of Ireland into the wider British polity), other forces were at work, utilising Irish history for their own (mainly political) ends. Ireland’s public culture was evolving during the 19th century. Indeed Irish nationalism evolved in an environment with a large number of enthusiastic adherents¹³. As part of this rise in popular culture, the act of reading proved to be one of the most efficient ways of imparting and reinforcing a set of cultures different from the metropolitan-centred culture located in London. Reading, both books and newspapers, had long been a political act in Ireland¹⁴. Newspaper reading in particular, as Hegel wryly noted, served modern man as a substitute for morning prayers. Elizabeth Eisenstein has written: “Printed materials encouraged silent adherence to causes whose advocates could not be located in any one parish and who addressed an invisible public from afar”¹⁵. The advantages to organizations that were not part of the establishment were clear, and newspapers were just one of the means used to recruit and inculcate nationalist values among a wide audience. Irish literature and Irish history were naturally going to form the bedrock of doctrine for young nationalists, and this history would be at odds with that expounded by Froude and Lecky.

One of the central cultural institutions for nationalist organisations was the reading room. It offered not only a convenient location to provide reading material, but also a means of social interaction for Nationalists. From the 1840s, reading rooms were associated with a number of nationalist associations in Ireland. From the Temperance and Repeal reading rooms, to the literary societies of the 1850s, to the Land League reading rooms of the 1880s, and on to the Gaelic League and more radical organizations from the 1890s onwards, these housed a ready audience for a national as opposed to a provincial or regional reading of Irish history.

These reading rooms, among others, were a response to a great increase in the demand for education among Irish people at the end of the 18th century, in particular the learn-

ing of the English language. From the 16th century the Irish language was excluded from the worlds of commerce, politics, official religion, the professions and the printed word. Although a small number of literate Gaelic (Irish language) speakers remained, there was no market for Irish language books. (Literacy in the Irish language was only maintained through circulating manuscripts, and was chiefly of interest only to antiquarians.) As Mary E. Daly has noted, “in Ireland the spread of literacy generally meant the acquisition of English, in part because both literacy and English were seen as synonymous with modernisation, and also because no facilities developed to provide mass literacy through Irish”¹⁶. The demand for English seemed strongest along the west coast, paradoxically where the least number of English speakers lived. Patrick Keenan, Inspector of National Schools, noted on a tour of schools on islands of the north-west coast of Ireland in the 1850s:

On Inishboffin people up to thirty years come to school. This passion may be traced to one predominant desire – the desire to speak English. They see whenever a stranger visits their islands that prosperity has its peculiar tongue as well as its fine coat and if they ever cross to the mainland for the ‘law’ as they call any legal process they see that the solemn words have come to them second hand through the office of an interpreter¹⁷.

Irish people wished to play an active role in the state, and understood that to get on in life they needed English. This demand was met from the later 18th century by private “hedge” schools¹⁸: in the course of the early 19th century, however, the State, facing political and social unrest, and a Catholic hierarchy concerned about the effectiveness of Protestant evangelicalism combined forces in 1831 to provide a system of schooling which would promote the “general intelligence and good conduct of the poorer classes”¹⁹. In the rural districts of Waterford, Kerry, Cork and Galway, previously the strongholds of Irish language literacy, there was great enthusiasm to adopt “the new tongue” as English was called²⁰. The National School system (the system of primary education established in Ireland in 1831) has been associated with the spreading of the English language in Ireland, nationalist polemicists complained that the system had killed off the Irish language²¹; however, it is clear this process was underway long before the establishment of the National School system, with people needing English to get state jobs, operate businesses and, as was the case for increasing numbers, to facilitate emigration to English speaking areas around the world.

The demand for cheap reading material in English increased dramatically at the end of the 18th century, and one source, particularly in rural areas, was book pedlars who sold chapbooks²² [explain], and private circulating libraries, usually run by literary clubs²³. These chapbooks were usually rip-roaring tales, mainly based on early English novels. A number also had Irish themes – such as [James Freney], *The Life and adventures of James Freney, commonly called Captain Freney. From the time of his first entering on the highway in Ireland* (Dublin, 1754); John Cosgrave, *A genuine history of the lives and actions of the most notorious Irish highwaymen, tories and rapparees* (Dublin, 1747); Anonymous,

Life of St. Patrick (Dublin, 1782) – but they fell into the general pattern of adventure stories or morality tales²⁴. However, if there was a demand from the masses for English reading material, there was also a demand from certain political and religious powers in Ireland to control that demand, and this led to the growth of reading rooms (in essence, public libraries) associated with the Temperance movement and mechanics' institute halls in many towns in Ireland in the 1830s. The first national movement to utilise reading rooms, established in April 1838, was Father Theobald Matthew's Cork Total Abstinence Society, based in Cork city: eight parish reading rooms were the focal point for the 10,500 members of the Society. There was a sub-text of cultural nationalism which was very strong within this organisation, which aimed at creating Irish people, in the words of one journalist, "fitted for freedom"²⁵. The organization soon became a mass movement, with hundreds of thousands of members across the country. The benefits of sobriety included reading and thinking, and for nationalists this meant a greater understanding of injustice and politics. Many newspaper editors argued for adherence to the Temperance Movement as part of a wider nationalist agenda. For example, the editor of "The Southern Reporter" wrote in 1839:

A sober people have more leisure – more penetration and more inclination to turn their attention to political subjects, from which their enemies would willingly shut them out. The more the masses are educated, the weaker – the more palpable – must become the fraud and villainy of those who have enslaved and plundered them²⁶.

The National Organiser, James McKenna, wrote that the great object of the Temperance Movement was "the education of the popular mind"²⁷, and it is no coincidence that the organisers of the Temperance Movement were mainly journalists and founders of newspapers such as "The Nation", and at the same time they were setting up a framework of national and provincial newspapers which were broadly nationalist and Catholic in their outlook, and their books and newspapers found their way into the Temperance Hall reading rooms. For example, John D'Alton, in his *History of Drogheda*, published in 1844, wrote that the reading room of the Total Abstinence Society had been set up in the town:

recommending to the working classes such popular treatises as will instruct them in the capabilities and chemistry of the soil, the improvement of long mismanaged farms, the cultivation of untenanted and unwholesome wastes, and other available resources for the manufacture of native produce. With the main objects of this Society have also been united, in the last year, useful and desirable efforts for the revival of the Irish language, literature and music²⁸.

There was a falling away of support for the Temperance Movement in the mid-1840s, but the kernel of organization associated with the Reading Rooms had been planted, and most of these were taken over by the Repeal Movement, a political mass movement which sought the restoration of the Irish parliament, under the leadership of Daniel O'Connell. Many of the people involved in this movement had also been involved in the push for Catholic Emancipation in 1829, and had developed a strong constitu-

tional political machine that led to the establishment of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Every district with 2,000 members was entitled to levy a fee of one shilling on members to run a reading room, and Repeal wardens would ensure that appropriate newspapers and books were stocked in the reading room. The Repeal Movement furnished the rooms with political tracts by O'Connell, histories of the Independent Irish parliament of 1782, and copies of "The Nation" newspaper, the newspaper of the Repeal Movement. The editor of this newspaper, Thomas Davis, was the strongest advocate of the reading rooms, and in his first issue of the newspaper set out the ideals by which the newspaper operated:

Nationality is our great object – a Nationality which will not only raise our people from their poverty by securing to them the blessings of a domestic legislation ... a Nationality which may embrace Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter, Milesian and Cromwellian, the Irishmen of a hundred generations and the stranger who is within our gates²⁹.

Davis called for newspapers and books which catered "for the tastes of its mass audience" and "serving the needs of nationalism", but he also recommended the reading room as the best place to meet and reinforce Nationalists with like-minded activists. He also called for a history of Ireland to be written in a true and concise style, using history to unify the Irish rather than to divide as heretofore:

The writer of such an Irish history must feel a love for all sects, a philosophical eye to the merits and demerits of all, and a solemn and haughty impartiality in speaking of all ... Such a work would have no passing influence, though its first political effect would be enormous; it would be read by every class and side; for there is no readable book on the subject ... Think, reader! Has God given you the soul and perseverance to create this marvel?³⁰

Davis' views became the touchstone for the development of history among Nationalists in Ireland. Many books began to appear in the course of the later 1870s directly inspired by Davis' call. Drawing on a strong antiquarian and romantic tradition, and inspired by similar nationalist movements in Europe, Irish nationalists sought to create a national history that could be used to inspire further generations in the struggle for independence. As R.F. Foster puts it:

In late nineteenth century Ireland, egalitarianism was said to have flowered in the Celtic mists, much as in English 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 1916³¹.

As Irish nationalism developed in the course of the later half of the 19th century, it drew on earlier work, on antiquarianism, on myths and legends, and on the new archival sources becoming available from the Public Record Office of Ireland, the facsimile editions of medieval codices, transcripts of sources such as *The Annals of the Four Masters*, and reissues of earlier histories such as Keating's *Foras Feasa na hÉireann* (originally written in the 17th century)³². This amalgamation of new antiquarianism, improved access to sources and old propaganda led to a fairly scholarly interpretation of Irish

history, and allowed popular histories of Ireland to reach an eager nationalist audience, and repudiate Unionist histories. In essence, these historians were writing primarily for an Irish audience (rather than – as Froude and Lecky had done – for an English audience), and created a history that was nationalist rather than regionalist in outlook. Books such as A.M. Sullivan's *History of Ireland*, John McCarthy's *Plea for Home Government*, William O'Connor's *History of the Irish People*, and Charles Halpine's *The patriot brothers: a tale of '98* presented Irish history within the framework of nationalist politics, and criticised Froude's work in particular³³.

Cultural nationalism in Ireland made huge strides in the 1890s and early 20th century, and there were a number of movements which pushed Ireland away from being a region or province dependent on London for culture towards being a more irredentist, monotheistic state which it became in the course of the 1920s and 1930s, and history-writing and the place of Irish history played its part in this process. The development of an Anglo-Irish literary movement was one aspect of this, as was the revival of the Irish language associated with *Connradh na Gaeilge* (The Gaelic League), and the c. 950 branches dotted around the country did much to bolster the nationalist view of history.

Academic enquiry and drawing-room antiquarianism combined with street theatre and public festival in the Gaelic League to create a nationalist meta-narrative that was respectable and defensible, if incomplete. League classes and *feiseanna* [entertainments] widely disseminated this teleological interpretation of the nation-in-formation, but the long-term impact of the revival on history education was even more direct because of another and less well-known league innovation – the Gaelic summer colleges³⁴.

Established in 1907, primarily to provide a grounding in the Irish language for national school teachers, these Gaelic summer schools also provided a nationalist history for those teachers, and for adult classes in the mainly English-speaking towns. Historical subjects were the key means of getting people to write and talk in Irish. One of the leading figures in the Irish language movement, Eoin MacNeill, established an important summer school in Omeara, County Louth, attracting the well-known historian Alice Stopford Green³⁵. Coláiste Chomhghail in Belfast offered three courses of historical interest³⁶, and the Leinster College taught ancient and medieval history under George Moonan³⁷. Moonan was an important figure, inculcating students from the nearby Marlborough teacher training college in Dublin, sending teachers back to the four corners of Ireland. Furthermore, he wrote *A short history of the Irish People* with Mary Hayden, Professor of Modern History at University College Dublin. This book was to become the main text book for the teaching of Irish history to primary and secondary school children for the first fifty years of the Irish state. The impact of this work, and of the nationalist presentation of history should not be under-estimated when it comes to assessing the (lack of) development in historical research in Ireland.

Neither the schools' slowly changing history curricula with its mimetic traditions, nor the nationalists' alternative approach to reading Irish history with its reiteration of the story of

colonization and resistance, of faith and fatherland, gave Irish students much experience in developing this important competency between 1870 and 1922³⁸.

Eoin MacNeill also had an impact at University College Dublin, where he was credited with having dragged Celtic Ireland “practically single-handedly out of the antiquarian mists into the light of history”³⁹. Invited by the President of the University, Father Delaney, he gave a lecture in 1904 entitled “Where does Irish history begin?” Drawing on the earlier work of John O’Donovan and Eugene O’Curry, MacNeill became the leading scholar on early medieval Irish society, and also transcribed many Old Irish tracts. He ended up in the post of Professor of Early Irish History at University College Dublin, yet he did little to shake up the teaching of history at university level. Both he and his colleague Mary Hayden simply replaced the old Unionist view of Irish history as a regional example for the wider British Isles with their own highly simplified Nationalist view of Irish history.

Two of Eoin MacNeill’s contemporaries in the Gaelic League acted as propagandists for this new Nationalist history, and their views found their way into the Irish educational system very quickly after the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1921. Padraig Pearse’s *Three Lectures on Gaelic Topics* (1897-1898), and all he wrote and taught up to his execution in 1916, did much to distort the ideals of Thomas Davis. This enabled him to build a view of history that, according to R.F. Foster was “a visionary world of early Christian 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”⁴⁰.

Pearse was primarily a propagandist. One would expect that sort rhetoric from him. Yet these views were expounded and widely accepted by an reputable historian, Alice Stopford Green, who averred a strong indebtedness to her Professor Eoin MacNeill, and placed a veneer of respectability on Pearse’s views. Writing in 1909, for example, she asserted that “History is more backward in Ireland than any other country”. She went on:

History may conceivably be treated as a science. Or it may be interpreted as a majestic national 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 particular 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 end⁴¹.

Daughter of an archdeacon in County Meath, and wife of one of the greatest popular historians of England, Mrs Green became a firm advocate of Irish nationalism. Her works included *The Making of Ireland and her undoing* (1908), *Irish Nationality* (1912) and *The Irish State to 1014* (1925). Her obsession with ‘the Irish national memory’ and her fanatical adherence to Irish nationalism, made her works handbooks for the Nationalist view of Irish history, works that Eoin MacNeill did little to distance himself from. She wrote of pre-1169 Celtic Ireland as a classless, egalitarian society,

where concepts of ‘nationality’ flourished, ‘Gaelic’ culture flourished, and the superior Gaelic civilization was lauded. With the advent of Irish independence these views were adopted as the official canon, teachers were told “the continuity of the separatist idea from Tone to Pearse should be stressed”⁴², and both the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland moved to establish their own histories very quickly.

If one looked at the cultural tropes associated with Ireland in the middle of the 19th century one would, without doubt, have viewed Ireland as a region of England. In terms of language, law and custom English was the only show in town, politically Ireland was part of the United Kingdom, economically it was dependent on England as a market for her agricultural produce, and her ruling, landed and state elites all looked to London. Writers, of all sorts, wrote for an English audience. While it suited historians to look on Ireland as a colony of England, there were determined efforts to integrate the island into the English state in much the same way as Scotland and Wales had become regions of that polity. The historians of the establishment, best exemplified by Froude and Lecky, needed to tame Irish history, and provide the ruling classes in England with the moral of the story of Irish history to ensure that they did not do something stupid like giving the Irish domestic government. This was presented in racial and sectarian terms, and when disputes did occur it was over the role of the English in Ireland in accentuating problems there.

With the evolution of popular literacy in Ireland, however, along with the development of mass moral and political movements, Irish nationalism fed off a mixture of antiquarianism, propagandist histories and newly accessible documents to re-invent Irish history as a national history, meeting the political needs of the constitutional nationalists of the 19th century such as Daniel O’Connell and Charles Stewart Parnell, and the revolutionaries of the early 20th century such as Padraig Pearse. Under both regimes, however, the teaching and understanding of Irish history was secondary to the primary impulse to support the political aims of either Unionists or Nationalists. Under both regimes, the teaching of history at university level remained patchy or non-existent, and it was not until the 1970s, with the advent of the revisionist academic historians, that the shibboleths of both Unionist and Nationalist histories were debunked, and a national history of Ireland in the proper sense of the term began to emerge.

NOTES

¹ “The Times”, 1 July 1899.

² For earlier discussions on this topic see in particular S. Ellis, *The Empire Strikes Back: the Historiographies of Britain and Ireland*, in S. Ellis (ed.), *Empires and States in European Perspective*, Pisa 2004, pp. 95-110; M. Coffey, *The Teaching of Irish History in the 1920s*, in S. Ellis (ed.), *Empires and States in European Perspective*, Pisa 2004, pp. 111-125.

³ A.F. Pollard, *Froude, James Anthony (1818-1894)*, rev. W. Thomas, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford 2004.

⁴ A. Wyatt, *Froude, Lecky and ‘the humblest Irishman’*, “Irish Historical Studies”, 1973, 19, pp. 163-164.

- ⁵ For J.A. Froude and Ireland see D. McCartney, *James Anthony Froude and Ireland: A Historiographical Debate*, in T.D. Williams (ed.), *Historical Studies*, viii, Dublin, 1977, pp. 171-190; E. Reilly, *J.A. Froude's use of history and his Irish prescription*, in L. McBride (ed.), *Reading Irish Histories*, Dublin 2003, pp. 140-155; C. Brady, *Offering Offence: James Anthony Froude (1818-1894), Moral Obligations and the Use of Irish History*, in V.P. Carey, U. Lotz-Heumann (eds.), *Taking Sides? Colonial and Confessional Mentalities in Early Modern Ireland*, Dublin 2003, pp. 266-290. On the colonial legacy he drew upon see N. Lebow, *British Historians and Irish History*, "Éire/Ireland", 1973, 8, pp. 3-38; C. O'Halloran, *Historical writings 1690-1890*, in *Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, i, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 599-632.
- ⁶ J.L. Hammond, *Gladstone and the Irish Nation*, London, repr. 1964, pp. 709-710.
- ⁷ C. Brady, *James Anthony Froude*, p. 267.
- ⁸ Lecky's review appeared in two parts in "Macmillian's Magazine", 27 January 1873, pp. 246-64; 30 June 1874, pp. 166-184.
- ⁹ Cairne's review appeared in "Fortnightly Review", new series, July 1874, pp. 170-191.
- ¹⁰ J.J. Auchmuty, *Lecky – a biographical and critical essay*, London 1945, pp. 29-30.
- ¹¹ W.E.H. Lecky, *A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, London 1892, v, p. 501.
- ¹² C. O'Halloran, *Historical writings, 1690-1890*, Cambridge 2006, p. 625.
- ¹³ J.S. Donnelly, K.A. Miller (eds.), *Irish Popular Culture, 1650–1850*, Dublin 1998; H.F. Kearney, *1875: faith or fatherland? The contested symbols of Irish nationalism*, in S.J. Brown, D.J. Miller (eds.), *Piety and Power in Ireland, 1760-1960: Essays in Honour of Emmet Larkin*, Notre Dame 2006.
- ¹⁴ N.Ó Ciosáin, *Print and Popular Culture in Ireland, 1750-1850*, Houndsmills 1997.
- ¹⁵ E.L. Eisenstein, *Some conjectures about the impact of printing on Western Society and Thought*, "Journal of Modern History", 1968, 40, p. 42; B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London repr. 1991, pp. 34-36.
- ¹⁶ M.E. Daly, *Literacy and Language Change in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, in M. Daly, D. Dickson (eds.), *The Origins of Popular Literacy in Ireland: Language Change and Educational Development, 1700-1920*, Dublin 1990, p.154.
- ¹⁷ *Twenty-third Report of the Commissioners for National Education in Ireland*, H.C. 1856, xxvi, Appendix B, 143.
- ¹⁸ G. FitzGerald, *The decline of the Irish language*, in Daly, Dickson *The Origins of Popular Literacy in Ireland* cit., pp. 59-72; D.H. Akenson, *Pre-university education, 1782-1870*, in W.E. Vaughan (ed.), *A New History of Ireland*, Oxford 1989, p. 524.
- ¹⁹ J. Logan, *Sufficient for their Needs: Literacy and Elementary Schooling in the Nineteenth Century*, in Daly, Dickson (eds.), *The Origins of Popular Literacy in Ireland: Language Change and Educational Development, 1700-1920* cit., pp. 113-138.
- ²⁰ *Appendix to the seventeenth report of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, H.C. 1851, xxiv, 135.
- ²¹ Most notably P. Pearse, *The Murder Machine*, Dublin, 1911, he later moved from being an educationalist to a revolutionary, leading the Dublin Insurrection of 1916. For the more recent debate on this topic, see D.H. Akenson, *The Irish Educational Experiment*, London, 1970, p. 381; S. Ó Buachalla, *The Language in the Classroom*, "Crane bag", 1981, 5, pp. 849-851; M. Wall, *The Decline of the Irish Language*, in B.Ó Cuiv, *A View of the Irish Language*, Dublin 1969.
- ²² R. Loeber, M. Stouthamer-Loeber, *Fiction available to and written for cottagers and their children*, in B. Cunningham, M. Kennedy (eds.), *The Experience of reading: Irish Historical perspectives*, Dublin 1999, pp. 124-182.
- ²³ For this process in Britain see D. Vincent, *Bread, knowledge and freedom*, London 1982; R. Porter, *The creation of the modern world*, New York 2000, pp. 86-87. For Ireland see M.-L. Legg, *The Kilkenny circu-*

- lating-library society and the growth of reading rooms in nineteenth-century Ireland, in B. Cunningham, M. Kennedy (eds.), *The Experience of reading* cit., pp. 109-123; M. Casteleyan, *A History of Literacy and Libraries in Ireland*, Aldershot 1984, pp. 89-119.
- ²⁴ For a list of chapbooks available from Richard Cross, Bookseller, of Dublin, in the early 1780s, see R. Loeber and M. Stouthamer-Loeber, *Fiction available to and written for cottagers and their children* cit., pp. 169-185.
- ²⁵ "The Freeman's Journal", 7 April 1840; for a more detailed examination of this see P.A. Townend, *Father Matthew, Temperance and Irish Identity*, Dublin 2002.
- ²⁶ "The Southern Reporter", 23 November 1839.
- ²⁷ J. McKenna, *The history of the temperance reformation in England, Scotland, and Ireland*, undated mss, Capuchin Archives, Dublin.
- ²⁸ J. D'Alton, *History of Drogheda*, (Drogheda 1844).
- ²⁹ "The Nation", 15 October 1842.
- ³⁰ T. Davis, *The History of Ireland*, in T. Davis, *Literary and Historical Essays*, Dublin repr. 1998, p. 38.
- ³¹ R.F. Foster, *History and the Irish Question*, "Transactions of the Royal Historical Society", fifth series, 1983, 33, p. 170.
- ³² D. McCartney, *The writing of history in Ireland 1800-1830*, "Irish Historical Studies", 1957, 10, pp. 347-363.
- ³³ For a typical reading list from one County Cork reading room see J.P. Hennessy, *What do the Irish Read?* in "Nineteenth Century", January - June 1884, 15, pp. 920-932.
- ³⁴ T.G. McMahon, *To mould an important body of shepherds: the Gaelic summer colleges and the teaching of Irish history*, in L. McBride (ed.), *Reading Irish Histories*, Dublin 2003, pp. 118-139.
- ³⁵ "An Claidheamh Soluis", 28 September 1912.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 17 September 1910.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12 August 1912.
- ³⁸ L. McBride, *Young readers and the learning and teaching of Irish history, 1870-1922*, in L. McBride (ed.), *Reading Irish Histories*, Dublin 2003, p. 117.
- ³⁹ F.J. Byrne, *MacNeill as Historian*, in F.X. Martin and F.J. Byrne (eds.), *The Scholar Revolutionary: Eoin MacNeill, 1867-1945, and the Making of the New Ireland*, Shannon 1973, p. 17.
- ⁴⁰ R.F. Foster, *History and the Irish Question*, "Transactions of the Royal Historical Society", fifth series, 1983, 33, p. 185; F. Shaw, *The Canon of Irish History: a challenge*, "Studies", 1972, 61, pp. 113-152; R. Dudley Edwards, *Padraig Pearse, the Triumph of Failure*, London 1977; J.V. Kelliher, *Early Irish History and pseudo-history*, in "Studica Hibernica", 3, 1963, pp. 113-127.
- ⁴¹ A.S. Green, *The Old Irish World*, Dublin - London 1909, p. 9.
- ⁴² Foster, *History and the Irish Question* cit., p. 188.

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